Spiritual Technologies and Altering Consciousness in Contemporary Counterculture*

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Introduction

With a focus on virtual reality, techno-rave culture, and “psychedelic trance,” this chapter explores practices of consciousness alteration within contemporary countercultures. By contemporary, I mean the period from the 1960s to the present, with the chapter addressing the continuing legacy of earlier quests for consciousness expansion. Central to the discussion is the development and application of spiritual technologies (cyber, digital, and chemical) and the appeal of traditional cultures in the lifestyles of those sometimes referred to as “modern primitives.” I also pay attention to specific individuals, “techno-tribes,” cultural formations and events heir to and at the intersection of these developments, with special observations drawn from the Boom Festival—Portugal’s carnival of consciousness. Furthermore, the chapter considers the prevalence of DiY consciousness echoed in practices of modern shamanism. As the contiguity between altering consciousness and altering culture is explored, the chapter considers the psychological and political dimensions of that which has been variously held as “consciousness” among spokespersons and participants within visionary-, arts-, and techno-cultures.

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Psychedelic Experience and Consciousness

It is necessary to begin with a discussion of the 1960s countercultural milieu, whose quest for and techniques of experience are a continuing legacy found in the conditions of ecstatic embodiment and visionary mind-states charted in this chapter. The 1960s saw the emergence of new and subversive forms of art, leisure, sexuality, and sociality. While “hippies” pursued a radical immanence rooted most immediately in the Beats and more epically in Romantic and Transcendentalist traditions, the “children of technique” were altering consciousness on a scale previously unknown. Psychotechnologies such as meditation and yoga, but also “acid rock,” chemical compounds, and psychoactive plants, enabled the new prometheans to lay claim to the possibility of the self’s encounter with the Other World, a gnosis we might identify as the epiphanous field of the sacred variously encountered in this period as the “source,” the “One,” “godhead,” “Great Spirit,” “Mother Nature,” or “Self”. Manifestations of a philosophia perennis, diverse symbolic guideposts enabled connection with the divine, offering continuing confidence in the evolution of consciousness that had been expressed since the late nineteenth century, especially in the work of the Theosophists, and articulated in the quest for “cosmic consciousness,” the term coined by Richard Maurice Bucke in 1901 (see Lachman, 2003). For those seekers of transcendence and conscientious objectors championing heterodox poetic, spiritual, and ecological aesthetics, the term freak was an acceptable designation for the evolutionary (or indeed revolutionary) mutation from a condition of separation. Experimenting upon one’s mind was critical to this break. To be a “freak” thus presupposes the personal journey of transformation integral to the new spiritual pathways fermenting in this period. The spiritual transit typically implies movement from a condition of alienation (from inner god/ess, nature, the cosmos, consciousness) implicit to monotheism, possessive materialism, patriarchy, and patriotism, and a corresponding movement toward a resolution: realization, utopia, awareness, peace, unity. Importantly, in this trajectory the self possesses a mind not disconnected from body and spirit, the holistic departure from which was embodied in the teachings of the human potential movement (Kripal, 2007) and the integral movement. ¹ For practitioners of this progressive and holistic

¹Among whom figure Sri Aurobindo (whose work provided the inspiration for the founding of the California Institute of Integral Studies), George Burr Leonard, who coined the term “human potential movement,” Michael Murphy, cofounder of the Esalen Institute in Big Sur and “Integral Transformative Practice” (with Burr Leonard), and Ken Wilber, who articulated “integral theory” and founded the Integral Institute.
movement, what Henri Bergson (1944 [1907]) called the “life-force” and what has generally been regarded as “universal consciousness” could be accessed and reaffirmed through chosen activities in the phenomenal world like Transcendental Meditation, dance, and travel to places of spiritual significance. Radical immanence was practiced and cosmic consciousness achieved in alternative subcultural lifestyle trends exemplified by the followers of the Grateful Dead, members of the Rainbow Family of Living Light, and, later, Burners, those inhabitants of the annual Burning Man Festival in Nevada’s Black Rock Desert, who Gilmore (2010, p. 96) indicates are performing a “spirituality” that is fundamentally “experiential.”

One of the chief ingredients in this development was LSD-25, the compound discovered in the late 1930s by Sandoz chemist Albert Hofmann. With Hofmann as its unwitting midwife, this potent mind-altering substance (“acid”) was crucial to the birth of the “psychedelic” (“mind-manifesting”) movement and its aesthetic legacy (“psychedelia”), whose artistic expressions had, by the 1970s, permeated popular Western culture. LSD is a curious story, for it is, in its spectacular amplification of divergent predispositions, a neutral agent [see Nichols & Chemel, Volume 2]. The truth of this statement is well documented by Martin Lee and Bruce Shlain (1985), who illustrate that, over the course of the Cold War, the CIA explored LSD’s power as a tool for mind control, coveting its potential utility to alter consciousness (to produce “an exploitable alteration of personality”) to secure state interests and funded a nationwide network of psychiatrists and other operatives for whom LSD was a “psychotomimetic” (psychosis-mimicking) drug. For “hippies,” LSD was hailed as a chief means to enhance an already altered worldview that had percolated among those for whom the “imperialist United States of America” was the primary cause of discontent and target of disavowal. That is, psychedelics were enabling those already seeking alternative pathways to “turn on” to higher states of consciousness of the kind conveyed in the writings of Aldous Huxley. In The Doors of Perception (1954) (usually published with Heaven and Hell: 1956), and Island (1962), Huxley endorsed the view that mescaline and other psychedelics were integral to mystical experience in the modern era. Railing against a culture of conformity and acquiescence in the shadow of the mushroom cloud, newly circulating psychoactives were considered the shortest and most effective route to cosmic consciousness yet: an atomic blast of consciousness for an atomic age. Following on from the nitrous oxide-fuelled insights of William James in The Varieties of the Religious Experience (1902) and Bergson’s understanding of the mind as a “reducing valve” articulated in his Creative Evolution (1944 [1907]), Huxley divined that psychedelics
enabled users to turn off the perceptual “screens” and “filters” that typically blind one to the Other World accessed by saints, seers, mystics, and prophets throughout history [see Geels, this Volume, Beauregard, Volume 2]. He thus acknowledged the psychophysiological basis of these universal visionary mind states that were no less real and could be achieved without fasting or a lifetime of meditational training.

Although Huxley saw the necessity for consciousness evolution with the assistance of LSD, as Jay Stevens illustrates in Storming Heaven (1989), the artistic, economic, and political elite was at odds with the likes of visionary poet Allen Ginsberg and maverick psychologist Timothy Leary, who used the mass media to promote LSD and facilitate consciousness change. For Leary, who would develop a model (the Eighth Circuit Model of Consciousness) in which psychedelics were integral to the evolution of consciousness (Leary, 1977), cosmic consciousness was not to be restricted to elites. Together with ex-Harvard colleagues Richard Alpert (aka Ram Dass) and Ralph Metzner, Leary produced an instruction manual for consciousness expansion modeled on the Tibetan Book of the Dead and inspired by a sojourn to India. As The Psychedelic Experience (Leary, Metzner, & Alpert, 1964) conveyed, LSD was configured as a kind of program for ego-death. As a manual that attempted to sequentialize the psychedelic experience such that a predictably enlightened outcome might be achieved, the manual was, in part, a programmatic counterpoint to the contemporaneous efforts of the celebrated author of One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest, Ken Kesey, whose Merry Pranksters orchestrated the mid-1960s west coast Acid Tests. Enabling collective states of entrance, the Acid Tests were a kind of “freak” rite of passage, the outcome of which held a degree of uncertainty—not unlike later rave and trance events. On the front lines of psychedelia, Kesey and his collaborators were change agents for whom consciousness alterants enhanced existing views, much the same way that LSD amplified the psychotic disposition of Charles Manson and his “family,” or “armed” various individuals and revolutionary cells associated with the Weather Underground.

One of the critical moments in the birth of this movement was the Gathering of the Tribes for a Human Be-in. Emerging out of the impulse toward cultural transformation building in San Francisco’s Haight-Ashbury district in the mid-1960s, this momentous event, in which more than 20,000 people participated, was held in Golden Gate Park on January 14, 1967. It was the nadir of the Summer of Love, and editor of the San Francisco Oracle Allen Cohen promoted the event as a meeting of the minds, namely the Berkeley radicals and the Haight-Ashbury hippies (Perry, 1984, p. 122)—in other words, the diverse membership of an
emergent *culture of consciousness*. Although commentators predicted that this event would usher in a “consciousness revolution” in which “fear will be washed away; ignorance will be exposed to sunlight; profits and empire will lie dying on deserted beaches; violence will be submerged and transmuted in rhythm and dance” (Allen Cohen in Perry, 1984, p. 122), with youth “sledgehammering at their shells until there was nothing left but the ubiquitous dust,” over the next year, LSD burnouts and heroin and methamphetamine addiction took their place alongside rapes and murders in the Haight. Although the universal consciousness revolution would thus remain illusory, by the late 1970s, *psychedelia* had become integral to the sensory indulgences and leisured life of Americans—an outcome that Leary took as his own legacy (Lee & Shlain, 1985, p. 292).

Among those drawn to Golden Gate Park that day was a young man named Terence McKenna. As an anarchist metaphysician and ethnonaturalist, McKenna would come to hold enthusiasm for the role of plant-derived psychoactives in human evolution [see Winkelman, Volume 1, Mishor, McKenna, & Callaway, Volume 2]. Formative was an expedition to La Chorrera in the Columbian Amazonas in March 1971, where Terence, together with his brother Dennis McKenna (who would become a world-renowned ethnobotanist), had gone in search of *ayahuasca*-using shamans and stumbled across *Stropharia cubensis* (psychoactive mushrooms; McKenna, 1993). In his so-called “stoned ape” theory of religion, McKenna (1992) speculated that tryptamines, principally hallucinogenic mushrooms, had performed a critical role in the evolution of consciousness and language, a view mooted by amateur ethnomycologist Robert Gordon Wasson and others (see Forte, 1997; Wasson, Kramrisch, Ruck, Ott, 1992). Furthermore, in a co-authored work (McKenna & McKenna 1993), the McKennas explored the ontological grounds for a theory of tryptamine-led revitalization later echoed in Jonathon Ott’s “Entheogenic Reformation” (Ott, 1995). Through the use of psychoactive plants, in particular psilocin-containing mushrooms, DMT, and the tryptamine-containing entheogens of the Amazon, western humanity, so long disconnected from “the vegetal Goddess,” could revive “the Paleolithic world of natural magic” and community (McKenna, 1991). As a core component to his prophetic insights, DMT was regarded as a significant agent in the coming eschaton, the theory of which was formulated in the “novelty” math

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2DMT (N,N-dimethyltryptamine) is a naturally occurring tryptamine found in many plants worldwide and is created in small amounts by the human body during metabolism. DMT-containing plants are commonly used in several South American shamanic practices, and it is usually one of the main active constituents of the drink *ayahuasca*. 
of Timewave Zero (McKenna & McKenna, 1993). Although the East had been a popular destination among post-1960s spiritual seekers in the wake of Leary, the McKenna’s expedition illustrated how the lore, practice, artifacts, and psychotropes of Amerindian cultures have influenced those desiring departure from core Western values and practice. The popularity of the McKenna’s ideas also demonstrated the appeal of the shaman as anarchist. An advocate of what Des Tramacchi (2006) has called “self-shamanism,” with his mesmerizing Irish brogue, wit, and charm, Terence McKenna would become a draw-card within the world psychedelic community from the 1980s through to his early death in 2000. In one inspired mid-1990s presentation, he inveighed that “our world is endangered by the absence of good ideas ... of consciousness,” and that the objective of the psychedelic experience was “to participate in the redemption of the human spirit,” charging neoshamanic experimentalists to “bring back a small piece of the picture and contribute it to the building of the new paradigm.”

Cyberculture and Virtual Reality

The popularization of altered states via the circulation of LSD in the 1960s is coincident with the emergence of the personal computer, and in particular the experience of mass altered consciousness facilitated by networked computers. This cyber-spatial consciousness is what had been dubbed “virtual reality,” the term science fiction author William Gibson applied to a disembodied networked experience that would leave fiction ten years after the publication of his Neuromancer (1984) as the Internet achieved widespread commercialization. Alongside LSD, the personal computer was imagined to enable a psychedelic experience by libertarian champions of altered states, principally Leary, who endorsed a “cyber-delic” thesis in which LSD and computers are integral to consciousness evolution (Leary, Horowitz & Marshall, 1994). In his premillennial cheerleading, Leary championed a “New Breed” of creative youth embracing psychedelics, cyberculture, and electronic music. At the high tide of extropianism, Douglas Rushkoff divulged (1994, p. 19) that the 1990s “cyberian counterculture” was “armed with new technologies, familiar with cyberspace and daring enough to explore unmapped realms of consciousness ... to rechoose reality consciously and purposefully,” his portrait of “Cyberia” a celebration of the “promethean spirit” integral to countercultures throughout the ages (Davis, 1998; Goffman, 2004). The PC revolution’s indebtedness to the utopian ideals of those for whom psychedelics
had fired revelation is discussed by John Markoff (2005), and Fred Turner (2006) argues that “digital utopianism” is rooted in the psychedelic counterculture via Stewart Brand’s Whole Earth network and its retooling of technologies from LSD to computers in the quest for consciousness, wholeness, and liberation. Although computer-mediated utopianism would take form in multiplayer role-playing games that found an exemplar in Second Life, perhaps the crowning achievement of DiY (do-it-yourself) techno-utopianism is the Burning Man Festival that, in a massive transmutation of the utopian subjunctivity (something that is imagined or at least has not happened yet) native to “virtual reality,” or perhaps more accurately “the metaverse” (the term used by Neal Stephenson in his 1992 science fiction novel Snow Crash), is annually rebooted on the hard white canvas of the Black Rock Desert, Nevada (Gilmore & Van Proyen, 2005).

The countercultural approach to new information technologies was far more complementary to its idealism than is often recognized. Although many embraced Jacques Ellul’s interpretation in The Technological Society (1964) of an essentially “Manichean” technology or mistrusted the dehumanizing and centralizing “technocratic” bureaucracy railed against by Theodore Roszak in The Making of a Counter Culture (1968), as Turner conveys, with countercultural appropriation of cybernetic and ecological discourse, the mythology of the personal and communally empowering computer evolved into a romantic/transcendentalist embrace of “machines of loving grace.” Indeed, the repurposing of cyber, chemical, and communications technologies was intended to inaugurate a New Consciousness post-1960s. Lifestyles characterized as “better living through circuitry” constituted a simultaneous phenomenological détournement of life under capital and a quest for an alternate world. Thus, here, altering consciousness would be implicit to altering social, cultural, and political structures. But although “Web 2.0” applications and technologies such as web applications, social networking sites, wikis, and blogs have facilitated interactive information sharing as well as user-centered design and collaboration, neoliberal globalization and state power have given rise to a “digital divide” and Internet surveillance, circumstances undermining the “digital utopia.” Criticism has also come from virtual reality pioneer Jaren Lanier. Earlier forecasting the revolutionary impact of the World Wide Web, Lanier (2010) grew to criticize what he called the “digital Maoism” associated with the likes of Wikipedia, Facebook, and Twitter and other virtual communities that are elevating the “wisdom of mobs” and computer algorithms over the intelligence and judgment of individuals.
Techno-Rave and Do-It-Yourself Consciousness

Since the 1960s, the “consciousness” whose expansion has been the purpose of spiritual technologies has been a Do-It-Yourself consciousness, since it is almost always enabled through the repurposing and remixing of existing cosmologies, beliefs, artifacts, and tools. The do-it-yourself Self is entirely consistent with developments in which consumers are encouraged to achieve their potential via a selective pastiche of symbols and praxis. From the I-Ching to meditation and yoga and from the didjeridu to the djembe and medicine drum, techniques and instruments enabling altered mind states and enthrancement were circulating among Westerners walking the aisles of the supermarket of consciousness. But although sampling from the art and rituals of world religions and shamanic practice facilitated access to hidden knowledge and enabled repertoires of authentic selfhood for disenchanted moderns, by the late 1980s an effusive sociality was at the centre of what in sections of the media was being hailed as the Second Summer of Love. I speak of the empathetic yet ephemeral sociality concentrated in the dance music phenomenon known as “rave.” While the 1980s might have been “peak oil” for the New Age industry, a period when therapeutic self-management workshops, salons, and seminars began employing teleologies of the self not incommensurate with corporate management-speak, in rave technologies were being harnessed, refit, and reapplied to orchestrate experiences of the sacred that were indelibly social. A unique crossroads of sound, vision, cybernetics, pharmacology, and embodiment in dance inaugurated, as many contemporaneous utopians claimed, a new consciousness revolution, or “rave-olution” (see St John, 2009a). Several important developments collided at this crossroads: new technologies of perception such as electronic synthesizers and computer-based samplers; the technique of the remix in music re/production and performance (Miller, 2008); consciousness alterants, principally ecstasy (MDMA), which came into mass circulation and ostensibly fostered spirituality, personal development, and life change (Takahashi, 2004, p. 151; see also Saunders & Doblin, 1996). New communications technologies, formerly the instant messaging service and the mobile phone and subsequently the Internet, enabled subterranean communications concerning production, performance, and a lifestyle that remained relatively covert and independent. As this compendium of techniques and prosthetics effectively enabled transient autonomous zones, from inner-city warehouse parties to massive “teknivals” emerging in Europe in the early 1990s, they were confirmation of the circulating ideas of radical libertarian Hakim
Bey (1991). Despite the enthusiasm demonstrated by raving evangelists (Fritz, 1999), others remained pessimistic about the utopian possibilities of rave, arguing that regulation and standardization lead to the emergence of “pleasure prisons” (Reynolds, 1998). Nevertheless, by the early 1990s, across Europe and North America, in Australia, and elsewhere, in various electronic dance music cultures (EDMCs), an assemblage of electronic audio, visual, and communications technologies were thus enabling new aesthetics of mass virtuality. Scholars of religion, music, and culture have employed diverse theoretical and methodological perspectives in their investigations of these developments. Attention has been directed to a range of relevant themes, including the heuristics of conversion (Hutson, 2000), sacrifice and transgression (Gauthier, 2005), communitas and the “vibe” (St John, 2008, 2011a; Tramacchi, 2000), ritualization (Gerard, 2004; Sylvan, 2005), and millenarianism and revitalization movements (Olaveson, 2004; St John, 2004).

Importantly, EDMCs contextualize the condition of ecstatic entrainment, a shifting (or nonsteady) state of altered consciousness proliferating in global dance cultures. Ecstatic entrainment does not simply refer to the state of ecstasy—associated with the Greek ekstasis, which means “to stand outside of oneself,” including one’s gendered identity (see Hemment, 1996)—but an entranced state, which implies the relinquishment of individual will and autonomy to an external power, higher energy, or extraordinary life force [see Ustinova, this Volume]. The history of EDM scenes illustrates commerce between these tendencies that fuel new socio-sensual spaces, cultures, and dance movements. Although there is a paucity of sustained efforts to understand such states, Hillegonda Rietveld (2004, p. 53) postulates transit to a “cyborg-like subjectivity” in postindustrial techno and house scenes in Detroit and London, which is the product of a sacrificial repetitive-beat ritual offering a temporary-yet-relived homeland for the alienated. Applying the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, for James Landau (2004, p. 113), the ecstatic condition of the unbound raving body is recognized as a “desubjectified cognitive state that can best be understood as a corporeal style of being, i.e. a non-reflective awareness autonomous in its ‘freedom’ from ideology, language and culture.”

The collective alteration of consciousness among adolescent populations accessing a veritable pharmacopeia (e.g., LSD, ecstasy, methamphetamine, ketamine, GHB, 2CB, cocaine, mushrooms) has been much maligned, eliciting challenges from cultural critics who railed against the emergence of club scenes “full of dead souls, zombie-eyed and prematurely haggard”; in such contexts, “instead of togetherness, sullen moats
of personal space reappear; smiley faces give way to sour expression” and participants “become connoisseurs of poisons, mix ‘n’ matching toxins to approximate the old high” (Reynolds, 1997, pp. 86–87). And moral panic concerning youth consumption of illicit consciousness alterants within these contexts has triggered potentially draconian legislation such as the RAVE Act (2003) in the United States, whose architects were apparently Reducing America’s Vulnerability to Ecstasy.

In the history of rave, the raising or expanding of consciousness is as important as its relinquishment in trance. Through the 1990s and the following decade, techno-rave culture offered upgrades on the techniques of the human potential movement whose holistic practices had become consistent with utopian, ascensionist, and evolutionary fantasies implicated in the cybernetic revolution. As a form of body transcendence, mind releasing, and self-awakening alongside meditation and yoga, certain forms of raving appeared to be integral to an ongoing consciousness revolution, a praxis in the repertoire of techniques of self-realization. The crowning achievements in this development are what have been known as “consciousness clubs” or intentional parties, exemplified by Fraser Clark’s London club Megatripolis, one of the earliest postrave conscious parties (see St John, 2009a, Chapter 4). In 1995, Clark opened the short-lived club Megatripolis West in San Francisco, the location fitting given that the city hosted the original tribal gathering model. With events promoted as “Hyperdelic Carnivals,” “Cyborganic Be-Ins,” and the “Digital Be-In” (Hill, 1999), in the early 1990s San Francisco held status as a nexus for conscious raving. By 1997, something of a global be-in had manifested as the Earthdance International festival. Promoted as the Global Dance Party for Peace, Earthdance is a synchronized global dance festival that began as a Free Tibet movement fundraiser and by 2010 was being held in more than 300 locations in more than 50 countries with participating events giving at least 50% of their profits to charities specifically addressing peace, relief efforts, environment, and world youth.

Trance, Psytrance, and Neotrance

Though it has grown to accommodate diverse music styles, Earthdance is rooted in psychedelic trance (or psytrance). Derived from parties held on the beaches of the former Portuguese province of Goa, India, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and incubated within “Goa trance” scenes developing in Goa and around the world from the mid-1990s, psytrance has proliferated globally (St John, 2010a). Demonstrating inheritance from
the ecstatic and conscious pursuits of the 1960s, infused with the independent remixological practice endogenous to electronic music production and performance, harnessing the communication capabilities of the Internet, and evolving a multimedia psychedelic arts scene, psytrance is an EDMC whose larger international festivals are among the most culturally diverse music and dance events globally. From the 1960s, Goa became an experimental outpost for middle-class dropouts seeking experience through transcendent states of subjectivity characterized across the decades by disciplinary practice, ecstatic pleasure, and visionary states. A place where charas (handmade hashish) remained legal until the mid-1970s, Goa became a laboratory of what Davis (2004) identifies as “spiritual hedonism”: an experience at the crossroads of the erotic/immanent and cognitive/transcendent. With “freaks” undertaking, as Anthony D’Andrea (2007) points out, the simultaneous “horizontal” (geo-spatial) and “vertical” (spiritual-psychedelic) journey from home/rational states, Goa was populated by self-exiled Westerners for whom travel to the Orient facilitated escape from the cage of Occidental rationality, enabling a mystical Orientation eventually packaged as trance tourism. Early Full Moon beach parties were spearheaded by California expatriate DJ Goa Gil, who became a sadhu (ascetic holy person) and advocated “recreating ancient tribal ritual for the twenty first century.” In his critique of Goa trance, Arun Saldanha (2007) argues that White “freaks” have been able to experience “tribal ritual” to the exclusion of brown-skinned natives. During the 1970s and 1980s, the experimental traveler-enclave fermented a distinct “Goa trance” sound and sensibility that would be transported around the world. Goa trance labels, albums, and events emerging in the mid-1990s would promote and package the trance experience as a transcendent journey adopting Oriental imagery and iconography to assist the journey. With the Goa aesthetic transportable, enthusiasts on the dance floor could consume the Goa experience, be exposed to the mystique, and access the metaphysical lore without ever having set foot in India.

Over the next decade, as the genre exploded into various subgenres, scenes, and aesthetics, psytrance made an impact across western Europe, Israel, North America, Australia, Japan, South Africa, and elsewhere, gaining popularity more recently in Russia, Brazil, and Mexico.

In this period, psytrance would become fertile ground for the appropriation of symbols and praxis of Amerindian cultures, especially regarding consciousness alteration via the use of native herbs and their chemical analogues. From the United States to Germany and Australia and indeed among Brazilians, Mexicans, and Chileans of Portuguese and Spanish decent, countercultural participants have long found
Amerindians to embody an originary power, a spiritual purity, a remedy for their alienated selves, circumstances challenged within academia where dubious claims to indigeneity (Kehoe, 1990) and “fakelore” (Niman 1997, pp. 131–148) are conflated with neocolonial practice (see Johnson, 1995; Root, 1996).

Psytrance is not above reproach, for native cultures have been romanticized by artists and enthusiasts who sculpt fantasies using sound and images sampled from popular cultural sources in music and at festivals where generic natives have been the source to which initiates journey to obtain wisdom to remedy their modern afflictions. But while cultures with great variation may be homogenized in sonic fictions and consumer fantasies standardizing peoples according to primitivist specifications, appropriations should not be subject to blanket dismissal, because: (1) native millenarian discourses have been adopted and repurposed to the ends of Western countercultural movements seeking resolution to the crises of modernity (e.g., existential, ecological, and otherwise); (2) native plants and their analogues are known to initiate profound shifts in consciousness (Strassman, 2001; Strassman et al., 2008; and other entries on “entheogenic spirituality” such as Oroc, 2009), and; (3) native actors have become involved in manufacturing, selling, spending, and buying their own products.

In relation to this last point, today *ayahuasqueros* (ayahuasca shamans) and other *curanderos*, *vegetalistas*, and *perfumeros* promote their services to Westerners who undertake journeys to, for example, the Peruvian Amazon (Razam, 2009). The practices of native inhabitants of the Central and South Americas have generated appeal among dissidents (Burroughs & Ginsberg, 1963), many of whom, following T. McKenna’s lead, and also the (dubious) works of Carlos Castaneda, went in search of what has more recently been identified as “entheogenesis” (literally, awakening the divine within), with the assistance of plants, fungi, and herbs such as psilocybin, *ayahuasca*, DMT, and *Salvia divinorum*, all used by various indigenous inhabitants of Mexico and the Amazon, whose ethno-exotic status validates the power of such plants as virtuous tools to be employed in the service of mind travel. A growing thicket of “plant allies” used in world shamanic practices have become popular as “the ritual use of tobaccos, the Caribbean *Cohoba* snuff, morning glories, *Datura* entheogenic cacti, and the vast pharmacopeia of South American psychointegrator plants” formed the “constellation of

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3Also known as “diviner’s sage,” *Salvia divinorum* has a long and continuing tradition of use by indigenous Mazatec in Oaxaca, Mexico, where is it used by shamans to facilitate visionary states of consciousness during curing or divination sessions and is also used to treat ailments.
New World entheogen use” (Tramacchi, 2006, p. 32). Within psytrance, ayahuasca shamanism (Metzner, 1999) gained in popularity in advance of its ostensible influence on Hollywood, notably in the film Avatar (see Davis, 2009). And as the popularity of DMT accelerated over the last decade, the “hyperspatial” effect of its ingestion would have a considerable bearing on psytrance music and culture, an impact that is clearly traceable to the work of McKenna, who remains the most sampled individual in music productions. With McKenna acting as posthumous guide to the psychosomatic and “hyperdimensional” frisson of DMT-space, psytrance and the wider visionary arts community have become fertile ground for neoshamanic experimentation.

Psychoactive plants and compounds amplify the liminal qualities inherent to psytrance music, their popularity indicating that self-transcendence is a chief motivation for enthusiasts and event management and is given expression across personal, social, and cultural vectors. And by virtue of the intense occultic sociality of the experience, habitués become involved in states of radical immanence that have long been associated with ecstatic dance cults (Baldini, 2010). Furthermore, the entire assemblage resounds with an expectancy of the kind animated by the recognition of mounting crisis (or crises) and that inspires the engineering of projects, organizations, and initiatives motivated to make transit into an alternative future, such as the cult of expectancy surrounding the 2012 movement (St John, 2011b). The psychedelic festival performs a crucial role in these transitions. From overnight parties to all-week festivals, often marking seasonal transitions or celebrating celestial events, these gatherings are the context for what I call neotrance, which indexes the complexity of altered personal, social, and political states contextualized by psychedelic festivals. These are events enabling participants from diverse national, cultural, and stylistic backgrounds to give expression to their difference while at the same time potentiating the experience of singularity. In the West, the expression and dissolution of difference is a circumstance traditionally conditioned by the festival of Carnival. In psytrance, the carnivalesque is apparent in dance festivals where the term tribe is adopted to connote a particular aesthetic, practice, technique, or language by which individuals or groups distinguish themselves from others, and/or designate the dissolution of such differences (St John, 2009b).

We can observe the performance and dissolution of self on one of the planet’s largest outdoor dance floors at Portugal’s biennial Boom Festival. Initiated in 1997, the premiere event in global psytrance is held next to lake Idanha-a-Nova in the mountainous Beira Baixa province. Known as
the Dance Temple, Boom’s main dance floor is a stage for the performance of a *freak* persona. Accommodating the creative recombination of aesthetics, undisciplined embodiment, and psychosomatic states, Boom is a freak theatre, a staging ground for what Victor Turner had called the “subjunctive mood” (Turner, 1984, p. 21), an experimental state or atmosphere where occupants (wearing outfits with theriomorphic [animal-like], anime, superhero, mythical, and extraterrestrial themes, adopting stylized glyphs printed on clothing, badges, and personalized patches, and through innovative dance moves) indulge in alternate personas [see Whitehead, this Volume]. Participants are illuminated under UV lights, caught in lasers, distorted by hypnagogic projections as they commit to the acrobatics of fire staff, glow-poi twirling, and club juggling. And in dreadlocked and shaven-hair aesthetics, multiple piercings, dermal anchors, tattoos, and other body modifications popularized in accordance with a “modern primitive” aesthetic (Vale & Juno, 1989), they become freaks on display. The queering of gender is also not uncommon, with females perfecting androgynous appearances and males adopting effeminate styles. Although the Temple is a context permitting participants to freak their bodies, it is also a context for self-immolation in the furnace of dance. With up to 40,000 bodies from more than 80 countries connected through persistent rhythms, intense consumption, body modifications, and self-abandonment, Boom orchestrates the individual participant’s connection to a subterranean carnivalesque body.

The psychedelic festival enables new modes of identification through altered conditions of consciousness that are interpreted via narrative frameworks and folk themes apparent in vocal samples from various media sources (e.g., cinema, TV, documentaries, and radio) used in music production and in event decor and fashion. The main themes I have explored include the figures of the alien, the monster, and the indigene, who, from their various outer, abject, and ancient positions afford gnosis to disenchanted moderns. In the former, as chiefly expressed in the context of Goa (or “cosmic”) trance, the inner journey is facilitated by the sound apocalypse of self-discovery as analogized in the encounter with extraterrestrial aliens (St John, 2011c). Hosted within the subgenre of dark trance (or “darkpsy”), monsters, especially the living-dead zombie poached from horror cinema, burlesque the unpredictably re/animated condition of the trance dance floor (St John, 2011d). And, throughout the psytrance development, indigenes are embraced in the search for knowledge, consciousness, and re-enchantment (St John, 2012). In their adoption of a shifting assemblage of dress options, body modifications, hairstyles, adornments, and inscriptions, psytrance
enthusiasts thus cobbled identities from a cornucopia of religious, esoteric, and popular cultural sources.

The psychedelic festival, then, permits its habitués the freedom to join one’s flame to the conflagration and to hold self-promotions on and off the dance floor. Affording this commotion of singularity and freakiness, Boom participants may experience fusion with or autonomy from others in extraordinary altered states of consciousness. Event management, in collaboration with DJs, producers, sound engineers, and visual and décor artists, optimize space, time, art, and other resources to realize this dynamic of spectacular self(less)ness, which lies at the root of what I have been calling neotrance. This concept, then, derives from the suspicion that traditional conceptions of “trance,” particularly “possession trance” and especially the analogy with what Emma Cohen (2008) calls “executive possession,” are ill-suited to recognize the experiential complexity of dance festal behavior and in particular the experience of trance endemic to the psychedelic festival, its music, and its dance. Although the psycho-physiological impact of percussive and rhythmic music (but see Rouget, 1985) may hold across traditional and contemporary trance performance (Sylvan, 2002; Takahashi, 2005; Till, 2009), and although DJs (and scholars) invoke loose folk theories of divine guidance, conventional understandings of spirit possession tend to offer overstated, unfair, and misleading frameworks for understanding trance dance cultures associated with contemporary popular music [see Fachner, this Volume].

Loose contrasts make for an easy dismissal of EDM cultures as comparatively meaningless. Commenting on raves, Georgina Gore (1997, pp. 137–138) claimed that, compared with possession trance within cults of the Southern Nigerian Bini, rave is “a rite of passage leading nowhere... It is a ritual without content, ecstatic, solitary and narcissistic. It is a game of chance; its trance is aleatory and dizzying.” Rave might apparently exemplify the zombification of modern life, a disappearance from meaning, the zone entered by participants perhaps as pathological as that ascribed to the world of gamblers and casinos.

Illustrating the results of an ethnographic approach to raves that would deliver us closer to the trance in question, Melanie Takahashi (2005) seeks to understand the alternative states of consciousness endogenous to these events. She argues that through DJ techniques, optimized audio-visual production, performance, and participant expectations at raves, “technological advancements may compensate for the lack of coherent cultural signifiers” vis-à-vis “the sophisticated scripted process of initiation observed in ceremonial possession” (Takahashi 2005, p. 253). Ravers remain “horses,” only now they are ridden by the spirit of the optimized
audio-visual assemblage channeled by the “shaman” DJ. Through these techniques and sound-art strategies, which Morgan Gerard (2004) calls “liminal techniques,” by comparison to other popular music forms/techniques, DJs are arguably better able to “control the means of perception” (Takahashi, 2005, p. 254). But while it makes sense to hold inquiry about the capabilities of newer and adapted technologies and chemicals to animate and energize participants and indeed communities of sound in EDMC events including psytrance, persistent analogical modeling with spirit possession becomes somewhat burdensome in itself.

With the objective of revealing the sacred terrain of raving, François Gauthier harbors no such intellectual burden. He argues that rave “is not a possession trance, unless perhaps possession by ‘nothing.’” Ravers “do not feel ‘something’ (or indeed ‘nothing’) is overcoming them. On the contrary, it seems this overwhelming feeling originates from within, only they cannot say how or where” (Gauthier, 2004, p. 78). Further, the experience is “unhinged from a defined and institutionalized—and therefore—explicit religious system that could explicate its meaning. By contrast to a mystical experience, the techno trance is sought in itself and for itself, detached from any defined meaning, aim, or purpose.” “This trance,” Gauthier continues (2004, p. 79), “is the desire for pure instituancy, pure experimentation with an otherness that remains confused and diffuse—a pure gratuitous act, or a simple gesture of revolt.” This argument, I suggest, may be more accurate for rave as opposed to psytrance, since the latter is more typically a repository for those practicing and experimenting with alternative spiritual dispositions who are open to traverse human/spirit world boundaries outside mainstream religious practice and faith (principally that associated with Christianity). This is why organizers, such as those who orchestrated Morocco’s Rhythms of Peace festival, sought to associate their events, in that instance, with master practitioners of Moroccan Gnawa, or why Sufi dancers were billed for the opening ceremony at Soulclipse total solar eclipse festival in Turkey in March 2006, or why ceremonial dance is performed to didjeridus performed by Aboriginal custodians in the opening ceremony at Australia’s annual Rainbow Serpent Festival. In such cases, there is a strong desire to claim connections with traditional cultures and continuity with (imagined or real) forebears. Although such appropriations are not unproblematic, I simply want to reiterate the view that in psytrance dance floor participants oscillate between the performative edge, where participants enact fantastic and erotic personas often drawn from composite influences, and an experience approximate to dispossession, where trancers find release from a troubled and dispiriting lifeworld.
Furthermore, infused with the ecstatic and utilitarian dimensions of the counterculture identified by Frank Musgrove as “the dialectics of utopia” (1974, p. 16), the psytrance festival accommodates diverse commitments in the wake of the 1960s consciousness explosion. Although dance floors are the context for dispossession from routine consciousness, the dance floor and wider festival grounds stage the performance of novel modes of consciousness associated with new social, cultural, and political initiatives. Because the festival is a vehicle for the ecstatic (self-transcendent), performative (self-expressive), as well as reflexive (conscious alternative) proclivities of the trance movement (St John, 2010b), it requires heuristics deviating from traditional (e.g., Winkelman, 1986) and Western (e.g., Taves, 1999) theories of trance. Although at one extreme, the party is a vehicle for getting “trashed” and “wasted,” at the other it accommodates an atmosphere of hope and expectancy. Where these events express desires for modes of sociality and states of consciousness perceived to have been lost or forgotten in the separation and isolation of the present, they mount a response to inherited sociocultural frameworks that render these events more than simply “parties.” Thus, while the popular tribal-trance designation may denote primitivist fantasies of the Other (Luckman, 2003), the terms tribe and trance are more than often adopted as generic signifiers for alternative community. The apparent role of dance events in raising consciousness and ecological awareness, facilitating intercultural harmony, delivering utopian dreams and global peace surface frequently in promotions. For instance, movement evangelists proclaim that psytrance holds the potential to “ultimately change the course of human consciousness,” and organizations like North Carolina’s Touch Samadhi and San Francisco’s Consortium of Collective Consciousness have pioneered strategies believed to facilitate necessary solutions for a troubled world.

Boom is again exemplary. Although the event features a range of trance genres, it is not strictly a music or dance festival—it is what organizers regard as a “visionary arts and lifestyle festival,” or an innovation in “sustainable entertainment.” Boom hosts two arenas that are representative of the ecstatic and reflexive dimensions of trance. Operating over 7 days, featuring more than 100 DJs and fusion bands from many different nations performing a range of electronic trance genres and catering to approximately 5,000 to 6,000 people, the Dance Temple hosts a sophisticated audio-visual assemblage designed for enhancing expressive/transcendent states. At the same time, promoted as a “dynamic confluence of people, traditions, energy and information,” Boom’s Liminal Village is an

*From the first edition of the in-Village publication, the “liminal zine” Pathways.*
educational platform for the contemporary visionary arts culture. In 2006, the Liminal Village featured several zones including a “visionary art” gallery and a solar-powered bamboo temple, the “Omniplex,” the central structure in an alternative educational zone, its “interactive curriculum spotlighting emergent mythologies, integrative philosophies, and techniques for sustainable and holistic living.”5 With workshops, presentations, and “metacine” cinema zone, the complex was devoted to the transmission of ecological principles (as demonstrated by permaculture workshops), and a range of other ultimate concerns, including self-healing modalities, psychedelic consciousness, and shamanism. That year, the Village hosted well-known Shipibo curandero Guillermo Arévalo, who leads ayahuasca retreats at his Peruvian botanical sanctuary, Espíritu de Anaconda. Offering a dedication to McKenna and the self-shamanizing theme, the Liminal Village represents a conscious effort to adopt a language, architecture, and vision of transformation using anthropological discourse forged in the study of ritual.6 Consciously emulating the demarcated and sacred zones of passage rites, facilitating the transmission of alternative cultural sacra, the Village is juxtaposed to the Temple, the vehicle for ecstatic states of dispossession.

In his observations on the idea of the festival, 2008 Liminal Village presenter Erik Davis (2008, p. 54) described the festival as “an incubator of novelty . . . A petri dish of possibility where the future forms of community and consciousness are explored.” This is a good description of Boom and an appropriate juncture at which to conclude this chapter, for it suggests that festivals can themselves be spiritual technologies. As a context within which reflexive practice, ecstatic experience, and expressive arts have coexisted and coevolved, and as a premiere site for the exploration of altered states of mind, body, and culture in the contemporary, Boom is a carnival at the crossroads of consciousness exploration. Heir to the quest for experience, Boom bridges ritual and party in an effort to export its culture of consciousness from the crossroads into the everyday. In this achievement, it lies downstream from the countercultural confluence in San Francisco in 1967 and is a repository for the paradoxical culture of consciousness that evolved through the developments discussed in this chapter: psychedelia, virtual reality, and the rave and psytrance movements.

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6The universal experience of ritual “liminality,” the potent threshold first articulated by Arnold Van Gennep in his study of rites of passage (1960) and then developed by Victor Turner (1982).
References


