

PSYCHEDELIC AESTHETICS AND TERRITORIAL AGENCY-ING

Ana Ramos

VOL 3 ISSUE 2

Once the *party* has been detected, we may hear, from afar, that characteristic clunking noise of the rolling bass. At this point, it is still considered noise because the bass is the only musical element that reaches far-ranging distances. Without the remaining musical elements, the beat becomes only a striking. The bass-line constitutes the basis of the psy-trance music. It extends across bodies to fulfill its capacity to delimit its own territoriality. Once you reach the assigned area of the party, the continuous drumming vibrates not only outside the perceiving bodies, but also inside the chest. This bass-line is the basis onto which a felt-like infinity of sounds overlaps. Sounds seem to be coming from everywhere. However, the number of speakers is necessarily limited. They are, in fact, strategically positioned. The multiple overlapping of sounds meticulously and carefully layered creates a density that has a precise effect: a psychedelic feeling. The experience of sound overflows with sensory information at every possible level. We not only hear the music, but we “feel” it vibrating inside/outside/passing through the body. On the dance floor, the experience is overwhelming. Sounds burst from everywhere, the ground seems to be bouncing, and an acute feeling of presentness arises with the dancing: every sense is heightened.

To party is a serious thing. The authentic party experience is always lived in a setting that allows the nights to extend through a long stretch of days. The experience is necessarily one of excess. To dance for hours ceaseless until the body does not hold together anymore underlies the question asked by Deleuze and Guattari: *How Do You Make Yourself a Body without Organs?* (1987, 149-166). The concept of body without organs is in counterpoint to that of organism, which entails a signifying totality. On one hand, the organism is ordered and organised in order to bear a name, a purpose, and the signifying totality expresses itself through the production of subjectivity. On the other hand, the concept of body without organs conveys, first of all, a sense of multiplicity of asignifying particles. It is a limit concept. There is no body without organs without an organism. They are partners in the dance of embodiment. As tendencies, the far range extreme of body without organs propels multiplicity and pure potential into the foreground of body experience. That multiplicity is always in movement: the body without organs is a dimension of movement. It can only be lived as a passage of intensities. The passage of intensities through the organism dismantles it, unties the knots of subjectivity, transforming the organism into a crossroads of pure intensities. The answer to the question “How Do You Make Yourself a Body without Organs?” contains two steps. The first one is related to setting forth the conditions that will allow something to circulate. These conditions are pragmatically set, and they require practice. The second step is to have the waves of intensity circulate. The purpose in setting a programme is to reach efficacy in the circulation of intensities. The question that underlies the practice is what is the effect of this programme?

To party, in the festival context, certainly means to set forth a programme. The key element is the length of time. The longer you party, the most efficient the experience. Once you have entered the psychedelic territory, the programme starts. You set up your tent, searching for the best spot.



Considering the usual sound of the rolling bass, and the sun that will hit your tent un pityingly during the day, the spot must follow the necessities of the programme, i.e. sleep at any moment of the day or the night. To dress accordingly is the next requirement in order to be past the threshold. [1] As a programme, to party means a construction and a practice. The setting of a programme is as valid and necessary for the bodies that inhabit the psychedelic territory as it is for the setting of the psychedelic territory itself. They both function as a micro and macro level. The construction of the territory is the first step. The practice and the constant improvement of the psychedelic territory sets certain conditions that will allow a psychedelic atmosphere to appear. The second step relates specifically to the circulation of the *psychedelic vibe*. The vibe allows the psychedelic state to happen: to party means to lift off. The party technique settling the psychedelic territory consolidated among travelling foreigners passing by Goa, India. The aesthetic quality of the *psychedelic territory* resides essentially in this passage. From elsewhere to Goa, then back and forth, it spread all over the world. The music itself carries this notion of passage, a feeling of being carried-out, sometimes translated as flying. [2]

How do you differentiate psychedelic music from other genres and what differentiates psy-trance from other electronic styles? One thing is certain: even though there are different psychedelic genres, the psychedelic quality is unique. The aesthetic quality transversally permeates the whole atmosphere; it is invisible, but palpable. This quality is responsible for the psychedelic wave that is embodied by the party as *vibe*. The psychedelic *vibe* is actualised by variable waves of intensity that traverse bodies of all kinds. It is invisible, but endowed with a power of action.

[1]Space Tribe emphasizes: "Whatever you have thought about the world before, forget it, now you are on this one." In "Atomic Pow Wow," Sonic Mandala, Spirit Zone Records, 1997.

[2]According to Astral Projection: "When you dream there are no rules, people can fly, anything can happen". In "People Can Fly," Trust in Trance, Trust in Trance Records, 1996.

It remains the principal element responsible for the dynamic that arises on the dance floor. What emerges throughout the extended period of time that the party lasts is a genuine psychedelic register. It means that the psychedelic feeling is not only produced as an emergent process, but it is in itself movement: the psychedelic aesthetics is firmly anchored in the notion of passage. Travel as passage, the transversal movement between different cultures that it embodies as mixture, the passage of a psychedelic vibe, and the movement of a multiplicity of intensities lived as asignifying particles. In this sense, to affirm that to party means to lift off is also an affirmation of movement itself.[3] Partying (going beyond time and space, reaching the limit of the body and beyond) becomes then mainly a practice of the passage. Ultimately, the passage is the place where one stands when partying: this is nomadism. The experience not only passes through the body, but in this passing through leaves an imprint of movement.

The practice of the territory: something doing

Territorialization is an act of rhythm that has become expressive, or of milieu components that have become qualitative (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 315).

As it is assembled, a psychedelic territory is already meant to be dismantled. The party is a relay, and a passage. In other words, the party is assembled and lived only to be left behind. For some, there is a customary path: they go from one party to another. But the parties are not an end in themselves; they are only consequences of a nomadic life. The principle is music: Psytrance is the refrain of contemporary psychedelic parties.

[3]It is from this standing point, for example, that the psychedelic culture explores various expressions related to intergalactic experiences. For instance, the album *Dancing Galaxy* by Astral Projection displays songs such as “Flying Into A Star” and “Life on Mars” (Trust in Trance Records, 1997).



The complexity comes from the fact that if the “territory is in fact an act that affects milieus and rhythms, that ‘territorializes’ them” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 314), it “already unleashes something that will surpass it” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 322). Thus the differentiation that Deleuze and Guattari make between *territory* and *earth*, that “intense point at the deepest level of the territory or is projected outside it like a focal point, where all the forces draw together in close embrace” (1987: 338-9). The key word here is “forces” and this is exactly what happens on the dance floor: an agitation of forces. What are these forces, where do they come from, and what is their relationship to the territory?

The territory certainly implies the notion of space for the time of its actualisation. However, this actualisation never relates to the settling of a permanent geographical space; it is a transient space. The territory implies, above all, affective forces. It is first delimited by a refrain, and this delimitation effectuates an *agency-ing*[4] of recurrent forces that play an affective role in the establishment of the territory. Deleuze and Guattari affirm that the territory protects from chaos: the song “jumps from chaos to the beginnings of order in chaos” (1987: 311). A comforting feeling arises. However, for nomads, home is where the heart is and the heart is always already in movement. The nomad, as defined by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), does not inhabit a pre-existent territory. Rather, he encounters certain qualitative conditions, and performs a relational grasp of the field of potentialities. This intensive interaction with a field of forces allows a relational grasp that is articulated in experience as the dimension of spatiality. Through these lenses, space is never the same because it requires a focus on qualitative differences. Consequently, space folds into itself at every step, revealing intensities rather than stable references. The materials onto which the nomad walks are made of singularities, and the walking itself is a relational prolonging of the affective forces he encounters.

[4] When discussing Deleuze and Guattari’s concept *agencement*, Brian Massumi explains the difficulty of translating the French word as follows: “This is a word that is impossible to translate. The best anyone’s come up with is ‘assemblage’, but that’s misleading. *Agencement* connotes a doing doing itself. You have to understand the event itself as agency-ing” (2015: 157). I use *agency-ing* in the present text in order to render justice to the processual nuance embedded in *agencement*.

How may we understand the consistency of a temporary but persistent territory? The massive volume of the music activates an affective *territory imprint*, and this imprint remains after the party occurrence. If the psychedelic aesthetic always re-emerges, it is essentially because the music allows a *psychedelic affect* to arise. What allows the transposition of the psychedelic territory is the fact that it carries a recognisable aesthetic. The psychedelic work of art conveys a recognisable trait of expression: the affirmation of movement itself, the affirmation of the passage. It happens through a transversal movement that unites every shifting position into one single aesthetic quality. The twist of colors characteristic of tie-dye carries the same internal logic that belongs to Goa and Psytrance music: saturation, spiral movement, and unified multiplicity. And despite this constant aesthetic logic pertaining to psychedelic works of art, creativity is always at work. Every reiteration of the psychedelic affect carries the capacity of continuous renewal. Creativity in this sense is immanent to the event itself.[5] Therefore, for the length of time that it lasts, the *psychedelic territory* displays the (always reinvented) party conditions for the pack to come together as one. What these conditions allow is the circulation of a psychedelic vibe. Time is key. The psychedelic aesthetic effectuates a shift in time perception. Time's texture is woven into *bodying* the psychedelic territory: the musical *vibe* articulates this territory. When you enter the psychedelic territory, you leave behind a threshold. It will no longer be a matter of hours, but days.

The refrain: an agency-ing of affective forces

In a general sense, we call a refrain any aggregate of matters of expression that draws a territory and develops into territorial motifs and landscapes (there are optical, gestural, motor, etc., refrains). In the narrow sense, we speak of a refrain when an assemblage is sonorous or 'dominated' by sound—but why do we assign this apparent privilege to sound? (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 323).

In the 1990s, Goa trance music emerged as one distinct form out of various electronic music genres. Today psychedelic electronic music

[5] Even though it takes shape through its actualisation in the human body, creativity here does not belong to the individual experiencing a psychedelic affect.

has evolved into many branches, but Psytrance is the motif that assembles most of them. As a vector, it directs the party assemblage to form the refrain shaping the psychedelic territory. Hippies, Goa Heads, Psytrancers embody a psychedelic aesthetic for the period of time during which they assemble to practice the party as a collective technique. For some, the atmosphere may seem unusual (“freaks” they call themselves). For others, it is magic and dazzling. In fact, the experience comprises all of the precedent adjectives and more since it is as complex as the broad spectrum of feelings.[6]

The first thing that we learn when we enter the psychedelic territory is that time is not counted in terms of minutes or hours. It is rather a matter of experience. A qualitative time arises. There is an ideal musical style for every moment of the practice of the psychedelic territory; the party is conceived to be danced. This implies that psychedelic music is a broad term that encompasses other subgenres. Psytrance is one of them, but also Goa Trance, Psyprog, psybient, and other genres may be played according to the party’s wave of actualisation. This allows the different stages of the party to be considered in regard to an unstoppable dancing body. Of course, bodies do stop sometimes. However, the conditions are set in order to convey a trance state: one song after another, the music stands as one continuous beat. Switching from periods of continuous beat to atmospheric intervals throughout a combination of different subgenres of electronic psychedelic music, the programme sets forth the conditions for a psychedelic vibe to arise and circulate. Every song is chosen with a specific intention that responds to the immediate appetite of what is doing: what happens is a co-construction through sensations. Relatively contained at the beginning, the music slowly builds-up to reach higher energetic reservoirs and then maintain itself on a plateau for a certain period of time. In this sense, the DJ’s function is to sense the dance floor, and improvise accordingly in order to reach that plateau. This plateau is called trance state, or *trancen’dance*. How long does it last? At this point, you are no longer counting the hours.

[6] The psychedelic affect, although being specific (like works of art, it is comprised by internal logic), also carries the power of variation pertaining to the event’s creativity at work. It means that its actualisation is always sited within a context. The variety of human experience belongs to the context and therefore plays an important role in affect actualisation.

The first stage is the hardest to traverse because at a certain point bodies fatigue. The articulation between beats, ground, hunger, thirst, pleasure, light, weather, delight and pain starts. However, if a genuine relation arises between bodies and beats, the music pushes a body over the edge. Which body? Ideally “every” body reaches that level of musical communion. After this threshold is crossed, every sensation that could possibly lead to a “disjunctive relation” (James, 2003) between music and body ceases to matter and is rejected from the attention spectrum. You are beyond yourself: *trancen’dance*. To break out beyond oneself means largely to break into a new self. The old self does not cease to exist, but is included in the new one. And this is happening all the time: what the expression “expansion of consciousness” means is exactly the transition from one experience into another, and it keeps only adding to itself. In the specific situation here described, what *trance n’dance* allows for is a significant leap forward, as if every experience could bear more than what it normally does, enhanced by a greater density. You are dancing your multiple selves. The feet are still sore and the thirst still strikes; but they remain only latent. Experience builds-up slowly, but when the setting is complete we feel it: the music is rolling deep and the dance floor is crowded. *Something* is doing. It happens through the articulation between not only sensations and music, but also the environmental conditions like sunlight or moonlight, the decoration, the light shows and so forth: an embrace of forces (the *earth*). *What is doing* is not the setting, but the articulation itself: the *agency-ing* (always a multiplicity) of qualitative intensive (objective) feelings. *It* desires as *it* produces something (a *Body without Organs*) in a definite locus (the psychedelic experience). The “desire” is the “production” itself: appetite (Deleuze and Guattari, 2009). As long as there is appetite, something is doing and the beat is rolling. At this point, we may notice that there is not even an object of desire; there is only the production of desire rolling with the bass line. *It* is not a force, but the expression of a force (psychedelic). Here, *desire* is not related to a lack. *It* does not express a psychedelic force to fill in a gap. *It* desires as a co-creation with psychedelic embody-ings,

in relation with what emerges, within the emergence of the psychedelic experience. Expression and content are merged into one single matter: the event. *It* here refers to the act of agency-ing itself, and *desire* belongs to that same event of agency-ing. In this sense, we are departing from a subjective/objective perspective to highlight exactly the midst dimension, the relational. This is where desire is manifesting itself.

Reaching (and losing) consistency: something feeling

At any rate, you have one (or several). It's not so much that it preexists or comes ready-made, although in certain respects it is preexistent. At any rate, you make one, you can't desire without making one. And it awaits you; it is an inevitable exercise or experimentation, already accomplished the moment you undertake it, unaccomplished as long as you don't. This is not reassuring, because you can botch it. Or it can be terrifying, and lead you to your death. It is nondesire as well as desire. It is not at all a notion or a concept but a practice, a set of practices. You never reach the Body without Organs, you can't reach it, you are forever attaining it, it is a limit (Deleuze and Guattari, 149-150).

The party's consistency is made by its unleashed forces. These forces are psychedelic affects because they infiltrate bodies, spreading like a virus. When we feel that *something is doing*, we know that we have reached it: *Psychodelia*. The *Natal*, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is the "the matters of expression themselves" (1987: 332). Among the notions of the *territory*, the *earth*, and the *natal*, the third is the most difficult to grasp because, as far as it is related to psychedelic aesthetics and territorial assemblage, it refers to the purest psychedelic quality. It implies, for the territorial agency-ing, the notion of the "innate", and a "movement of decoding" that leaks into territoriality as that which is acquired and at the same time "forever lost, or refound, or aspiring to the unknown homeland" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 332). The unknown homeland is *Psychodelia*. It hovers over the party, its matters of expression being agitated by the vibration of colours, feelings, and sounds. Psychedelic matters of expression appear. These matters of expression experience themselves appearing, through perception itself. Here, decoding functions both ways: human and non-human. Perception stands right at its centre.

There is a perception [7] of the event perceiving itself that belongs to a fugitive homeland. *Psychedelia* is a limit notion that is never fully reached. To party is the continuous tending towards this homeland: both in the sense of aesthetic qualities that we cultivate and also a tendency that we follow. As a homeland, *Psychedelia* is to be understood as a virtual land, continuously on the cusp of actualisation. It may be beautiful, and it may be terrifying. Its potential reaches your own apexes.

The territory reaches consistency through the reiteration of a refrain articulated by motifs and counterpoints. The organisation of the territory happens according to an empirical principle that arises immanently as agency-ing (assemblage).[8] To “possess” a territory is thus to practice expression. The territory starts to take shape with the construction of the scene as a central milieu. The delimitation of the camping area is established, and the needs in water and food are assessed according to the number of participants. Marks and points of reference are set. A code of conduct is established [9] (for example, the often circulated letters P.L.U.R. refer to *Peace, Love, Unity, Respect*). This is the plane of consistency where the distribution of psychedelic modalities is made. But the territory is not the earth. The earth, as defined by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), is that intensification point at the deepest center of the territory, the battlefield where desire subsists at its highest capacity. There, the embrace of forces is so dense that it may open to a disjunctive relation with that territorial consistency; sinking too deep into the “Ground” Deleuze and Guattari (1987), into the depths of *Psychedelia*’s own appetite for expression. At the core of territorial assemblage,

[7] This perception is of a different kind than the human perception (based in the senses). This event perception is responsible and intimately linked to the event’s self-generating ontogenetic movement of agency-ing. We may understand it as a dynamic principle, what Alfred North Whitehead calls “prehension” (1978).

[8] In Deleuze, *les mouvements aberrants*, David Lapoujade distinguishes three planes that cross Deleuze’s thought: the plane of consistency, the abstract machine and assemblage – here referred to as “agency-ing” (2014: 29-30).

[9] I am here referring to Lapoujade (2014: 38).

there are two parallel melodies. One is a melodic and constant refrain that effectuates an agency-ing of affective forces. Chaos is no longer lingering; the first stage is past, *trancen'dance* has now been installed. The party is rolling, joy and revel burst everywhere and it is at that deepest level of the territory that an urgent pull of the Ground may be felt. Another threshold, but not necessarily one that you will cross: you oscillate. Rather, it oscillates through you. The song of the earth is the growl that may distort the first one. It is an "earth machine" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 339). This abstract machine effectuates a disjunctive relation with the actual territory effectuating a different distribution of affects. It leads to a different plane of composition, opening up to a new potentiality. This earth machine is a deterritorialising vector located at the deepest core of the territory. It means that no territory is completely closed, especially the psychedelic territory.

The negotiation between territorialisation and deterritorialisation happens at the level of the party as a psychedelic territory, but also at the level of the body as an embodying territory. The psychedelic experience is made of multiple thresholds. *Trancen'dance* is the first one. It happens when you are no longer dancing, but you become the dance. Yet, there is still another threshold: the Body without Organs. This is the abstract machine of desire at the level of the body. It emerges as an affective state of pure intensity. First, the conditions are set: a psychedelic territory, the dance floor, *Psytrance* as the refrain. Second, *trancen'dance* settles. Beyond that state, the next threshold propels the body into the state of a rhizome of felt intensities. The perception of structure fails, shifting towards the experience of a rearticulating of the body as intensity rather than extensity. What escapes the formal organisation of the body feeds into the establishment of a different articulation. Then, the circulation of psychedelic intensities becomes the central focus of experience. Intensities must here be understood as agglomerations of pre-individual singularities that are interrelated. They form a rhizomatic web of embodied aesthetic qualities. This is the molecular level of experience. At this point, the matters of expression are directly experienced. The awareness of this molecular level of experience has consequences for the way we conceive communication theory, for instance.

The rhizomatic understanding of experience is crucial if we want to introduce affect to communication theory. In a linear manner, we would understand the psychedelic matters of expression as being mediated as content. But what happens in a context where the content is a-signifying? Here, content and expression implode as one single event: waves of intensity. What the limit concept of the Body without organs allows is the understanding that, if we want to treat of a-signifying contents of experience (for example, intensities), we can no longer depart from music going towards music embodiment. What exactly is mediating the content? Through a relational perspective, the event is its own media. The psychedelic matters of expression being then immediately available to experience: they do not present themselves to experience, but are directly embodied. This affective dimension of experience can be understood and further pursued through the concept of “immediation” (Thain, 2017 ; Massumi, 2011: 72 ; Massumi, 2015 ; Brunner 2012 ; and Manning, Munster and Stavning Thomsen, forthcoming).

Ana Ramos holds a Ph.D. from the Department of communication, Université de Montréal. Her current postdoctoral research at the SenseLab, Concordia University, is devoted to process philosophy inquiry as related to art experience and techniques of the body. Her writings focus on finding a better grasp of the virtual processes acting at the foundational level of experience. She is most interested in the diversification of modes of perception through means of immersive technologies and the techniques of the body. Feeding from both affect theory and media aesthetics, her research work spans questions concerning: technology, perception, and collective subjectivity. Her current research is part of a wider SenseLab research project entitled *Immediations*. She is concerned with social contentenactment and the micropolitical implications acting through practices of emergent media technology. The key concepts of her research are: media/immediation, the virtual, affect, relationality, sense and singularity. In her publication “On consciousness-with and virtual lines of affection”

(<http://eventalaesthetics.net/aesthetic-inquiries-2/ana-ramos-on-consciousness-with/>), she proposes the acknowledgement of an affective dimension of the body (affective consciousness). In order to do so, the body is understood as both a crossroads of “affective lines of affection” and a musical instrument that vibrates the affective notes of its environment. She is currently working on a manuscript called *(Im)Mediation, Affective Entanglements, and Communication Theory*.

References

Brunner, Christoph. “Immediation as Process and Practice of Signaleitic Mattering.” *J. Aesthet. Cult. Journal of Aesthetics and Culture* 4, 2012.

Guattari, Félix, and Gilles Deleuze. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

Guattari, Félix, and Gilles Deleuze. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London, UK: Penguin Classics, 2009.

James, William. *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. Mineola: New York: Dover Publications, 2003.

Lapoujade, David. *Deleuze, les mouvements aberrants*. Paris: Minuit, 2014.

Massumi, Brian. *Semblance and Event Activist Philosophy and the Occurrent Arts*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2011.

Massumi, Brian. *Politics of Affect*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2015.

Manning, Erin, Anna Munster and Bodil Marie Stavning Thomsen (ed.). *Immediations*, Open Humanities Press (Forthcoming).

Thain, Alanna. *Bodies in Suspense: Time and Affect in Cinema*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Whitehead, Alfred North. *Process and Reality*. New York, NY: Free Press, 1978.