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Photography in the Arts

ADAD5004 Research in Practice

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Consciousness, paradox and practice.

List of Enclosures

1. Jacob's Dream by William Blake, circa 1799-1806.
2. Diagram of keywords, 'The spectrum of arrows' by Jeffrey Mishlove, 2021.
3. Mark Rothko's Black on Maroon, 1958.
4. Vincent Van Gogh's Starry Night, 1889.
5. L'hotel de la plage. Dolores Marat.
6. L'enfant dans la sable. 1993. Dolores Marat.
7. Domen Lo, Bargoed. Osi Rhys Osmond.



Fig 1

In this essay I will research the keyword topics of consciousness, paradox and practice, in order to arrive at a question that will then form the basis of further academic study.

Kandinsky, W. (1977p.1), suggests that “Every work of art is a child of its age and, in many cases, the mother of our emotions.”

He goes on to propose that art conveys more meaning and connects more directly if it comes from the heart and the soul of the practitioner and it is only when sincerely held emotions are expressed can the artist expect to engender an emotive response in herself or a spectator. He posits that spiritual aspects of art are deeply entwined within this relationship.

Marien, M.W. (2006, quoted in Bull, 2010, p.133), when talking about Minor White states “White saw art photographs as ‘mirrors’ of the photographer rather than windows on the world.”

It seems to me, as an aspiring artist, that I should seek to understand myself and to try to express my emotions, beliefs and feelings into creative work. When one’s world view is challenged by new life perspectives then it is perhaps vital to reevaluate one’s core values and try to assess and contextualise this potentially new and uncharted personal landscape.

For the past four decades I would have described myself as an atheist. However, as a child I was expected to attend religious services. I went to a Church in Wales school, Neath’s Alderman Davies, where daily religious ceremonies were embedded into the routine. I went to the midweek youth club run by the church; I went to Sunday School and was a choir boy and required to participate in the morning and evening Sunday services. I was Confirmed into the Church of England at the age of 12.

Despite all of the religious education and indoctrination that I experienced, I remember that I always had a feeling that I lacked a true faith. I felt that somehow, I was a fraud and that I was missing out on something and that maybe I was just not bright enough to understand. I found it difficult to accept the supernatural aspects of this Christian religion. Also, it seemed that the prevailing paradigm of the early 1970's was one of declining religiosity. It was an age of technology and in school I was taught the scientific method based on experimentation and empiricism.

As I got older and gained greater personal agency, I decided that I would no longer attend church and that I could not identify as a Christian. My Atheism was strengthened and affirmed by the writings of people like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens and it seemed to me that a reductive materialistic view of the world was the only credible explanation for the meaning of life. I believed that when we die it is the end for us as individuals; there will be nothingness.

Dawkins, R. (2007) talks about a God who is described in the world's religious texts as often vengeful and cruel and how organised religions seem to sometimes display dogmatic, brutal, controlling and exploitative traits. His writings helped to push me towards Atheism and also to disregard the possibilities of a spiritual existence. Whilst I acknowledged the intriguing complexities and vibrancies of culture, art, politics, philosophy and so on, as highlighted by the New Materialists such as Jane Bennett, I was closed off to the possibility of there being anything other than a Materialist perspective where everything derives from matter and that consciousness is a material product of, and solely contained in the lump of meat in our heads. I was at times drawn towards the Humanist and Buddhist traditions but did little to explore these concepts further.

I wish to avoid sentimentality but I need to set out the nature of the challenge to my previously held world views. In October 2021 my partner Heather died. One of the most emotionally difficult aspects of supporting her through the last year of her life was the fact that she was an atheist and that she had no expectation of an afterlife. She was also angry and bitterly disappointed at a terminal diagnosis and that her life was ending at the relatively young age of fifty-nine.

The reality of that situation and of an early death of someone near and dear confronted itself to me in a manner that I had never before experienced. Suddenly death was closer than it had ever been. I felt many emotions including a deep sadness for Heather that she faced something brutally final. She believed that she was about to cease to exist. I wanted to help ease this stark and cruel expectation and I began to research literature about dying.

Through studies around death and near-death experiences, Fenwick, P. & Fenwick E., (2008), suggest that consciousness may survive the demise of the body. Peter Fenwick's scientific expertise, medical experience and peer reviewed studies in this area seem to strengthen the validity of his messages contained in this book. Further research has led me to conclude that there is a strong argument in favour of the proposition that the nature of consciousness might be fundamentally different to what I had previously accepted.

A compelling argument on the nature of consciousness and the survival of body death is presented by Mishlove, J. (2021) where he pulls together several keywords and goes on to examine these themes in more depth within his essay.

The Spectrum of Arrows

The best evidence in favor of an afterlife are the multiple, independent investigation approaches all pointing, in different ways, to postmortem survival. This section includes nine categories of inquiry. They are presented here, in clockwise order, as they are discussed in this section. In each case, critics have raised objections to which researchers have carefully, and successfully, responded. Salient debate points are covered.

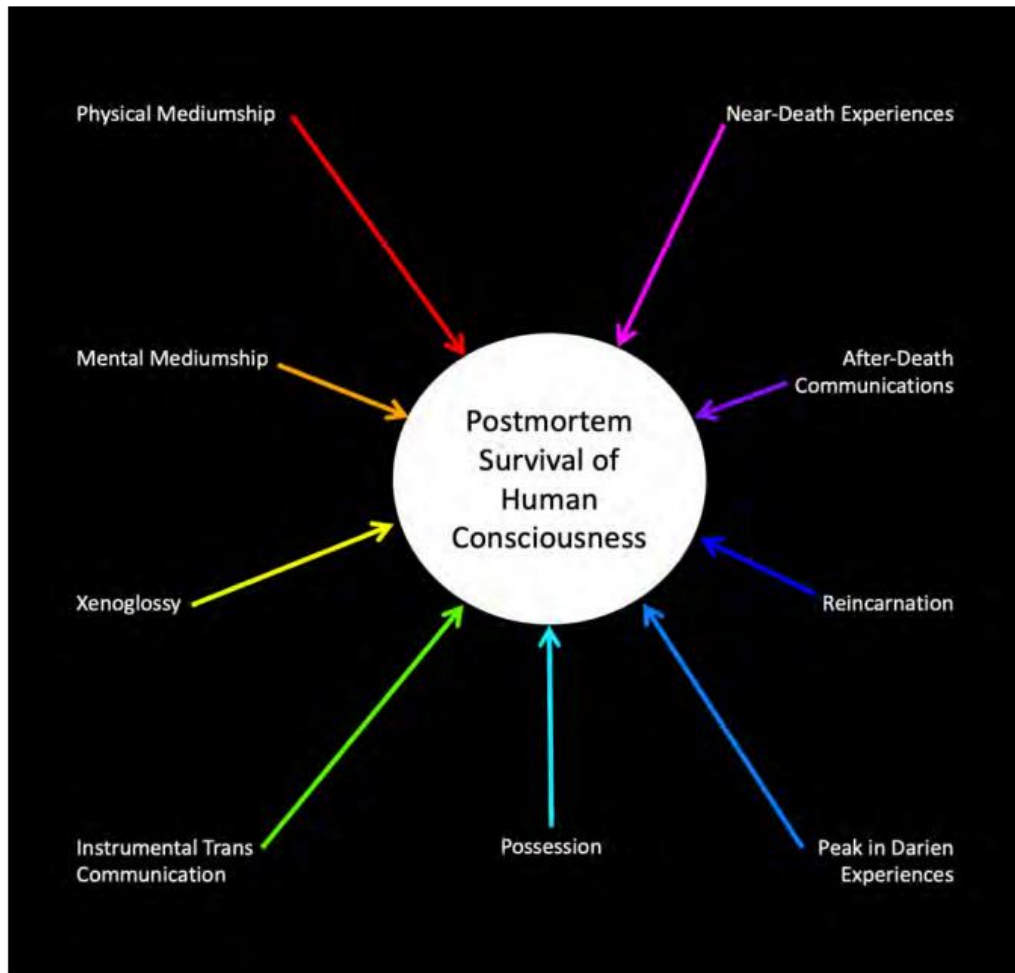


Fig 2

It is not my intention to advocate for the possibility of an enduring consciousness. Rather, I acknowledge that my own world view has encountered a paradigm shift and that I need to contextualise and explore these emerging perspectives in relation to ongoing creativity.

Main, R., (1977, p.122-128) presents correspondence between Carl Jung and the physicist Wolfgang Pauli and other writings by Jung on physics. Pauli and Jung discuss the paradoxical phenomena of the observer effect revealed by quantum mechanical experiments and the implications on the human psyche and Jung's ideas about a collective unconscious.

Jung's observations regarding quantum paradoxes and his ideas suggesting interconnectivity seem to be strengthened by further research.

Radin, D. (1997) ventures to explain how established quantum paradoxes relate to the nature of a non-local bound consciousness. He points out (Bell's theorem, p.300), that studies support the theory of entanglement where matter is connected and interwoven with other matter throughout the universe, instantaneously.

Famously, Einstein called this 'spooky action at a distance'. This seems to be an extraordinary revelation to me, bursting with conundrum and implications for artistic communications and my understanding of life and art.

Walleczek, J. & von Stillfried, N. (2019), raise concerns with Radin's claims regarding consciousness and suggest that his experimental methods are suspect.

Connected to the entanglement concept appears to be the observer paradox.

Al-Khalili, J. (2013), in his lecture to the Royal Institution explains the common-sense challenges of the double slit experiment, one of which is that the outcome is dependent on if it is being observed or not. For a Materialist, this is surely mind boggling. The wave becomes a particle when it is observed, now or any time in the future. It seems it is consciousness that gives rise to and creates matter.

He goes on to give further examples of quantum weirdness including entanglement, quantum tunnelling and quantum super position. He points out that in a quantum system all possible outcomes have potential. He tells us that quantum bizarreness is not limited to the subatomic but to all matter and all areas of scientific endeavour. He states, “Quantum mechanics is the most powerful theory in all of science.”

Barlow, P.W. (2015) discusses the studies on consciousness by Hameroff and Penrose and proposes that there are spiritual possibilities associated with their theories, including evidence relating to conscious awareness in plants.

Hameroff, S. and Penrose, R. (2014) have created the ‘Orch OR’ theory of consciousness and describe it as a quantum system. Mislove, J., (2015), discusses with Stuart Hameroff the spiritual implications of his and (Nobel Laureate, 2020), Sir Roger Penrose’s theories.

Hameroff proposes that as consciousness is a quantum system then it possesses the properties of quantum mechanics including entanglement and a non-local state potential.

He contends that his and Penrose’s findings are consistent with other studies and theories in the areas of parapsychology and spirituality and allows for the concept of an enduring, after death survival of the egoic self and supports the proposition that consciousness may be non-local and not restricted or restrained within a brain.

Indeed, Hameroff points out that, for example, a single celled organism such as the paramecium feeds, evades danger, seeks out a mate and has sex and does so without a brain or any apparent nervous system.

I am impressed and intrigued by the way that Hameroff and Penrose seem to combine the biological mechanisms and anatomy of the human brain (the microscopic neurone tubules

where consciousness resides) with the apparent quantum characteristics of consciousness. They appear to enjoy an eminent status within the scientific mainstream and seem to have highly regarded reputations, which make their theories more palatable and evidentially more robust for me.

However, their claims are not unchallenged and Reimers et al, (2014) criticise what they describe as Hameroff and Penrose's vague assumptions. Nevertheless, I feel that 'Orch Or' theory seems to me to be phenomenologically salient and worthy of serious contemplation.

A materialistic view of the world is significantly challenged by Hoffman, D., (2019), where he argues with his Interface Theory of Perception (ITP), that space time itself is false. At (p.102) he states, "Quantum weirdness is not confined to the subatomic realm."

He proposes that it is consciousness that brings into existence matter; and that matter is very different to what we perceive as a reality. He states (p.94),

ITP makes bold and testable predictions. It predicts that spoons and stars – all objects in space and time – do not exist when unperceived or unobserved. Something exists when I see a spoon, and that something, whatever it is, triggers my perceptual system to create a spoon, and to endow it with a position, a shape, a motion, and other physical properties. But when I look away, I no longer create that spoon and it ceases to exist, along with its physical properties.

He shakes to the core my world view with these claims. In one sense ITP has indexical links to Simulation and Simulacra, but where the shifting and slippage of meanings for Baudrillard is grounded in culture and society, Hoffman's theory of a symbol on a desktop, a simulacra, are altogether more shockingly elemental and intrinsic to nature.

Baudrillard, J. (1994, p.159), discusses nihilism engendered by consumerism and says, 'But before the simulated transparency of all things, before the simulacrum of the materialist or idealist realisation of the world in hyperreality (God is not dead, he has become hyperreal), there is no longer a theoretical or critical God to recognise his own.'

If, as Mishlove and others argue there is an afterlife, then for me this is a concept that challenges a nihilism engendered by an increasingly capitalist, consumerist and exploitative age. Fenwick, P. & Fenwick E. describe the near-death experiences we undergo as including a detailed life review and as a result our actions in life and interactions with others may carry with them a profound significance.

These Idealistic perspectives are perhaps nothing new and virtually every world religion throughout history has claimed theological and ontological commonalities, including the idea that we are accountable for our thoughts and actions and that there could be a reckoning. If we substitute the word God for consciousness then Idealistic and religious doctrines can seem to, in part, overlap neatly.

I find that my world view has been influenced by the above ideas regarding the ontological nature of consciousness, existence and the possibility of a soul surviving the death of the body. I think that I must now consider life and art in a different way. These ideas have had a profound effect on me and whilst I am reluctant to adopt a new label at this time, I now consider myself to be more of a free thinker and open to non-materialistic viewpoints.



Fig 3.

When I sit in front of the Segram Murals by Mark Rothko at the Tate Modern, I feel that I engage more than just my five senses of eyesight, hearing, touch, taste and smell. There is, after a while, a kind of bliss and a feeling of, or a hint of rhythmic, meditative vibration emanating from the work. I sense a quality of otherness and of something difficult to put into words. This bliss like experience is also something that I occasionally encounter at times during a creative process such as making art or playing music.

I acknowledge that the room itself and the curation of the works are wonderfully enveloping but I think that this might just be helpfully conducive but not causative in inducing an altered conscious state.

I have a similar experience when I look at many of the works of Vincent Van Gogh. I feel that I can sense his angst, wonder and creative drive. I accept that I may be culturally primed as a spectator and I acknowledge that I have seen the 1958 film 'Lust for Life' with Kirk Douglas and also listened to Don McLean's 1972 song 'Vincent', along with many other cultural conditionings. However, I still feel the intentionality and the emotions of the artist coming through strongly.



Fig. 4.

Gregg, M. & Seigworth, J. (2012) suggest "Affect arises in the midst of in-between-ness: in the capacities to act and be acted upon." They argue that affect can take in and intertwine with developments in science, the quantum and neurosciences.

Combs et al, (2007), describe the Akashic Field as comprising of all knowledge and memory of the universe, existing in the quantum and subquantum states and accessible to us under certain conditions such as during meditation. One wonders if a creative work might carry with it traces of the emotions and intentionality of the maker and there seems to be a clear resonance here with Jung's theory of a universal consciousness and that of Benjamin, W. (2008) and his ideas regarding the aura surrounding a work of art.

Numerous studies, undertaken by highly respectable scientists suggest that reality may be far from the mainstream reductive materialist beliefs of people in Western cultures. If consciousness is not constrained within the brain, then it seems that many of these anomalous proposals above may have some credibility and more to the point, now seem to me to feel 'right'.

It is widely acknowledged that there is no unifying Theory of Everything (TOE), despite a century of searching and experimentation by the world's brightest minds. As Hoffman points out, Newtonian and Einsteinian physics work to a point, and we know that the maths around quantum theory to be correct. But they do not fit with a materialist assumption of reality.

He states, (p.114), "Remarkably, a key prediction of ITP - that spacetime must go before a TOE will come - is close to consensus amongst physicists".

With regard to creative endeavour and expression, I'm now inclined to acknowledge and give attention to the possibilities and implications of a free ranging consciousness phenomenon. Not only must I consider the compositions, the denoted and connoted semiotic messages and all the other physical, time and space elements and variables but also the paranormal and spiritual; the in-between.

One artist who seems to create a distinct feeling of unease and contradictory otherness is Dolores Marat; I sense a glimmery metaxis between the banal and every day, imbued with a sinister and dreamlike quality.

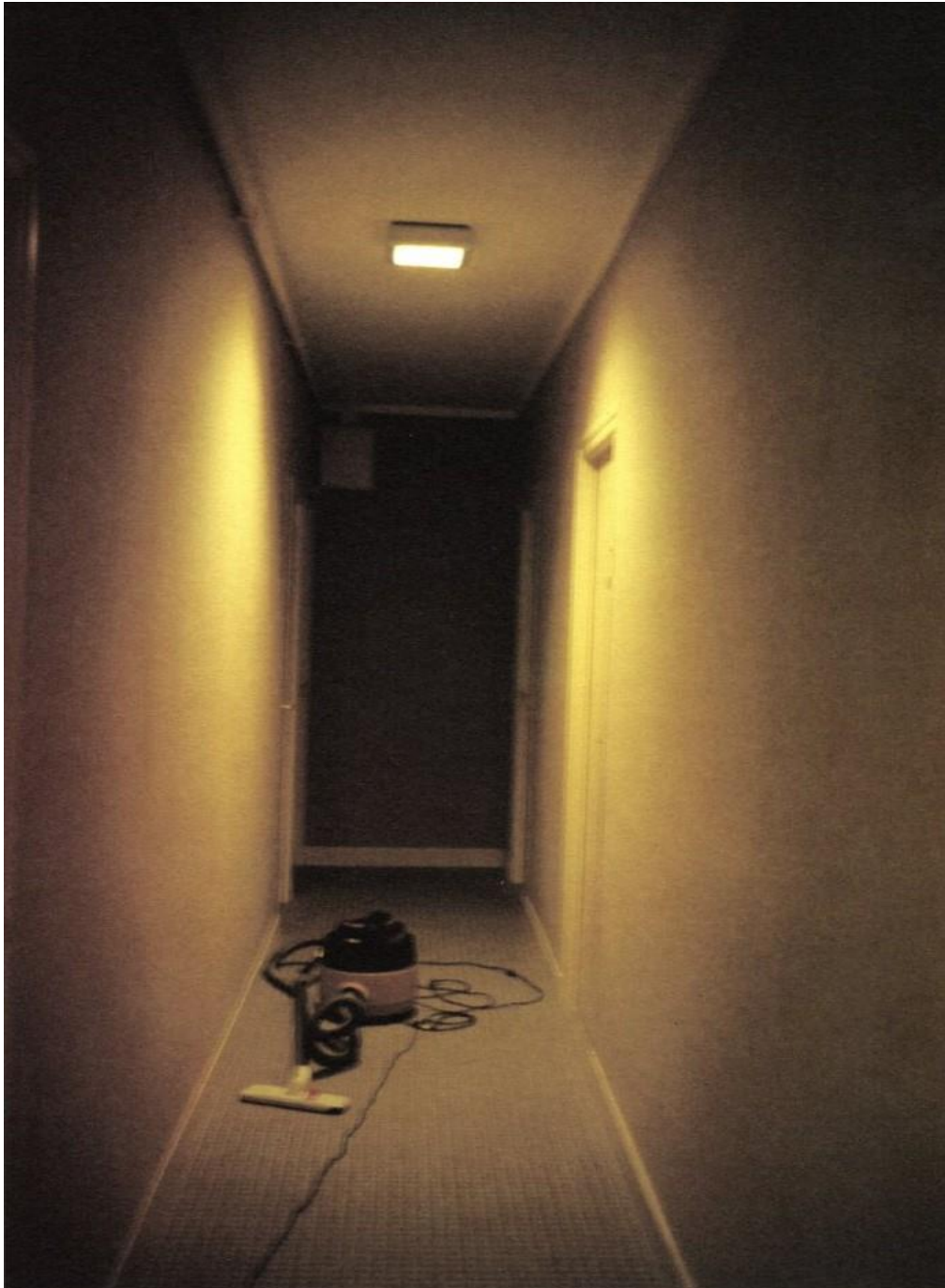


Fig 5



Fig 6

I could add many examples of artists whose work invites a deeper engagement. Perhaps it is the case that every piece of art can be interacted with subliminally, given the right conditions, to hint at its story and the intentionality of the maker.

In formulating a question, I bear in mind a recent lecture where it was reported that the artist Osi Rhys Osmond suggested that we are not seeking answers to questions; art is something we engage in.



Fig. 7.

Taking this on board, I nevertheless propose a question that will form the basis of further study.

What is the nature of consciousness?

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