POLITICS OF CONSCIOUSNESS AND IMMERSIVE MEDIA: AN INTEGRATIVE REVIEW

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Abstract: Awe-inspiring experiences and aesthetic rituals can induce profound epistemic transformations while also intersecting with structures of power. This review examines diverse case studies – from Amazonian shamanic rituals to ancient Egyptian temple arts, Surrealist dream experiments, transpersonal psychology, and science-fiction cyberculture – to understand how designed experiences of awe and immersion can transform or define knowledge and agency. Across these domains, we see a common thread: "politics of consciousness" – the way altered states and symbolic systems affect individual and collective worldviews – entwines with both spiritual mythos, realpolitik (the exercise of power), and sociotechnical imaginaries. We highlight examples of how sacred art-ritual ecologies and modern media techniques serve as architectures of transformation, allude to the distinctions of individual, community and corporate liminoid experiences, and then explore how technologically-mediated awe can both elevate and undermine human freedom. The goal is to elucidate how rituals of awe – including emerging immersive media – function as both tools of epistemic change and sites of political contestation over the human spirit.

Keywords: Awe; Art; Futurism; Shamanism; Design

POLÍTICA DA CONSCIÊNCIA E MEDIA IMERSIVA: UMA REVISÃO INTEGRATIVA

Resumo: Experiências inspiradoras e rituais estéticos podem induzir profundas transformações epistémicas, ao mesmo tempo que se cruzam com as estruturas de poder. Esta revisão examina diversos estudos de caso – desde rituais xamânicos amazónicos a artes em templos do antigo Egito, experiências surrealistas de sonhos, psicologia transpessoal e cibercultura de ficção científica – para compreender como as experiências planeadas de admiração e imersão podem transformar ou definir conhecimento e agência. Entre estes domínios, vemos um fio condutor: a "política da consciência" – a forma como os estados alterados e os sistemas simbólicos afectam as visões do mundo individuais e colectivas – entrelaça-se tanto com o mito espiritual, a realpolitik (o exercício do poder) como com os imaginários sociotécnicos. Destacamos exemplos de como as ecologias de arte-rituais sagrados e as técnicas mediáticas modernas servem como arquiteturas de transformação, aludimos às distinções

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entre experiências liminoides individuais, comunitárias e corporativas e, em seguida, exploramos como a admiração mediada pela tecnologia pode tanto elevar como minar a liberdade humana. O objectivo é elucidar como os rituais de admiração – incluindo os media imersivos emergentes – funcionam tanto como ferramentas de mudança epistémica como espaços de contestação política sobre o espírito humano.

Palavras-chave: Admiração; Arte; Futurismo; Xamanismo; Design

POLÍTICAS DE LA CONCIENCIA Y MEDIOS INMERSIVOS: UNA REVISIÓN INTEGRADORA

Resumen: Las experiencias inspiradoras de asombro y los rituales estéticos pueden inducir profundas transformaciones epistémicas, a la vez que se intersectan con las estructuras de poder. Esta revisión examina varios estudios de caso —desde rituales chamánicos amazónicos hasta artes de templos del antiguo Egipto, experimentos oníricos surrealistas, psicología transpersonal y cibercultura de ciencia ficción— para comprender cómo las experiencias diseñadas de asombro e inmersión pueden transformar o definir el conocimiento y la agencia. En estos ámbitos, observamos un hilo conductor: la «política de la conciencia» —la forma en que los estados alterados y los sistemas simbólicos afectan las cosmovisiones individuales y colectivas— se entrelaza con los mitos espirituales, la realpolitik (el ejercicio del poder) y los imaginarios sociotécnicos. Destacamos ejemplos de cómo las ecologías de arte-ritual sacro y las técnicas mediáticas modernas sirven como arquitecturas de transformación, aludimos a las distinciones de las experiencias liminoides individuales, comunitarias y corporativas, y luego exploramos cómo el asombro mediado tecnológicamente puede tanto elevar como socavar la libertad humana. El objetivo es dilucidar cómo los rituales de asombro, incluidos los medios inmersivos emergentes, funcionan como herramientas de cambio epistémico y como espacios de debate político sobre el espíritu humano.

Palabras clave: Asombro; Arte; Futurismo; Chamanismo; Diseño

1. Introduction: Aesthetics as Epistemic Technology: Awe and Cognitive Alteration

Aesthetic experience has long been treated as a kind of epistemic *techne* – a tool for shaping knowledge and consciousness. In particular, the emotion of awe can function as a modality of cognition, one that radically alters how individuals perceive reality. Psychologists classify awe as an *epistemic emotion*, arising when one encounters something vast that defies one's current mental schemas (Keltner and Haidt 2003; Chirico and Yaden 2018). Awe's defining features – perceived vastness and a need for cognitive accommodation – make it a disorienting and expansive state (Keltner and Haidt 2003). By changing existing frames of reference, awe forces the mind to stretch and reorganize itself to accommodate new insights or paradoxes. In William James's classic analysis of mystical states, for example, experiences of profound awe (the numinous) are marked by ineffability and a noetic quality – a feeling of having gained some insight or knowledge beyond

ordinary discursive understanding (James 1902). Modern research likewise finds that awe induces a "small self" and enhanced connectedness to a larger whole, suggesting a reconfiguration of subjectivity and knowledge of one's place in the world (Piff et al. 2015; Stellar et al. 2018).

From a political and epistemological standpoint, awe is double-edged. On one hand, it can diminish the ego and open individuals to new perspectives and collective identity – studies show awe increases humility and prosocial behaviors, expanding one's sense of meaning beyond the self (Stellar et al. 2018; Piff et al. 2015). This expansive quality of awe can be emancipatory, undermining parochial assumptions and fostering what some have called a transformative experience. Anthropological accounts of rites of passage and vision quests emphasize that awe (often induced by ritual ordeal or the sublime grandeur of sacred spaces) breaks down the initiate's ordinary reality to facilitate new understanding – a process Victor Turner termed liminality, wherein one's old identity and worldview are dissolved in order to be recombined at a higher level of insight or social role (Turner 1969).

On the other hand, awe's capacity to reorganize cognition can be harnessed to impose particular worldviews or social hierarchies. Aesthetic awe has been used as a tool of power – what anthropologist Alfred Gell famously called the "technology of enchantment," whereby art and spectacle captivate the mind and secure the acquiescence of individuals to a desired social order (Gell 1992). Gell argued that art objects' technical brilliance casts a kind of spell that can naturalize the status quo: aesthetic awe persuades people at a visceral level, beyond rational argument (Gell 1992). Authoritarian regimes and religious authorities have exploited awe-inspiring architecture, pageantry, and imagery to shape subjects' beliefs and loyalty. For example, the Nazi state deliberately employed monumental architecture and mass spectacle to induce feelings of awe that emphasized the regime's power (Taylor 1974). Psychological studies suggest that in such contexts, awe can increase deference to authority and diminish independent reasoning. For instance Italian fascism used neo-classical building projects meant to invoke the majesty of the Roman Empire's mythology and "egregore," blending awe of the ancient with modern propaganda (Taylor 1974; Arthurs 2012).

Transformation design explicitly seeks to leverage art-technological systems to facilitate human potential and epistemic expansion, distinct from coercive practices. Buchanan (2001) conceptualizes "fourth-order design," directly concerned with systems-level shifts in consciousness and human experience. Dunne and Raby's (2013) critical and speculative design frameworks further suggest art-technological systems can inspire epistemic shifts through awe, reimagining human potential beyond existing techno-political limitations. Related transdisciplinary research by Escobar (2018) and Haraway (2016) also emphasizes transformative design as politically radical and ecologically sensitive, highlighting potentials for generating collective awe in service of ecological consciousness and ethical-political imagination.

By engineering awe we may induce epistemic yielding – a readiness to accept new "truths" or identities. This plasticity can be used or misused. We must distinguish *sacred awe* from *spectacular awe* (a theme we deepen in following sections). Historically, many cultures developed immersive aesthetic environments specifically to teach and transform participants, not merely to dazzle them. Sacred ritual space is a 'concentration' of the culture's epistemology, ontology and eschatology, but also possesses the potency of adaptive function and transformation. (Delineations are apt to be fuzzy – neatly contrasting sacred awe from spectacular awe is not always possible, as often they occupy the same spaces simultaneously.)

2. Indigenous Design Systems of Transformation

In our discourse we will take *Ayahuasca* culture as an exemplar of grassroots transformation ritual and then proceed to discuss urban-agrarian examples. Ayahuasca (*Banisteriopsis caapi*, often mixed with *Psychotria viridis*) is a synergistic visionary tea indigenous to the Amazon. It is at once a biochemical agent, and the nucleus of complex ritual design systems for transformation. Traditional ayahuasca ceremonies led by Amazonian shamans are meticulously structured to induce an ordeal-like journey of death and rebirth, facilitated by an intentional crafting of set and setting. As Ralph Metzner notes, shamanic practitioners inherently understand what modern researchers' term "set and setting": "A ritual structure is essentially the conscious arranging of the set and setting for the purposes agreed upon by the shaman and the patient or initiate" (Metzner 2006, 21).

In a typical Peruvian *mestizo* ceremony, participants gather at night in a *maloca*, ingest the brew, and enter an immersive sensory environment shaped by darkness, tobacco smoke, and *icaros* – sacred songs – sung by the shaman. These songs are regarded as design elements that guide and transform the visions. The shaman's *icaros* function as auditory catalysts that modulate the vision, effecting shape-shifting experiences (flying as a bird, merging with plant spirits) and "cleansing" the participant to facilitate insight. As one Shipibo maestro explained to foreign participants, "When we drink ayahuasca, our songs transform us into birds, plants, many things, and we clean your body so you can see beautiful things" (Gearin 2024). In some Peruvian traditions, visual design elements also play a central role, such as the design-language of the Shipibo-Conibo, with fine, circuit-like patterns being painted on the body to channel beneficial energies. The same motifs decorate traditional ceramics, textiles, and *kene* shamanic robes, conferring a unified visual texture to the ritual. Phenomenologist Benny Shanon argues these motifs constitute cognitive universals – specific vivid content that may reflect "facets of ontology" beyond individual psychology (Shanon 2002). In Amazonian terms, the ceremony is a sophisticated *technê* of the metaphysical.

A central symbolic framework in ayahuasca visions across indigenous cultures is the death-rebirth sequence, hence its title 'vine of the dead'. Anthropological and psychological studies concur that many ayahuasca drinkers undergo a powerful death-rebirth experience, often described as ego dissolution and sometimes as the feeling of literally dying, followed by a rebirth-like renewal of consciousness (Shanon 2002; David et al. 2024). The ayahuasca ritual complex provides an open-ended, frameless "immersive" environment where participants confront primal symbols of death, encounter tutelary spirits (serpents, jaguars, plant teachers), experiences of vastness and visionary realms, ultimately re-emerge with an altered epistemic framework. Indigenous discourse frames this as learning from the plant spirits and cleansing the body-mind; Western participants often describe it in psychological terms (releasing trauma, gaining insight into the self). Both converge on the idea of profound change by ritual design – awe is not a passive feeling but an active force for knowledge-production and subject formation.

Ayahuasca is not exempt from involvement in psychological exchanges of personal power and manipulation. Ayahuasca shamanism operates within social ecologies of relationships. Brujeria – a 'dark side' of shamanistic practice – involves an inversion of the aims of empowerment and healing, with revenge, retribution, seduction also being possible vectors of ayahuasca ritual. In grassroots shamanic traditions we observe how the power involved in wielding immersive spaces and

transformations of consciousness can be dual-use. Like the Amazon forests themselves, Ayahuasca is not 'safe'; it is powerful – a tool that can be used and misused. The dual-use of awe to assert and maintain power structures continues into the evolution of early agrarian-urban societies.

3. Ancient Egyptian Immersive Rites

We will now consider the sacred art of Egypt, exemplar of the shift into large-scale agrarian-urban settlements evolving after the 'Neolithic package'. Whether an Egyptian temple, a Hellenistic Parthenon, a Gothic cathedral or a corbel-encrusted mosque – the *temenos* (sacred space) can be seen as an immersive media system for inducing awe and epistemic change. But unlike a modern framed experience (such as a film, which the audience knows is a fiction with boundaries), the temple ritual is *frameless* in that it is (or was) presented as reality – operating in continuity with the mythos of the society at large. This creates an environment where symbol and reality are merged – an augmented reality of myth.

Egyptian temples and mystery rites functioned as art-ritual ecologies in which architecture, symbolism, and performance were unified to facilitate spiritual experiences and state ideology. The Mysteries of Osiris, celebrated annually at sites like Abydos, can be seen as a prototype of immersive ritual theater. Archaeological and textual evidence shows that at Abydos (the traditional tomb of Osiris), the Egyptians held a great festival procession each year, reenacting the god's passion: his murder, dismemberment, and miraculous resurrection by Isis (O'Connor 2009; Mikhail 1983). Crowds of pilgrims flocked from all over Egypt to witness and participate in the ritual drama. (Similar processions culminating in a fertility-bestowing *hieros gamos* existed in ancient Mesopotamia, such as at Ur.) These mysteries combined public spectacle and secret rite: public in that masses attended the procession, and initiates within inner sanctums focused the ritual over many days or even weeks.

The temple architectures in which these rituals took place functioned as immersive symbolic environments – frameless epistemic spaces. Egyptian temples were not only assembly halls; they were microcosms of the universe and stages of creation, encrusted from floor to ceiling with repeating inscriptions, ceilings painted with stars and zodiac signs representing the sky, while the floor represented primordial earth or the Nile. The temple structure itself – its over-enveloping proportions and positioning – was often aligned with cosmic events, signifying the synchronization of earthly order (the temple and kingdom) with the heavens. Worshippers and initiates entering this space would be enveloped in a didactic 'art installation' on a massive scale, though presented not as an entertaining fiction but as a focused expression of the sacred world surrounding them.

Spiritually, the temple provided the populace and priesthood with frameworks for encountering the divine, ensuring epistemic continuity (each generation re-affirms the cosmic order and afterlife through ritual) and transformation. And yet these awe-inspiring systems also served to legitimize power – divine lineages, royal authority, *electi*, God-Kings. The pharaoh was often central in ritual, presented as Horus avenging Osiris or as the divine intermediary maintaining *Ma'at*. A similar notion of earthly power being 'ordained' by divine forces in the "great chain of being" is echoed to this day with the artistic pomp and ceremony involved in statecraft and important public figures.

4. Spectacles of Awe in Secular Cultures

> "We must storm the citadels of enlightenment. The means are at hand."
> — *William S. Burroughs*, in a letter to Brion Gysin about the device that would become the Dreamachine.

Traditional sacred practices come embedded within a cosmology that orients the experience. Ritual was not countercultural but rather an immersive focusing of cult ontologies. However, in the secular West, a mythic sacred immersive space related to a collective, shared mythos has diminished. Bringing this discussion forward into the age of Darwin and existentialism, we can ask what happens to awe when the paradigmatic scaffold collapses. Modernity is often described as the disenchantment of the world – the retreat of the sacred in an age of secular reason and industrial technology. "The centre does not hold," and our culture has become a fragmented assemblage of diverse subcultures siloed within distinct economic, social, and generational streams.

Brion Gysin, left, and William Burroughs use one of Gysin's Dreamachines in 1970. Photograph: Charles Gatewood/TopFoto

In the collapse of institutional access to spiritual and mythic rites, the 'sacred' does not simply vanish – it is transmuted, finding new avenues for expression. We see in Surrealist art a substitution of the framework of religion with the framework of Freudian and Jungian psychology. The underlying impulse – to reveal the subliminal operating system of culture via its dream symbols – is analogous

to the sacred art of antiquity. The methods of dream induction the Surrealists pioneered (or 'borrowed' from esoteric culture) and the worlds they presented anticipated our contemporary fascination with immersive virtual worlds. In the post-war period, literati and poets experimented with psychedelics – introduced (or 'reintroduced') into Western culture via ethnobotany and the pioneering field research of R. Gordon Wasson, and the pharmacological experiments of Albert Hofmann. The Beat poets Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs traveled to the Amazon looking for the 'ultimate fix' via 'telepathine' and instead experienced arduous visions with ayahuasca, their reports becoming *The Yage Letters*. Burroughs, along with Brion Gysin and Ian Sommerville, later invented the Dreamachine in 1961. The Dreamachine, inspired by the stroboscopic effect Gysin experienced driving down a tree-lined avenue in sunny Marseilles, is a kinetic light sculpture – a rotating cylinder with cut-out slits placed on a record turntable with a light inside – that emits flickering patterns at a specific frequency (~8–13 flashes per second). It was the first artwork intended to be "viewed" with eyes closed – the flicker is perceived on the eyelids and induces vivid mental visuals in the viewer's mind. Art scholar Daria Baryshnikova notes that Gysin considered the Dreamachine a radically new art form, "art not seen but perceived" internally – a shift from external image to directly hacking the viewer's neural perceptions (Baryshnikova 2018).

'Vision questing' has become decentralized. Whilst pews sit empty in churches, more and more people seek epistemic expansion through entertainment, syncretic spiritual practices, and world travel. In the contemporary epoch, individuals must seek or construct existential frameworks for transpersonal experiences, since none are provided by the dominant culture. Dispossessed spiritual pilgrims migrate across the memetic terrain, surfing New Age and syncretic cults. Meanwhile, mainstream society avails itself of awe via Guy Debord's *spectacle*. In Debord's analysis, the *spectacle* is a mass-mediated simulation of life that dazzles people, integrating them as spectators rather than active participants – "Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation," Debord writes (Debord 1967). If classic rites and contemplative arts seek to disorient in order to reorient – a controlled breakdown of ordinary reality to allow reassembly on a new, elevated plane – then by contrast, spectacular immersion is often passive and dissociative: it floods the senses or emotions without providing a framework for personal growth or understanding, frequently reinforcing the status quo.

The Sundance ceremony of the Lakota and other Plains tribes is a grueling multi-day ritual where dancers pierce their flesh and circle a sacred cottonwood pole under the summer sun. The experience is profoundly challenging, inducing visions and, ultimately, an ineffable awe at the sacred mysteries of life and sacrifice. Importantly, this vision quest is done for community and cosmos, not spectacle. Contrast this with a mega-event like a Super Bowl halftime show or the Las Vegas Sphere's LED extravaganzas – pageants of dancing performers, jet flyovers, giant holograms, mass choreography. In these, the vision is provided to a passive audience, and the awe serves to fuse the crowd into a moment of uncritical collective emotion, often harnessed for "bread and circus." In the spectacle, the individual spectator is not changed in any deep sense; rather, they are swept up and subsumed in the mass. Are these spectacles functioning as a secular catharsis – a corporate stand-in for the awe-inducing community rites of previous generations? And conversely, does a Sundance or ayahuasca vision hold meaning if the community vessel does not recognize it as a source of healing and truth?

As Debord notes, the spectacle "serves as a total justification of the conditions and goals of the existing system" (Debord 1967), affirming what already *is*, rather than opening space for what *could*

be. The Nuremberg rallies staged by the Nazi regime were immersive on a grand scale – tens of thousands of people packed in formation, saluting in unison, the feeling of being part of something greater – yet this awe was tightly choreographed to direct faith toward Hitler and the state. The architecture and stagecraft drew on sacred tropes (columns of light, rune-like banners) and appealed to primal energies of national or ancestral myth. In parallel, the neo-classical building projects of Mussolini were intended to invoke the majesty and mythos of the Roman Empire (Taylor 1974; Arthurs 2012).

Detail from frontispiece for Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651) by Abraham Bosse (ca. 1604-1676)

It would be too easy to claim such spectacles were coldly engineered manipulations of the masses, if not for the alternative but equally likely possibility that these leaders were themselves gripped by the same primal forces they sought to project. This was C. G. Jung's controversial suggestion regarding the Nazi uprising: that the archetype of Wotan – suppressed by secularism and rationality – had awoken in the Germanic psyche (Jung 1970). Jungian critics have noted that archetypes can function on both an individualizing and a mass register. Individuation (psychic integration) uses archetypal vision to free the self; mass psychology (as in fascism) uses archetypal imagery to subsume individuals into a collective identity (Dohe 2016).

This presents a disquieting possibility: just as a drowning man will cling to any flotsam, a people bereft of deep, heartfelt meanings will readily seize upon any powerful psychic images that offer them

a sense of collective purpose, vision, and future. If a community has no individual or communal rite-of-passage or rebirth mystery, then such compulsions may express in a mass political rally mobilising ethnos or collective destiny – a mobilization of *eros* served by hallucinatory and glittering choreographed musical pageants – or it may be a techno-imaginary of post-scarcity AI societies and spaceships on Mars.

5. The Corporate Sociotechnical Imaginary

As technology evolves it develops new means as an instrument to induce awe and perhaps mystical states on demand. As we navigate a 21st-century landscape of sophisticated immersive media, this distinction warns us to ask: how will awe be wielded? The power of spectacle wielded by technology increases. Today's immersive media continue this dual legacy. Virtual reality (VR) and related technologies have revolutionized how awe can be engineered on demand. Psychologists and designers now routinely study awe induction in VR, treating it as a "transformative" emotional state (Quesnel and Riecke 2018). For example, immersive simulations that let users "explore Earth from ground to orbit" have been found to elicit awe: participants gave an average self-rating of 79.7/100 for awe when using an interactive VR system to view Earth (Quesnel and Riecke 2018). In controlled experiments, bespoke "awe environments" (like cosmic vistas or vast natural scenes in VR) induce significantly higher awe and presence than neutral scenes (Chirico et al. 2018). In short, VR is emerging as an almost tailor-made awe machine.

N.Y. City II Lovecraft over N.Y. City (work 452) (1980) by HR Giger

Neuroaesthetic research complements this picture by showing how such experiences reconfigure the self. Awe – often equated with the sublime – triggers complex neural and physiological shifts: it can diminish default-mode network activity through higher neural entropy (dissolving the ego), engage emotional reward circuits, and enhance meaning-making processes. Keltner and colleagues note that awe involves "a diminished focus on the self, increased prosocial relationality, greater social integration, and a heightened sense of meaning and purpose" (Keltner 2023). VR and digital art exploit these mechanisms. Immersive VR can, for instance, induce a state akin to mystical insight: as Chirico et al. put it, VR's sense of presence and scale helps "reproduce intense feelings of awe within laboratory conditions" (Chirico et al. 2018).

Commercial "immersive experiences" – from Van Gogh projection rooms in shopping malls to VR art museums – seize the language of transcendence and transformation. Critics argue they often deliver little beyond surface-level spectacle. In her review of Illusionaries in London (an immersive digital art gallery), Sophia Satchell-Baeza observes that the term "immersive" has become marketing-speak for projection-based exhibits heavy on sensory dazzle and light on substance. Viewers are submerged in 360° visuals and surround-sound – dissolving the boundary between artwork and audience. But the critical difference lies in integration: a looping kaleidoscope of stunning visuals, even if drawn from spiritual or psychedelic art, may simply entertain or overstimulate, short-circuiting true transcendence by giving the impression of profundity without the personal effort or context that real transformation demands (Satchell-Baeza 2024). The current technoscape often delivers the peak without the context.

We see here a microcosm of the sacred vs. spectacular tension: the *form* of sacred awe is mimicked (immersive, multi-sensory, boundary-dissolving), but the *function* skews toward spectacle (fleeting impact, commercial aim), since representations of expanded states do not replicate the expanded state itself. (Such a limitation is not exclusive to modern digital art – sacred iconography in traditional contexts was typically accompanied by practices and interpretive frameworks that grounded the experience in a larger narrative and path of integration.)

In a world increasingly saturated with designed experiences – theme parks, viral media events, mega-concerts, and VR games – understanding whether an immersive experience is sacred or spectacular is not just an academic exercise, but a civic one. The measure of success becomes whether users report lasting perspective shifts (longitudinal trait changes), not just *wow*-factor during the session. In practice, of course, the line can blur. Contemporary mega-events and cyberdelic immersive media are spectacular by design. The question is whether they transform the society or merely affirm it. By contrast, a grassroots immersive theater project that engages a community in re-envisioning their neighborhood could have lasting impact, if the participants emerge with new social bonds or insights. The application of a hypothetical "Earth Prayer Hour" – synchronizing millions of people in a collective digital *temenos* to affirm a vision of hope and a positive future – would be more than a substitute temple; it would be a nascent communal sacred space.

6. Transformation Design

Immersive experiences of awe can profoundly transform human consciousness, but this is never neutral in its cultural and political effects. They operate within what we might call a "politics of the sacred and the real." Variables include the framework of interpretation (sacred vs. secular, healing vs. art for art's sake, etc.) and the locus of control (community ritual vs. individual exploration vs. corporate platform). Interpretive frameworks – whether sacred myth, secular art theory, or scientific discourse – determine the epistemic claims and ideological subtext of the experience. In a sacred-healing frame, an immersive ceremony might be seen as revealing metaphysical truth or curing spiritual ailments, so its epistemic status is very high (divine revelation) and its ideological function is to reinforce the sacred order. In a secular-art frame, an immersive performance might claim to challenge perceptions or simply to be enjoyed; its epistemic function could be personal insight or "making the familiar strange" (as Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* aimed to do), and its overt ideology might be muted – though subtle messages about society or the self are still conveyed. Even an avowedly "non-utilitarian" art experience can carry political meaning (as avant-garde movements did) or become an ideology of art's autonomy itself. As Catherine Bell argued in ritual studies, context and framing distinguish ritual-like acts from ordinary ones: ritualization is "the way in which certain social actions strategically distinguish themselves" from the mundane (Bell 1992). The framework tells participants how to interpret what they undergo.

The cyberdelic theorist Carl Hayden Smith has called this *"context engineering"*, a creative act of building genuinely humanistic context around emerging powerful media technologies. Awe-mediated experiences themselves are a kind of neutral raw energy – what they do epistemically or ideologically depends on how they are contextualized and directed. By examining traditional rituals, artistic avant-garde happenings, and digital spectacles side by side, we see both the continuity of human awe and the contingency of its interpretation. Traditional societies tended to integrate awe with their epistemology and ideology seamlessly – ritual was both their science and their social glue. Modern art sought to pry awe loose, to use it as a tool for personal or political epistemic breakthroughs ("making it new"), sometimes explicitly opposing reigning ideologies. Contemporary digital culture in many ways merges these extremes: it offers never-ending newness and individual choice (an echo of avant-garde epistemic play), yet through centralized platforms that often enforce a homogenized global culture (a new kind of omnipresent ideology). In the age of plurality, making definite ontological and ethical propositions – and acting on "absolute truths" – is often more taboo than experimenting in the liminal shallows.

What changes across sacred vs. secular or healing vs. art contexts is not the basic capacity for awe or immersion, but the framework of interpretation (the narrative and value context that tells us what this experience is and why it matters) and the locus of control (who sets the stage and the rules for the experience). The politics of awe is the recognition of how this powerful force of transcendence is wielded in culture – as a path for transformation or as a force to paralyze.

Authentic transformative media – be it a ritual or a therapy – tends to emphasize integration and autonomy at the end of the process. For example, the ayahuasca ritual, when done traditionally, ends with group sharing and the individual making meaning of the visions in their life context. Transpersonal psychology seeks to help patients integrate their death-rebirth insight into healthier

daily functioning. In this sense, the *art of awe* is more than spectacle; it is a whole-system design orientation that allows the results of "healthy awe" to be incorporated into the functioning and eschatology of communities.

Conclusion

As mentioned in the introduction, the field of "awe studies" is nascent and its delineations are fuzzy. For this reason, it has been useful to discuss this term and its implications, to elucidate questions and provide context, in the hope of promoting further discussion.

By analyzing ancient and modern, spiritual and technological, therapeutic and artistic domains, we gain a richer vocabulary and deeper insight into how immersive media (broadly defined) can be used to engender awe and epistemic shifts. We become alert to the double-edged nature of awe. We affirm the knowledge that altering consciousness is a powerful act – one that can reconfigure what people believe is true or important – and thus those who design our new immersive realities carry a responsibility. By learning from past and present examples, we can aspire to designs (whether rituals, therapies, or media platforms) that honor the full depth of the human psyche – its need for meaning, for rebirth, for connection – and resist the reduction of human life to anything less rich or free.

We conclude that any study of media or politics devoid of the consciousness dimension is incomplete: the symbolic, the immersive, the sacred are not epiphenomenal to material history but at its core. Awe has a politics, and politics has its awe; understanding their entanglement is key to both individual flourishing and the collective future.

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