Chapter 12

Arcadian Electrickery: Locating “Englishness” in England’s Psytrance Culture and Sonic Aesthetic

Gemma Farrell
University of Sussex, UK

ABSTRACT

Psychedelic Trance (psytrance) is a sub-genre within electronic dance music (EDM) that is notable for its longevity considering EDM mutates and evolves so rapidly. It has flourishing scenes worldwide and for many participants it constitutes a lifestyle and an integral part of their identity. Psytrance has been discussed in terms of its global and local expressions; this chapter seeks to explore how England as a local node reinterprets the culture of a global scene. Some key characteristics of English psytrance are discussed via types of national identity outlined by scholars like Martin Cloonan and a further attribute specific to English psytrance, a humorous psychedelic sensibility, is argued for.

INTRODUCTION

English psychedelia has tended to take inspiration from the past, expressing a deep nostalgia for a pre-industrial, pastoral golden age whose basis lies more in the realm of mythology than historical accuracy. On the other hand, English literature and film past and present is awash with science-fiction and the notion of technology-
assisted social progress. Psytrance encompasses both these perspectives, at once embracing ancient wisdom and neo-tribal sensibilities whilst making reference to space travel, cyborgs and the like, and adopting ever more complex music production technologies. English psytrance particularly exemplifies this dual horizon. It is heir to the nostalgia of preceding manifestations of English psychedelic culture, from Humphry Davy’s experiments with Nitrous Oxide and Thomas de Quincy’s exploratory use of opium at the turn of the 19th century to the psychedelic folk music of the 1970s and the acid house and rave scenes of the late 1980s and 1990s. It is also influenced by well-established literary traditions in science-fiction and by technological progress, from H.G. Wells to Dr Who and the Industrial Revolution to Tim Berners-Lee’s World Wide Web. A distinct anarchic humour prevails in the English psytrance scene, permeating and subverting its brand of Arcadian nostalgia.

This chapter investigates how England as a local node of psytrance reassembles the culture of the global psytrance scene. Some dominant characteristics of English psytrance are discussed via types of national identity and a further attribute specific to English psytrance, a humorous psychedelic sensibility, is argued for. The first section provides a brief introduction to psytrance and then presents five types of Englishness and a number of dominant attributes relating to those types, proposed by Martin Cloonan and other scholars writing more recently. The second section discusses some of the dominant attributes of Englishness identified in the first section, adding the perspectives of scholars in the field of psytrance. The final section argues for an additional dominant attribute in English psytrance, a humorous and introspective psychedelic sensibility, identified using Andy Medhurst’s work on British humour and the author’s analysis of psytrance music.

BACKGROUND

Contestation has defined psytrance from its earliest Goa beginnings, where an early schism developed over live-ness and authenticity between the original ‘freaks’ of the late 1960s and 1970s, whose parties were accompanied by psychedelic rock and soul music and the new influx of nomads in the 1980s who brought their club music with them in the form of artists like Kraftwerk and Tangerine Dream (Mothersole, 2012). This newly imported electronica blended with the spiritual music found in India and other countries on the hippie trail, retained much of the progressive psychedelic sensibilities of its predecessors and would eventually become the prevalent musical style at Goa’s beach parties (St John, 2012b). A cultural nexus formed in Goa, a site of discourse with music scenes all over the world. Diverse electronica like Chicago house, Detroit techno, New Wave, Electronic Body Music, Goth and Industrial collided there and DJs, such as French innovator Laurent, extracted and
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