

ENTHEOGENIC CREATIVITY: SHAMANISM AND ENTHEOGENS IN THE VISIONARY ART OF ALEX GREY

*CREATIVIDADE ENTEOGÊNICA: XAMANISMO E ENTEÓGENOS NA ARTE
VISIONÁRIA DE ALEX GREY*

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ABSTRACT:

To identify, starting with an aesthetic and philosophical analysis, the presence of elements coming from shamanism in the artworks of Alex Grey. To evidence, through a descriptive methodology, the relation of reciprocity established between visionary culture and shamanic traditions. To explain how entheogens, or sacred plants that awaken the consciousness of the inner divinity, are instruments which favours the creative process of artist. To clarify in what measure, extraordinary states of perception, such as dream and ecstasy, lead Grey to consider creative action from the perspective of mystical experience. To elucidate in which form, entheogenic mysticism and artistic activity, when correlated, are capable of propitiating a radical transformation in the structures of society and in the worldview of individuals. To demonstrate, on the basis of a vast theoretical background, the indispensability of including and expanding, in the sphere of higher studies, the discussion of shamanistic religiosity in alignment with visionary art and contemporary philosophy.

KEYWORDS: Entheogens; Philosophical Aesthetics; Psychedelic Philosophy; Shamanism; Visionary Art.

RESUMO:

Identificar, através de uma análise filosófica e estética, a presença de elementos originários do xamanismo nas obras de arte de Alex Grey. Evidenciar, a partir de uma metodologia descritiva, a relação de reciprocidade estabelecida entre a cultura visionária e as tradições xamânicas. Explicitar como os enteógenos, ou plantas sagradas que despertam a consciência da divindade interior, são instrumentos que favorecem o processo criativo do artista. Esclarecer em que medida, os estados extraordinários de percepção, como o sonho e o êxtase, levam Grey a considerar a ação criativa na perspectiva de uma experiência mística. Elucidar de que maneira, o misticismo enteogênico e a atividade artística, quando correlacionados, são capazes de propiciar uma transformação radical nas estruturas da sociedade e na visão de mundo dos indivíduos. Demonstrar, com base em um amplo referencial teórico, a imprescindibilidade de incluir e ampliar, na esfera dos altos estudos, a discussão da religiosidade xamanística em alinhamento com a arte visionária e a filosofia contemporânea.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Enteógenos; Estética Filosófica; Filosofia Psicodélica; Xamanismo; Arte Visionária.

Introduction: Core Shamanism and Visionary Culture

According to Alex Grey, in a world without aesthetic creation, the existence of civilization would not be possible because the development of human consciousness is intrinsically related with the universe of visionary and sacred art. The creative activity, when is offered like a tribute to cosmic forces, becomes a channel for the shamanistic artist to connect with the universal mind. In his book *The Mission of Art*, Grey writes: “Art can become a record of and a way of sharing the healing history or a way to honour a mythic cosmology and the spiritual forces with which the shaman works” (1998, p. 209). From the stone paintings of human ancestors in prehistoric caves that illustrated shamanic rituals to the computer interfaces of contemporary cyberart which produces electronic ecstasies, artistic intervention serves to the noble purpose of explaining the evolutionary history of each being alive. In the words of Alex:

The history of art becomes your link to universal spirit, and artists participate in the prophetic lineage by receiving and transmitting the iconography of Evolution of consciousness from prehistoric cave paintings through magic mythic archetypes to modern and post-modern art; the arc of the developing soul of humanity is etched into the arts (GREY, 2012, p. 177).

The visionary artist creates a possibility of connection between the immanent and transcendental levels of reality. Through the dimensions of immanence, like a shamanistic healer that enshrines the most powerful entheogens in his ceremonies and rituals, he gains the transcendence to understand the meaning of life from a higher perspective. In *The Iconography of Visionary Experience*, Allana Cordy-Collins regards: “Very often such people [shamans, mystics, visionaries, seers] are artists who can portray their solitary ecstatic encounters in forms accessible to everyone” (1989, p. 34). Visionaries hold the power to make the forms of the supra-sensible world manifest in the sensible world by means of the sacred work of art. The heightened understanding provided by ecstatic and dreamlike experiences is the original foundation of Alex Grey experimental mysticism. Rooted in his own inspiring dreams and treed in his own entheogenic revelations, Grey follows the intuitive steps of the core shamans¹ and perform a brilliant interpretation of the current world spirit through his artwork.

¹ The term “Core Shamanism” was used for the first time in the work *The Way of Shaman: a Guide to Power and Healing*, by the American anthropologist Michael Harner [1929-2018]. The definition constitutes the principal representation of a social movement of an aesthetic and religious character that envisages the historical restoration of the damage caused by colonisation against ancestral knowledge. However, the expression has come to define the common denominators identified at the core of all shamanistic traditions in the world, such as, for example, the harmony of consciousness with the forces of nature, the arts as instruments of reconnection with mysticism, the sacredness of the shaman's relationship with the

For Alex, the creative force is present in every manifestation of nature and cosmos. In a microscopic and puzzling conglomerated of cells or in an extrasolar and amazing constellation of giant stars, the power of creation manifests itself. Interpreting reality from this point of view, the creation of the universe, the propagation of light, the formation of the galaxies, the orbit of the planets, the appearance of life forms, the evolution of living beings, are authentic aesthetic phenomena. In his book *Net of Being*, the visionary says: “Creativity is another name for Evolution. Evolution and creativity are Spirit in action. Fundamental to existence, creativity is Spirit’s voice, the uni-verse, the one song occurring in all phenomena” (GREY, 2012, p. 101). In the artistic theory of Grey, the ways to awaken human consciousness to cosmic creativity are numerous: meditation, prayer, silence, isolation, near death, sensory deprivation, active visualization, alkaline fasting, super health foods, tantra exercises, radical sports, holotropic breathwork, and the most powerful of these practices, to wit, the ritual use of sacred plants or psychedelic drugs used for artistical purposes. He says:

There are many ways by which the aspirant may access the mystical dimension: meditation, prayer, yoga, breathwork, tantric practice, dream, vision quest, working with a qualified spiritual master, visualization, fasting, sleep deprivation, sensory isolation, shamanic drumming, chanting, near-death experiences, and psychedelic or entheogenic drugs. These or other methods may trigger experiences that take the aspirant from a mundane perception of reality, wherein objects seem separate and composed of only material properties, to a view of divine unity with boundless depth of dimension and meaning (GREY, 1998, p. 117).

The methods described above creates the possibility of accessing mysterious dimensions that cannot be accessed in ordinary states of consciousness. After entering the unexplored realms of nature and cosmos, the shamanistic aesthete can accomplish the transfiguration of his spiritual visions and ecstatic sensations into a greatest masterpiece. In his essay *Transfiguration: an Artist’s Journey*, Stephen Larsen evidences: “By engaging in various ritual practices, from the shaman’s drum or drug to the yogi’s meditation, visionaries around world have gained access to the inner realms of the soul” (2001, p. 39). From Alex Grey’s perspective, the Cosmic Force manifests itself in the world in an artistic way: the Great Spirit comes to be conceived as an omni-dimensional artist who delineates the constitutive reality of all energy levels existing in the universe. Transcendental mind experiences open the gateways of inner creativity. The clairvoyant artist becomes a co-creator of his own perceived world. Every phenomenon that happens in reality are interpreted by the visionary as an aesthetic manifestation. In a broad sense and without exception, all lives and forms of life that live in harmony with natural and universal laws are works of art in Grey’s conception.

ancestors, among other elements. In a nutshell: “Core Shamans” are those who, in addition to recovering the ancient rituals of shamanism, reconcile them with the philosophical and cultural ideas of modernity.

Alex Grey's artwork portrays mystical, psychedelic and visionary experiences. From the consecration of an entheogen and spiritual practices, the brain, mind and consciousness can be simultaneously transfigured. Transfiguration through art is a multidimensional process. Therefore: “In the works of Alex Grey, the human form is refracted (like light through a prism) into multiple 'ekstases' of being - these ascending from the biological to the personal to the ultimately transpersonal” (CARUANA, 2001, p. 16). Grey expresses the connection between shamanism and sacred plants in paintings like *Praying* (1984), *Journey of the Wounded Healer* (1984-85), *Holy Fire* (1986-87), *Adam and Eve* (1988), *Gaia* (1989), *Transfiguration* (1993), *The Visionary Origin of Language* (1998), *Vision Tree* (2001), *Contemplation* (2002), *Peyote Being* (2005), *Hummingbird* (2005), *Vajra Horse* (2005), *Cannabacchus* (2006), *Cannabis Sutra* (2010), *Planetary Prayers* (2010), *Flesh of the Gods* (2021), among others. From his angle of view, the shamanistic journey can present the possibility of living as a work of art and thus, through the sacred paths, the traveler can establish an interdimensional alliance with the web of life, for the cocreation of a brave new world:

At this critical phase of the human story, the metamorphosis of the World Soul requires imagining a planetary civilization, a world united for a common goal of survival, sustaining the web of life, remediating damaged ecosystems, and consorting with all wisdom traditions including indigenous and sacramental. Visionaries are clustering together to imagine and evolve a better world” (GREY, 2012, p. 80).

The path opened up by the creative process of visionary art constitutes an attractive possibility against the worldwide spread of nihilism. The nihilistic worldview presupposes that there is no meaning in life and the best alternative for those who are alive would to be die and nothing more: “Nihilism is the belief that all existence is meaningless and there is no possibility of truth. Nihilism is the hopeless darkness of the spiritual blind. Nihilism blind us to the interdependence of all beings and concern for their common good” (GREY, 1998, p. 53-54). In the critical stages of the most terrible of all soul diseases, ecocide, genocide, homicide and suicide are the perilous symptoms that determine the final fate of the sick and even the planet Earth. Entheogenic creativity is an antidote to spiritual suffering and existential unhappiness. With formidable healing powers, aesthetic creation offers an alternative to reverse the threat of massive destruction. In visionary artistic theory, the main function of the core shaman is to heal the pathologies of the human soul and the spiritual disorders of civilization which seriously threaten the evolutionary march: “the shaman’s primary role is of a healer within the malignant chaos of ecocidal and biological self-destructiveness, psychological alienation, and ideologically misplaced absolutes that have diseased our beliefs and behaviour in recent times” (MCCORMICK, 1990, p. 23). For Alex Grey, the artist is a healer in the ecogenocidal situation and your honorific mission is to transfigure the probability of extinction into the possibility of evolution. In the same way that

shamans are protectors of nature and all living forces, visionaries have as their duty the preservation of ecosystems and all forms of life. Because of this, one of the most expressive ideals of visionary art consists in reversing the imminent catastrophe that threatens not only the existence of humanity, but also puts at risk the continuity of life on Earth. Living intense shamanistic journeys with psychoactive sacraments, to find his life purpose and the meaning of his art, Alex travels through the dimensions of sensible, intelligible and transcendental perception, in order to redefine through aesthetic creation, the fateful destiny towards which civilization is heading. Thereby, in his psychedelic cosmivision, the visionary culture is an expression of core shamanism and the core shamanism is an expression of visionary culture.

1. Dreams, Ecstasies, Shamanistic Imaginary and Works of Art

Alex Grey's artwork expresses with exceptional precision the universe of shamanic journeys and spiritual visions provided by the sacramental uses of psychoactive and sacred plants. In the aesthetic perspective suggested by Carlo McCormick: "Alex Grey must be considered as a shaman, a mysterious healer of the tainted collective soul and the dark times in which our hypertechnological, anatomically, and spiritually alienated culture currently resides" (1990, p. 18). Through the ritual consecration of entheogenic medicines, the interpretation of his own dreams, and multiple mystical practices, Alex reaches the state of inspiration necessary for the creation of his visionary art. Even psychedelics, which for many have not spiritual character use, in Grey's creative experience, the latter possess the same aura of sacredness as entheogens: "This class of drugs has been called Phantastika, psychomimetics, hallucinogens, psychedelics, and, most recently, entheogens, because of their ability to provide the user with a glimpse of the divine within" (1998, p. 118-119). With this the artist says that psychoactive substances, when used for creative and mystical purposes, can serve as excellent catalysts for the aesthetic and spiritual process. One of Alex's most expressive paintings, *Transfiguration*,² was conceived from a dreamlike and ecstatic experience:

The following is a description of the events leading up to the painting of *Transfiguration*. Early one morning I awoke from a dream. In the dream I had been painting a piece called *Transfiguration*. The painting had a simple composition, consisting of two opposing spherical curves connected by a figure. Floating above the earth sphere, a human, who was fleshly at the feet, became gradually more translucent. At about the groin level it 'popped' into a bright hallucinogenic crystal sphere. This inspiration provided by the dream was underscored later that week when I smoked dimethyltryptamine (DMT) for the first time. As I inhaled the immediately active and extremely potent psychedelic, I experienced the transfigured subject of my painting first hand. In my vision my feet were the foundation of the material world. As I inhaled the material density of my body seemed to dissolve and I 'popped' into the bright

² Disponible in: <https://www.alexgrey.com/art/transcendental/transfiguration>.

world of living geometry and infinite spirit. I noticed strange jewel-like chackra centers within my glowing wireframe spirit body and spectral colors that were absent from my dream painting. I was in my future painting and was being given an experience of the state so I could better re-create it (GREY, 2001, p. 150).

The creative process described by Alex suggests a deepest immersion in the atmospheres of dream and ecstasy. Taking into consideration that psychedelic compounds can produce transpersonal experiences in those who enjoy them, Grey considers them to be enlightenment drugs, capable to inspiring and defining creative visions more precisely, in each and every aspects: “The visionary substances include such drugs as marijuana, hashish, DMT, LSD, mescaline, psylocybin, MDMA (ecstasy), 2CB, ketamine, ayahuasca, Salvia Divinorum, and many other natural and synthesized compounds” (1998, p. 118). Shamans throughout the world interpret ecstatic and dreamlike visions as channels of connection between consciousness and the universe. In the case of Alex Grey’s artwork is not different. For him, the creation of visionary art can be considered a mystical experience: “The sacred art and traditions have incorporated prayer and meditative techniques to assist artists in making their creative work function as a spiritual practice” (GREY, 1998, p. 215). In other words, the spiritual practices of shamanism – such as healing prayers, dream journeys, and entheogen consecration – are incorporated into the creative movement undertaken by the artist to help him heal and repair all personal and collective traumas. The sensible, intelligible, and transcendental pleasure arising from the aesthetic act works as a shamanistic antidote that effectively combats existential negativity.

In paintings such as *Praying*,³ *Contemplation*⁴ and *Planetary Prayers*,⁵ the mystical foundation present in every shamanistic tradition, the simplest form of contact between spirit and divinity is presented by Grey. Contemplative activity and healing prayers enable the shaman to dialogue with cosmic forces and unite himself in consciousness with the heart of Great Mystery. In *The Mission of Art*, the visionary explains: “Sacred artists need penetrating insight into their own true nature and devotional intensity in order to make art a spiritual practice” (GREY, 1998, p. 226). From the perspective that sacred art can be a gateway to the transcendental universe, *Praying* expresses the individual process of connection with divine reality, *Contemplation* represents the trance state characteristic of entheogenic ecstasy, and *Planetary Prayers* portrays an ontological synthesis between creativity and mysticism. The union of microcosm and macrocosm takes place through aesthetic creation experienced as a mystical and non-dual self-realization:

Mystic art provides a means for both artist and viewer to align with the creative force and unite with God through contemplation of cosmic symbolism. We reflect on visionary art in order to

³ Disponible in: <https://www.alexgrey.com/art/progress-of-the-soul/praying>.

⁴ Disponible in: <https://www.alexgrey.com/art/anatomical/contemplation>.

⁵ Disponible in: <https://www.alexgrey.com/art/nature-field/planetary-prayers>.

glimpse the Divine Imagination and align ourselves with God. Beauty attracts us by the shine of the divine – it's God that's the true magnet in Beauty" (GREY, 2012, p. 177).

The God conceived in Grey's artwork is not restricted to a single religious or wisdom tradition: the Cosmic Force is *Brahman* for the Vedanta, *Mazda* for the Zoroastrians, *Ha'Shem* for the Jewish, *Olorum* for the Yoruba, *Osiris* for the Egyptians, *Odin* for the Asatruars, *Zeus* for the Hellenists, *Jupiter* for the Romanists, *Wanka Tanka* for the Native American, *Tupã* for the Tupi Guarani, Metaphysical Light for the Neoplatonists, Nature Naturing for the Pantheists, Absolut Spirit for the Idealists, and so on. In Alex Grey's aesthetic perspective, "Each artist is a facet of God's unfolding infinite vision, refracting the light of awareness in his or her own particular way" (1998, p. 9). All visionaries express their creation in an original form, in a way that corresponds to their own artistic authenticity. This time, if sacred plants can be creative tools for the spiritual artists, their works of art can be magnificent mirrors for the mystical viewers. With the wisely used entheogenic master keys, the aesthete can explore the dimensions of divine creativity; and through the shamanistic contemplation, the seer can be brought into the transcendental realms of consciousness.

In triptychs like *Journey of the Wounded Healer*⁶ and *Holy Fire*⁷, Alex Grey represents the visionary's spiritual quest and his interdimensional transfiguration through the divine creation. In the *Journey of the Wounded Healer* triptych, *panel I* expresses the shaman's initiation into the realm of spirits and his evolutionary descent; *panel II* depicts the fragmentation of the ego at the subatomic, molecular, cellular, planetary and galactic levels of reality; and *panel III*, portrays the artistic healer ascending a crystal mountain towards the reintegration between Self and Godself. As suggested by the artistic philosopher Laurence Caruana, in *First Draft of a Manifesto of Visionary Art* (2001, p. 11): "All visionary artists are united by this spirit of on-going experimentation. And their works bear testimony to those mind-altering, soul-shattering but potentially enlightening experiences". Thus, the fearlessness needed to face the unknown, the passionate willpower to dissolve limiting beliefs and throw yourself into mystery, the strength to break old paradigms and go beyond obsolete values, these can be considered as the virtues that are part of the shamanistic collective consciousness. In accordance with the artist's integrative cosmivision:

Visionary mystical experiences are humanity's most direct contact with God and are the creative source of all sacred art and wisdom traditions. The best current existing technology for sharing the mystic imaginal realms is a well-crafted artistic rendering by an eye witness. Mystic visionary artists distil the multidimensional, entheogenic journey into externally crystallized theophanies, icons embedded with evolutionary worldviews (GREY, 2012, p. 182).

⁶ Disponível in: <https://www.alexgrey.com/art/anatomical/journey-of-the-wounded-healer>.

⁷ Disponível in: <https://www.alexgrey.com/art/anatomical/holy-fire>.

In Alex Grey understanding, the mystical experience induced by entheogens combined with spiritual exercises may be the oldest source of aesthetic inspiration. The elements present in shamanistic journey – such as music, dance, chants, and sacred plants – can lead the visionary traveller to contemplate unimaginable interior and exterior horizons, which are transformed into works of art: “The aim of these experiments is to bring alternative states of consciousness to reality. Or rather, to bear witness to other realities which are made evident in alternative states of consciousness” (CARUANA, 2001, p. 11). The *Holy Fire* triptych is a perfect example to illustrate the creative process of transcendental art. *Panel I* represents the immemorial ritual of the vision quest performed by the pilgrim of the entheogenic paths on the summit of an amethyst mountain. *Panel II* depicts the cryptozoological metamorphosis of the shaman into a phoenix, the legendary bird that symbolizes the rebirth of consciousness in the archetypal spheres. *Panel III* expresses the illumination of the initiate who, have attained the divine clairvoyance, descends the mountain to carry the message of transfiguration to aspirants on the holy pathways. The common element between the two highlighted triptychs is in the fact that both symbolize the search for an individual and planetary healing, the multidimensional epiphany of visionaries and the possibility of co-creating a better world for all.

Alex Grey artworks such as *Gaia*⁸ and *Adam and Eve*⁹ have a very strong social and ecological character. Shamans of all times have lived and are living in total synergy with cosmic and natural forces. From the entheogenic connection between humanity and divinity, the way to prevent an unprecedented catastrophe can be visualized, a new possibility of evolution and development can be opened to the human consciousness. From the position of Albert Hofmann [1906-2008]: “Awareness of the transcendent and religious nature of these truths gained through meditative observation and illumination could establish the foundation for a new universal spirituality” (2013, p. 74). The first work cited, or *Gaia*, brings with it all the love that shamans nurture for the generative forces of life and the extraordinary effort of nature to stay alive in the face of the ecogenocidal destruction caused by the necrocapitalist system. The last work mentioned, or *Adam and Eve*, represents the primordial garden of creation, the archetypal matrix of humanity symbolized by the union of polarities through transcendental knowledge: the paradise of past time in which humans, animals, vegetables, and minerals coexist in the most perfect harmony, like a mirror for the future generations. For Alex, as is evidenced, the purposes of sacred art are to heal traumatic experiences, reduce planetary suffering, and create meaning in existential reality:

⁸ Disponible in: <https://www.alexgrey.com/art/nature-field/gaia>.

⁹ Disponible in: <https://www.alexgrey.com/art/anatomical/adam-and-eve>.

Art can portray human struggle and suffering but can also uplift and heal the soul. Art can point to transcendental source of wisdom. By doing all these things and more, art can encourage and nurture what is best in us and give people joy and hope. If we cannot envision a better world, we cannot create one (GREY, 1998, p. 29).

In the shamanistic cosmovisions, all species have equal importance in ecosystem; for this reason, the artist's mission is to make the planet a good place, not just for himself, but so that all other forms of life can develop with him. Through the critical analysis of Grey's artworks, Donald Kuspit highlights the correlation between all the living forces present in the circumscription of cosmic creation: "The fundamental truth is that all living beings are finite forms or manifestations or materializations of infinite, universal energy, and when they die, they become pure energy once again" (2001, p. 48). Another important aspect of shamanism in the sacred art of Alex Grey comes to be the primordial connection with the animals of power. Two crucial examples to illustrate the totemic forces invoked by Alex are the paintings *Hummingbird*¹⁰ and *Vajra Horse*¹¹. In Amazonian cosmologies and folk legends, the hummingbird symbolizes pure love, spiritual healing, good fortune, psychological rebirth, crystal clearness and ontological lightness. In the cosmogonies and sovereignty myths of the Vedic tradition, the horse represents skilful activity, barrier breaking, quick decisions, energized enthusiasm, divine magnificence, endless creativity and the archetypal vehicle of Indra, the god-king of heaven. Animalistic totems in the context of visionary art can be understood as representations of guardian spirits who guide the shaman through the sacred journey.

2. Shamanism and Entheogens through Alex Grey's Artwork

Visionary mushrooms are the oldest entheogens known on the face of the Earth. These bewitching forms of life in symbiosis with the psychoactive flora of the Palaeolithic period may have been one of the main responsible for the cognitive development of the ancestors of human beings. Credit for this theory belongs to the philosophical ethnobotanist Terence McKenna [1946-2000]: "The strategy of these early human omnivores was to eat everything and to vomit whatever was unpalatable [...] The mushrooms would be especially noticeable because of their unusual form and colour" (1992,

¹⁰ Disponible in: <https://www.alexgrey.com/art/nature-field/humming-bird>.

¹¹ Disponible in: <https://www.alexgrey.com/art/nature-field/vajra-horse>.

p. 144). The evolution of consciousness through entheogenic dietetics is depicted by Grey in his painting *The Visionary Origin of Language*¹². In the latter, preterhuman intelligence holds a flush of sacred fungi, the images that form before the ancestral being are the first alphabets, the sounds that are heard by the speleological creature are the first words of the future humanity. Put another way, complex rationality may have emerged from higher states of mind:

Consciousness is an aspect of all life-forms and has obviously evolved and diversified along with the physical forms of all living beings. Observing human development in the light of evolution theory, we may surmise that human consciousness in its very early stages was without language and probably without the capacity for rational and conceptual thought. Humanity has developed to its current state of complex rationality because of the refinement of language. Considering consciousness as an evolutionary force may imply that there are higher states of consciousness beyond reason, transrational states (GREY, 1998, p. 59).

Transrational states go beyond the reason without, however, contradicting it. Such visionary processes are known by many names: the mystical experience is *Samadhi* in Vedantism, *Moksha* in Jainism, *Zazen* in Zen-Buddhism, *Sama* in Sufism, *Unio Mystica* in Judaism, *Gnosis* in Hellenism, *Henosis* in Neoplatonism, and on and on. Another Alex Grey's painting that represents the magical and healing power of the fungi kingdom is *Flesh of the Gods*.¹³ The work in question highlights the importance of magic mushrooms for the birth of religion and philosophy. The name "Flesh of the Gods" comes from the Mexican term *Teonanácatl*, as it was known among the Aztecs. The nomenclature of the mushroom among pre-Columbian civilizations points to its sacredness and ability to provide divine powers for shamans and other psychonauts¹⁴: "Few plants of the gods have ever been held in greater reverence than the sacred mushrooms of Mexico. So hallowed were these fungi that the Aztecs called *Teonanácatl* ("Divine Flesh") and used them Only in the most holy of their ceremonies" (SCHULTES; HOFMANN; RATSCH, 2001, p. 156). This artwork also suggests illustrating an ancient narrative that Siddhartha Gautama's ultimate nourishment – to attain *Mahaparinirvana*, that is, the final extinction – was a psychoactive mushroom called *Sukara-Maddava*. The psychedelic Buddha hypothesis was put forward by ethnomycologist Robert Gordon Wasson [1898-1986]. In his essay on the Buddhist mysticism, *The Last Meal of the Buddha*, the aforementioned researcher says: "Perhaps it was the first time in his life that

¹² Disponible in: <https://www.alexgrey.com/art/transcendental/visionary-origin-of-language>.

¹³ Disponible in: <https://www.alexgrey.com/art/nature-field/flesh-of-the-gods>.

¹⁴ The expression *Psychonauten* appears for the first time in the work *Annäherungen: Drogen und Rausch*, by the German philosopher Ernst Jünger [1895-1998]. The word "psychonaut" brings together two radicals from the Greek language, *psyché* (which can mean "soul/mind/conscience") and *nautikós/nautiké* (which can mean "navigator/art of navigation"). In this perspective, "psychonauts" could then be those who, through the technologies of consensual expansion, with the purpose of finding solutions to the crucial problems of civilization, practice "the art of navigation on the seas of the soul".

the Buddha, of *ksatriya* origin, was being offered mushrooms to eat. But these particular mushrooms were familiar to him because of their unique role in the Hindu religion in which had been brought up” (WASSON, 1986, p. 120). Capable to providing extraordinary experiences of consciousness, enabling the development of cognitive faculties and directing the human spirit towards the mystery of transcendence, magic mushrooms were the first forms of life on Earth and probably also be the last. If it were not for the intervention of fungi on nature, if the latter had not colonized the planet millions of years ago, perhaps plants and animals would never have developed, perhaps human beings would never have evolved to achieve rationality, perhaps the arts, sciences, religions and philosophy would never have been born.

The ritual use of cannabis can be identified in the magic and religions of mankind, in multiple parts of the world, from thousands of years until the present. The *Kaneh Bosm* of the biblical Old Testament, the Elixir of Jerusalem of the Knights Templar, the Green Lion of the alchemists of the Age of Enlightenment, the *Herbo Sanctissimo Arabico* mentioned in the mysterious, mystical and magical writings of Sir Aleister Crowley [1875-1947] are examples that highlight the undoubted presence of cannabic culture in the East and in the West, from antiquity to contemporary times. In his multidisciplinary book entitled *Food of the Gods*, Terence McKenna writes: “The thousands of names by which cannabis is known in hundreds of languages are testament not only to its cultural history and ubiquity but also its power to move the language-making faculty of the poetic soul” (1993, p. 82). In Alex Grey’s artwork, the painting entitled *Cannabacchus*¹⁵ expresses the magical-religious power of the sacred herb in the classical world. In Roman mythology, Bacchus was the god of wine, drunkenness, physical excesses, music and nature. Alex portrays the god with a greenish weed eyed-mask symbolizing the multilateral vision opened by the plant and the celebration of fertility or the bacchanals, the entheogenic rituals performed in his honour in ancient Rome. In the insights of the psychonaut artist, the wisdom of cannabis is manifested through the utility, sexuality, health, love, poetry, perception and spirituality, or the key virtues of the seven chackras:

Seven Lights of Cannabis Wisdom. 1. The light of utility: Cannabis is nature’s most useful plant, providing hemp fibers for clothing, rope, hemp oil, hemp plastics stronger than steel. 2. The light of sexuality: The increased sensitivity and aphrodisiacal qualities of cannabis inebriation are undeniable. 3. The light of health: The numerous medical applications of cannabis for healing and hemp powder as a complete food are a boon for the body. 4. The light of love: Cannabis opens the heart and sensitizes us to the others. 5. The light of poetry: Cannabis allows the flowing tongues of bards contact with new modes of knowing and speaking. 6. The light of vision: Opening of the third eye allows the artist in everyone access to the Divine Imagination. 7. The light of God: Ganja smoking Babas, Rastafari, and many others regard cannabis as a sacrament opening us to the highest creative source, allowing us to realize we are the Light (GREY, 2008, p. 91).

¹⁵ Disponible in: <https://www.alexgrey.com/art/psychedelic-saints/cannabacchus>.

The cabalistic meaning of number seven establishes an analogy with musical notes, days of week, colours of the rainbow, magical planets, and also with the seven branches of cannabis leaf: not by random Alex chose it to numerologically illustrate the wisdom derived from the sacred weed. Another important painting by Grey that comes to represent the connection of his art with the plants of power and eastern religiosity is named *Cannabis Sutra*.¹⁶ Called *Ambrosia*, *Bhang*, *Charas*, *Ganja* or *Vijaya* in the Vedic Tradition, besides being popularly used in the Festival of Colours, a celebration held every year to commemorate the arrival of spring, and other religious holidays, cannabis as a power plant is a ritualistic sacrament for devotees of Shiva, Krishna, Kali, Ganga, and many other divinities, also used by these mystics in the ceremonies of Tantra: “In Tantric sex rites, cannabis was often consumed. Although Shiva is the Lord of Bhang, cannabis appears in offerings to a number of other deities such as those dedicated to Shiva’s consort Kali, Goddess of Life and Death” (BENNETT, 2018, p. 64). On the canvas painted by Alex, an interdimensional human figure can be seen with a cannabis leaf fixed in the centre of his forehead and holding another in his left hand. The two visible leaves have spiritual eyes in their respective branches, ramifications that represent the various modes of understanding and perception stimulated by the magic herb. The ritual consecration of cannabis in India is very vast and multi-millennial. In the *Atharva Veda*, for example, the plant comes to be described as a sacramental inebriant that was created along with *Soma*, a mysterious healing potion that appears in the scriptures, at the moment when the gods stirred the oceans. Having a divine origin in the East at the same time natural in the West, as well as multiple forms of use in science, art, thought and mysticism, cannabis can be considered a master plant, and perhaps the most widely used psychoactive plant worldwide, an inestimable creative tool in Alex Grey’s visionary process.

Ayahuasca is a sacred brew that consists of the basic mixture of two Amazonian plants, namely, *Banisteriopsis Caapi* and *Psychotria Viridis*. The featured entheogen has many different popular names: *Uni*, *Kamalāpi*, *Yagé*, *Nixi Pae*, *Daime*, *Hoasca*, and others. How and when the *Banisteriopsis* and *Psychotria* were united for the first time is to this day an ethnopharmacobotanical enigma. Nevertheless, one can safely say that the psychoactive sacrament is part of the traditional medicine of many rainforest people, like the Yawanawa, the Huni Kuin and the Shipibo, as well as being the most recognized guiding thread of the ritualistics in the Brazilian entheogenic religions: “The drink, employed for prophecy, divination, sorcery, and medical purposes, is so deeply rooted in native mythology and philosophy that there can be no doubt of its great age as a part of aboriginal life” (SCHULTES; HOFMANN; RATSCH,

¹⁶ Disponível in: <https://www.alexgrey.com/art/fire-eyes/cannabis-sutra>.

2001, p. 124). *Vision Tree*¹⁷ is a painting by Alex Grey in which one can clearly perceive the symbology of the ayahuasca mysteries. In the centre of the canvas, at a proximal angle, a female figure burns in purifying flames: she is the Queen of the Forest, the Pacha Mama, the wild woman who emerges from within the Tree of Life. Around her, in a medial position, the master plants that constitutes the wine of the souls, just as the jaguar and the serpent, the power animals that symbolize the union of polarities, can be seen. On the sides of the frame, in a distal perspective, the original ayahuasca users are depicted preparing and consecrating the medicine in a ritualistic context. The following passage describes the paths that were opened for the artist through the ritual use of the sacred plants:

Some cultures have elaborated and cathartic rites of passage for every stage of life. Our culture has not fostered safe death and rebirth rituals. So people create their own, consciously or unconsciously. I have found that entheogens and other spiritual practices can provide ego-shattering, cathartic yet reassuring encounters with inner spiritual light [...] However we transcend and transform ourselves, let us be encouraged not to lose hope; the ground of infinite compassion and illuminating vision is everyone's rebirthright. Art can illumine the shadows and pains of ego's death, and art can midwife the soul's brilliant rebirth (GREY, 1998, p. 146).

Alex found in the rituals of the shamanistic traditions a safe way to access psychedelic realities that are only perceptible from extraordinary states of consciousness. Through the consecration of entheogens and mystical practices, the artist can find the answers to the most disturbing enigmas of existence and transform highest levels of perception into works of art. According to Ken Wilber's vision, in his essay *In the Eye of the Artist* (1990, p. 13): "Art was to be not just the technical skills of observation and execution, or creativity, but a method of spiritual growth and development on the part of the artists". A significant spiritual experience of Alex Grey with entheogenic flora can be observed in his painting *Peyote Being*.¹⁸ The peyote cactus, whose scientific name is *Lophophora Williamsii*, also popularly known as *Hikuri*, *Mescalito*, *Tatewari*, *Wirikuta*, has for millennia occupied a sacramental space of fundamental importance among the original Mexican and North American people, like the Cheyenne, the Apache and the Huichol: "Peyote is considered sacred by Native Americans, a divine "messenger" enabling the individual to communicate with God without the medium or a priest. It is an earthly representative of God to many peyotists" (SCHULTES; HOFMANN; RATSCH, 2001, p. 154). On the aforementioned canvas, a trifacial figure of humanoid appearance can be seen: it is the spirit of the peyote manifesting its power in the sensible, intelligible and transcendental worlds. The two skulls with foetuses inside that reflect each other, as well as the phoenix rising toward heavens, represent the cycles of death and rebirth, the reconciliation of antinomies that presents itself to the shaman on his journey

¹⁷ Disponible in: <https://www.alexgrey.com/art/nature-field/vision-tree>.

¹⁸ Disponible in: <https://www.alexgrey.com/art/transcendental/peyote-being/>.

through the spheres of perception. *The Visionary Origin of Language, Flesh of the Gods, Cannabacchus, Cannabis Sutra, Vision Tree* and *Peyote Being*, are works that clearly, distinctly, and undoubtedly portray the connection between shamanism, sacred plants, and Alex Grey's visionary art.

Conclusion: The Creative Keys for the Evolution of Consciousness

For visionary artists like Alex and Allyson Grey, as well as the vast majority of Chapel of Sacred Mirrors members, entheogens are like creative keys which enhance the capacity to perceive, reflect and appreciate, with greater richness of details, the possibilities of being in the world and the life that we love. To constitute a work of art from the entheogenic experience is not only a manner of keeping alive a tradition of knowledge that has existed since immemorial times, but it is also a very efficient form of direct action against the international repression of psychoactive substances, a prohibition which damages the cultural and religious memory of the original people around the world. In the perspective of Stephen Larsen: "The act of ingesting an entheogen, painting the experience, and speaking openly about it becomes a political act in the face of unjust laws and a protest of repression of what should be a basic freedom of religion" (2001, p. 39). Sacred plants and/or enlightenment drugs when used by the artist in a therapeutic, psychedelic and mystical context can be enable himself to perfect his creative techniques, cognitive faculties and perceptual abilities, to intercept what cannot be grasped by ordinary states of consciousness. For the Colombian anthropologist Luis Eduardo Luna, in his scientific article about mind phenomenology entitled *The Varieties of Ayahuasca Experience* (2008, p. 71-72): "These strong aesthetic feelings are enormously uplifting, liberating, and therapeutic. Synesthetic experiences are frequent, such as auditory hallucinations and tactile sensations and an array of other possible effects". Thus, the entheogenic journeys fulfil the purpose of awakening the psychonaut to their better existential possibility, and in the case of aesthetes, the immersions enable them to find an original source of inspiration and meaning for their works of art, without excluding the shamanistic origin of the impulse that triggers their creative visions. In this sense, the visionary art of Alex Grey should be seen as an authentical ally of the shamanism and vice-versa:

The ceremony in Grey's art is not literal "extra-cultural" transpositions, or reconstructed borrowings, but rather personal rituals with transpersonal intentions. For Grey, the purpose of the shaman's art and actions today is to catalyse the awareness or awakening within a culture to the unknow realities, or sacred mysteries, that our scientific, ecclesiastical, and civic institutions have systematically denied and suppressed since their first inception" (MCCORMICK, 1990, p. 23).

The art of Alex Grey seeks to open ways for traditional knowledge to gain visibility in academic, scientific and secular environments, in institutions that often have no openness to mystery, no place for the unknown, no space for the extraordinary, so that the latter may break outdated paradigms and recognize other epistemological possibilities for interpreting the world. In the words of Albert Hofmann: “This knowledge is in harmony with the mystic’s experience of the unity of all life—of the integral security of the human being within the living Creation” (2013, p. 74-75). The ritualistic use of power plants combined with spiritual practices by the visionary artist aims to expand the collective consciousness, to connect the human spirit with the Cosmic Force, to awaken the individual to his true nature, to constitute an experimental mysticism that interconnects Eastern and Western wisdom traditions in an interfaith path. Stephen Larsen emphasises: “An understanding of perennial philosophy, the cross-cultural essence of the world’s mystical traditions, is evident in Grey’s interfaith artwork” (2001, p. 44). Throughout the interior of the Chapel of Sacred Mirrors, the art gallery of Alex and Allyson Grey, the most varied religious symbols can be identified by the viewers. Glyphs of Pax Cultura, Native American, Shinto, Taoism, Sufism, Sikhism, Wiccan, Hinduism, Baha’i, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Tibetan Buddhism, Islam, Pagan, Hunab Ku, Buddhism, Jainism, and many other expressions of religiosity can be seen by the attentive observer, who will surely recognize, amidst the plurality, spiritual experience as the common denominator of sacred pathways.

The contemplation of archetypal images presented in sacred art may be able to favour the awakening of everyday consciousness to existence of the divine being that inhabits the ontological architectures of the eternal spirit. For very sensitive spectators, the apparently simple experience of contemplating a masterpiece can provoke remarkably powerful physical, mental, emotional and spiritual reactions on the human soul. In the Grey’s worldview: “At the moment of aesthetic perception, if one is viewing a great work of art, one’s rational faculties are transcended and the ego seems to dissolve into an awe-filled timeless presence” (1998, p. 83). A truly integrative artwork brings together in its entirety the elements pertaining to sensibility, intelligibility and transcendentality, that is to say, the phenomenological set that contemplates the most impacting biological, psychological and energetic impressions possible in life. Not many contemporary artists embrace through creative movement the multidimensional varieties of aesthetic experimentation, but from the angle of vision presented by Ken Wilber: “Alex’s work places him in a very small group of important contemporary artists; through his art he aspires to all three realms – reaching from matter, to mind, to spirit – in itself a very rare ideal” (1990, p. 15). The crucial difference between visionaries and conventional artists resides in the fact that the first are willing to use all means to reach the superior state of perception from which they draw the inspiration and the latter, paralysed by the terror that can come from facing the unknow dimensions of

consciousness, are not willing to risk everything for their creations. The *First Draft of a Manifesto of Visionary Art* makes this distinction clear:

Where Surrealists tried to elevate the dream-state into a higher reality (and opposed the use of narcotics) the Visionary artist uses all means at his disposal - even at great risk to himself - to access different states of consciousness and expose the resulting vision. Art of the Visionary attempts to show what lies beyond the boundary of our sight. Through dream, trance, or other altered states, the artist attempts to see the unseen - attaining a visionary state that transcends our regular modes of perception. The task awaiting him, thereafter, is to communicate his vision in a form recognizable to 'everyday sight' (CARUANA, 2001, p. 10).

Although the conceptual discussion of psychonautic art is recent, the artists belonging to the movement described above are being responsible for the continuation of a much older tradition, which begins with the Palaeolithic art associated with shamanism. From his earliest works, one of Alex Grey's strongest tendencies has been to realize the ideal of shamanistic visionary art: "The detailed precision of his work arises from an obsession to experience and communicate the multidimensional nature of the self and the transformative and evolutionary potential of consciousness" (WILBER, 1990, p. 15). The art of the visionaries stands out from the conventional arts because where many others go backwards, they go forwards; because, even in the face of the atavistic forces of the collective unconscious that can trigger fear attacks in unexperienced psychonauts, the artist of panoramic vision does not hesitate to surrender body and soul to the purposes of cosmic creativity, however much he may not be an experienced traveller, since he understands that even from adversity something genuine can blossom. According to the transpersonal perspective presented by Stanislov and Christina Grof [1941-2014], in their co-created book titled *Beyond Death: the Gates of Consciousness* (1980, p. 94): "Only when the ordinary perception of the material world is transcended - as in deep meditation, psychedelic states, spontaneous mystical experience or physical emergency - can consciousness connect with the heavenly regions". The intensive processes of death and rebirth, the phenomenological visualization of beauty and ugliness, the aesthetic experimentation of the sublime and the grotesque, the metaphysical contemplation of light and shadow are part of spiritual transformation and as such should not be rejected; on the contrary, in order to catalyse all the forces of creation, the opposites must be unified through mystical art. The results of the experience provided by experimental mysticism should never be reduced to moral terms, limited by the concepts of good and evil, diminished by conceptions of right and wrong, seeing that, the psychonautic journey transcends duality and projects the adventurer into the dimension of the Great Primordial One, into the hypersphere where the polarities are reunited in the supreme oneness.

By awakening the consciousness of the divinity that exists within himself, through the ritualistic use of entheogens and sacramental practices of mysticism, the visionary can become aware of

his planetary mission, that consists of preventing the extinction of humanity, making his own existence a work of art that aligns itself with all forms of life on Earth: “The great uplifting of humanity beyond its self-destruction is the redemptive mission of art” (GREY, 2013, p. 100). The creative process of mystical art resembles, in a microcosmic measure, the force that always moves the axis of the wheel of worlds, the manifestation of the generative power that governs the machinery of the universe, the mysterious energy that builds the great work of the Universal Architect. In his book *The New Mission of Art*, elucidates the philosopher Jean Delville [1867-1953]: “Art is that balancing force which brings the rational into harmony with the spiritual, emotion with reason, and the natural with the supernatural [...] The monstrous is mingled with the divine. It is an astounding chaos of hidden glories” (1910, p. 65). Entheogenic creativity would be the force that transforms the artist into a co-creator of reality, an active agent of transfiguration that will regenerate the opened wounds of the world, an instrument at the service of the unlimited spirit that gave birth to all visible and invisible beings, a legitimate clairvoyant who wisely appreciates power plants to convert the results of his appreciation into aesthetic creation:

Art is the transmission of states of being. Viewers appreciate art because they resonate with those states of being. No matter what state of being is expressed in a work of art, universal creative spirit is the prime mover behind all art media. The transparency of a work of art to its spiritual source makes visible the depth of an artist’s penetration into the divine mystery of creation. Most works of art in the twentieth century do not deliberately invoke or evoke God and therefore remain opaque or obscure to their true source. If metaphysical truth is the basis of great art, then the artist’s creative receptivity or spiritual attunement to inspiration must be developed as conscientiously as any skill with clay, pen or brush. For artists, the goal is to reach a state of mind where art flows irresistibly through them. Finding that energetic and idiosyncratic fountain of creation, an art spirit, is the artist’s task” (GREY, 1998, p. 79-80).

Like shamans who connect with the forces of nature through healing chants, sacred drums, whirling dances and master plants, visionaries connect with the forces of the universe through electronic music, archetypal dreams, psychedelic journeys and spiritual exercises. For Alex Grey, the fraternal celebration of urban tribes with original tribes opens the way that can prevent both the destruction of traditional knowledge and the annihilation of the human species itself: “When tribes of humans gathering in natural surroundings experience inspirational mass consciousness, utopian dreams are catalysed, which is important for human survival” (2012, p. 95). When art comes to be considered as mystical practice and when the mystical practice comes to be interpreted as art, the metaphysical paths of the shaman and the aesthete intertwine at some point of convergence in the space-time binomial. In his book *Telematic Embrace: Visionary Theories of Art, Technology, and Consciousness*, Roy Ascott affirms: “As artists, we move through parallel universes, shifting in and out of time-frames, phase shifts, tunnelling through one set of realities into other worlds” (2003, p. 230). The technologies used by the psychedelic artists to achieve their creative visions serve to communicate the advent of a new perspective that can

change the fate of the world and civilization. According to Robert Masters and Jean Houston: “Utilizing these basically familiar forms, but sometimes in new way sand with unique vision, psychedelic art may come to speak better than any other to a new consciousness emerging among our people in our time” (1968, p. 21). In this new paradigm, psychoactive substances are not thought of as agents provoking public and private degradation, but rather, as powerful supertonicics that are able to reverse the deterioration of society and individuals. The visionary shaman, as follows, the mystical artist who makes use of a psychonautic methodology to reach higher states of consciousness and transforms the impressions of journey into artistic creation, not only opens the gateways of the supra-sensible dimension, but also brings the content of the latter into sensible reality. In the words of Alex Grey: “The job of the visionary artist is to experience the higher spiritual states and to bring this experience – in the form of energy and imagery – to his or her art” (1990, p. 71). Through the sense of unicity provided by the communion of sacred plants and by the common desire to make life as a work of art, people of all ethnicities, religions and philosophies can meet with the truth in their hearts and share the wisdom with each other. The ethnocentric worldview that starts from the false premise in which one culture is superior to another, deservingly, is crushed into pieces by the creative union of all visionary tribes in the multidimensional organicity of the web of life.

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