

# THE VIBE AS PEACE

EDMC CONFLICT STUDIES AND MONTREAL PSYTRANCE SPHERES

— FEATURE ARTICLE —

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## ABSTRACT

While discourses of peace abound in cultural, youth and EDMC studies, notably in relation to concepts like *communitas*, the dominant moral and modern conceptions of peace and conflict appear limited to tackling the inevitable conflict dynamics inside parties and around the vibe as a peak experience. Inspired by contemporary peace studies, Peter Sloterdijk's psychopolitical-morphological argument known as spherology and participation in Montreal's psytrance scenes, this paper offers an alternative understanding of productive conflicts at work in the vibe and outside of it. At the end, this paper seeks to offer observers and practitioners means to discuss the various peace-conflict dynamics nascent on dance floors with effects on global cultural formations.

KEYWORDS: peace, psytrance, atmosphere, Sloterdijk, spherology

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## INTRODUCTION

In the last decades, cultural and EDMC studies illustrated the intimate relation between peace and conflict in the cultural politics of youth underground movements. These studies portrayed underground cultures as solutions *carved out* with violence and pressure, removed from neoliberal economics, environmental degradation, racism and misogyny. Within a cultural architecture apart, underground movements and cultures appeared to create “a social space where difference, status and inequalities are temporarily suspended”. Known by participants as “the vibe”, these spaces were “renowned for their extremely low levels of violence” (Olaveson 2004: 94). Fuelled by a reconciliatory and utopian mood, EDMC cultures were also described as preoccupied with changing the world and with bringing peace to all. Some applauded without hesitation these pastoral mobilisations that “have a positive impact in the real world in a variety of ways” (Sylvan 2005: 181). Others, however, noted not without a touch of anxiety, that the *vibe to export* reveals, from the inside-out, other, more conflictual dynamics.<sup>1</sup> This latter group emphasize that the more we look and live through these cultures, the more we see the immanent bordering or conflicted peaceful practices of *the vibe*. Noting the conspiracies, paranoias, orientalism and microfascism characterizing the journey towards the peak, some EDMC observers have concluded, if implicitly, that their field, at its very core, studies *cultures as conflicts*. Such an understanding, obviously, generates important questions.

This article explores some of them. If EDMCs are at their core conflictual, what does this imply about analyses of the vibe as peace? Can conflict be involved in the transpersonal peak experience so often presented in EDMC literature and testimonies? How can *the vibe* be discussed in terms of conflict? Our journey departs from the peace-conflict framework particular to (neo-)Birminghamian cultural studies analysis or even Turnerian anthropology. Second, it considers EDMC (conflict) studies with concepts from critical peace studies and psychopolitics. To illustrate, it will draw material from ethnographic and auto-ethnographic insights generated from the author’s many years of active participation in Montreal’s psytrance universe. The scene, part of a “transnational, emergent and labyrinthine” culture (St John 2012: 4), will at first appear as a local iteration of what is often presented as the most peaceful of contemporary EDMCs. It is characterized by ascensionist tropes and many issues central to the project of the Human Potential Movement. It appears as the radicalisation of the PLUR generation’s resistance to neoliberalism. It carries an objection to the wars on crime, drugs and terror; it stages a quest towards global ecological transformation, sexual, gender or queer emancipation and active reconciliation with Indigenous peoples all around the world. For the newcomer or the observer on the margins, this culture—especially at its peak—is peace realized, or peace in a process of realization.

In what follows, we will see how psytrance in Montreal is embedded in conflict(s). The first step of our inquiry, supported by the work of contemporary peace theorist Wolfgang Dietrich, will explain the importance of acquiring distance from *moral* and *modern* visions of peace. Moral and modern frameworks theorize peace with concepts like justice and

security. In this dichotomous thinking, *the vibe as peace* cannot also be *the vibe as conflict*. In other words, it cannot approach the productive tensions inherent to feelings and ideas of justice and security. We will then explore a post-modern perspective to frame the party as a place rife with exclusionary dynamics. And a trans-rational perspective follows, furthering the analysis. Supported by a fusion of Stanislav Grof's perinatal psychology and Peter Sloterdijk's morphological tool, spherology, this section will discuss *the vibe* as an immunological density.<sup>2</sup> The section describes the vibe's achievement of temporary harmony through absorption and enlargement. The vibe and the experience of peace it carries are here understood to be entirely constitutive of conflict. At the end, being conscious about the productivity of conflict for the sustainment of any vibe is not to depart from psytrance ideals or practice, quite the contrary. Psychopolitical analysis, combined with the other images or layers of peace, reinforces the deep tendencies while offering practitioners and observers means to discuss emergent bordering practices and their effects on the culture and its agents.

### BRING BACK DIONYSUS: THE MORAL-MODERN PEACE PARADIGM IN PSYTRANCE

We should begin with a few notes on conflict and peace. Practicing and researching conflict, from inter-state violence to internal cultural tensions, reproduces specific conceptions and visions of peace. When we engage in conflict, actively or discursively, we also engage in peace. But as peace theorists argue, contrary to conflict, peace still remains an unknown (Lederach 2005: 5). In his recent trilogy entitled *Many Peaces*, Wolfgang Dietrich uncovered four layers of meaning (or "images") attached to the term peace in Western minds and practices: the energetic, the moral, the modern, and the post-modern peace (Dietrich 2012, 2013 and 2018). Let us focus for now on the most dominant assemblage: the moral combined with the modern.

According to Dietrich, the moral dimension of this dominant assemblage appeared a few centuries before Christ and as early as the Axial Age. In this vision, peace means *justice*. However, justice "is [not] perceived here and now, but it is projected forward from a pitiful now into a better future, which first of all has to be imagined" (Dietrich 2012: 74). As such, this vision posits a generalized cosmic total war between the Good and the Bad where peace and conflict are mutually exclusive. The present is conflict, chaos, division. It is dominated by *exteriority*. Peace as justice becomes synonymous with the establishment of a clear separation between what is *inside* and what is *outside*. Keeping the chaotic outside at bay is only one aspect of this total war. The other battlefield is the homeland, *here and now*: there are agents of chaos within us that must be either purified or excluded. For such peace to be maintained, two parallel movements must persist: the conversion or purification of the world, *and* submission to discipline by continual ritualized purifications. Such a peace appears more like permanent wariness: a warmongering peace, a peace resulting from combat.

For contemporary peace theorists like Dietrich, there are few differences between the moral and the modern visions. Since the “death of God”, *justice* was partially translated as *security*. However, the increased interest in worldly and material matters did not alter the spatial logics. Both enacted the same processes of combat for peace, the same constant separation between inside and outside. While the Hobbesian *Leviathan* is one example of peace through permanent war, Marxian classless society obtained by infinite expropriations is another. Indeed, the modern vision is only a secularized version of the thousands years old cosmovision. For Dietrich, both visions usually operate together in idea and practice.

Just like most of the social sciences and humanities, many branches of EDMC literature exhibit a broad tendency to describe *the vibe* as peace, as *justice*, as *security*. Some of the branches especially prone to theorizing a static and dichotomous understanding of conflict and peace include social-constructionist readings of the liminal, explorations of moral panics and discussions on emancipation or resistance.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, certain cultures were said to be in permanent *peacelessness* or war with the “mainstream”, while on the other hand their *vibes* were portrayed as (temporary or victorious) “authenticity”. Conflict, especially within the vibe, was camouflaged. For these theorists, *the vibe was peace*.

Conventional narratives about psytrance culture and its history usually reaffirm such analysis.<sup>4</sup> Born in Goa at the end of the 1980s before becoming a worldwide culture, psytrance pioneers were expatriated hippies, backpackers and *freaks* who felt the injustices and insecurity of neoliberalism, the war on drugs and the restrictions imposed by instrumental reason. As an answer to these outside pressures and modern illnesses, they developed a specific solution, a space carved into the margins of the mainstream. Linked to the Human Potential Movement, they tried to enact the revival of the Archaic and the rebirth of Dionysus. Individual practices of ascension from the mainstream—like dance, drug intake, Ashrams and travel—became means for the rise of a community of the enlightened (neo)shamans. The vibe, as it happened in their beach parties, was justice and security, a temporary victory over a chaotic and violent European modernity. Fuelled by this experience and an extensive spiritual framework, the psytrance community acquired a global purpose: provoking global changes in consciousness.

The Goa “state of mind” exported worldwide with the tight networking of tourists and musicians contaminated Montreal in the early 1990s. Since then, its pioneers like DJ Zen, Rikam, and more recently Prana Papa or Akibel, have decorated Montreal’s party spaces with an ascensionist structure. They are supported by a potent network of DIY artists, promoters and collectives managing food, scene building, equipment sharing and party organizing. The community meets at carved out places. These include underground parties, local cafés, smoke shops, nightclubs, festivals like Eclipse and Timeless, Sunday park events and food sharing assemblages, urban and remote. Each of its community spaces is said to be both outside the mainstream *and* connected with the traditional, the Archaic, the sacred, often performed *via* the reutilization of local Indigenous symbolism and practices; every festival has its teepees and many have sacred smoke ceremonies. I cannot count the number

of times I stumbled on the global culture arch-prophet, Terence McKenna, in Montreal. Music is ripe with his quotes, and I once came upon his book, *Food of the Gods* (same edition as mine), on my neighbors' camp table at Timeless 2018.

While the spaces are still surveilled and curtailed in many ways by the mainstream, those of us who transitioned from club culture find peace, peace as justice, peace as security. Inside these spaces, my friends and I can finally spread love and be spiritually open to nature's energy. We can be on the good side, while being opposed in principle to the plagues of mainstream club culture: money, individualism, production, heteronormativity. Authenticity in these spaces is measured against poser events like weekly Piknic Electronik and expansive Stereo afterhour, or mega-raves like Black and Blue. Participants and organizers—my crew included—constantly state the need to change world consciousness. We do this by proselytising to outsiders and contributing to harm reduction or ecological food-sharing. And of course we do this by making some noise. Québec's and Canada's national days are celebrated separately, on June 24<sup>th</sup> and July 1<sup>st</sup> respectively. During these weekends, many core actors of Montreal's psytrance scene merge, as they often do, with local techno crews increasingly marked by the presence of French expatriates to organize underground (anti) nationalist parties and festivals. On both St-Jean-Baptiste and Canada Day, parties will be held illegally. On the south shores of the St. Lawrence river, facing Montreal, one party offers a *bricolage* of resistant tropes: “no one is illegal”, inverted flags and loud music.

### THE POST-MODERN TRUTH-EXPERIENCE

Psytrance culture is not, however, only in conflict with its not-so-distant outside. There are conflicts and power relationships *inside, within the vibe*, but the moral-modern peace paradigm is ill-equipped to see them. Following Dietrich's genealogy, it is only with post-modern peace that a new paradigm opens up. Peace is no longer justice or security, but *truth* about justice or security. And since there are as many practiced truths as there are contexts, conflicts necessarily abound.

Readers of Bourdieu, Foucault, Maffesoli and Deleuze in EDMC studies emphasized the internal conflicts of dance cultures.<sup>5</sup> They have shown intrinsic power relationships at work at various levels. They understood the (neo)shaman as a product of knowledge, technologies of power and habits: a subject of varied but specific dispositions, some applied to the surroundings of the party, some internalized in strict self-imposed discipline. Authors have explored issues such as the biopolitics of harm reduction, normalizing practices at the door, lifestyle and discipline and debates on the best *spiritechnics*. In this vision, the (neo) shaman depends on (and contributes to) the formation of his/her “milieu”, the organized space. As explained by Campbell, “the milieu is a mode *and* a medium for grasping the spatial co-ordinates and normalised distributions of circulatory flows such that an optimal circulation of people and things can be managed and maintained” (Campbell 2019: 17). Similarly, psytrance events are never only about “music”. Seminars, visual designs, panels and barriers show the way at night and help channel traffic away from the river bridges.



Harm reduction specialists are on patrol, guidelines frame the ascensionist practices of the (neo)shamans in the gathering, and participants are encouraged to constantly look out for each other.

EDMCs, notably psytrance in Montreal, are especially interesting to analyse from the post-modern vision. There are and always will be a plurality of crews *and* their vibes, truths about justice and security. Walking through the encampments in a local EDM festival, one may find a variety of vibes. As one prominent Montreal producer explained, “here one needs to build his own clique”. And as Saldanha observed with wisdom, “clique formation has a geography” (2007: 150). My own crew of friends is representative. We generally have the same opinion about the “illnesses” of society, but we value different things at parties, not only with respect to music. Most of the girls of the group are creatures of the day, highly spiritual, love psychill, do yoga, and restrict their drug consumption to the minimum. The boys are on the transgressive side, nocturnal, less spiritual, more party animals; they prefer psytech because it is harder. I myself stand in the middle: spiritual but also transgressive, deep into darkpsy. Debates and confrontations within our group are inevitable all year. How (much), when *and why*? Which kind of music? Which kind of activities? Which party should we go to *together*? For example, there are intensive debates yearlong in relation to the biggest event of the year, Eclipse, organized by Rikam’s Techsafari. Each year it is the same discussions. For some participants, sometimes pejoratively called the hippies, Eclipse is too commercial, too big. It has lost its authenticity. 3000 participants and a \$350 ticket? It has lost its essence, its soul, its authenticity! But as an organizer told me, “everyone is here”. No one would miss this so-called commercial event for anything.

Going to a party is also highly ritualized. Everyone needs slightly different preparation. While my girlfriend and I are light travelers (food, quality substances, warm clothing, cigarettes, a hoola-hoop and body paint), some friends pack like it is the end of the world. Once on site, they will establish our encampment with great care. At night, trying to reach the peak will be a long and difficult process where small ritual differences within a group of friends will often become explicit. A friend wanting to get “trashed” might just be cautioned on his/her intentions, incited to take care of his/her health. In Montreal, not only within our group, consumption of what McKenna calls “dominator” drugs, those reinforcing ego (cocaine, alcohol, etc.), is debated. With time, our group stabilized. More recently, on Saturday nights of summer festivals, we split into smaller clusters, each with their own ways of the (neo)shaman. This “deliberate indifference”, or explicit differentiation, is *necessary*. In the words of Saldanha, discussing the tensions between freaks and beggars in Goa, “[w]e all agreed that deliberate indifference is necessary in order to have fun on the dance floor and not be bogged down by guilt. I too had to learn it” (2007: 171).

In the post-modern vision, *the vibe* is not the experience of group security and justice in relation to a demonic always-present mainstream. It is a “truth” experience designed by individual and collective means where the (neo)shamans, the subjects, feel entirely immersed in their own internalized dispositions, sustaining feelings of security and justice. I have my own well established practice of reaching the apex: being alone in the

middle of the hardcore darkpsy sets, barefoot, enough cigarettes and water around, no copious meal within the last 4 hours. Others in the group will prefer to walk in the forest, eat constantly and laugh their arses off. Each of us practices our own “truths”. I don’t mind my group coming around and chatting on the dance floor, but if they stick around for too long, they break *this* vibe I am co-creating with the other lone dancers around me. I also find whistles disruptive. Although they are crucial to others’ vibes of emancipation and authenticity, it is a far cry from mine. Nonetheless, that is a truth I hold to: whistles are so vibe-breaking that they should be prohibited on site. Thankfully, they are rare in events, in comparison to djembés.

Parties are “truth spaces” where various understandings of peace abound and bump up against each other. The inevitability of conflict led St John to affirm that psytrance *communitas* might be better termed *discommunitas* (St John 2012: 77-78). The vibe is plural and relational. It depends on context, participants and participants’ knowledge and practices. Any single party is better viewed as a plurality of vibes and vibe tribes (St John 2009: 120). Authors had it right when using the metaphor of the city in reference to parties, events, or even the music. Discussing the early rave scene, Gore viewed parties as “microcosm of the contemporary metropolis” (1997: 51). St John, in describing Boom Festival, referred to it as a “dance metropolis”: “a temporary sonicity that includes its own cosmopolitan population, architecture, communications, plumbing, restaurants and shopping center, security, and recycling” (2009: 126). In these spaces, the vibe is peace *and* conflict, peace predicated on multiple necessary exclusions.

### THE PARADOXICAL TRANSRATIONAL-SPHEROLOGICAL PEACE EXPERIENCE

This paper will now follow critical peace theories interested in the spatiality of pre-discursive peace-conflicts dynamics. They will be related, if implicitly, to notions like body, feelings, emotions and trauma, ultimately moving us towards a psychopolitical take on the vibe.<sup>6</sup>

Wolfgang Dietrich is at the core of this current. Inspired by Indigenous and Oriental cosmovisions, as well as by the figure of the shaman, the UNESCO Chair of Peace Studies looks to reactivate what he terms the energetic peace, a vision silenced (but never forgotten) in the Western world since the coup d’état by the moral paradigm two millennia ago. The result is stunning: from the refusal of rigid dichotomies by the post-modern emerges another image of peace, namely the transrational, where the subject is notably understood to be:

... like a constellation of energy. The energy, which is imagined as the innermost self, is contained in the body that itself is an accumulation of energy enclosed by a more or less firm form. This form is permeable, because every human being also has an energy field outside of his/her own body, and this field is influenced by other human beings, just like she/he herself also influences the energy field of others (Dietrich 2012: 242).<sup>7</sup>

For such energetic beings, peace is first of all a matter of *harmony*, an immersion wherein “the energy of life [can] flow unimpeded” (Dietrich 2012: 260). In order to access this harmony and be “in the flow”, a person has to *open up*. For harmony,

... arises first of all within the human being itself. From this grows harmony with others, and from that in turn, harmony with the whole world.... Peace is manifested through not desiring and not wanting to control, the letting happen (Dietrich 2012: 48-49).

At this point, some scholars will probably be inspired by Spinozist-Deleuzian conceptual tools like *intensity* or *atmosphere*.<sup>8</sup> However, as argued by Anderson, rigid nonrepresentational theories giving ontological priority to affect risk dismissing the ways in which affect is shaped, worked, conducted, contained, generated and transmitted by discourses, images and apparatuses (2014: 79-103). Peter Sloterdijk's spherology, supported by Stanislav Grof's perinatal psychology, offers this article a potent toolbox sensible to these aspects.

This addictive "meta-narrative" tells a story of energetic beings in *spheres*. For Sloterdijk, a Heideggerian and Nietzschean philosopher, a sphere is composed of five co-constitutive elements: two diffused poles, a density, a form or force and a difference between inside and outside.

The first two elements are the active/ecstatic pole (the Self) and the activating pole (the partner of Self). The third is an *atmosphere* (a field, a *vibe*) linking the two poles of partnership. There is no individualism here. A subject is inherently dual: inspired, conducted, contaminated, mesmerized, driven, mobilized by the energies of Others. As Elden and Mendieta explain, "coming to the world is a form of coupling; being-with is a being-with-another which forms a couple" (Elden and Mendieta 2009: 6). As the being-in-sphere partners with humans and things, s/he "participate[s] and create[s] multiple microspheres simultaneously" (Janicka 2016: 66). S/he engages permanently and continually in spherical relationships of various formats and of various polar qualities.

The same goes for psytrancers and members of Montreal's EDM scene. While I come to this dance floor, this party, I come with many partners in and around me: girlfriend, friends, Gods, this or that DJ, former teachers, Terence McKenna, Sloterdijk, St John, some material objects (my cigarettes and leather pouch). Some partners are new to me: this dancer next to me with whom I will spend the night sharing a spot. I also share my partners with others, forming molecular networks, vibe tribes or what Sloterdijk would call "foams": surreal neighbourhoods composed of many spheres held together by commonalities that enable accelerated contaminations and transmission (Sloterdijk 2003: 230).

The fourth element of a sphere is a *container* form around the Self guaranteed by the partner(s). This creates, finally, a sensible difference between *interior* and *exterior*. The sphere, as a concept, directly discusses the spatiality of psytrance subjectivities and their assemblages. It is a concept that puts emphasis on the density formed by relationships that one *inhabits*. The density of these relationships distinguishes and protects inhabitants from the world through the (re)creation of a world. Hence, as we will see, the vibe, as a feeling of justice and security, a produced truth experience, is a deep experience of space as protective interiority.



Every sphere has similar structural qualities (interiority, bi/multipolarity, a density, etc.). It also has a generalized purpose: it is a transfer of past space-experiences (Couture 2016: 69). Dietrich goes on in the same direction: “biographic experience of the world is predetermined by perinatal experience in a decisive way” (Dietrich 2013: 55). Any sphere models the *intra-uterine bubble* (the placenta, or the mother-foetus relationship), the most perfect protection and habitat one would have ever lived in and the proto-subject’s first experience of harmony. Stanislav Grof, the pioneer of transpersonal and psychedelic psychologies who inspired Dietrich and Sloterdijk, stated it clearly: a human’s first experience is the core of the Basic Perinatal Matrix (BPM) system, the compass for anyone’s biographical experiences.

In the womb, all needs are met and beings-to-be float, ecstatic, in non-duality, in “a blissful, undifferentiated, oceanic state of consciousness” (Grof 1975: 105). This is also “closely related to, if not identical with, the transcendental experiences . . . for which Abraham Maslow coined the term ‘peak experiences’” (Grof 1975: 107). The BPM I conditions subsequent experiences of peace and harmony for a human subject. Spherology, in the same way, illustrates how placenta nurtures foetus in a surreal relationship. A sphere is formed around the ecstatic being-to-be, providing the latter with a habitat, protection, immunity and a primary experience of perfect interiority.

Later in life, spheres are spiritual and concrete *re-constructions* of the first experience of harmony. Spherical beings design daily their extra-uterine wombs with micro-rituals, practices, symbols and movements. My spheres emerge in the knowledge and practice that I enact here and now. A couple materializes in its apartment, a tribe in its hang-out and its encampment, a spiritual community in its churches and rituals.

Psytrance culture, therefore, enacts different scales of spherical processes. I am attracted to this or that party by my (local) spherical influences and will try to transfer/reinforce them on site. For example: Prana Papa, an inspiring DJ that I enjoy listening to at home, is scheduled to play. I will not miss the chance to dance *in* his music! Moreover, my girlfriend and I, having our own spherical relationships, will try to inhabit our common space in this festival. My influences of work, family, school and life-events—not unlike hers—will mark the way we act or move here. Together, we will have our own vibe, and someone passing between us or visiting our tent will be able to experience that difference. That guy with the whistle surely has his very own spheres. The same is true of vibe tribes with their encampments and rituals; they are multipolar spherical assemblages sustaining their own vibes.

As ten Bos explains, “human beings are creatures that desire to be encircled and surrounded” (2009: 79). Event organizers and promoters, in designing the “difference engine” (St John 2012: 8), have their very own spherical intentions reminiscent of group psychotherapy. The party-space ought here to be “a safe, sheltered environment [that] may help people to act, express emotions, and create meaning in a way that they cannot otherwise do in daily life” (Hunger and Rittner 2015: 376). They offer a terrain of experimentation for anyone to create their own spheres of harmony. In this sense,

vibe cultures—mastering ecstasy, immersion and contacts—are veterans of the journey towards primal interiority. Psytrance, with its marked spirituality and its quest for the Archaic harmony in Being, appears as a radicalized expression of what Sloterdijk calls spheropoetics, the art of installation. Surrounded by spiritual discourses, symbols and a complex technical assemblage, EDM and psytrance parties intend to provoke radical *at-wombness*. Participants' testimonies directly speak about this experience as cosmic harmony, as being in the womb of Mother Nature. DJs, organizers and participants will then work to perfect their coordination on site so that every vibe tribe will have its means to reach *this thing*, or better, so that a “meta-vibe” may emerge.

So far, the vibe is peace. It is the density of relationships that a subject inhabits mentally and physically, a density that resonates with the primordial space of life. However, spheres are immunological designs that protect their inhabitants from the outside. The moral and the modern, just like the post-modern understanding, showed aspects of this exclusionary tendency clearly.

Spheres are hence constituted by and constitutive of conflict; they are as much a product of primordial harmony as of a *second* space, what Grof calls BPM II, or what Sloterdijk calls *anti-sphere* (2010: 545). Grof identifies BPM II as formed in the early stages of the birthing process, when the mechanisms of expulsion abruptly end the experience of non-duality. In this anti-sphere (if ever one can be “in” such a thing) everything is turned upside down; the former inhabitant of the sphere is now crushed (and/or dissolved) in an instance of complete externalization.

Grof understands this second basic perinatal matrix to enable “the recording of all unpleasant life situations in which an overwhelming destructive force imposes itself on the passive and helpless subject. The most typical and frequent examples are situations endangering survival and body integrity” (Grof 1975: 121). These include “experiences [of] incredible physical and psychological tortures” (Grof 1975: 116). For Sloterdijk, the nurturing partner, the animator, seems to have abandoned (or arguably, turned in alliance against) the Self who now faces imminent death. Therefore, we may easily relate this space to pure oppression, invasion, dis-animation, auto-referential enclosure, *étroitesse*, depression, melancholia, *ennui*, dystopia, Nietzschean individuation and obviously hell.

Psytrance is versed not only in creating hospitable spheres of love and harmony. It also specializes in the production of atmospheres of intensity, conscious bombardments, a difference engine channelling a variety of thoughts, emotions, feelings and affects that are sometimes too heavy and challenging. In the party, one has contact with a multiplicity of atmospheres, spheres and vibes in the same physical space. As Anderson argues, atmospheres are local entities, far from being universal. Atmospheres are relations of co-existence where each entity is affected differently by the whole. “Atmospheres can . . . coexist alongside one another without fusing or melting together precisely because the objects and bodies that make up an atmosphere do not exist as a set of totally interactive or accessible relations” (Anderson and Ash 2015: 40). S/he does not stand, dance, live *in* all, but s/he is still touched constantly. While many will be compatible with my own spherical constructions

(we are all here at this party, no?), others might externalize, invade, crush or change the climate of my own portable spaces. This touch, that thought, even a whistle, might threaten this vibe I am in.

Still, oppression is not conflict *yet*. Something *must* ensue: an activity, a mobilisation, a process of discharge, a fight for interiority, being outside yet moving to, *hopefully*, get home. Our understanding of transrationalism underlines the importance of a third experience of primal space that Sloterdijk calls purgatory. Grof names this spatial experience BPM III, the Dionysian perinatal matrix.

The situation ceases to have the quality of suffering and agony; the experience then changes into a wild, ecstatic rapture of cosmic proportions that can be referred to as ‘volcanic ecstasy’ [that] involves enormous explosive tension with many aggressive and destructive elements [where] various polar sensations and emotions melt into one undifferentiated complex that seems to contain the extremes of all possible dimension of human experience (Grof 1975: 125).

In transrationalism, today’s tensions in inter-personal relationships are reminiscent of past experiences. They are symptoms of previous unresolved conflict episodes, themselves re-enactments of the primal spaces of birth. These reactions, these new “episodes” for Dietrich, “block” the flow of energy (Dietrich 2013: 34).<sup>9</sup> Parties may indeed provoke such episodes. As a participant is repeatedly distressed by intensive body contacts, speeches, loud music, wind, smoke, dirt, body odors, lack of sleep, anything that makes a party a madhouse, s/he can become possessive, violent, and/or resentful for being forcibly abandoned by his/her partners, thrown in hell. *Reactive*, s/he will move towards identifying the sources of pain and destroy/cancel them. These offensive mobilisations will usually be framed as being *for* justice and security. But such “dark” spheropoetics is warmongering and arguably carries a “bad vibe”.

The ethics of peace in shamanism, transrationalism, spherology and psytrance is different. It promotes a *working with* more than the *fight against* energetic blockages of the Self. To use a spherological metaphor, the spherical being needs to correct the atmospherical pressure through adaptation. And this cannot be performed individually; it requires basic immunity, partnerships that are hopeful and encouraging (“go on, almost there!”). Ritualized party destructuration is a structured process: the post-birth participant somewhat already knows the finale (sweet interiority) and is *animated towards* it. Hence, psytrancers of the dark night are trained regulars willing to withstand the adversities of the party itself. Thanks to friends, comfortable clothing, my take on the ideological structure of the culture itself and over a decade of party experience, I can stand and enjoy the darkpsy hardships composed of bodies, vibes, musical cues like screams, police sirens, alien sounds or dark mantras, anything that has the potential to reactivate anti-spherical experiences. I can be in this hard void yet dancing my ass off with a smile. I understand that “opening ourselves to what we oppose may lead us into a crisis. Such a crisis can be healing” (Dietrich 2013: 126).

Throughout this journey driven by hope, recalling BMP III, intensity is on the rise until the participant reaches the climax. For the resentful, climaxing means the (metaphorical) destruction of the inopportune Other and the return to *status quo ante bellum*. But for the (neo)shaman, the movement is different. The apex is the overcharge and dissolution of what was left of ego mechanisms. Dietrich, like Turner, argues that when a certain limen is crossed, “subconscious mechanisms are no longer active. The persona’s contact boundaries dissolve, and a world that lies beyond them opens up” (Dietrich 2013: 221). Energy flowing completely free, the persona drops the mask. S/he starts, like the Afrofuturists state, to “feel at home in alienation” (Goodman 2010: 61). When one crosses the limen, s/he reaches experience-spaces related to BPM IV, with or without being “struck by visions of blinding white or golden light” (Grof 1980: 85). Doing so, s/he basically comes back to BPM I.

If we follow our spherological interpretation of transrationalism, however, what happens in climactic states is less complete dissolution in non-duality than, again, a process of transfer. It reproduces perinatal experience-spaces and their subsequent re-enactments in the world. “Hey, I know this place!” Indeed, rebirth, or birthing anew, is no linear process; it is a cycle. The spherological tools understand the end as the re-establishment of the beginning, the sphere, at-wombness and *the interior experience of non-duality*. As ten Bos argues, “mysticism is the art of being surrounded or enclosed without fear and desire. This implies that the surrounding medium loses its object status: you are in it rather than in front of it” (2009: 78). Rebirth, as it is happening on the dance floor, is Huxley’s mind-at-large, or minds-in-enlargement. In spherological analysis, human beings are caught in a uterine destiny where “transcendence is interior building” (Morin 2009: 61). Peak-like situations are moments of (re)creation of a larger, cosmic interiority. Here, oppressive exteriorities become real proximity, *inside*, vectors sustaining life itself. Being conscious of my immersion in this ultimate and infinitely generous sponsorship is *immunity*.

Harmony in vibe-culture emerges from this bizarrely active tranquility built on conflictual processes. The vibe, single or plural, general or particular, good or bad, is conflict, a continuous process of absorption of what-is-not-already inside.

Everyone’s daily spherical construction project is therefore driven by two complementary peace-conflict drives. Going back inside, after being (un)voluntarily thrown into anti-sphere, is one thing. The other, happening daily, is staying indoors: resisting constant micro-conflictual pressures that might lead to anti-spherical experiences. This is the idea of immunity. Indeed, one can only explore the outside world while being comfortably installed in some interiority structure, in his/her very own vibes. Without spheres, I would never have the protection needed to attend a party, much less to withstand the crushing intensity of the dark hours madhouse. I would not be able to organize the absorption process in order to translate the world as home. Any opening is a policed opening, policed by one’s partners, the spherical structure itself that one inhabits. Morin explains: “Being-in-the-world means being-able-to-be-with what is not given here and now, yet this openness is mediated by a being-in-a-sphere. If openness to what is remote is essential to being human, so is the protected space that grants this openness” (Morin 2012: 85). Never leave home without



your headset, your diet, the motto of your Grandpa, this or that knowledge, a language of some sort. With nothing to make sense of the world, I would be dissolved in nothingness. A sphere is an atmosphere, an “assemblage of technologies, calculations, practices and strategies which fill out a three-dimensional and volumetric space” (Campbell 2019: 13). For Sloterdijk, atmospheres are containment *in what we live*.

A sphere is “a spatially anchored immune system en miniature and thus, immunologically speaking, a sort of preventive security construction” (Klauser 2010: 331-332). It is “designed to demarcate a sphere of well-being from invaders and other agents of unwellness . . . that establishes a physical border between the protected interior and the potentially dangerous exterior” (Borch 2008: 558).<sup>10</sup> If such (atmo)spheres are not growing, constantly absorbing new meanings and affects, they cannot hold true. Exteriorities will always provoke rebirth, the hard reconstructive process.

The problem then is the fact that churches, nations, communities and couples are all spherical projects, and none are ever entirely realized. They all have constant unfinished business. Partners (techniques, gurus, knowledge, Gods) offer neither perfect immunity against nor perfect absorption of a complex world. A disruptive noise, an opposing theory, an unwanted touch: spherical-beings are always threatened with rebirth by the coldness of exteriorities. Nothing is ever entirely immune to climate-change, the impact of exteriorities that might provoke unwanted transitions to BPM II and III moment-spaces.

With this transrational model in mind, we see that EDM cultures are especially prone to difficulties. Because their participants play radically with space, vibe cultures accelerate the immanent spherical reconstructive cycles. They constantly live through (and provoke) climate changes. For cultures that prioritize peace and harmony, the management of these changes is key. For psytrance, with its purported spirituality, this process is especially challenging and seems to provoke translations of perennial theological dilemmas: how can exteriorities still be part of the Divine, how to deal with them and how to obtain final *closure*?

For a moment, everything is inside as I stand in this perfect harmony after a long struggle: days of negotiation to choose the event, days of preparation, hours of driving and installation. My mind is at large: everything—music, dancers, wind and sun—is part of this perfect universe. In the middle of the dance floor, at the highs of the peak, I am one with the divine being, one with the cosmos. Temporarily yet timelessly discharged. But everlasting harmony is difficult to maintain for the modern living being. It will surely be local and temporary.

In the transrational framework, “disturbances in the sensation of peace, peacelessness, are stored in the memory of the body” (Dietrich 2012: 250). It is a work of a lifetime to be discharged of pain, or, using spherological language, to sustain a large spherical construction that immunizes a Self from the touch of unwanted affects. Anything can resonate with past-present trauma-spaces; anything can become for me a vector of oppression that is not processed by my partnerships as vector of expression, as a vector towards harmony. Some things won't be processed as interiority and the space *will* shrink radically.



On this aspect, psytrancers need to navigate many issues. Larger spaces created by minds-in-enlargement are never shared by everyone on site. Not everyone is in the madhouse at the same moment, not everyone stays long enough beside others to be co-absorbed into what could be called an emergent collective space. As others have said in relation to EDMCs, “there is no singular climax point of the event” (Takahashi 2005: 256). Moreover, this harmony is bodily, and “bodies make mistakes, trip or fall, get toothache or migraine, can see only partially or not at all, get chronic diseases like arthritis—or simply drop dead” (Thrift 2008: 238). They are vulnerable. Moreover, sunshine comes, policemen arrive, weekends end, psychedelics fade, mom calls, this friend is elsewhere; the musical-technical assemblage is not flawless. My partners—friends, Gods, music—are imperfect partners. I feel something cold touch me and now I am back on Earth. You felt it also, didn’t you? Did I just feel your space implode, therefore mine? I am transitioning towards BPM II or III, and I must fight once again for interiority through absorption. This is the historical mode of survival for spherical spaces: to preserve the inside *via* absorption of the outside. Indeed, “the best protection against the outside, the best immunisation of the interior, is the integration of that outside” (Morin 2009: 62).

We have at this point a glimpse of the tortuous relationship between peak and post/pre-party, a crucial articulation still waiting for more explorations. The party won’t last, but I will still try later, maybe tomorrow, to reach this never-lasting harmony again. I might change my process, be more prepared or more open; or I might look to construct walls around the dance floor to block the outsiders, the vibe-breakers. With such adaptations, I might migrate towards new neighbourhoods, and arrive to the next party with new friends, or to entirely different parties. In any case, to reach the climactic party harmony again, I will need to absorb in some form any potential vibe-breaking exteriority.

Let us extrapolate on some visible tendencies. If absorbing means maintaining my distance from the mainstream and its agents by identifying tourists here and revolutionizing the world, so be it. This too will be an absorptive process, ridden with conflict at every level. If, on the contrary, I need to consume the other in order to be this Cosmic Being unmoved by down-to-Earth criticism of cultural appropriation, again, so be it. Either I eat the world or exclude it totally, but such a resulting harmony will always be *of* conflict.

## CONCLUSIONS

In the last decades, EDMC conflict studies have referred to various conceptions of peace. Using paradigms that dominate social sciences, these studies have described music cultures, psytrance included, as answers to “partly conscious and unarticulated feelings of injustice” (Jensen 2018: 410), answers to climates of insecurity. The conflict they described was understood to exist between the music culture and its oppressive environment, alternatively identified as the capitalist music industry, instrumental reason and its legitimations of environmental degradation or heteronormativity. While useful for understanding the place and the relationship between music cultures and host society, these studies also limited the

exploration of conflict dynamics at the core of party experiences, at the core of the vibe. The post-modern vision overcame this limit and enabled the observer and the participant to develop a sense of the power relationships inherent at any party. The vibe was understood as a truth experience, the product, creation, design of many coordinated individual and collective movements of knowledge and practices endogenously enacted by subjects. The party hosted many vibes and many tribes enacting them.

This paper continued the inquiry of EDMC conflict studies with attention to the psychopolitical processes marked by conflict at the core of the vibe. Indeed, using transrationalism as a combination of spherology and psychedelic psychology, it showed that psytrancers live in “dyadic, triadic, and multipolar bubbles [that] are the exterior of the interior and the interior of the exterior, the ecstatic intertwining of the subjects in the common interior space where those that really live together are mutually nurtured” (Castro Noguiera 2009: 87). Central to current scholarly interest on the spatiality of subjects and bodies, Sloterdijk and Grof help explain how human beings *live in* their relationships, in their immunity habitats. These structures happen to be constantly challenged, and paradoxically, they have to be in order to create and sustain the deepest peace possible. Parties radicalize the living conditions of being: they offer psytrancers the path to harmony through absorption of what is exterior to them. But since parties are multiclimactic, never-lasting harmonies, they *also* suffer from radical compression of space, the passing of their peace. Veterans of continuous climate changes, psytrancers must brace for the next time and what St John called an “intracultural energy crisis” will surely follow (2014: 57). Debates about collective absorption qua protection will mark the next parties. At the end, *the vibe*, notably in psytrance, is of both peace and conflict, and the two aspects must at every level be understood together as one single (but complex, multidimensional) process.

## NOTES

- 1 The critical eye of Simon Reynolds (1998) launched the discussion, but it is authors inspired by Bourdieu and Deleuze that offered the most impressive framework for understanding the internal or co-constitutive tensions; see Saldanha (2007, 2010), D’Andrea (2007, 2010) or Goodman (2010).
- 2 Sloterdijk’s meta-narrative is very well synthesized by Elden (2012) and Couture (2016).
- 3 See, for example, Sylvan (2005) and Turner (1982, 1988) on the liminal. See also Hier (2002), Martin (1999) or Miller (2006) on moral panics. For (neo)Birminghamian analysis, see Shildrick and MacDonald (2006) or Thornton (1995) or D’Andrea (2010). This paradigm could also include the Bakhtinian concept of carnival (1984), or Durkheim ennui (Hampartzoumian 2004).
- 4 On the detailed history of psytrance, see St John (2010, 2012) or Reynolds (1998).
- 5 See, for instance, D’Andrea (2007) and Saldanha (2007) on the formation of cliques through discipline. Marsh (2006) offered a very interesting discussion on the biopolitics in rave regulation in relation to harm reduction initiatives. See St John (2012, 2014) for the various polar tensions between vibe-tribes. See also Thornton (1995) and D’Andrea (2010) for an exploration inspired by the sociology of Bourdieu.

- 6 Couture explains what psychopolitics means: “psychological moods [are] qualities that can be transferred from individuals to collectivities and vice versa” (Couture 2016: 8).
- 7 The “transrational” child of the post-modern combines *ratio* and energy. It is conceived as a mean to discuss and produce harmony, the latter clearly being a human technical/tactical intervention rather than an otherworldly blessing.
- 8 Many authors have worked on concepts sympathetic to the “energetic being”. See for instance Massumi (2002), Manning (2007) and Goodman (2010) on intensity; and Thrift (2008), Anderson (2009), Bissell (2010), Adey et al. (2013), Ash (2013), Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos (2013), Anderson and Ash (2015) and Bille, Bjerregaard and Sørensen (2015), on atmosphere.
- 9 Abuses, violence and traumas are “strangled emotions (‘abgeklemmter Affekt’)” (Grof 1980: 26). They are experiences of emotional and physical charge, negative or toxic engrams; they are “injurious or otherwise painful moment[s] literally recorded by the body” (Kahn in Goodman 2010: 135). On this aspect, it is pertinent to link this discussion to the central dimension of Erin Manning’s analysis of affect: the *don’t touch me* (2007).
- 10 See, for similar arguments, Klauser (2010: 331) and Sloterdijk himself (2003: 173).

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