

Huxley on Drugs and Creativity

Aldous Huxley interviewed for The Paris Review (1960)

Aldous Huxley

Interviewers: Do you see any relation between the creative process and the use of such drugs as lysergic acid [diethylamide]?

Huxley: I don't think there is any generalization one can make on this. Experience has shown that there's an enormous variation in the way people respond to lysergic acid. Some people probably could get direct aesthetic inspiration for painting or poetry out of it. Others I don't think could. For most people it's an extremely significant experience, and I suppose in an indirect way it could help the creative process. But I don't think one can sit down and say, "I want to write a magnificent poem, and so I'm going to take lysergic acid [diethylamide]." I don't think it's by any means certain that you would get the result you wanted -- you might get almost any result.

Interviewers: Would the drug give more help to the lyric poet than the novelist?

Huxley: Well, the poet would certainly get an extraordinary view of life which he wouldn't have had in any other way, and this might help him a great deal. But you see (and this is the most significant thing about the experience), during the experience you're really not interested in doing anything practical -- even writing lyric poetry. If you were having a love affair with a woman, would you be interested in writing about it? Of course not. And during the experience you're not particularly in words, because the experience transcends words and is quite inexpressible in terms of words. So the whole notion of conceptualizing what is happening seems very silly. After the event, it seems to me quite possible that it might be of great assistance: people would see the universe around them in a very different way and would be inspired, possibly, to write about it.

Interviewers: But is there much carry-over from the experience?

Huxley: Well, there's always a complete memory of the experience. You remember something extraordinary having happened. And to some extent you can relive the experience, particularly the transformation of the outside world. You get hints of this, you see the world in this transfigured way now and then -- not to the same pitch of intensity, but something of the kind. It does help you to look at the world in a new way. And you come to understand very clearly the way that certain specially gifted people have seen the world. You are actually introduced into the kind of world that Van Gogh lived in, or the kind of world that Blake lived in. You begin to have a direct experience of this kind of world while you're under the drug, and afterwards you can remember and to some slight extent recapture this kind of world, which certain privileged people have moved in and out of, as Blake obviously did all the time.

Interviewers: But the artist's talents won't be any different from what they were before he took the drug?

Huxley: I don't see why they should be different. Some experiments have been made to see what painters can do under the influence of the drug, but most of the examples I have seen are very uninteresting. You could never hope to reproduce to the full extent the quite incredible intensity of color that you get under the influence of the drug. Most of the things I have seen are just rather tiresome bits of expressionism, which correspond hardly at all, I would think, to the actual experience. Maybe an immensely gifted artist -- someone like Odilon Redon (who probably saw the world like this all the time anyhow) -- maybe such a man could profit by the lysergic acid [diethylamide] experience, could use his visions as models, could reproduce on canvas the external world as it is transfigured by the drug.

Interviewers: Here this afternoon, as in your book, *The Doors of Perception*, you've been talking chiefly about the visual experience under the drug, and about painting. Is there any similar gain in psychological insight?

Huxley: Yes, I think there is. While one is under the drug one has penetrating insights into the people around one, and also into one's own life. Many people get tremendous recalls of buried material. A process which may take six years of psychoanalysis happens in an hour -- and considerably cheaper! And the experience can be very liberating and widening in other ways. It shows that the world one habitually lives in is merely a creation of this conventional, closely conditioned being which one is, and that there are quite other kinds of worlds outside. It's a very salutary thing to realize that the rather dull universe in which most of us spend most of our time is not the only universe there is. I think it's healthy that people should have this experience.

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