

Shamanic diffusions: a technoshamanic philosophy of electroacoustic music

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Electroacoustic music affords the possibility of creating journeys through non-realistic or illusory spaces, through the use of sonic materials. This article proposes the application of the concept of 'technoshamanism' as a principle for composing and performing electroacoustic works of this type. I shall commence by examining the use of the term 'technoshaman' in relation to psy-trance culture. Through consideration of Rouget's (1985) definitions of ecstasy and trance, I will discuss the relationship of psy-trance culture to Rouget's definition of trance. From this position I shall then propose the use of electroacoustic music in relation to Rouget's definition of ecstasy. This will enable me to define 'shamanic diffusions' as an opposing technoshamanic approach to that which is used in psy-trance. Under this discussion, electroacoustic music will be considered as an ecstatic technology. I shall then conclude with some comments and speculation regarding how this concept may be useful as an approach for the composition and performance of electroacoustic music. For example, in various composed works I have used altered states of consciousness and hallucinations, as a principle for the design of sonic materials and musical structure. Through the course of this article then, I will describe a conceptual model through which to consider electroacoustic composition and performance.

Technoshamanism

'Technoshamanism' is a term that has been used in relation to electronic dance music (EDM) culture, describing the analogous role of the DJ as the conductor of a spiritual journey that ravers experience through dance (Hutson, 1999). In particular, the term has been applied in relation to psy-trance¹ (St. John, 2011). The 'spiritual' or therapeutic aspects of the experience can be considered to result from the sense of unity that participants experience through collective dancing (Hutson 1999: 64-67). In a temporary environment that is removed from everyday social structures and activity, ravers are over stimulated through loud techno music, lighting and dance. Often recreational drugs such as MDMA are used, contributing to intense empathic sensory experiences. At the height of the experience, participants describe the dissolution of usual social and personal boundaries, and collective experiences of unity. These experiences can be viewed in accordance with Rouget's definition of trance states; altered states of consciousness that occur through movement, in company, with loud noise and sensory overstimulation (Rouget, 1985, p.11).

Psy-trance culture coalesces a distinctly postmodern collection of ideological fragments; the associated iconography draws from Buddhist, Hindu and Native

¹ Psy-trance or Goa trance is a psychedelic form of techno music that is used at large outdoor dance parties and festivals. For a further discussion, see St. John (2009).

American symbols, popular science fiction and others (St. John 2009, p.43). It is a montage of belief systems and exotic ideals regarding consciousness expansion and spiritual transcendence that can be traced back to the hippy movement of the 1960s (St. John, 2011). Like drugs or meditation, the music is seen as a technology for expanding consciousness. Driving techno rhythms (4/4 house music drum patterns) ensure the music can be danced to. In the mid-to-high frequency range synthesized sounds and noises with digital effects and spatial processing are used, to create disorientating and hypnotic quantised patterns. Synthesizer melodies or rhythmically gated harmonic sounds utilise melodies that are reminiscent of Eastern tonality, in a general fashion that is exotic and accessible for Western audiences. Speech samples are used periodically, echoing the fragmented symbols of the culture; clips from Terrance McKenna or Timothy Leary podcasts, or samples about consciousness expansion from science fiction movies such as *Dune* (1984).

Though fragmented, a typical impression emerges from the greater whole. Hutson discusses the common use of ‘tribal’ themes within psy-trance culture. DJs such as Goa Gil view the dance party as “redefining the ancient tribal ritual for the 21st Century” (St. John, 2011, p.101). A utopian concept of tribalism is seen as a reaction to the perceived detachment of individualist modern Western society; ‘tribal’ rhythm and dance is seen as an ancient, primal form of experience that recaptures a spirit of collectivity which is otherwise lost (Hutson, 1999, p.64). Mayer (2008, pp.80-84) refers to McKenna’s discussion of the “Gaian supermind” (McKenna, 2011). For McKenna the collective trance experience is seen as a ritual that enables participants to communally access the “domain of Gaian ideas”, for the purpose of redirecting the course of evolution. In this context, the DJ-as-technoshaman is the individual who conducts the ritual of trance through use of music technology, and the trance is viewed as ‘healing’ through the revival of ancient experiences of rhythm and unity (which are supposed to be otherwise missing from the everyday experience of modern Western society).

The concept of shaman when used in such cases is evidently not identical to the application of the term in traditional cultures such as those of the Amazon Basin. Harvey (2002) discusses the use of the term ‘shaman’ as Western terminology to describe a broad range of traditional practices in different parts of the world. He highlights that the term is a Western invention that can risk promoting generalised views and misconceptions of the respective cultures it is applied to. Yet in these terms it should not be considered inappropriate or inauthentic to use the term in Western contexts, provided an explanation is given regarding which aspects of the shamanism concept are being referred to.

Mayer provides a list of shamanic concepts that are attractive to Western culture (Mayer, 2008, pp.88-92). The concept of technoshaman in psy-trance fits within several of Mayer’s concepts, notably ‘*the shaman as healer*’ (where spiritual healing is considered to occur through the act of trance dance) ‘*the shaman as master of ecstasy*’ (since he/she conducts the use of musical forces to attain an altered state of consciousness) and ‘*the shaman as an ecologist*’ (under McKenna’s discussion, where experience of the ‘Gaian supermind’ has ecological implications).

We have seen how the shamanic concept can be applied to psy-trance culture. The purpose of this article is to describe how the concept of technoshaman can be utilised

as an approach for the performance and composition of electroacoustic music. This will draw selectively upon Mayer's concepts of '*the shaman as master of ecstasy*' and '*the shaman as psychonaut and 'wanderer between worlds'*'. These definitions describe the shaman as master of a journey to other states of consciousness that are difficult to obtain otherwise. As I shall explain through the course of this article, these will be interpreted as a means through which to consider electroacoustic performances as 'shamanic diffusions'. While the application of this concept is related to technoshamanism in psy-trance culture, I shall situate it in opposition to psy-trance through discussion of Rouget's concepts of ecstasy and trance.

Ecstasy and Trance

The role which music plays in psy-trance cultures can be viewed in relation to DeNora's discussion of the responses that music can 'afford' for listeners (DeNora, 2000, p.45). For DeNora, musical meaning arises through a combination of musical properties and listener response, and can be established through repeated patterns of listening. We cannot presume that certain musical arrangements will produce corresponding results, since listener interpretation is somewhat flexible. However we can say that a musical object may 'afford' certain responses for the listener in the appropriate social context. In the case of psy-trance, the music affords the possibility of experiencing trance states in a social context that is supported by other cultural factors.

DeNora's discussion of affordance corresponds with Rouget's (1985) ethnographic research regarding the role that music plays in various possession trance cultures. Rouget investigated the use of music in trance and shamanic cultures such as those of Bali (and many others), where music is involved in the production of trance states. His findings dismiss the notion that trance states can be produced by a particular musical instrument or arrangement of sound. Instead the role of music is as a socialised force, where its effects have been established through cultural patterns of use. Certain types of music, and techniques such as increase in tempo may be associated with producing the trance in a particular culture, but there is no standard or absolute approach. Even within its associated culture, music may not be required to produce trance, though Rouget found that it often plays a significant role. In such cases then we may consider that music and the arrangement of sound affords a trance response for the listener.

Rouget defines 'trance' and 'ecstasy' as distinct and opposing concepts (Rouget, 1985, p.11). For Rouget 'trance' refers to states of possession, typically associated with loud noise, movement, collective experience and over stimulation the senses. Possession trance can be viewed as the entry of an entity from the spirit world into the individual, and results in amnesia. 'Ecstasy' is achieved in quiet contemplation, sensory deprivation and solitude, without movement. It produces hallucinations and recollections. Ecstasy can be viewed as a journey to the spirit world, as typically found in shamanism. For Rouget the concepts are mutually exclusive, though shamanic rituals may involve both ecstasy and possession trance at different stages.

Hutson draws a connection between Rouget's definition of trance and the experiences discussed in rave culture (Hutson, 1999, pp.61-62). The over stimulation of the

senses found in psy-trance culture correlates with Rouget's definition. The 'possession' distinction is possibly less applicable; there is insufficient evidence to suggest that the experience is generally seen in this way². Nonetheless, Hutson's (1999, pp.64-67) discussion suggests that experiences of nondifferentiation and unity are common, even if they are not absolute (1999, pp.67-72). In these terms it is possible to draw a correlation between the loss of individual personality in possession trance, and the collective experiences of unity in psy-trance.

The correspondences of movement, over stimulation, nondifferentiation and collective experience are sufficient to illustrate the technoshamanism of psy-trance in relation to Rouget's definition of trance. I will now proceed to discuss an opposing concept of technoshamanism that is situated in relation to Rouget's definition of ecstasy. While the technoshaman of psy-trance uses musical forces to conduct trance, I shall argue that an electroacoustic technoshaman can use musical forces to afford an ecstatic experience. Under Rouget's definition, ecstasy is viewed as a journey of hallucinations and recollections, achieved in stillness, contemplation and introspection. In terms of Western scientific notions of consciousness, hallucinations can be considered as internally produced phenomena that occur in the human brain (Hobson, 2001). Under this definition, ecstatic hallucinations are introspective, drawing upon memories and recollections, and can be considered in opposition to the depersonalised collective unity of trance.

Shamanic Diffusions

The concept of ecstatic shamanism can be applied to electroacoustic music. We can consider this through discussion of the socially established meanings that are afforded by electroacoustic music. As Kendall (2011, pp.231-233) discusses, electroacoustic music can afford an interpretation of non-realistic and imaginary sound objects and spaces. Through the use of digital audio the composer is able to construct a journey through these spaces. He describes the cognitive process when hearing such works:

"Electroacoustic listeners hold a frame for their physical location whether it is a concert hall or a living room, while at the same time they are activating other frames in order to understand what is heard". (Kendall 2011, p.232)

In these terms, the diffusion of electroacoustic music may afford a shamanic interpretation; the composer acts as the individual who conducts a journey to imaginary worlds of experience, which would be otherwise difficult to obtain.

In opposition to my discussion of psy-trance, the electroacoustic experience can be viewed in correlation with Rouget's definition of ecstasy. Rouget's definition of ecstasy describes sensory deprivation. While electroacoustic music does not deprive the senses, the concert environment is designed to suppress the intrusion of sounds that are not part of the composition. This is achieved through acoustic dampening, dim lighting, a culture of quiet, attentive audiences and the ubiquitous instruction to turn off all mobile phones. Thus the usual sonic environment dictated by actual physical location is suppressed in order to afford immersion into non-realistic sonic

² It may be that in contrast to the possession cultures that Rouget discusses, the fragmented ideologies of psy-trance are less capable of supporting a cohesive culture that understands trance as possession.

environments. The musical experience then facilitates a journey through illusory sonic environments, which could be viewed as analogous to the hallucinations perceived in ecstatic experiences.

Rouget's definition of ecstasy describes contemplation, introspection and recollection. These features can also be considered in relation to the experience of electroacoustic music. The use of acousmatic sound promotes an interpretative response from the listener; since the source of the sound is unseen it invites the listeners to create their own associations. As Kendall discusses, some degree of commonality is likely for sounds that produce a similar experience or have a familiar cultural understanding (Kendall, 2011, p.229). However, sounds may also evoke unique variations in their associative response for each individual. It is in this sense that the listening experience can be considered personal and introspective. As in ecstatic experiences, the listening experience triggers personal recollections through associations.

Finally, we may also draw correlations between ecstasy and the solitary, immobility of the electroacoustic listening experience. Evidently the seated listening experience is usually immobile. Although concerts have communal aspects, we can reasonably consider the listening experience in solitary terms. Unlike collective experiences of dance, where communication occurs through interactive networks of physical motion, the electroacoustic experience relies more significantly upon the absence of interaction between audience members. When interactions do occur, they are likely to be seen as distractions or interruptions for those attempting to engage in the listening experience. In this sense the experience can be seen as personal and solitary, though this is not to disregard the effects of collective silence, attention and congregation seen in the concert environment.

The correlation I have drawn between music and Rouget's definition of ecstasy demonstrates how electroacoustic music potentially affords experiences that could be termed ecstatic. In the terms I have discussed, this potential is not necessarily exclusive to works of electroacoustic music that are conceptualised as shamanic³. Under my discussion, it is possible for some existing works of electroacoustic music to afford technoshamanic interpretations, regardless of the composers' intentions; certainly I am able to hear some electroacoustic compositions in this way, and this has provided the stimulus for this article. However, the purpose of this writing is to define the concept of 'shamanic diffusions' in order to utilise it as a specific approach for the composition and performance of electroacoustic music. There are several reasons for doing this, as I shall proceed to discuss:

Firstly the shamanic concept may suggest alternative approaches for programming and contextualising electroacoustic music. For example, it may be possible to programme and advertise electroacoustic concerts as shamanic journeys or rituals through the diffusion of sound. The notion of shamanism may also suggest alternative venues or audiences for electroacoustic music, outside of the usual academic locations (e.g. electroacoustic venues as a component of psy-trance events). Since trance states are sometimes viewed as therapeutic, it is also possible that

³ It should also be noted that the concept I am proposing for electroacoustic music could also be applied to other musical forms. For example, Veal (2007: 200-202) draws a similar connection between dub music and Rouget's discussion of ecstasy. Here, listening to dub music is described as an ecstatic meditative experience, which affords the perception of an African utopia.

shamanic journeys might afford similar benefits, although further research would be required to prove if this is the case.

Altered states of consciousness, and the notion of a shamanic journey can also be used as a basis for the compositional design of sonic materials and structure. I have been developing techniques for mapping features of hallucinatory experiences to fixed electroacoustic works, related projects in audio-visual media, and video game technology. I discuss these works in greater detail elsewhere (Weinel 2011a, 2011b, 2012). For example, during a hallucinatory experience one may perceive distortions to time-perception or spatial awareness. One may also see visual patterns of hallucination, hear auditory illusions or imagine strange entities. These can be used as a basis for the design of sonic materials and spaces. For example: if a hallucination contains whispering voices in the context of a room that seems to grow and shrink unnaturally, corresponding sonic materials can be produced and spatial processes can be applied. Likewise, hallucinatory experiences often have a gradual onset, plateau and termination. These can be used as a basis for the design of corresponding musical sections.

The concept of ‘shamanic diffusions’ may also suggest a political purpose for electroacoustic music. Just as composers have been able to address ecological matters through the use of electroacoustic music, shamanic electroacoustic music may be able to draw attention to the human potential for hallucinations and altered states of consciousness. This area of research saw significant decline after drugs such as LSD were banned in Western culture during the 1960s, though has recently been seeing a resurge of interest. Likewise, the term ‘consciousness’ was mostly avoided within the field of psychology from around the 1960s, and only saw a significantly renewed interest during the 1990s (Blackmore, 2003, p.18). These fields are active within research now, yet it is still arguable that dreams and hallucination are often viewed as insignificant in Western culture. It is the author’s belief that they are both worthy of scientific and artistic enquiry, and provide an excellent basis for composing art and music.

Finally, combinations of the above may contribute toward initiating a cultural discourse of electroacoustic music as an ecstatic shamanic technology. Western interpretations of shamanic practice often emphasise technologies for changing consciousness over systems of religion or belief. McKenna (2011) discusses rave culture in these terms, where the use of rhythmic techno music is a technology that affords changes in consciousness through collective dance. In similar terms it may be possible for us to establish methods for using electroacoustic music as an ecstatic technology. As we have seen, psy-trance culture depends on a combination of cultural factors to produce trance states. The concept of ‘shamanic diffusions’ may help to initiate a socialised meaning of electroacoustic music that affords this type of ecstatic response, through a supporting cultural context.

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