



The "dolphin Experience": Technologies of Enchantment Promoting Self-Transformation

Véronique Servais, University of Liège (B)
Arnaud Halloy, University of Nice Sophia Antipolis (F)



The experience of enchantment :

- The **suspension of the ordinary** way of experiencing the world (i.e. encounter with a spiritual entity, extra-sensorial communication with an animal, etc)
- **"Interceptive biais"**: attention is turned inward to own feelings, sensations and thoughts.
- **Uncanny feelings**, sensations and emotions that cannot easily be identified and lead to some confusion
- **Trance-like** states (dissociation, hypnotic states)
- Intense **imaginary** mobilization
- **Ontological uncertainty** about dolphins (who are they really?)

An technology of enchantment is made of three steps

1. Preparing the novice by unlocking the imagination and educating the attention : this is the "preparation" of the novice
2. The experience of enchantment itself
3. The social assessment of the enchanting experience : it truly took place

From the fieldwork: what people say

The **enchanted encounter** between humans and dolphin creates what people call an "inter-species connection". People experience:

- Entering **another world**: "I touched the dolphin's head and I left this world"
- **Full and immediate communication** with the dolphins : the dolphin *intentionally* addresses the human being and the latter easily *understands* what he means
- **Telepathic Communication**: the human being hears inner speech that is experienced as messages sent by the dolphin
- A **revelation-like experience**: the human being discovers who (s)he really is. Seeing oneself in the eye of a dolphin reveals the "true nature" of the self.
- **intense positive emotions**: feelings of pure love, joy, euphoria, loss of the limits of the self, alteration of body, time and space perceptions
- **Self-transformation**: the "dolphin experience" is often a life-changing experience. It may be an important step in a psychotherapy process (for depressed or anorexic persons it proved to be the beginning of their change, Servais 2006.) It may change the sense of one's *identity* as a human being

The enchanted encounter is different from a "mere" dolphin encounter at sea.

How can such an event happen?
Is it a mere illusion ?

OUR HYPOTHESIS: IT HAPPENS THANKS TO A TECHNOLOGY OF ENCHANTMENT

- A **technology of enchantment is:**
- **Culturally organized** practices and environment facilitating the experience of enchantment
- An **In-between space** of practices, in which evocative fields, expectations, dispositions for a specific experience (enchantment) are created
- A **transitional space** (Winnicott) neither totally material, nor totally subjective, where internal and external worlds can meet, thanks to the work of imagination. The transitional space is where personal experience gets integrated
- The experience of enchantment always remains uncertain: the device is not deterministic



1. Unlocking the imagination

Engagement in the "world of the magical dolphin" (blogs, workshops, books, websites, etc.) arises doubts about the identity of the dolphins arise : who are they really ? In those stories, the dolphins are presented as :

- **Healers**: because of their kindness towards human species, they can heal the wounded hearts. They are also said to heal autism.
- **Rescuers**: they rescue shipwrecked people and/or protect them from sharks.
- **Conscious beings**: dolphins deliberately seek the contact with human beings. "If a dolphin comes to you, it isn't by chance: he wants it!"
- **Messengers**: dolphins contact human beings because they want to transmit important peace and ecological messages to us
- **Omniscient creatures**: thanks to their sonar, dolphins can see through human beings. Dolphins know everything about the person facing them: how she feels, what she had for dinner, if she is sad or happy, and even what is going on in her mind. There is nowhere to hide.

All together it is suggested that the dolphins are not "mere animals". Imagination is unlocked and ontological uncertainty about the dolphin's identity is triggered: "what if it were true? If dolphins were not what they have been thought of, then everything could be different..."

... and educating the attention

Stories focus repeatedly on some points (the dolphins' intentionality, gaze, kindness, wisdom, sonar) to which the attention will become fixed during the encounter and that will serve as guiding points for perception. Additionally, while getting ready for the encounter, participants are taught:

- How to "let the dolphin touch their heart": they remember one painful experience or emotion and offer it mentally to the kindness of the dolphin (= letting go of control; humility towards the dolphin, who is the one in charge)
- How to feel like a dolphin: participants might be invited to mentally feel what it is like to have flippers instead of arms and hands (= gaining awareness of the dolphin's kinaesthesia)

2. The experience of enchantment. How does it happen?

Not every dolphin encounter is enchanted. Actually, many are not. Drawing from Gell (2006) we make the hypothesis that **for enchantment to happen, there must be at least four conditions**:

- **ONTOLOGICAL UNCERTAINTY**: about the dolphins, about his(her) own experience
- **TRUST AND BENEVOLENCE** as descriptive qualities of the environment
- **A SPECIFIC PERCEPTUAL SENSESCAPE** where perceptual elements are assembled in a way to create the experiential texture of new embodied meanings
 - the dolphin's smile, her rounded face, direct gaze and slight head tilt, the dolphin's synchronization of movements with swimmer, the dolphin's smooth bodies and paucity of non verbal signals, deep alteration of the body schema, etc.
- **COGNITIVE OPACITY** that comes between the experience and its interpretation. The emotional saturation and the uncanny feelings prevent the person from understanding what is happening to her. Her inner world and the external reality are disconnected, calling for an important work of imagination in order to connect them and integrate her experience.

The best reaction for the novice then is to give up control completely and to allow her to the "non-will", which means that the novice's attention is both available, i.e. not guided by intention, and channeled by the sensescape itself: previously unnoticed perceptual elements are articulated and assembled together to create new meanings. Then the dolphin's behaviours become meaningful

3. The social assessment of the enchanting experience. "It truly happened"

the experience of enchantment is hard to share with others. If not shared, it might become distressful. They find effective to write about their experience, which is a mean to validate it as a true "dolphin experience" instead of, for example, a dissociation episode