

## **From religious ecstasy to ecstasy pills: a symbolic and performative analysis of electronic music festivals**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article looks to analyze the process through which eastern cosmological elements and religious practices acquire new meanings as they take on fresh uses in western festive contexts, as well as examine the symbolic and performative dimensions of the phenomenon in question. Electronic music festivals suggest a reading of eastern religious factors that serve as a reference to their 'origin myth.' The ethnographic data reveals a new form of obtaining ecstasy via music, performances, 'natural' ambients and altered states of consciousness. The appeal to transcendence is the direct result of western re-workings of Indian religious practices – especially those proposed by the spiritual leader Osho, who formed a cosmology based on fragments taken out of their 'original' context and given meaning in the life of those who adopt the Sannyasa lifestyle.

**Keywords:** party, performance, psychoactive drugs, New Age spirituality

### **Introduction**

Based on the ethnographic material contained in my master's dissertation, this article explores a movement of resignification that transplants fragments of eastern religious systems to the festival contexts of young westerners. It looks to highlight the symbolic and performative dimensions of this phenomenon and its particular appeal to transcendence. The specific type of electronic music festival under study exemplifies the transposition from eastern practices to western capitalist contexts via facts and events occurring over the last thirty years that rework the meanings of one of the most important youth countercultures of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the hippie movement. The process of appropriating the hippie imaginary for contemporary contexts began when people

anxious to pursue a 'quest for spirituality' in the west found answers in western translations of eastern cosmologies and practices in 'New Age' religiosity.<sup>1</sup>

The article is divided along two analytic axes. The first part presents the succession of events and facts that enabled the emergence of globalized festival contexts where the pursuit of ecstasy predominates. Based on techniques taken from Indian orientations previously translated to the west, the festivals are stimulated by the 'spiritual quest' of the hippies at the end of the 1970s (Bellah 1977). The main translation used to provide an origin to the festivals is the one proposed by Indian spiritual leader Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, who created a lifestyle known as Sannyasa, which translates yoga to daily life as a means of personal 'enlightenment.' The second part examines how the appropriation of these elements brought a new form of achieving ecstasy to the contemporary capitalist context, based on music, performances, 'natural' ambients and altered states of consciousness, and which explores the body as the main medium of communication and efficacy.

The presentation of the movement and the exposition of the main features of the festival universe are based on my field research, which accompanied the calendar of a specific type of electronic music festival in Brazil. The field work was conducted over 2003 and 2004, and involved frequenting all the events in the festival calendar and remaining for a week before and after the realization of each event. Based on a "wider and more open [approach to] ethnographic investigation" (Giumbelli 2002), I looked to include the largest possible number of research sources so that the ethnography would not be confined to field work alone. Although participant observation provided the main source of data, this tool was combined with other sources in order to understand and explain how the symbolic transmission of the event in question functions. Interviews,<sup>2</sup> documentaries, the scant literature on the phenomenon,<sup>3</sup> videos and photographs helped to compose the ethnographic material.

## 1. Festive meditation

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<sup>1</sup>This new religiosity is known to researchers as 'New Age.' Studying the main manifestations of the phenomenon in the south of Brazil, Sonia Maluf observes that the list of therapies and spiritual and religious experiences surrounding 'alternative spirituality' is extensive. It includes the adaptation of techniques from different eastern medicines, exercises and body disciplines, alternative western medicines (homeopathy, phytopathy, naturopathy), the creation of new psychotherapeutic techniques, the different forms of meditation (zen, dynamic, kundalini), astrological knowledge, numerology, I-Ching and the co-existence of religious and spiritual movements (such as Santo Daime and the followers of Rajneesh) (Maluf 1996).

<sup>2</sup> I conducted a closed questionnaire with thirty participants; the five questions included were: "what is your age," "education," "what festivals have you already been to," "what is the state of ecstasy and how do you attain it." These were not produced at the time of the festival; instead, they were completed via email based on contacts I made over the days of the events. Rather than being provided in full, the interviews appear in the ethnographic text in fragmented form at opportune moments.

<sup>3</sup> There are no publications dedicated to electronic music festivals in Brazil.

The *Sannyasins or neo-Sannyasins* are formed by followers of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (1931-1990), or Osho, as he came to be known at the end of his life. The guru graduated in philosophy from the University of Jabalpur and worked as a spiritual leader until 1966, when he decided to focus his attention on training Sannyasins. The group is characterized by its orange clothing, the use of necklaces bearing the image of Osho and by its dedication to distinct meditative practices (Maluf 1996). The guru<sup>4</sup> also chose a new name for his disciples, who abandoned their original names to become: Kranti, Banzi, Riktan, Anteda, Atan, Lockan.<sup>5</sup>

In general, the group was formed by people coming from the USA and Europe who gathered in Osho's apartment in Mumbai (formerly Bombay) in India. Despite his acceptance in the western world, the guru had to move to Puna because of Indian opponents who contested the practices of the Sannyasa lifestyle. His teachings were not well received by Indians who accused him of moulding a millennial culture to the gaze of the west. In this town, large Ashrams (places for teaching) were built through which more than fifty thousand westerners passed over a period of five years (*Osho Times* 1989). In 1981, Osho's health problems prompted him to go to the United States in search of treatment. In response, Sannyasins from around the world united and bought a six million dollar ranch in the town of Antelope, Oregon (cf. Wikipedia). Known as Big Muddy, the 65,000 hectare site was transformed into a community and at its peak was home to three thousand fixed residents who paid high sums for the terrain.

The ranch was later known as Rajneesh's Town and became a frequent target for denunciations for tax evasion and fraud. In 1987, Osho returned to Puna on being expelled by the US government under the accusation of arranging marriages between Indians and Americans by telephone. His death occurred in 1990. Some Sannyasins accused CIA agents of poisoning him.<sup>6</sup> It is believed that the Sannyasins today number around four million practitioners with six hundred training centres scattered around the world (*Osho Times* 1989).

Osho's teachings propose a mixture of self-knowledge, western psychology, existential philosophy, meditation techniques from the four yoga orientations (tantra, tao, zen and sufi), psychotherapy, holistic therapies and the consumption of cultural goods linked to the doctrine. According to Maluf (1996), as well as their strong interest in therapeutic practices, the Sannyasins also comprise a religious group with a doctrine (the writings of the leader) and a proposal for

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<sup>4</sup> In this case, the term 'guru' can only be applied insofar as a typical ideal construction is involved. The writings of Anthony D'Andrea (2004<sup>a</sup>, 2004<sup>b</sup>) indicate that the spiritual leader was against this designation because of its reference to a lifestyle rather than a religion. Osho did not believe that the spiritual quest was personified by himself, but rather in each person who followed the proposed doctrines.

<sup>5</sup> The disciples should have the letters 'a' and 'n' in this order in their name.

<sup>6</sup> A large controversy erupted after his death. The majority of sources suggest poisoning as a cause of death, though others talk of accidents and even a death caused by AIDS.

spiritual development in which meditation is attributed fundamental importance. Osho adapted different forms of meditation that were 'appropriated' by the type of culture predominant in modern western societies, producing a counterpoint to the accelerated rhythm of life in the big metropolises.

The proposed teachings focus on bodily movement and the expression of feelings and emotions, in which the most important aspect is not the technique in itself but the meditative state. His principal book, *Meditation: The Art of Ecstasy*, teaches techniques for attaining ecstasy through meditation. In the preface to the work, an Indian writer presents the ideas of the spiritual leader:

In this book the enlightened spiritual master Bhagwan Sheree Rajneesh speaks about meditation and suggests a certain number of meditation techniques that have proven to be particularly appropriate for westerners. The techniques begin from where a man is, and not from where he was one day, nor where he wants to be. They start from the beginning and take us to the point where we are to where we can be. Whether creating new meditation techniques rooted in therapeutic bases, or reviving and renewing ancient techniques taken from innumerable traditions, Rajneesh's interest resides in helping each of us to find the right path. Following the Christ's path, Buddha's steps or Krishna's journeys will not make you a Christ, a Buddha or a Krishna; you must find your own path. The explanations contained in this book and the techniques presented here are an attempt to help you to find your own path. (Ma Satya Bharti in Rajneesh 1976:8)

The guru also developed the technique known as 'dynamic meditation,' which involves interspersing moments of profound silence with moments of celebration and hedonism, with the aim of attaining a single essence, something that transcends any type of categorization. The person must forget past, present, future, ego and self in order to connect with the 'one' state. Only in this way will the individual be caring for his spirit through practices and orientations to be followed in day-to-day life.

Yoga signifies the total essence of man. It is not simply a religion. It is the total science of man, the total transcendence of all his parts. And when you transcend parts, you become whole. The whole is not just an accumulation of parts, it is not something mechanical in which the parts are aligned to form the whole. No; it is more than something mechanical, it is more like something artistic. (Rajneesh 1976:45)

One of the principal dimensions of this lifestyle is highlighted by Osho as caring for the 'spiritual side' without forgetting the 'material' side – the latter would be immutable and would not impede the development of the former. The exercises and teachings can be undertaken anywhere, the location and occupation of the practitioner being unimportant. The individual should attain his or her spirituality without thereby renouncing "being in the world" (Maluf 1996).

The guru's idea is that the quest for spirituality can be united with economic rationality, selling products linked to the 'soul.' Currently, the Sannyasins dominate a significant portion of the market of products relating to 'New Age' spirituality, developing astral maps, biodance workshops, biotherapy and vegetarian cuisine, as well as organizing electronic music festivals, the theme of my research. The compatibility and efficacy of this type of practice in the contemporary western context are reflected in the high sales of Osho's books in diverse languages. This success resulted in the accumulation of Osho's substantial personal wealth, as well as a small group of Sannyasins who knew how to take advantage of this new market.

During the 1980s in Europe various news articles were published on the group and a flood of accusations generated around the fact that the gatherings held in their temples promoted large-scale sexual encounters. The media referred to Osho as a 'sex guru' (D'Andrea 2004b). The movement linked to Bhagwan was the object of fears typical to those surrounding sects in France (Giumbelli 2002) and in Belgium, where people expressed their concerns over 'brain washing' and deviant sexual behaviours (Els Lagrou, personal communication). In fact these encounters were promoted to obtain ecstasy through sex. In his book *Tantra: sex and spirituality*, Osho describes techniques for attaining ecstasy through individual or collective sexual acts.

If you see two people making love, you will feel that they are fighting. If children ever see their parents in this situation, they think their father is going to kill their mother. The act appears violent, it seems like a fight. It is not beautiful, far from it. The act should be musically harmonious. The two partners should act as if they were dancing rather than fighting, as if they were intoning a harmonious melody, creating an atmosphere in which both can develop and become one. Then they relax. This is the meaning of Tantra. It is absolutely not sexual. It is the least sexual thing that exists and yet it is concerned with sex. Is it not admirable that, through this relaxation and release, nature reveals to you its secrets? You then start to perceive what is happening, and thanks to this perception many secrets enter your mind. (Rajneesh 1977:14)

Following Osho's death in 1990, his teachings lost their doctrinal nature and became exposed to a range of interpretations. Some of his followers started to search for spiritual expansion via the use of psychoactive substances, primarily through ecstasy. The contact of Sannyasins with this 'new drug,' which had emerged at the end of the 1980s, occurred in the United States where the substance had been legalized for years and where psychotherapists had already discovered and exploited its effects.<sup>7</sup> Like Osho's followers, the first psychotherapists were enthralled with the use

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<sup>7</sup> The main active component of ecstasy is MDMA, patented in 1912 by Merck, a German company from the chemical-pharmaceutical sector. The therapists knew that if MDMA transformed into a 'popular' 'street' drug, it could follow the path taken by LSD and be criminalized by the government. This is

of MDMA and were fully conscious that they had found a 'real tool,' as one of them relates in Adelaars's book (1994:234): "MDMA is the penicillin of the soul, and a doctor doesn't stop prescribing penicillin after seeing what it can do."

The psychoactive substance entered Europe via two distinct groups of users in the mid 1980s. While Osho's followers brought samples of the psychoactive drug from the USA and propagated its use as a means of spiritual enlightenment, elsewhere, on the Spanish island of Ibiza – known as the paradise of electronic music – the psychoactive substance came into the hands of people who "just wanted to have fun" (Saunders 1996).<sup>8</sup>

In parallel with the search for new ways to attain ecstasy, the 1980s were marked by the start of the global proliferation of AIDS. According to adepts themselves, the new context created by the disease ended up curtailing the tantric encounters after the discovery that some Sannyasins had been infected with HIV. These encounters had to be replaced by other techniques for attaining ecstasy. A small following of Sannyasins substituted the ancient tantric techniques with others, also developed by Osho in the book *Meditation: The Art of Ecstasy*, known as Nataraja. This consists of dancing over a long period, lulled by a repetitive musical style that induces trance, altering the dancer's state of consciousness and uniting 'body' and 'soul.' This should occur in the company of people seeking the same goal.

Dance as a technique has been used by many. When dance is there, the dancer is nowhere to be found. Only dance exists. Many techniques are used for dances. Nataraja is just one dance. It is dance as total meditation. The technique is as follows: First stage: forty minutes of dance. Allow your unconscious to take complete control. Dance as a process. Don't plan nor exercise any control over your movement. Forget onlooking, observation, consciousness – be simply and totally just dance. The dance will begin in the centre of your sex and will then rise. Let this happen.

Second stage: when the music ceases, stop dancing immediately, lie down and for twenty minutes remain perfectly silent and still. The vibrations of the music and the dance will continue within you. Allow them to penetrate your most subtle layers. Third stage: stand up, and for five minutes dance in celebration. Enjoy! (Rajneesh 1976:210)

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precisely what happened. On March 23<sup>rd</sup> 1988, MDMA became listed as a banned substance (Saunders 1996). The ban did not lessen its consumption and meant that traffickers mixed MDMA with other substances, such as amphetamines and stimulants, thereby generating the ecstasy pill as it is today.

<sup>8</sup> Until 1984, MDMA was not banned and students in the United States could buy the drug legally in bars, take it to parties or send it to Europe. With a high purchasing power, the Ibiza public was composed of elites from different parts of Europe such as France, Germany, Italy and Spain (Saunders 1996, Adelaars 1994, D'Andrea 2004b).

At the end of the 1980s, a short while before the death of the spiritual leader, the westerners travelling to India in pursuit of Osho's teachings ended up gathering in the period between Christmas and New Year in the coastal region of Goa,<sup>9</sup> near to Puna, intent on taking part in large-scale hedonistic encounters dedicated to celebrating and swapping their experiences relating to the new teachings. The encounters were ran by Goa Gil, the first DJ to play this acoustic mix in the 'spiritual' context of Goa.<sup>10</sup> Along with other artists, Gil played at large parties that attracted an extremely varied public of westerners visiting or living in the region. Following the arrival of electronic music, the DJ discovered a singular form of mixing the elements of 'spirituality' proposed by Osho with a contemporary musical style, which resulted in Goa trance or psychedelic trance. The form in which the term 'spirituality' is associated with the musical style produced in Goa can be observed in the words of the DJ himself when asked about the relationship between 'music' and 'spirituality':

In my opinion, we are reviving the times of the ancient religions. Since the beginnings of humanity, we have used music and dance to associate with the spirit of nature and the spirit of the universe. We use *trance* music and dance to attain this association. This is what I call "Redefining the ancient tribal ritual for the 21st century." When I go to a party I try to connect my thoughts to nature's cosmic spirit, reciting Mantras and making offerings to this spirit; then and only then I begin my presentation. The music and the people at the party connect to the Cosmic Spirit of the Lord Shiva as Nataraja, Lord of Dance, who comes to bless everyone. Thus the participants, the music, the DJ, the spirit, everyone transforms into just one, creating a single essence. OM NAMAH SHIVAYA!!!! HARA HARA MAHADEV!!!! Dance activates meditation. By dancing, the human being activates meditation. When we dance, we go beyond thoughts, beyond consciousness and even beyond individuality itself to become just one in the divine ecstasy of the union with the cosmic spirit. This is the essence of the experience of an electronic party in Goa. (Interview conducted with Goa Gil on 21/03/02)

Making use of the drug ecstasy to attain ecstasy at these parties, the Sannyasins developed or influenced the origin of a particular set of symbols and practices that took some of Osho's teachings, such as prolonged dance and alteration of consciousness, and adapted them to a festival context. In the 1990s, trance festivals spread around the world, opening up the possibility for the circulation of a large volume of capital. Propagation of the event occurred via the Sannyasins who left India and took this type of party to their home lands. Italy, Germany, Portugal, Spain, Israel,

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<sup>9</sup> The region is known for its tolerance of westerners, comprising a location isolated from the east by four hundred and fifty years of Portuguese colonization.

<sup>10</sup> According to D'Andrea, this 'paternity' cannot be attributed to Gil in such direct form, since it comprises a complicated process with numerous names involved. This author suggests that Gil conquered the mainstream and created a marketing strategy about himself that enabled him to become known and respected globally for developing this acoustic fusion.

Brazil, Japan and Australia all contain large urban centres where rave culture was implemented and which attract a large youth public.<sup>11</sup>

The Sannyasins control or occupy key positions in the main markets based around events under study. In the music market, the main DJs are the Banzi and Riktam brothers.<sup>12</sup> In the production market, the Sannyasins run the main international festivals. Antaro, who is the owner of the most important psychedelic trance recording label, organizes “the world’s biggest electronic music festival,”<sup>13</sup> the *VooV experience*, which takes place in Germany and attracts around twenty thousand people. In Brazil, the presence of Kranti, a Sannyasin who lived in India for two and a half years and brought these events to the country, represents the group’s importance. The Sannyasin nucleus of Alto Paraíso organizes Brazil’s two most important festivals, one in Bahia and the other in Alto Paraíso itself, with an average public of four to eight thousand people per event.

The cosmology propounded by the Indian spiritual leader can be compared to a ‘logic of the concrete’ of contemporary societies composed of its own reasonings and interpretations. The logic analyzed by Levi Strauss (1989) can be applied to non-western societies and to western groups that do not follow scientific logic. To give meaning to everyday life, the ‘native’ creates a logic that reunites apparently disconnected elements, acquiring meaning in the imaginary of a determined group on the basis of their day-to-day practices.

## 2. Electronic music festivals

The festivals are composed of raves that take place in the open air far from the urban centres, in places known for their ‘natural’ beauty due to their beaches, waterfalls, valleys and mountains. Through the events and chance happenings of the last thirty years, we can observe the development of festivals that are informed and transformed by a set of symbols and practices. The trajectory of festivals in Brazil and the world takes as a reference point one of the most important countercultures of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the hippie movement. According to the origin myth of the studied festivals, members of this movement left many countries, especially the USA, to meet at the Indian beach resort of Goa. The motive for leaving and subsequently gathering there was the “search for a lost spirituality,” based on eastern discourses and practices translated into the west, such as, for example, the teachings of Osho. The ‘spiritual quest’ prompted the emergence of open air festival gatherings designed by the followers of the eastern teachings who mixed with the

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<sup>11</sup> From the Israeli site *Isratrance* [www.isratrance.com](http://www.isratrance.com)

<sup>12</sup> They are in high demand and charge from \$2,000 to \$4,000 for a three-hour presentation.

<sup>13</sup> Published on the site [www.deutschetrance.de](http://www.deutschetrance.de).



tourists visiting the region and bringing new features to the event, the main of these being the musical style.

In Brazil, the movement was propagated by travellers who sought out the south of the Bahian coast to hold their events. The shared feature of the first exponents was their countercultural affiliation. The two Italians involved in the development of trance festivals in Brazil, Michelli and Max, visited different parts of the world, choosing the best place for developing an 'alternative' lifestyle and, later, searching for new 'stages' for producing festivals. The Brazilians involved, Alba and Kranti, are likewise followers of counterculture discourses and practices, the prime example of these being Sannyasa, and perform their daily jobs in 'New Age' markets. For Maluf (1996), the political dimension derived from this spirituality is similar to that of counterculture movements: "change the world and change yourself."

The electronic music festivals therefore combine factors with a strong symbolic charge that lead to a type of performance in which the pursuit of ecstasy is considered the main shared objective. Through the combination of sensory stimuli, performance and the consumption of psychoactive substances,<sup>14</sup> the participants experience strong sensations that induce them into this particular state of euphoria.

This movement involves the creation of a globalized festival culture with symbols that transcend national boundaries, spawning networks and markets linked to the events. A striking feature of this set of imagery is the multiplicity of discourses and practices found among ravers. Whether among the explanatory leaflets, small workshops, decorative motifs, informal conversations or meeting points across the global computer network, I noted the proliferation of ideas making up the imaginary of festival culture: a proposal for changing the way the days and months of the year are counted, using the Peace Calendar or the Mayan Calendar, a form of relationship based on 'peace, love, union and respect,' and the issue of 'sacralizing' nature, which is represented by the extreme care shown for the natural environment where the event is held, through awareness raising and a collection service for recycling waste.

Along these lines, large festivals are organized that may last from three days to a week, uniting thousands of people from different parts of Brazil and the world. In Brazil, the festivals seem to be distributed across the year with intervals varying from two to four months. The calendar begins with the *Universo Paralello* festival, which takes place at New Year on Prati beach in the state of Bahia, the summer season continuing in the landscape of Trancoso,<sup>15</sup> on the southern coast

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<sup>14</sup> I use the generic pharmacological term 'psychoactive' which broadly designates substances that produce an alteration in the psychic state (Macrae & Simões 2000).

<sup>15</sup> In Trancoso, small parties are held throughout January. It is not a large festival, therefore, but a 'summer season.'

of this state. Later there is *Celebra Brasil* during the week before Easter, held in Parati Mirim in Rio de Janeiro. In July *Transcendence* is held near to the Chapada dos Veadeiros, in Goiás. Finally, *Earthdance* occurs in September, closing the yearly cycle.

The vast majority of the public at an electronic music festival is made up of young people aged between twenty and thirty years old with a high purchasing power. The exclusive and 'elitist' nature of these events is marked by the high cost for the participant, who in addition to paying between 200 and 300 reais for the festival ticket has to cover personal expenses during the event and transport to the location, which quadruples the festival entrance fee.

### **2.1. Manipulation of the body in pursuit of ecstasy**

The ethnographic data show that the shared feeling of well-being lived and experienced by this urban rite is a state of ecstasy. The English term *rave* which is used to describe these events as a whole is related to the idea of exaltation and euphoria, referring to a state distinct from the quotidian.<sup>16</sup> The names of some parties also refer to this particular state, such as *Transcendence* and *Universo Paralello*. The interviews and statements collected during the period of research, however, show that the symbols and practices of the event do not provide a precise definition of what this state would be, varying as it does from person to person:

It's something very odd to talk about. When you close your eyes and are unable to distinguish between what your body is, the music, the place and the people, turning everything into the same thing, it's a really marvellous sensation. (E., festival-goer)

Imagine dancing in the company of thousands of beautiful and open-minded people, on a paradisiacal beach on the Bahian coast, listening to a marvellous sound with your head a bit different from normal, it's a feeling of freedom and well-being. Time seems to freeze, it becomes an unforgettable moment. (C., festival-goer)

Ecstasy occurs when various factors harmonize your ego with the other elements such as place and music and you enter in a 'one' state where we cannot distinguish what is material or not, where things enter into syntony and constitute a unique moment, precisely the kind sought in mediation. (Kranti, event organizer)

Despite the lack of a precise native definition of the term, the state sought through the rite is clearly produced through the harmonization of the different symbolic referents with the subjective and bodily experience so that they communicate ecstasy to the spectator. The ritual efficacy connects and combines elements that acquire meaning over the days of the event.

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<sup>16</sup> *To rave* – to be delirious, enthusiastic, excessively happy (Cambridge Dictionary).

Among the signs active in the electronic music festivals, we encounter a particular kind of manipulation of the body. It is on the body that the signs act directly and that the symbolic efficacy of this urban rite is based. The pursuit of ecstasy has to take place via the body: altering its metabolism through intoxication by psychoactive substances or through the ‘play of the senses’ that takes place in the events. Any individual is able to experience part of the sensations and experiences induced by the ambient of the festivals via the body. The moments of shaping and building the body in pursuit of ecstasy function as momentary mechanisms, available to all, for attaining the shared objective quickly and immediately.

## **2.2. The ‘play of the senses’**

The ‘play of the senses’ produced in the festivals is related to the various stimuli that the different senses of the human body receive simultaneously. We can perceive that the senses of vision and hearing are intensely explored in the search for an ecstatic state. The stimulation of these senses manipulates the body to produce a state of ecstasy and indicates a specific kind of trance, the result of equally specific body techniques. If we understand the native uses of the senses, we can also understand the different mechanisms for obtaining this particular state.

Through vision, we have a good example of how the elements interrelate to stimulate a sense. The places where the events are held provide the first stimulus to vision, functioning as the ‘setting’ for the festival. The calendar starts with festivals on the beaches and slopes of the Trancoso region in Bahia. Between Trancoso and Arraial d’Ajuda there are approximately three kilometres of deserted beaches that during the month of January are home to small electronic music events. In April, Parati Mirim, in the state of Rio de Janeiro, stages a large festival on a small island of fishermen. In July, the setting for the festivals is Chapada dos Veadeiros in Goiás; here *Transcendence* is held in the middle of a valley lined with crystalline waterfalls. The dance floor is constructed on top of a small mountain surrounded by the imposing rock formations of the Chapada dos Veadeiros. In September, the setting is Serra do Cipó in the state of Minas Gerais. The event takes place near to a 80-metre high waterfall that can be seen from the festival’s different ambients and acts as one its main attractions with numerous participants circling it. The event at the end of the year takes place in a coconut farm covering 5km of coastline where only uninhabited beaches are found. The *Universo Paralelo* is held in Pratigi, Bahia.

As I was able to observe, the choice of locality offers a stimulus to vision, composing a setting distinct from the everyday. Waterfalls, paradisiacal beaches, mountain ranges and forests therefore constitute symbolic factors that act on the body with the aim of stimulating and provoking the state of ecstasy. The visual stimulation should occur via the stimulation of the senses, presenting

landscapes that contrast with urban settings. The further the event location is from the urban centres, the more chance the festival has of success. Talking with organizers, I realized how the choice of location is decisive:

We were left choosing between a place in the interior of São Paulo and Parati in Rio. When I was in Parati, I felt the energy of the place and decided it was going to be here, there's no way an event can go wrong in a natural paradise, here there's no problem, it's far from everywhere and has deserted beaches. (Organizer of the *Celebrabrasil* festival, 19/07/2002)

A festival of five days of music, art and culture in the Chapada dos Veadeiros, in the heart of Brazil. The region is famous for the exuberant nature that conceals magical views, beautiful landscapes, rock formations, waterfalls, crystal mines, *cerrado* flowers and the energy that emanates from the soil. (Pamphlet publicizing the *Trancendence* festival 2003)

In the festivals, the dance floor is located so that the natural beauty of the site can be appreciated. We can note the importance of this element for participants:

It really is something out of this world to dance, completely hallucinated, on the shore of a paradisiacal beach with coconut palms moving in the same rhythm to the music and waves; it's really something fantastic. Even when you have a bad trip, there's no problem, you feel close to the waterfall, look at that sight, the crystal-clear water, and two minutes later you forget everything and you're dancing again. (C., festival-goer)

Another important visual stimulus takes place in the nocturnal part of the festivals when the surrounding natural beauty cannot be appreciated. At this moment, a scintillating mixture of strong colours illuminated by blue light or black light emerges. This facet comprises a characteristic feature of the decoration of electronic music festivals. A member of a famous decoration group claimed that:

The key factor is to leave the ambient as psychedelic as possible, transforming it into something completely different to what's seen during the day. Black light, when it strikes fluorescent colours, emits a shine that helps people to transcend. (T., decorator for electronic music festivals)

Known by festival goers as *fluor* decoration, this generally involves a sparkling and shining effect based on the illumination produced by the blue light on fluorescent colours, giving a futuristic atmosphere and inducing the participant to perceive another type of reality. Colours such as yellow, orange or green which enter into contact with this light and emit a particular kind of luminosity can be seen on the different panels with spiritual designs such as Shiva or Ganesha, geometric or symbolic figures from the Mayan calendar, on the different sculptures on the dance floor, on the structures decorating the event and on the clothing and accessories of the participants.

The different products offered by the small artisans, such as ear-rings, necklaces, bags and T-shirts, mainly use contrasting colours. The nocturnal part of the festival employs a type of decoration based on 'psychedelic' visual stimulation. Another curious element of the decoration is the use of mandalas. These may be seen on T-shirts, tattoos, accessories, panels, information sheets and publicity material. They comprise a geometric design in which basic forms such as triangles, squares, lozenges and rectangles multiply into a variety of other forms. Seen from a distance, they display a single and cohesive figure, while observed more closely, they give the impression of the design tending towards infinity. This is what one of the participants remarked:

It's great journeying into the mandalas, they seem to have the same state of consciousness as you. (L., festival-goer)

If you make a mandala without popping anything, you can forget it – you'll end up with something like a high school drawing. You've got to take acid, then you're tripping alright, sure. (L., artisan)

Through the music, we can perceive how hearing is another highly stimulated sense. Music is the big attraction at the festivals and comprises the most striking feature among the offered symbols. Known as psychedelic trance, this branch of electronic music emerged at the end of the 1990s, the result of the meeting of different musical elements that at a certain point converged and generated this new musical movement. When the first parties were held in Goa, the music played was the psychedelic rock-'n'-roll of the 1970s, the typical musical of the hippies. Since the region was famous for its paradisiacal beaches and the spiritual quest of westerners, many Europeans spent holidays or longer periods in India's coastal region. At the start of the 1990s, the travellers incorporated a new element in the festivals, electronic music – an acoustic style that brought computers and synthesizers to the music scene and which was becoming fashionable in Europe.

This style of music is characterized by strongly accented beats and cadences that rarely exceed or diverge from a tempo of 130 to 150 beats per minute. These are energetic beats that remain in 4/4 time. The music is composed on modern computer programs such as Cubase and Sonar, which work with digital audio tracks, called multitrackers, discarding the analogical dimension of musical instruments.<sup>17</sup> With the precision of the operating systems, the beats become mathematically aligned with the other elements without the need for a deep knowledge of musical theory. Along with the beats, an interesting trait of this style is its development of a sequence of bass sounds. This is synthesized so that it attains frequencies outside of the human hearing range, below the 30hz frequency. When this frequency is played at high volume, above 100,000w, the

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<sup>17</sup> Such programs occupy so much space in the computer memory that they can only be executed on the latest machines.

human body is unable to recognize the sound through hearing but can do so through the sense of touch. This resource, known as sub-bass, means that the sound is felt rather than heard. The low frequency escaping human ears is captured by the rest of the body. The high volume provokes a displacement of air that in contact with the air of the participant's larynx transmits the feeling that the bass sound is 'filling' the body. In the case presented, the energy is transformed into a displacement of air provoked by the high volume. Here, then, the music is both heard and felt. Accompanying this rhythmic doubling, the audio track is filled with chord progressions or small melodies that are passed through digital filters that alter their frequencies, giving the 'futuristic' tone of this music, the well-known 'little sounds.' The synthesizers modify the sound through the use of various effects while numerous filters alter its original frequency.

The main characteristic of the style of music played in the festivals consists of exploiting other acoustic parameters, which vary from 30 to 120,000hz through the use of the technological resources of computers and synthesizers. These modify the sounds to the point of exceeding the hearing range and challenging the limits of human audition. The challenge not only occurs in the composition of the music, but also in its execution. To capture the sensations transmitted by the sub-bass, the loudspeakers need to be suspended and strategically placed on the dance floor so that they line the sides of the event. This enables the stereo effect to be clearly heard – or, in other words, the 'passage' of a sound from right to left and vice-versa.

### **2.3. The efficacy of the 'play of the senses' based on the consumption of psychoactive substances**

The body must also undergo alterations to its metabolism for the 'play of the senses' to attain the goal of ecstasy. The alteration occurs through the ingestion of psychoactive substances that take the participant to another state of consciousness. Drug consumption is widespread and the main factor behind the stigma attached by other urban groups and, primarily, the State. From the festival's origin myth, which assumes a degree of continuation from the hippie movement, we can perceive how 'drugs' become an important facet in the system of symbols. In the 1970s, the discovery of lysergic acid by the chemist Hoffman coincided with the 'spiritual' quest of the hippies. LSD became an important means of reaching the "spirituality lost by the west" (Bellah 1977). Timothy Leary was perhaps the biggest defender of the use of this substance for spiritual ends and for expanding the mind. In his experiments as a psychologist, he always sought to attain the expansion of consciousness via lysergic acid.<sup>18</sup> In this way, Leary developed a kind of 'drug

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<sup>18</sup> He was later expelled from the Department of Psychology of Harvard University for prescribing LSD to a patient suffering from paranoia.

culture' whose main goal was to attain an extramaterial dimension. The hippie culture, whose main characteristic was the search for a 'lost spirituality' and which preached the detachment from material life and the search for a more intimate contact with material 'nature,' sometimes renouncing certain urban values, acquired a new impulse with the emergence of LSD. The development of the chemical industry enabled the emergence of new substances created and developed for non-recreational ends, but which combined with the anxieties and expectations generated by this new phase of western history.

Although those frequenting electronic music festivals make use of all kinds of substances to attain ecstasy, the synthetic 'drug' known as ecstasy is the most popular and the one most in line with the values expressed by the symbols and performances of this type of festival. The interviews show that ecstasy takes the participant to a state of consciousness in which different factors blend harmoniously to form an extraordinary context.

Wow, it's really wicked, when I pop a pill I can hear every small noise that the DJ makes, it's incredible. (C., festival-goer)

Everything is more beautiful after taking a pill, the person you'd never seen before becomes your best friend, the place you'd never visited becomes your second home, the sound you never normally listen to becomes something pleasant and exciting. (D., festival-goer)

Ecstasy makes you willing to dance for as long as necessary, while there's water, sun and beach there's no need to stop. (F., festival-goer)

Some drugs have the capacity to expand our mind, to divert your attention to the sensory world where the material and immaterial merge to create something singular, a sublime experience, ecstasy has this agreeable characteristic. (G., festival-goer)

I noted that the consumption of any psychoactive substance is deemed valid in obtaining this particular state. In a small informal survey, I noted the use of: cannabis, lysergic acid, cocaine, ecstasy, MDMA,<sup>19</sup> hashish<sup>20</sup>, charas<sup>21</sup>, inhalants, mescaline, antidepressants,<sup>22</sup> alcohol, tobacco, LSA,<sup>23</sup> amphetamines, skunk<sup>24</sup> and daime,<sup>25</sup> creating a culture of consumption generically shared by the festival participants. The knowledge generated in the process is based on personal experiences or those of friends, who form large generalizations and 'native' prescriptions on how to use each substance.

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<sup>19</sup> The main active agent of ecstasy, sold in powder form or crystals.

<sup>20</sup> Cannabis preparation with a high THC content.

<sup>21</sup> Cannabis preparation with an very high THC content.

<sup>22</sup> In most cases, restricted medications.

<sup>23</sup> A substance extracted from various kinds of vine that provokes hallucinations.

<sup>24</sup> Another species of cannabis, *cannabis indica*.

<sup>25</sup> An infusion made from a mixture of vine and leaf, used in the Santo Daime rites.

In contrast to medical discourse which lists numerous symptoms for each substance based on its effects on the organism, the native discourse relates contexts and feelings in a unique knowledge which is transmitted in an informal and fragmented way among participants, a 'logic of the concrete' concerning the consumption of psychoactives. The symptoms of each substance are elaborated on the basis of shared elements taken from different personal experiences that form a source of knowledge on side-effects. Hence, in informal conversations among the participants, it was possible to note a clear distinction between drugs that make the person 'fry' or 'melt.'

The term 'fry' is associated with those substances that provoke euphoria and disposition, such as ecstasy, cocaine, stimulants and inhalants. The participants claim that the sensation caused by the ingestion of these psychoactive substances in the context of the festivals is like the feeling of being in contact with the "hot oil of a frying pan" (C., festival-goer).

According to some festival-goers, it can be noted that someone is 'frying' when their body temperature rises, their pupils dilate and innumerable involuntary movements of the jaw start to appear. In this state the consumption of large amounts of water is advisable, as well as the use of light clothing and the ingestion of natural foods like fruits. 'Frying' is associated with a more rapid and aggressive style of psychedelic trance known as full on. This style is normally performed in the morning and reaches its peak between midday and three o'clock in the afternoon.

To listen to the sound of Mack (*DJ*) you've got to be up to it, he smashes everything. His sound is more like frying without pause, you've got to take one or two pills half an hour before he plays so you're already in the mood when he starts. (M., festival-goer)

Every time I'm frying, my face becomes horrible, I start biting myself non-stop. But it's really good frying and entering into that freezing cold water of the waterfall. (F., festival-goer)

It's really an incredible moment seeing 4,000 people frying in a marvellous setting surrounded by beautiful people and positive energy. (C., festival-goer)

'Melting,' on the other hand, is the interpretation given to the symptoms generated by drugs whose main characteristics are euphoria and disposition. These are the set of drugs that provoke 'psychedelic trips' and are known as substances that cause 'melting.' This stage is that in which "the body becomes calmer while the mind is functioning and tripping" (D., DJ). The use of drugs like LSD, mushrooms and mescal act incisively on the mind of the participant, leaving the body with the sensation that it is 'melting.' The state of 'frying' differs from 'melting' precisely because the first works more directly on the 'body' while the second stimulates the 'mind.' In the 'melting' state, a music style that develops the creative part of the participants is recommendable. The described state is prescribed for the end of the afternoon and the nocturnal part of the festival, when



a style of melodic trance is played with innumerable 'little sounds' that exercise the participant's creativity. This state is ideal for the futuristic character that the rave assumes during the night with its fluorescent decoration and less accelerated music. To match this bodily and mental state of the ravers, the organizers look to offer water in the centre of the dance floor and provide shaded areas. The organization of the DJs is structured so that the quicker styles are played in the morning and the slower music in the afternoon and at night.

The difference between Mack (DJ) and Dino (DJ) is that with one of them you fry, and in the other you melt, but both are excellent. (F., festival-goer)

When you're melting, your head is spinning and all your thoughts are rushing at the same time; and when you connect with the music, another trip starts and your thoughts are lulled by these small sounds. It's always like that when you take acid, that trip and the feeling that your body is melting and you've become really heavy. It really is good. (D., DJ).

In parallel to these two categories, there are also the secondary drugs that accompany the participants the whole time. Cannabis, alcohol, tobacco, hashish and skunk are all auxiliary drugs shared by everyone. These drugs are recognized as inoffensive or not producing symptoms that need special care on the part of participants as occurs in the previous cases. These substances are suitable for any period of the festival and help stimulate contact between the participants. Drug consumption in general is also one of the main factors behind the interaction among festival goers. During the purchase, consumption and swapping of this kind of substance, I could perceive how relations are established. The drugs deemed to be light – which I listed as secondary – are typically consumed in groups and enable moments of conversation and relaxation during which 'native knowledge' on the consumption of psychoactive substances is transmitted. This knowledge also includes the recommendation of a moment of relaxation and rest for those who 'fried' or 'melted' during the party.

## **Conclusion**

The data gathered during field work allowed me to discover that the main means of communication and symbolic efficacy in the pursuit of ecstasy found in electronic music festivals is the body. It is through its uses that the shared state is attained. The 'play of the senses' works with the different perceptions in order to harmonize the symbolic elements and render them intelligible and capable of being experienced. The music stimulates hearing with repetitive and unconventional sounds. The place and the decoration work with the visual side, while the consumption of psychoactives orders this 'play of the senses' by interconnecting apparently incompatible elements in a 'play of perceptions.' The harmonized whole produced in the process seems to be the intense

sense of well-being pursued by the symbols and practices of the studied universe, known as ecstasy, a 'good' whose main means of communication is the body.

The analysis I propose centres on a movement that provides new meanings to eastern meditative practices in contemporary capitalist contexts, which culminated in the emergence of festival encounters in which the search for ecstasy comprises the principal shared objective. Electronic music festivals comprise a specific type of youth consumption whose main 'product' is the quest for spirituality. Features of this new stage of metropolitan capitalism, which appear explicitly in the rave universe, reveal affinities with the theory of the "Orientalization of the west" proposed by Campbell (1997).

Consequently, it is in the very heart of the West that 'occidentalization' (the expansion of the capitalist system) is facing its wildest challenge, a challenge that is being supported by a viewpoint that is essentially eastern. The latter no longer sustain a vision of the world divided into material and spirit governed by a God, creator, personal and all-powerful, who placed his creatures above the rest of creation. He has been replaced by a fundamentally eastern view of humanity as part of the interweaving fabric of spiritual and sensorial life.

The rave phenomenon presents the commercialization of a 'product' that substitutes western paradigms for eastern ones, as the English sociologist suggests. The western idea that humans must control and manipulate nature to ensure their survival is replaced by a different thinking in which humans are compelled to recognize their unity with nature, the spiritual and the mental, rather than trying to manipulate, use, label and categorize things in the world. The electronic music festivals combine factors with a strong symbolic loading that lead to a type of performance in which the search for ecstasy, transcendence or unity of 'body' and 'mind' is the main shared objective.

Through the relationship of sensory stimuli, performance and the use of psychoactive substances, the participants experience strong feelings that induce a particular state of euphoria. In a consumer society, the eastern search for unity provides a 'product' that contests the dominant paradigm that "served the west so efficiently for two thousand years" (Campbell 1997) that humans have characteristics separating them from nature and the spiritual.<sup>26</sup> This dimension is essentially

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<sup>26</sup> The main theoretical argument of my dissertation is the link I make between the analyzed phenomenon and the movement described by Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. In the theoretical chapter entitled 'The Sannyasa ethic and the new spirit of capitalism,' I depart from the Weberian idea that the overlapping of social spheres comprises one of the characteristic features of the cultural dynamic of western capitalist societies. In Weber's case, the relation established between religion and economy at a determined historical moment gave rise, he argues, to the modern 'spirit of

reflected through the broader process of the “marketing the soul” (Amaral 2002) or “spiritual economics” (D’Andrea 2004a) provoked by new types of religiosity.

Osho therefore constituted a cosmology based on fragments that are taken from their original context and that acquire meaning in the Sannyasa lifestyle: the meditation techniques are taken from the Indian cosmology in which they had been situated for thousands of years and are shaped for western eyes; existential philosophies and psychology are taken from western scientific debate and integrated in a whole that makes sense in the practice and everyday life of followers. The *metamorphic* (Velho 1999) nature of their beliefs enables a greater degree of adaptability to the context in which they are inserted. This can be seen in the fact that we do not see a decline in the number of Sannyasins after Osho’s death: on the contrary, their number has doubled from two to four million followers.<sup>27</sup> This has been due to the variety of interpretations and currents that emerged after his death, as well as the means of publicizing his doctrine globally.

Because of the high potential for *metamorphosis* possessed by the Sannyasin lifestyle, we can see how the discovery of new substances, impelled by the fear of sexual experimentation that came with the global spread of AIDS, enabled the emergence of an event that allows a new form of obtaining ecstasy in festival contexts. Youth, use of psychoactive substances, types of spirituality developed in the large urban centres, uses of the body, musical movement and consumption of goods are some of the spheres found in these surroundings.

Currently, according to organizers, the events do not have the air of ‘spiritual quest’ contained in their discourse of origin in India. Following their ‘popularization’ or the influx of an ever growing public, it is common to hear organizers, artists and festival goers complain that the commercial side has supplanted any spiritual search the movement possessed at first. But as we have seen, this does not prevent ‘ecstasy’ and allusions to ‘transcendence’ from assuming a paramount role in the symbolic universe surrounding electronic music festivals.

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capitalism.’ Various authors point to hybridism and the intersection of analytic categories as structuring elements of so-called postmodernity. Following this line, I suggest that electronic music festivals manifest and reflect this trend, deepening the question initially proposed by Weber.

<sup>27</sup> Sonia Maluf provides data towards this claim in her study. In Porto Alegre, the Sannyasins are much more organized nowadays than over the previous decades (1980s and 1990s). Currently, there is the *Osho Body Meditation Center*, a luxurious buildings where alternative therapists work and where meditation sessions are held. They also publish the Brazilian version of the *Osho Times* (Maluf 1996).

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