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The concept of the oceanic feeling in artistic creativity and in the analysis of visual artworks

Introduction

In a recent study on artistic creativity, artists from several fields were interviewed regarding their subjective experiences of the creative process.ⁱ In addition to various psychological and behavioral phenomena, the artists reported feelings of connectedness with something beyond themselves, of dissolution of personal boundaries, of absorption in the artwork, and of timelessness, awe and joy. For the past half-century, psychoanalytical writers on art have used the concept “oceanic feeling” to designate similar experiences of oneness, limitlessness and elation in creativity. Despite its long-term use, the concept still lacks precision – due perhaps to the elusiveness and ineffability of the very experience it intends to grasp. On the other hand, the oceanic feeling has developed into a semantically rich concept: its immediate connotation of affectivity belies a host of meanings denoting mental structure, cognitive faculty, phase of creative process, and state of mind. In other words the concept has been stretched to cover mental phenomena far beyond the boundaries of mere feeling, and thus holds significant potential for illuminating the complex psychological elements involved in creativity and aesthetic appreciation.

In this article, I will examine the most influential account of the oceanic feeling in aesthetics, developed by the art pedagogue and critic Anton Ehrenzweig (1908–1966). Following his emphases, I will focus on the structural, perceptual and affective aspects of oceanic states of mind. In order to further illuminate some of the central premises and problems of Ehrenzweig’s account, I will assess two separate analyses of visual artworks that have incorporated his ideas. To conclude, I will present my own view of the oceanic feeling in artistic creativity, analysis of visual artworks, and aesthetic encounters. To begin, however, I will provide a brief overview of the transportation of the concept from its original, religio-mystical context into the aesthetic one.

The oceanic feeling – from mysticism to aesthetics

The concept of the oceanic feeling made its way into academic discussion through the correspondence between Sigmund Freud and Romain Rolland in the first half of the 20th century. Besides being a Nobel-winning novelist and social critic, Rolland was a professed mystic who had experienced rapturous feelings of eternity, timelessness and limitlessness. As he matured, these early transient mystical episodes consolidated into a permanent existential mode of being. In Rolland’s terms, at the core of this developmental achievement was “the simple and direct fact of *the feeling of the ‘eternal’* (which, can very well not be eternal, but simply without perceptible limits, and like oceanic, as it were).”ⁱⁱ Rolland maintained that the oceanic feeling not only provided a valuable sense of vitality and moral fiber, but also revealed the mind’s inbuilt contact with a supra-individual, limitless metaphysical substance. Seeking to bolster the psychological legitimacy of his convictions, Rolland turned to Freud for a psychoanalytic interpretation of the matter.

Freud, who claimed to have never experienced anything of the kind, was somewhat perplexed by Rolland's request. He nonetheless presented a tentative analysis of the oceanic feeling in the first chapter of *Civilization and its Discontents*.ⁱⁱⁱ After rephrasing its ideational contents as that of "limitlessness and of a bond with the universe", and of "an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole"^{iv}, Freud explained it in terms of individual development. That is, he reasoned that a primary "all-embracing feeling" of infant-mother unity could endure "side by side with the narrower and more sharply demarcated ego feeling of maturity".^v Simply put, Freud found the roots of the oceanic feeling in the benign maintenance of primary narcissism. As such it was a remnant of the past that could affect the present, bereft of any intrinsic adaptive value for day-to-day living.

Freud and Rolland never reached agreement on the nature or value of the oceanic feeling. Moreover, in much post-Freudian psychoanalytic discussion the concept came to be used as a general euphemism for mystical experiences of union that were considered predominantly defensive, infantile, and even pathological – divorcing it even further from Rolland's original commendatory stance.^{vi} In the late 1950's and early 1960's, however, increasingly favorable psychoanalytical views towards mystical experience began to emerge. Moreover, the established view of the oceanic feeling as a derivative of individual psychological development made it reasonable to assume that its occurrence was not limited to religio-mystical contexts exclusively. It was expected, then, that experiences of the oceanic kind would be recognized in other domains of life as well, paving the way for an extended use of the concept. It was in this opportune climate that the oceanic feeling debuted in psychoanalytical aesthetics.^{vii} In the following, I will present its application to artistic creativity and aesthetic appreciation based on the writings of its most prominent promulgator, Anton Ehrenzweig.^{viii}

Anton Ehrenzweig on the oceanic feeling

As an art educator and art critic, Anton Ehrenzweig was closely acquainted with the psychological processes inherent in both artistic creativity and aesthetic encounters. Even though his theorization was thoroughly psychoanalytical, he departed from traditional psychoanalysis by emphasizing the structural and perceptual features of the unconscious mind. That is, he was more concerned with explaining how the mind functions *formally* on different levels in producing and experiencing art, rather than focusing on individual unconscious *contents* (phantasies, wishes, conflicts, and the like) that were presumably manifested in these processes.

Ehrenzweig had already referred to the oceanic feeling in his first major book, *The Psycho-Analysis of Artistic Vision and Hearing* in 1953.^{ix} However, it is in his posthumously published book *The Hidden Order of Art* from 1967 that we find his most comprehensive account of the oceanic state in artistic creativity.^x Ehrenzweig's fundamental metapsychological presupposition was that the mind (i.e. the ego) is two-tiered by nature, divided into opposing levels of surface and depth minds. Furthermore, he maintained that these two levels each incorporate distinct modes of attention and perception. Differentiated surface level attention produces consciously controlled, narrowly focused, and distinctly articulated perception, whereas dedifferentiated depth level attention produces unconscious, fluid, diffuse, and holistic perception. Put simply, the surface mind tends to present things as clearly separate, whereas the depth mind tends towards loosening their boundaries, freely

mixing and merging them together. At any given moment, attention oscillates between these extreme ends and thus incorporates various levels of perception simultaneously. However, unconscious imagery is always withdrawn from conscious perception, not merely because of its offensive content, but because of its undifferentiated structure. Ehrenzweig called this “purely formal ‘structural’ repression”.^{xi}

Ehrenzweig argued that flexible interaction between the surface and depth minds is an essential prerequisite for true artistic creativity. He deemed the functioning of the depth mind – with its capacity to disrupt sterile and habitual modes of surface perception – necessary for vital symbol formation. Moreover, he regarded as crucial the role played by the oceanic state in the collaborative interplay between the two levels. In order to understand why this was the case, we must clarify the senses in which Ehrenzweig employed the concept ‘oceanic’ in his theorization. To make matters somewhat complicated, he introduced a number of derivatives of the concept to designate various different aspects of creativity. In other words, he attached the term ‘oceanic’ to a heterogeneous host of psychological categories: not just feeling, but to phase, state, and mode of perception, as well.

A suitable starting point for the conceptual clarification of the oceanic feeling is Ehrenzweig’s tripartite phasic model of artistic creativity, which presents the process of creative work broadly as follows.^{xii} The initial schizoid phase involves breaking down rigid surface perception and projecting split-off parts of the self into the work at hand. At this stage, the scattered elements of the work may appear accidental, fragmented and persecutory, requiring flexibility and toleration of anxiety from the artist. The following manic-oceanic phase incorporates the powers of unconscious, undifferentiated depth perception to tie the elements together in the pictorial space of the work. Ehrenzweig describes it thus: “In this ‘manic’ stage all accidents seem to come right; all fragmentation is resolved.”^{xiii} Here the hidden order of art – its unconscious substructure – is formed, and the most crucial creative work is carried through. The final phase involves the re-introjection of the work’s hidden substructure into the artist’s ego and the reintegration into consciousness of the previously split-off parts of the self. At this stage, the work of art is finished off, and it achieves a clearly independent status. This is often accompanied by a somber acceptance of imperfect otherness as the feeling of oneness with the work of art fades. Thus, in the complete creative cycle, “a full exchange occurs between the conscious and unconscious components of the work as well as between the artist’s conscious and unconscious levels of perception”.^{xiv}

As indicated above, Ehrenzweig used the term ‘oceanic’ to delineate an inherent *phase* in creativity. The beginning of this manic-oceanic phase is marked by a gradual descent into depth-level perception, or, as Ehrenzweig puts it, by an active and deliberate surrender to the “pull of the deep”.^{xv} More frequently, however, he used the term ‘oceanic’ to describe the actual *structural* features and *perceptual* capacities of the depth-level mind incorporated during this phase. As attention gradually sinks towards the depths of the mind, a near-oceanic limit approaches, and once the deepest oceanic level is reached, dedifferentiated oceanic perception suffuses the surface mind. In this state, there is an unlimited mutual interpenetration between images, objects and concepts: opposites are undone, inner and outer worlds merge, death and birth become one, and the restrictions of space and time are dissolved.^{xvi} In effect, all splitting and choice-making is temporarily suspended. Ehrenzweig insists that the manic-oceanic phase’s characteristic perceptual mechanisms of low-level vision and unconscious scanning may appear vague and chaotic from a conscious point of

view, but are in fact superiorly efficient tools in gathering information.^{xvii} This is due to their ability to hold on to consciously incompatible entities in a single comprehensive view, which is useful in handling the open-ended structure of creative work.

In conjunction with *feeling*, the term ‘oceanic’ quite evidently points to a set of affective qualities. Ehrenzweig was somewhat ambivalent about the status of these feelings in the creative process. For the most part, he considered manic feelings of oneness, envelopment and mystic union as concomitants of the descent into the oceanic level of the depth mind. He writes: “Dedifferentiation suspends many kinds of boundaries and distinctions; at an extreme limit it may remove the boundaries of individual existence and so *produce* a mystic oceanic feeling that is distinctly manic in quality.”^{xviii} On the other hand, he speculated whether it is not the removal of boundaries *per se* that produces the oceanic feeling, but rather the rising into conscious awareness of the products of dedifferentiated perception.^{xix}

Viewed in either light, feelings of the oceanic kind are considered contingent, and therefore ineffective in explaining *why* or *how* creative symbol formation occurs. Ehrenzweig notes that “maybe, a manic element belonging to deeper near-oceanic levels of dedifferentiation (where unconscious scanning is carried on) must persist to sustain the artist against the onslaught of depression at the sight of persisting surface fragmentation”.^{xx} As such, the oceanic feeling holds the power of sustenance and guidance rather than primary generation. Nelson and Rawlings express the same idea in similar terms: “The highness of mood can be experienced as not only propelling the artistic activity forward, but as guiding the direction of the work: it can ‘signal’ to the artist that her artwork is progressing well, prompting her to continue in a manner which maintains this mood.”^{xxi}

Based on the above, we may present the following summary. In Ehrenzweig’s theorization the term ‘oceanic’ has to some extent been divorced from what it has commonly been used to refer to, i.e. feeling. Following this, Ehrenzweig has reattached it to both a *phase* in the creative process and to a *level and mode of perception* of the unconscious mind. Furthermore, he has used the term in a more general sense to refer to any such *state* that incorporates oceanic depth-level processing, embodies feelings of oneness, etc., or both. This state of extreme dedifferentiation and temporary paralysis of surface functions may be found in creativity across various domains of life, including mystical religious practices. From this point of view, the oceanic phase in artistic creativity may be understood as one instance of a general class of oceanic states, and as such, arguably quite different from that of mystics due to its distinct context and aims.

The oceanic feeling in aesthetic encounters and the interpretation of visual artworks

What does all of this imply for encountering and interpreting visual artworks, and paintings in particular? Ehrenzweig reiterates throughout his work that art always reflects the psychological processes inherent in creativity. In fact he states outright that the main object of *The Hidden Order of Art* is to “demonstrate that creating a work of art means externalizing the inner workings of the ego”.^{xxii} To this end, he coins the term ‘poemagogic imagery’ to designate those images that reflect the various perceptual levels and phases of creativity.^{xxiii} Importantly, he regards the poemagogic imagery of the manic-oceanic phase as particularly crucial in all truly creative work, as it produces the work’s minimum content – i.e. its unconscious substructure. It is the wealth of this unconscious matrix that gives new symbols

their plastic power and sense of intense vitality. However, the finished work of art can never do complete justice to the fullness of its unconscious sources. This is due to inevitable secondary revision which condenses, simplifies, and solidifies the freely interpenetrating depth-level images into narrowly focused and tight surface patterns. In this sense, the work of art is essentially like the mind itself: split into surface and depth, conscious and unconscious structures.

Ehrenzweig maintains that purely formal structural repression prevents us from consciously perceiving the unconscious hidden order of artworks. This poses a difficult epistemological problem, one that Ehrenzweig readily admits, but is unable to solve convincingly.^{xxiv} If the artwork's most important element – its unconscious substructure – is by definition impossible to ascertain through conscious perception, how can we know it's there? This dilemma is the unfortunate yet inescapable implication of Ehrenzweig's rather straightforward view of the relation between the artist's mind and her artwork. That is to say, he assumes that since there is unconscious perception at play in creating art, there must also be a corresponding unconscious substructure in the materiality of the resultant work. Because of this he is left to concede, somewhat wistfully, that the "work of art remains the unknowable *Ding an sich*".^{xxv}

Ehrenzweig's account carries a deep-rooted problem found in theories that attempt to analyze art and aesthetic experience in terms of essential (formal) properties. How are these properties to be defined and identified? In Ehrenzweig's case the problem is exacerbated, since the formal properties that are intended to explain art's aesthetic effects are beyond our conscious contemplation. As a practical solution, Ehrenzweig proposes a type of intuitive and inferential approach to artworks. He suggests art's hidden order can be apprehended through the pictorial space of the painting, which functions as a conscious *signal* of the unconscious matrix below.^{xxvi} Accordingly, he encourages us to encounter works of art equipped with the very same oceanic dedifferentiated perception that presumably played a key role in creating them. Ehrenzweig asserts it is possible for both artist and viewer to "train one's powers of introspection to hold on to less articulated states of consciousness and to earlier phases in the history of perception where its gestalt structures were not yet fully crystallized".^{xxvii} What this boils down to is learning to see things anew by relying on primary, depth-level modes of perception.

For example, Ehrenzweig suggests that in facing an abstract expressionist Jackson Pollock painting we "allow our eye to drift without sense of time or direction, living always in the present moment without trying to connect the colour patch just now moving into our field of vision with others we have already seen or are going to see".^{xxviii} If we succeed in evoking in ourselves such unconscious scanning, the hidden structure of the work may emerge. Ehrenzweig also calls for an increased sensitivity to the spontaneous scribbles and marks of artworks – the handwriting of the artist – as they indicate the unconscious matrix of the work in more unmediated fashion.^{xxix}

Acknowledging that we may indeed learn to view artworks in the manner described above does not, however, eradicate the epistemological problem inherent in Ehrenzweig's setup. The uneasy question lingers: How do we *know* when we have apprehended the hidden order of art? A promising and more concrete indicator could be the poemagogic images characteristic of different levels of perception and stages of dedifferentiation in creativity. Ehrenzweig claims that the stratification and interaction of poemagogic imagery – all the way

from the surface level to the oceanic depth-level of the mind – is discernible in great works of art.^{xxx} Therefore the structural analysis of poemagogic imagery is closely linked to the aesthetic analysis of art's unconscious order. However, the manner in which poemagogic imagery translates into actual images and symbols in works of art is not presented in any systematic fashion by Ehrenzweig. Likewise, no reliable method for discerning and categorizing poemagogic imagery – especially in visual art – is given. Apart from a brief description of Michelangelo's paintings on the Sistine Chapel ceiling,^{xxx1} Ehrenzweig analyzes myths, operas, and tragedies to expose how poemagogic themes are incorporated into their narrative fabric.^{xxxii} For example, ubiquitous womb-themed phantasies – which can manifest themselves in a multitude of ways – are interpreted by Ehrenzweig as aptly expressing oceanic-level poemagogic imagery. In the end, distinguishing poemagogic themes and images in art seems to rely more on the interpreter's powers of imagination than on the properties of the artworks themselves.

If poemagogic imagery is an unjustifiable source of knowledge regarding art's hidden order, are we left with any plausible options? As one further possibility, Ehrenzweig argues we “must infer its unconscious existence from its palpable effect on our conscious *emotional experience*”.^{xxxiii} In other words, depth-level perception may provide the grounds for experiencing the *affective impact* of the hidden order, if not its structure *per se*. Here Ehrenzweig seems to shift from a formalist aesthetic approach to an affect-oriented one, which analyzes aesthetic processing in terms of its experiential effects.^{xxxiv} Again, a clearly delineated description of what this affective experience should consist of is left unstated. Most often Ehrenzweig associates encounters with the hidden order with feelings of the oceanic kind. Writing, for example, of modern art (e.g. Pollock), Ehrenzweig describes how “the undifferentiated matrix of all art lies exposed, and forces the spectator to remain in the oceanic state of the empty stare when all differentiation is suspended. The pictorial space advances and engulfs him in a multi-dimensional unity where inside and outside merge... Seen in this way, the oceanic experience of fusion... represents the minimum content of all art”.^{xxxv} However, are oceanic feelings of envelopment and oneness the only valid indicators of minimum content (unconscious substructure)? What of those who have not felt these or cannot do so? If, as Ehrenzweig claims, only certain psychological types are disposed to empty-eyed low-level scanning and its affective repercussions, are the incapable types ruled out from appreciating art's most powerful dimension?^{xxxvi}

In sum, inferring the hidden order of art in a roundabout manner from intuitive perception, poemagogic imagery and/or nebulous emotional impact appears to be an altogether random affair. Taken to its extreme, low-level vision is reduced to an esoteric capacity of the mystic that shuns the uninitiated. As it stands, Ehrenzweig's theory does not provide us with a generally applicable or valid method of discerning the unconscious substructure possibly hidden in any given work of art. It cannot function as an arbiter of true creativity, either, since its criteria are grounded in subjective experience. Furthermore, and somewhat paradoxically, even the highly recommended wide-embracing vision becomes constricted considerably by its single-minded aim of apprehending art's hidden order.

Yet there is something appealing about the possibility of honing one's perceptual skills to see things more vividly and deeply than habit allows. Perhaps Ehrenzweig's epistemological conundrum may be avoided by a theoretical modification of the suggested relationship between artist and artwork. May we not agree that perception operates on various levels of

consciousness and differentiation in both creativity and aesthetic appreciation, without subsequently assuming that causally determined unconscious substructures exist independently in the materiality of artworks themselves? This would free us from any essentialist search for the hidden order of art, and allow us to create and encounter artworks without the nagging suspicion we are missing out on something special.

I will next examine two analyses in which Ehrenzweig's theory of creativity and the oceanic feeling has been used in interpreting visual artworks. In both cases, I will clarify in which senses the concept has been used and highlight the ways in which they relate to the problematic aspects of Ehrenzweig's theory discussed above.

Marion Milner on William Blake's *Illustrations to the Book of Job*

Since 1955, Ehrenzweig and psychoanalyst Marion Milner (1900–1998) worked together to discern the psychological processes of creativity. Milner was similarly intrigued by the oceanic state in the creative process, by “the role in art of that inherent capacity of the ego's awareness which causes it to swing between conscious, directed, deliberative attention, and an absent-minded dream-like state, in a kind of porpoise-like movement of emergence and submergence”.^{xxxvii} In the following, I will examine how Milner uses Ehrenzweig's ideas of the two-tiered nature of the mind and the oceanic state to interpret William Blake's artwork in highly original fashion.

In a lecture entitled *Psychoanalysis and art*,^{xxxviii} Milner presents an intricate interpretation of William Blake's *Illustrations to the Book of Job* (final version, published in 1826), which consists of twenty-one engraved plates complete with biblical texts and marginal drawings.^{xxxix} Overtly the series depicts the well-known sequence of Job's tribulations, from the extraordinary deal between God and Satan to his horrible downfall (Plates 1–11), and on to his successful restoration as an upright and devoted believer (Plates 12–21). Milner, however, argues that Blake is using the ancient biblical story symbolically to convey something of utmost importance about the nature of creativity. More specifically, she maintains that the series depicts the psychological blocks to creativity and the means by which these inhibitions may be overcome.

Milner approaches the series with the question: “What is Blake's view about why Job had to go through such torment?”^{xl} Her answer is that according to Blake, Job had erred in two crucial ways. First, he had rigidly followed the conscious “letter of the law” and “thought that he was perfect because his conscious intention was perfect”.^{xli} The converse of this blind obedience to God was a denial and unawareness of any destructive element in himself that might require expression. In structural terms, Job's depth mind activities were forcefully repressed and chained by his surface mind sensibilities.

The first two plates of the series illustrate how submission to the rigid laws of surface level processing leads to a stultification of creativity. In Plate 1, Milner notes how Job's family is grouped underneath a tree upon which unused musical instruments hang. In addition, Job is seen reading from a book, and one of the marginal texts declares: “The Letter killeth, the Spirit giveth life”. The plate therefore depicts the initial situation wherein strict adherence to the law of the surface mind has stifled Job's creativity.

In the second plate, Job's denied inner world is pictured outside and above his head, and "in it is Satan, the principle of destruction, leaping in and demanding expression".^{xliii} Milner suggests that the text – "When the Almighty was yet with me, when my Children were about me" – should be understood in light of Job's early psychological development: it speaks, in fact, of the lost oceanic feeling of his infancy. In this scenario, Satan embodies Job's denied anger at having to give up the primary oceanic feeling of union, a feeling desperately sought later by attempting to be one with God through submission to divine law. Milner notes that this is a rather traditional Freudian reading in its emphasis on unconscious content, i.e. on repressed infantile wishes and denied aggressive feelings. Hence, in a counterbalancing move in line with Ehrenzweig, she turns to Job's second error, which involves the structure and mode of processing of the unconscious rather than its repressed content.

Milner argues that Blake sees Job's second error as holding on to a unilateral frame of mind. Being a patriarch and man of power, Job is one-sidedly male in his attitude, leading to a refutation of all that is female within him. Milner uses the term 'female' in two senses here. First, it refers to inadmissible wishes that are incompatible with rationally accepted standards of the self (signifying mental content), and second, to the perceptual functioning characteristic of the oceanic depth mind (signifying mental mode of processing). Elsewhere, particularly in her book *On Not Being Able to Paint*, Milner also attaches the idea of male and female ways of being to the two separate types of cognitive processing: to distinctive surface perception and wide-ranging depth perception respectively.^{xliii} Job's one-sided attitude is illustrated in the sixth plate, in which he is smote down with sore boils by Satan, and seen by Milner as repudiating the female aspect of his own mind, symbolized by his wife.

In Plate 11, God appears to Job as a demon bearing Job's own face. After this climax in suffering, a turn in Job's fortunes sees the gradual awakening and emancipation of his creative capacities. Plates 14 and 15, amongst others, depict the central themes behind his recovery. Milner points out that in Plate 14 the moon goddess (seen driving a team of serpents on the right) is given equivalent status to the sun god (seen driving a team of horses on the left), signifying the equal importance of the male and female aspects of the mind. Furthermore, she notes a recurrent theme in the positioning of arms in the recovery pictures: "They gradually become spread out in a wide, embracing gesture; and this is surely significant in connection with that wide-focused, wide-embracing kind of attention which Ehrenzweig claims is characteristic of the functioning of what he calls the depth mind."^{xliv}

Plate 15, in turn, further illuminates the two-tiered nature of the mind. The Deity is shown drawing the attention of Job and his wife and friends to an inner world encapsulated below. Its two monsters – the Behemoth on land and the Leviathan half-submerged in water – depict the surface and depth levels of the mind. Milner suggests that "certainly in this picture Blake seems to be showing his idea of the basic human energies in their most primitive form, for both creatures have a look of blind, unseeing eyes, as if to express the idea of energy not yet aware of itself".^{xlv} In the latter part of the series a dawning awareness of the mind's creative potential is slowly emerging in Job. Milner adds that "Blake seems to be saying that this awakening comes through the acceptance of, equally with the male, what he seems to look upon as the female phase of mental functioning; also that the full experience of this female phase means a willingness to accept a temporary submergence below the surface

consciousness”.^{xlvi} This is but a slight rephrasing of the manic-oceanic phase of Ehrenzweig’s model of creativity.

In the final two plates of the series, Job is seen restored with his family. In Plate 20, he is in his house surrounded by artworks and his three daughters, who signify Painting, Poetry and Music (Milner draws this allegory from another picture of Blake’s which is not included in this series). Plate 21 has the same basic design as Plate 1, but now Job and his family are playing the very instruments that previously hung unused in the tree above them, symbolizing the flowering of creative potential.

In sum, Milner believes Blake is illustrating the attitudinal errors that suppress creativity and the psychological processes that evoke its resurgence. What is required of the artist is a struggle of biblical proportions – akin to that of Job’s – of actively letting go of the purposive and controlling surface mind in order to stir the creative potential of the unconscious depth mind. Recourse to the oceanic (or feminine) phase and its comprehensive mode of perception is therefore regarded as a necessary precondition of vital artistic creativity. Milner puts it as follows: “Thus it seems that having once achieved the sense of separate existence, it is then necessary to be continually undoing it again, in a cyclic oscillation, if psychic sterility is to be avoided.”^{xlvii}

Like Ehrenzweig, Milner emphasizes the collaborative and flexible interplay between the surface and depth minds. The oceanic feeling as an affective state, however, does not in itself guarantee creative results. Milner states this unequivocally: “But it is not the oceanic feeling by itself, for that would be the mystic’s state; it is rather the oceanic state in a cyclic oscillation with the activity of what Ehrenzweig calls the surface mind, with that activity in which ‘things’ and the self... are grasped separately, not together. And the cyclic oscillation is not just passively experienced but actively used, with the intent to make something, produce something.”^{xlviii} Echoing Ehrenzweig, Milner’s distinction between the affective oceanic feeling and the creative oceanic state emphasizes the perceptual features of the latter. Furthermore, oceanic feeling is contingent, whereas oceanic perception may be “actively used” to create new artistic imagery.

In her analysis, Milner does not use Blake’s illustrations to deduce the nature of the specific creative process that produced them. Nor does she call to our attention anything related to the possible unconscious substructure of the works themselves. Instead, Milner suggests that Blake must have been aware of the psychological processes inherent in true creativity, and that he exhibited this knowledge in his depiction of Job’s tribulations. Viewed in this light, the Job series unfolds like an illustrated morality play with the oceanic state in the role of redeemer. At the same time, it serves as a pictorial exposition of Ehrenzweig’s and Milner’s joint theorization on the creative process. As such, it sidesteps the awkwardness of explaining the illustrations in terms of the psychological processes the artist put to use in creating them. The difficulties involved in this kind of attempt will become more apparent in our next example.

Marlene Goldsmith on Frida Kahlo’s *Flower of Life*

In an article focusing on the work of Mexican painter Frida Kahlo, Marlene Goldsmith uses the theorization of both Ehrenzweig and Milner to promote the vital and transformative

aspects of artistic creativity. She encapsulates their shared position as follows: “Milner and Ehrenzweig point out that the surface mind’s logical, analytical, and discriminating mode of functioning must be abandoned in a creative surrender; that is, the artist must open herself to a dissolution of the ordinary commonsense ego and immerse herself in the oceanic fusion of self–world–other.”^{xliv} She also reiterates their key notion that this “rhythmic, alternating experience of the self as separate and merged with the other and the world is essential to creativity”.¹

In addition to a number of other Frida Kahlo paintings, Goldsmith analyzes *Flower of Life* (c. 1944). She believes it “expresses in paint the liberating activity of creativity”.^{li} Furthermore she asserts that in the painting “we see rendered the elation and ecstasy that Milner believes essential to the creative act”, and that it “suggests aspects of the creative process described by Ehrenzweig”.^{lii} In other words, Goldsmith sees in the painting the workings of the oceanic *phase* of creativity, its characteristic mode of oceanic *perception*, and the oceanic *feelings* it engenders. The stance that she seems to be attributing to Milner regarding the role of the oceanic feeling in creativity is, however, slightly misleading. As I have argued above, Milner, like Ehrenzweig, regarded oceanic depth-level perception as the necessary precondition of true creativity. The oceanic feeling is less prominent in this regard, and can rightly be viewed as a consequence of rather than a prerequisite for creativity.

In order to facilitate a more systematic assessment of Goldsmith’s view, I will quote the key part of her analysis of *Flower of Life* at some length:

“Its blackness recalls the ego dissolution and death which the artist faces during the first phase of creativity. The unified surface of the painting alludes to the second phase. Images which the conscious mind, through reason and logic, could not have unified – images such as those of the penis, plant, fallopian tubes, arms, semen, and light – are merged to form a beautiful painting in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts and which we grasp all at once with an intuitive, syncretistic vision. Here we see the work of the containing womb and unconscious scanning. One can imagine the images suspended in an oceanic, womb-like container and then perceived with an act of unconscious scanning that resulted in a holistic substructure. This holistic vision was then transferred to the painting’s surface. Once done, this transfer makes possible conscious integration of unconscious symbols, both for the artist and for us.”^{liii}

Goldsmith’s equation of the various formal properties of the painting with aspects of the creative process is somewhat problematic on several fronts. First, she begins with a tenuous association of a specific color, black, with a certain psychic phase, ego dissolution. The problem here is that the given association needs to rely on some kind of valid fixity between the phase in question and its formal output. There is, however, no necessary or even *perceivable* connection between phase and formal features, making this type of matching altogether random (as in the case of poemagogic imagery). What, for instance, would the distinctive and recognizable visual features of the manic-oceanic phase be? Would the color black be out of the question here? Art therapist and aesthetician David Maclagan raises the same point in his discussion of Jackson Pollock, Willem De Kooning, and other artists who are often seen as having relied on the oceanic state in their painting processes. He duly cautions us of the “danger in identifying the unconscious substructure of art too closely with certain formal styles or aesthetic features, such as impulsive brushwork or splattered paint”.^{liv}

Second, Goldsmith asserts that the unified surface of the painting alludes to the manic-oceanic phase during which its holistic unconscious substructure was produced. Here she relies on Ehrenzweig's view of the strong pictorial space as a conscious signal of unconscious integration.^{lv} However, appealing to a consciously perceived unified surface in order to deduce unconscious substructure brings the previously discussed epistemological problem emphatically back to the fore. Interestingly, we may turn to Ehrenzweig for an example that runs counter to Goldsmith's assessment of pictorial space. He discusses at length how the surface gestalt of modern art "lies in ruins" and leaves the viewer to face a fragmented, splintered and unfocused pictorial space.^{lvi} Beyond this apparent surface chaos, however, assuredly lies unconscious depth coherence. Here we have two completely different types of consciously perceived surfaces: the unified one of Kahlo and the fragmented one of, for example, a Pollock. As it turns out, a strong pictorial space can presumably be embodied in a virtually infinite number of consciously perceived surface forms and combinations. Therefore consciously perceived formal features cannot be used as criteria for deducing the existence of a hidden order nor, for that matter, of the occurrence of any phase that may have produced it. In sum, Goldsmith's identification of a unified surface loses its role as a reliable or valid signifier of anything beyond itself.

Goldsmith also argues that the painting's images of the penis, plant, fallopian tubes, and so on could not have been unified by the reason and logic of the conscious mind. This is a strongly counterintuitive claim to make. It is not only conceivable but also quite plausible that one can make an exclusively conscious decision to combine all sorts of formal elements or objects without recourse to the unconscious and syncretistic vision of the oceanic depth mind. Furthermore, conflating unconscious substructure with seemingly bizarre or absurd combinations of elements misses the point. I believe Ehrenzweig's idea of oceanic dedifferentiation implies something far more radical than merely combining imagery in odd ways in the unconscious. In point of fact, he asserts that his proposal of an unconscious matrix provides an explanation for what lies below the "more superficial primary process forms".^{lvii} To make his stance absolutely clear, he states: "We cannot see it [unconscious substructure] because it comes from deeper, less differentiated levels than the more superficial primary-process forms of condensation, displacement, representation by the opposite and the like. It may come from an undifferentiated matrix underlying all conscious imagery and image-making where all the *non-sensical contradictions and distortions* of the primary process are at last resolved."^{lviii}

Finally, Goldsmith's description of "transferring" the holistic unconscious vision to the painting's surface is excessively mechanistic and simplified. It implies that all the images are first gathered, suspended and perceived holistically in the "womb-like container" of the oceanic phase, after which their transportation to the painting is all there is left to do. There is no mention of the inevitable oscillation between different levels of consciousness in the painterly process and how this might have influenced the gradual emergence of the pictorial space of the painting. Painting is not so much a wholesale transferral of unconsciously preconceived images as it is a process of forming those very images through a dialogue between unconscious and conscious modes of processing. Indeed, Ehrenzweig likens the work of art to another person with whom the artist converses.^{lix} The creative process is a living and often surprising relationship of mutual give and take.

To mitigate the impression of a straightforward causality between artist and artwork, Goldsmith uses terms such as ‘allude’ and ‘suggest’ to qualify the connections between the formal features of the work and the psychological processes of its creation. Also, in her summary of Ehrenzweig’s and Milner’s ideas she does pay heed to their theoretical nuance, noting, for example, the importance of a creative rhythm that smoothly incorporates different levels of perception. Nonetheless, her actual usage of these ideas in analyzing Kahlo’s work comes across as a rather programmatic application of a ready-made interpretive template. Not only does this carry over some of the problems inherent in Ehrenzweig’s theorization, it glosses over the subtleties of some of its central tenets.

Conclusion

How, then, could the concept of the oceanic feeling be justifiably used in examining artistic creativity, aesthetic encounters and individual artworks? The oceanic feeling as *feeling* is undoubtedly a genuine and well-documented aspect of artistic creativity and aesthetic experience. As such, it is an established and appropriate concept for expressing experiences of ecstatic oneness and boundlessness in art, whether in creation or reception. Ehrenzweig’s derivatives of the concept have, however, extended it to encompass perceptual cognition and phase of creative process, as well. The consequences of this modification have been double-edged: while the concept has become semantically enriched, it has also become embedded in a denser network of theoretical problems.

In this article, I have examined the implications of these theoretical difficulties specifically in light of aesthetic analyses that use the ‘oceanic feeling’ and its derivative terms as interpretive conceptual tools. As I have argued, searching the artwork for an unconscious substructure that embodies the products of oceanic dedifferentiation and the manic-oceanic phase is a dauntingly labyrinthine, if not indeed impossible task. This is not to negate the possible existence of oceanic modes of perception and phases of processing as such, but to call into question what we can know of their effects on the actual materiality of works of art, and hence, the aesthetic interpretation of these works.

To conclude, I suggest a more modest usage of the concept in aesthetic analyses. It is quite justifiable to speak of the subjective oceanic experiences of oneness, boundlessness and elation aroused by art. These emerge from an intricate interaction between the formal and material features of the artwork and the structure, content and dynamics of the perceiver’s mind. Likewise, the prospect of broadening one’s perceptual and aesthetic sensibilities to include oceanic low-level scanning is a truly alluring option. However, posing any one or combination of these oceanic experiences and processes as universal criteria for discerning the presence of a hidden order in art, or as indicators of its aesthetic value, is a theoretical dive too deep to take.

ⁱ Barnaby Nelson and David Rawlings, “Its Own Reward: A Phenomenological Study of Artistic Creativity,” *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* 38 (2007): 217–255.

ⁱⁱ Quoted in William B. Parsons, *The Enigma of the Oceanic Feeling: Revisioning the Psychoanalytic Theory of Mysticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 173.

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- ⁱⁱⁱ Sigmund Freud, “Civilization and its Discontents,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XXI*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1961), 64–145.
- ^{iv} *Ibid.*, 65.
- ^v *Ibid.*, 68.
- ^{vi} See for instance Jeffrey M. Masson, *The Oceanic Feeling: The Origins of Religious Sentiment in India* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1980).
- ^{vii} See for instance Adrian Stokes, *The Critical Writings of Adrian Stokes, Vol. III, 1955–1967* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978) and Marion Milner, *The Suppressed Madness of Sane Men: Forty-Four Years of Exploring Psychoanalysis* ed. David Tuckett (Hove: Brunner-Routledge, 1987).
- ^{viii} For an analysis of the relations between Ehrenzweig’s, Freud’s, and Rolland’s accounts of the oceanic feeling, see Author (2012).
- ^{ix} Anton Ehrenzweig, *The Psychoanalysis of Artistic Vision and Hearing: An Introduction to a Theory of Unconscious Perception* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953).
- ^x Anton Ehrenzweig, *The Hidden Order of Art: A Study in the Psychology of Perception*, (London: Phoenix Press, 1967).
- ^{xi} *Ibid.*, 32.
- ^{xii} *Ibid.*, 95–109.
- ^{xiii} *Ibid.*, 103.
- ^{xiv} *Ibid.*, 104–5.
- ^{xv} *Ibid.*, 196.
- ^{xvi} *Ibid.*, 103, 120, 192.
- ^{xvii} *Ibid.*, 32–46.
- ^{xviii} *Ibid.*, 294, my italics.
- ^{xix} *Ibid.*, 295.
- ^{xx} *Ibid.*, 193.
- ^{xxi} Nelson and Rawlings, “Its Own Reward: A Phenomenological Study of Artistic Creativity,” 232.
- ^{xxii} Ehrenzweig, *The Hidden Order of Art*, 249.
- ^{xxiii} *Ibid.*, 176.
- ^{xxiv} *Ibid.*, 78.
- ^{xxv} *Ibid.*, 79.
- ^{xxvi} *Ibid.*, 80.
- ^{xxvii} *Ibid.*, 88.
- ^{xxviii} *Ibid.*, 74.
- ^{xxix} Anton Ehrenzweig, “A New Psychoanalytical Approach to Aesthetics,” in *Psychology and the Visual Arts*, ed. James Hogg (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1962), 109–128.
- ^{xxx} Ehrenzweig, *The Hidden Order of Art*, 228.
- ^{xxxi} *Ibid.*, 208–211.
- ^{xxxii} *Ibid.*, 228–256.
- ^{xxxiii} Ehrenzweig, “A New Psychoanalytical Approach to Aesthetics,” 128, my italics.
- ^{xxxiv} For a discussion of different approaches to aesthetic experience, see for instance Noël Carroll, “Aesthetic Experience Revisited,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 42, no. 2 (2002): 145–168.
- ^{xxxv} Ehrenzweig, *Hidden Order of Art*, 121.
- ^{xxxvi} *Ibid.*, 74.

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- xxxvii Milner, *The Suppressed Madness of Sane Men*, 242.
- xxxviii *Ibid.*, 192–215.
- xxxix The plates can be viewed online in the William Blake Archive through the link “Illustrations of the Book of Job (1823–1826): electronic edition,” <http://www.blakearchive.org/blake/indexworks.htm>.
- xl Milner, *The Suppressed Madness of Sane Men*, 201.
- xli *Ibid.*, 201.
- xlii *Ibid.*, 201.
- xliii Marion Milner, *On Not Being Able to Paint* (NY: Tarcher/Putnam, 1957).
- xliv Milner, *The Suppressed Madness of Sane Men*, 203.
- xlv *Ibid.*, 203–204.
- xlvi *Ibid.*, 204.
- xlvii *Ibid.*, 204.
- xlviii *Ibid.*, 197.
- xlix Marlene Goldsmith, “Frida Kahlo: Abjection, Psychic Deadness, and the Creative Impulse,” *Psychoanalytic Review* 91, no. 6 (2004): 740.
- l *Ibid.*, 739.
- li *Ibid.*, 748.
- lii *Ibid.*, 749.
- liii *Ibid.*, 749.
- liv David Maclagan, *Psychological Aesthetics: Painting, Feeling and Making Sense* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2001), 69.
- lv Ehrenzweig, *The Hidden Order of Art*, 171.
- lvi *Ibid.*, 121.
- lvii *Ibid.*, 267.
- lviii Ehrenzweig, “A New Psychoanalytical Approach to Aesthetics,” 115, my italics.
- lix Ehrenzweig, *The Hidden Order of Art*, 102.

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