

## **Anton Ehrenzweig: this artist's best friend**

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Of all of the writers on art I have read – art critics, theorists, philosophers, artists themselves – none has been of as much practical help to me, as a developing artist, than Anton Ehrenzweig. Without his insights, I do not believe I could have made what was an intense and very demanding transition from a man of business to being an artist. This is not to undervalue the support I have had from these writers, nor the lecturers, teachers and colleagues who have given me such support, but Ehrenzweig addresses the deepest and, for me, most difficult aspects of the creative process and gave me the inner strength to continue.

In this paper, I wish to identify and summarise those aspects of Ehrenzweig's writing that have been of greatest help to me, and to explain why this was the case<sup>1</sup>. My encounter with his writing came at a time when I was adapting to a new, very unfamiliar, and intensely personal way of being – that of an artist. My sense of myself, and the degree to which my inner core was revealed to the world, were under severe stress as the demands of making art forced me behave in ways I had never encountered before. I was new to this level of creativity, and my art came from my inner self in ways I didn't understand, making me feel very vulnerable and exposed – an historically dangerous position for someone of my background. In explaining the creative process in terms I could understand, Ehrenzweig legitimised what I was doing and gave me the confidence to push myself as far as I could into this new way of being.

At a more intellectualised level, I am increasingly aware of the holistic nature of creativity – that everything touches and affects everything else, regardless of boundaries, hierarchies etc. Hence my recognition of teachers, colleagues and writers who have helped my progress. In particular, Ehrenzweig complements my interest in Heidegger, another writer who has had a very significant impact on my way of being. In the same sense that Ehrenzweig explains creativity by going deep into what it is to be human, Heidegger does the same through a penetrating search into the external world, beyond what we see, and comes to a sense of being in the world that complements Ehrenzweig.

The following description is my interpretation of Ehrenzweig's analysis of the psychology of the artistic process. My interpretation has been developed to support my way of being, and this is what I present here.

The starting point for understanding Ehrenzweig is, for me, his structuring of the inner processes in a way that accommodates the logical and organised, and the chaotic and illogical, both of which are part of human experience. He describes them as primary and secondary processes. Understanding this structure provided me with a framework for explaining the creative process, that works across both realms.

The Primary process contains our deepest sense of being – often mischaracterised as childlike and primitive. This unconscious space holds that part of the world which is unstructured, undifferentiated and syncretic. Everything is of the same significance and there is no hierarchy, but a deep oceanic sense of existence. Here lies our internalisation of the world that is not subject to conscious interpretation.

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<sup>1</sup> Ehrenzweig's writing is contained 'The Hidden Order of Art' (1995, University of California Press, California).

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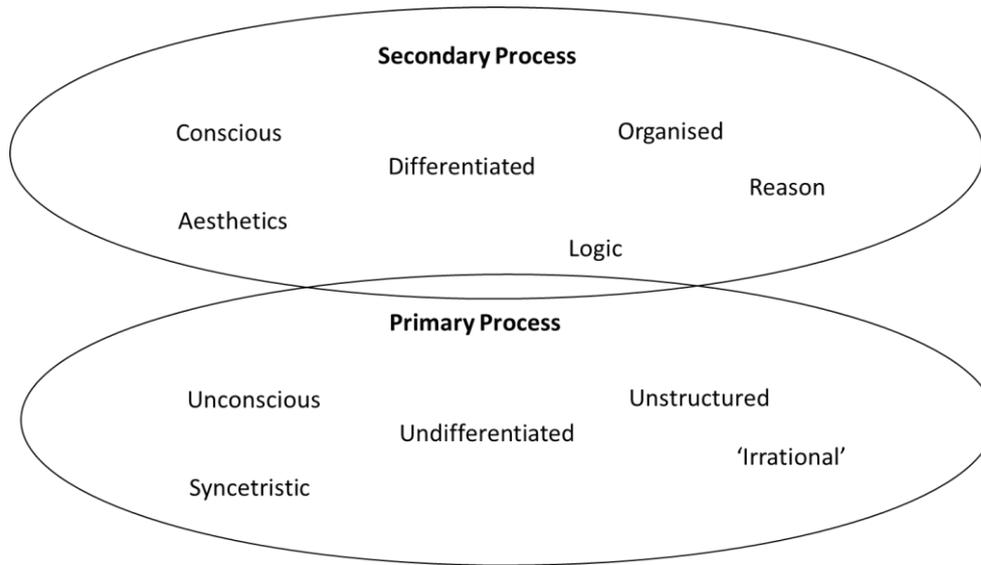


Figure 1: Primary and Secondary processes

The Secondary process holds our conscious being, where the world is visible and organised, and can be subjected to reason and logic. In creative terms, our developed sense of the analytic gestalt resides here, alongside concepts of aesthetics.

My personal sense of the contrast between the two states is that one is undifferentiated (there is no difference between any entity in this space) and differentiated (everything is catalogued and organised).

This rather simplistic summary will, perhaps, become more meaningful as we look at the creative flow that occurs between the primary and secondary processes.

A significant concept in this analysis for me was that of the syncretistic capacity to comprehend total structures. In simple terms, to see everything in one complete view, without differentiation. The view of a landscape, an interior, whatever, is seen as one, everything at the same time, everything as equal – nothing is deemed insignificant or accidental. This is in contrast to the gestalt perception, where a dominant form is foregrounded, and everything else is background, less significant. This is significant for me in 2 respects. Firstly, it reflects how I believe I see things – taking in the total view as one, without prioritising. I felt Ehrenzweig had vindicated my way of seeing. Secondly, it provides a way of understanding a critical part of the generation of creativity.

This syncretistic capacity underpins what Ehrenzweig calls 'unconscious scanning'. An example of this is what we artists do when we switch our conscious mind off and look at our work. We seem to take it in in its totality, almost absentmindedly, and then associations and commentary takes place deep in the sub-conscious, to emerge as an idea or a concern. I feel 'unconscious scanning' is at its most powerful as an idea when applied to how we work in the primary process. Ehrenzweig talks of a deep oceanic and unbounded unconscious, where all of our undifferentiated existence resides. Our ability to scan this environment in a syncretistic manner means that we can create an astronomical combination of ideas and symbols, completely ungoverned by rationality, taste, moralising etc.

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Unconscious scanning is, I believe, a core sub-conscious part of my practice. To dive into that oceanic space and attract those symbols that reflect my unconscious pre-occupations – unbounded by aesthetics or any other considerations.

This leads me onto my interpretation of Ehrenzweig's three stage description of the creative process. I must confess I have not fully grasped it in its entirety, but my working model is what gave me the understanding of my internal processes sufficient to give me the confidence to continue my artistic journey.

My interpretation is as follows:

- Stage 1 – the 'schizoid' stage of projecting parts of one's self into the work: this fragmented material comes unmediated from one's sub-conscious. It therefore has all of the characteristics of the primary process as described above, and as such seems accidental, fragmented, unwanted and persecutory. In other words, it is material that is kept in the subconscious because the person (in this case, the artist) cannot normally cope with it in the conscious space, but the artist is forced to face it during the early stages of creation.
- Stage 2 – the 'manic' stage of integration: the artist, in response to what he sees (often in horror), subconsciously scans and tries to integrate the fragments. This, however, is done at sub-structural level and does not resolve the surface 'gestalt'. This can often be the cause of severe anxiety (that artist's often feel in their true creative phase), as the work seems fragmented and unresolved (and too self-revealing)
- Stage 3 – re-introjection of part of the work's sub-structure into the conscious mind (and ego). The revealed elements of substructure seem fragmented and chaotic, and can cause severe anxiety, but is manageable. At this stage, the artist will often force gestalt thinking and an aesthetic appreciation onto the work in an attempt to return to conscious norms. In my view, the greater the resistance to this temptation, the greater the likelihood is that truth will remain in the work.

I have deliberately left in the psychological emphasis because, to me, it is the element that most troubled me and can cause one to restrict one's creativity for fear of revealing this undifferentiated, chaotic sense of the world. By understanding the psychological, I could tolerate what otherwise would be overwhelming

There is so much more than I have described in Ehrenzweig's writing, but to go further would involve a level of complexity that even he freely admits is difficult for many people to comprehend. I believe that there is enough here to indicate the sense of his psychological explanation of the creative process, and why it meant so much to me. In addressing my concerns about opening out the sub-conscious and handling the result in such a public way as art demands, Ehrenzweig gave me 'permission' to not worry, and I push my art as far as I mentally can; and this is partly why I have made the incredible transition from the business world to artist.