

Chapter 8

Exploring Psytrance as Technognosis: A Hypothesis of Participation

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the performative process occurring in the dance-floor/ stage of a psytrance event as ‘technognosis’, a concept that combines media, arts, performance and technology with the notion of gnosis. Technognosis is proposed as an overarching concept, able to theorize the whole transpersonal range of the psytrance experience, including its spiritual dimension, enabled by the induction and facilitation of alterations in consciousness. The psytrance experience is analyzed in terms of aesthetic, visionary and mystical experiences understood here as qualities of gnosis. At the same time, this chapter contends that technognosis affects participation and invites its multi-media and performative expression, triggering fundamental changes in ways of human thinking, imagining and operating; potentiating the adoption of participation as the next paradigm in human existence. In parallel, the chapter proposes a post-modern approach in researching and analyzing the psytrance phenomenon as a whole, combining media and performance studies with religious studies methodological tools.

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INTRODUCTION

Postwar youth cultures and their relationship to music and style were initially studied from a sociological perspective as a cultural phenomenon of resistance and solidarity under the lens of Marxist subcultural theories developed by the CCCS (Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies) (Hall and Jefferson, 1976; Bennett, 1999). Following this line of thought, and progressing to theories with a post-modern perspective, early research on proto-raves as Electronic Dance Music Cultures (EDMCs), underlined the loss of subjectivity and the disappearance of self through intoxication and a new media voyeuristic escapism/hedonism, conceived as a form of 'hyperreal' and 'imaginary resistance'; the dance-floor was seen as a place for temporary liberation from the everyday life of consumer-based post-industrial late capitalist society, which lacked any other substantial meaning (Melechi, 1993; Redhead, 1993; Rietveld, 1993, Knutagard, 1996, Reynolds, 1999).

The widespread consumption of illegal substances, and the spate of legislation banning rave events in the UK and USA during the 1990's, attracted widespread academic attention, from a public health perspective, on the negative consequences related to health risks, thus re-affirming the earlier assumption of contemporary youth's sense of loss of meaning (Reynolds, 1997; Yacubian et al., 2004; Kelly, 2005; Miller et al., 2005; Sterk et al., 2006). However, illegal substance use itself, and police actions to prevent raves, also served to strengthen their countercultural character; something consistent with the grass-roots and DIY structural organization of rave culture, complementary to the PLUR ethos (Peace, Love, Unity, Respect) (Hill, 2002; Reynolds, 1999; Takahashi & Olaveson, 2003). PLUR acted as a marker of authenticity, in accordance with its (hippy) countercultural heritage, derived from a sense of connectedness, solidarity and belonging, that arose from communal dance and the use of substances such as Ecstasy, Mdma and Lsd, which enhanced the empathic feelings of participants and functioned as liberating agents engendering the formation of individual and collective identity (Hutson, 2000; Sylvan, 2002, 2005; Hitzler & Pfadenhauer, 2002; Salasuo & Seppälä, 2004; Ter Bogt et al., 2002).

The dance-floor has been analyzed as a space for spiritual healing, transcendence and transformation achieved through transpersonal ecstatic states, where socio-cultural differences and constructed identity boundaries dissolve (Hutson, 1999, 2000; Saunders & Doblin, 1996; Sylvan, 2002, 2005; Landau, 2004; St John, 2011a). Van Gennep's liminal 'rites of passage' and Turner's 'structural ritual' were adopted by cultural researchers of electronic dance music gatherings as the functional models of analysis, evaluating the events in terms of their 'efficacy', that allowed for the formation of spontaneous "communitas" (Van Gennep, 1909; Turner, 1969; Gore, 1995, 1997; Grimes, 1995; Malbon, 1999; Gauthier, 2004; Gerard, 2004; Takahashi & Olaveson, 2003; Olaveson, 2004; Tramacchi, 2000; St John, 2004, 2008, 2010).

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