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# Introduction to Deleuze and Guattari and the Psychedelic Revival

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It will not have escaped your attention that we are in the midst of a psychedelic revival. After many years of taboo and a total war on drugs, psychedelics have made a comeback, both in medical contexts as well in culture at large where books, films, series, blogs and social media bear witness to a transforming discourse concerning mind-altering substances. Michael Pollan's *How to Change Your Mind* (2018) has been recognised as a game changer in public discourse. Psychedelics, entheogenic or hallucinogenic plants that have the capacity to expand consciousness, have been around for many centuries: shamanistic ayahuasca practices in the Amazon, psilocybin medicines used by curanderos in Mexico, iboga initiations and other religious rites in African cultures, alchemical traditions across the world that were involved in opening the doors to secret knowledge about the mysteries of life, esotericism and witchcraft traditions in Europe—these are all practices that carry diverse ancient wisdoms of plants, medicine and mind-manifesting insights that were not invented by the Flower Power movement in the United States and Europe in the 1960s (Eliade 1978; Cotnoir 2006; Alpert, Metzger and Bravo 2010; Ramey 2012; Hanegraaff 2013) Yet, when we speak of a psychedelic revival, the historic reference is to the wave in popular use of psychedelics in the West during the mid-twentieth century that (arguably) started with the invention of LSD in 1948 by Albert Hofmann, and spread via the medical circuit and the CIA into the general population and popular culture (Langlitz 2013; Pollan 2018; Hartogsohn 2020)<sup>1</sup>

This first popular psychedelic wave is generally associated with rebellious and liberating movements: the 1960s counterculture, the generation gap and the emergence of youth culture, the context of

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the Cold War and protests against the Vietnam War, emancipation movements such as women's lib and the civil rights movement, pop culture (especially music, poster art and iconic movies such as *Easy Rider*, the acid western and other hippie exploitation movies from the West Coast, as well as avant-garde and experimental movies of the New York and European underground scene) (Braunstein and Williams Doyle 2002; DeAngelis 2018; Pisters 2023b) When the movement grew too strong and became controversial not only because of misuses and scandals around debatable gurus such as Timothy Leary but also because of its threats to the establishment, President Nixon declared his War on Drugs in 1972. This not only put an end to medical experiments and legal research on psychedelics in medical contexts but also, slowly but surely, pushed the countercultural practices to the margins where they nevertheless continued to develop in relative silence (Greer 2020).

The current psychedelic revival is associated with very different practices and develops in a different setting. In order to avoid the political and other controversies associated with the freedom fighting and rebellious youth culture of the 1960s, since the late 1990s neuroscientists and medical doctors have picked up research into the beneficial effects of psychedelic and empathogenic substances (such as ayahuasca, psilocybin and MDMA) under strict medico-ethical and scientific conditions, with a focus on healing and treatment of (what is now, not unproblematically, considered as) brain disorders such as PTSD and severe depression (Langlitz 2013). The larger contextual milieu in which this research is taking place has also changed. While pop culture is still very important, we now are surrounded by digital and social media networks, big data surveillance, and a growing consciousness of our planetary precariousness, as well as the continued emancipatory conflict in #Black Lives Matter and #MeToo global movements (Yusoff 2018; Papasyrou, Baldini and Luke 2019). However, in spite of the increasing acknowledgement of the need for a decolonising perspective on the psychedelic revival, and the revaluing of Indigenous knowledge and wisdom, the psychedelic revival by and large is still a 'white western' research field (Williams and Labate 2020). Moreover, neoliberalism and capitalism's need to harvest new markets pushes more investments in the field. On the one hand, this moves the decriminalisation and legalisation of psychedelics and psychedelic research forward; on the other, it creates a high-stake and high-reward pharma industry which involves ethical and political questions about, among other things, patenting, patient care and access (Love 2022; Vedantam 2022).

Research and publications on the psychedelic revival have a strong focus on neuro- and medical sciences, on psychiatry and medical anthropology, and on ethnobotanics or (to a lesser extent) on religious practices. In order to revive the potential of psychedelics, its surrounding discourse has by and large been depoliticised in a sobering approach of ‘disenchantment’ (Langlitz 2013: 44). An in-depth consideration of the philosophical and aesthetic dimensions of the inner journeys and its implied significance that often transgress medical scientific frameworks has only been emerging more recently (Sjöstedt-Hughes 2015; Hauskeller and Sjöstedt-Hughes 2022; Langlitz 2023; Lyon 2023). This is where Deleuze and Guattari come in. As readers of Deleuze and Guattari know, many of the concepts they have put forward are ‘hallucinatory’ in themselves; many thoughts and concepts move on a molecular level, beyond the ‘normal perception’ of the world. Anna Powell argued, for instance, how Deleuze and Guattari’s ‘pharmacanalysis’ of becoming (becoming-animal, becoming-matter) translates the altered states of mind in film (Powell 2007). And their concepts, such as rhizomatic thinking and the value of a non-hierarchical, non-oppositional rhizomatic model of thought, appear at dispersed places in references to the psychedelic revival (Pokorny 2013; Genn-Bash 2015). But their ideas have not yet been brought together around this topic. Because Deleuze and Guattari have been associated with May ’68 in France and the rebellious youth culture of the 1960s more broadly, and because there are sparse but nevertheless explicit references to drugs in some of their works, it is not surprising to see these connection to psychedelics in relation to their work re-emerge. But how can we make the mind-expanding qualities of Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy explicitly relevant for the current wave of interest in psychedelics? How do drugs change perception, ‘even of non-users’, as Deleuze and Guattari argue in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987: 248), and why would this be necessary, especially at this moment in the twenty-first century?

While we find ourselves confronted by all kind of crises, ranging from the enduring consequences of the recent coronavirus pandemic, a growing increase of depression in (mainly Western) populations, PTSD and other mental disorders related to war and other traumas, the increasingly alarming manifestations of climate change, the undermining of democracies by extremisms of various kinds, the imminent threats of global war with the mounting tensions between the United States, Russia and China, and various other crises of the Anthropocene,<sup>2</sup> it seems that we are collectively in need of and searching for new ways of perceiving

the world and understanding our position as human beings in relation to the world. And it seems that psychedelics may offer some perspective and, possibly, point towards ways of healing. As Allan Badiner suggests, the current revival

raises the question of a possible role that psychedelics have in the maturation of deep ecological intelligence and a sense of kinship with all life. It is arguable that our only hope for surviving the man-made perils ahead is a rapid and thorough awakening of this kind. (Badiner 2017: 16)

This is absolutely not to say that psychedelics will offer an instant cure to all sorts of crises, nor that expanding consciousness is automatically used for the better. As Ralph Metzner reminds us, ‘Charles Manson used LSD, and look what he did with it. What good was that?’ (Badiner 2017: 18). So, with the renewal of a global interest in psychedelics and relaxation of drug laws in an increasing number of countries (and reminding ourselves that in many places in the world these laws are as strict as ever), we do need more analytical and conceptual tools to understand the current developments.

The premise of this special issue is that Deleuze and Guattari offer important concepts and insights to make sense of this renewed interest in psychedelics in the context of today’s world. The articles collected here want to make a contribution to a humanities approach to the psychedelic experience. They are written by ‘noumenautics’ who often combine phenomenological experiences with philosophical analysis. (Sjöstedt-Hughes 2015). In the first article, ‘Towards a New Materialism in Psychedelic Studies’, Daan Oostveen discusses the metaphysical presuppositions of the psychedelic renaissance, and identifies five ‘pitfalls’ of a psychedelics ideology that is at risk of being captured by cognitive capitalism, namely: the dangers of a reversed orientalism; reductive (neuro)materialism; the premise of neo-Neoplatonic mystical experiences; medical functionalism; and uncritical enthusiasm. He argues in favour of a new materialism that involves thinking between the human and nonhuman that is inspired by Deleuze and Guattari, as a more suitable metaphysical framework by which to understand psychedelics today.

In the second contribution, ‘Songs of Life: Psychedelic-Assisted Psychotherapy and Deleuze and Guattari’s “Desiring-Production”’, Patricia Kubala picks up the neo-Neoplatonist pitfall described by Oostveen when she asks: ‘Has “mystical experience” become the “imperialism of Oedipus” within the psychedelic revival, towards which all psychedelic experience and activity of the unconscious is

expected to tend?’ Returning to Deleuze and Guattari’s critique on psychoanalysis in *Anti-Oedipus*, Kubala demonstrates that in spite of the different circumstances in the contemporary revival of psychedelic-assisted treatments, the heart of the problem that Deleuze and Guattari address in their seminal work is still relevant today: the misconception of desire as lack, a problem that Deleuze and Guattari ascribe not just to psychoanalysis but also to much of the Western philosophical tradition. She pleads for the introduction of a schizoanalytic approach in the emerging field of psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy, in which a subject’s ‘desire-machines’ and ‘songs of life’ are taken seriously (Deleuze and Guattari 2009 [1977]: 331).

While Kubala addresses the ethics of psychiatry by updating Deleuze and Guattari’s critique of psychoanalytic psychiatry to psychedelic-assisted therapy, Erica Biolcini focuses on the aesthetics of processing trauma and healing by introducing the possibility of a ‘psychedelic crystal’ in contemporary cinema. In her piece entitled ‘Psychedelic Crystals in Cinema: Opening Virtual Dimensions and Potential Healing’, Biolcini returns to Deleuze’s *The Time-Image* (1989) and offers a rereading of the cinematic crystals of time. She argues that within the crystalline temporal regime in cinema the formation of a psychedelic crystal offers a ‘therapeutic’ or, in Siegfried Krakauer’s words, a ‘redemptive’ dimension (Krakauer 1960). An analysis of Jan Kounen’s ayahuasca western *Blue Berry* (2004) offers the elements of a psychedelic crystal. In particular, the return to (repressed) moments in a traumatic memory, helped by hallucinatory visions that crack open the virtual, seem to produce a redeeming experience that may demonstrate how art can be a medicine of sorts.

Joshua Ramey, in ‘Becoming-Metal: On Knowledge by Ketamine’, is not so much interested in the therapeutic and healing properties of psychedelics, but more in their epistemological potentiality. More specifically, Ramey speculates how knowledge by ketamine can be understood as a kind of becoming-metal of consciousness that entails an explorative, edgy and recalcitrant type of knowledge. He draws upon Deleuze and Guattari’s central idea that ‘metal is the conductor of all matter’ and the intuition of non-organic life proper to matter (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 411). Without making claims for ketamine as in any sense sufficient for a becoming-metal of consciousness, Ramey argues that ketamine may be constructively conjugated with other ‘minor sciences’, knowledges of transformation and transmutation, such as knowledge by meditation, by dance, by music or by martial arts. These types of minor knowledges remain important in order to create new

assemblages, moving fluidly between nature and culture, and to signal that non-organic life is present everywhere.

In his contribution, 'Cooking the Cosmic Soup: Vincent Moon's Altered States of Live Cinema', Amir Vudka discusses the live cinema performances of Vincent Moon. He argues that as an audio-visual ethnographer of world religions, Moon is distinctly influenced by shamanic and animistic traditions. By comparing Moon's live performances to Paul Schrader's transcendental style in film (Schrader 2018), Vudka demonstrates that Moon brings the transcendental back to the plane of immanence, one of the basic ontological premises in the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari (Deleuze and Guattari 1994). Informed by an in-depth interview with Moon, Vudka shows how his live cinema performances could be seen as 'a spirit-channelling machine' that recalls the esoteric history of modern technology, described by Erik Davis as *techgnosis* (Davis 2015 [1998]).

While Vudka describes how Moon, as a sort of nomadic and modern-day techno-shaman, opens in his performances a 'gateway between chaos and cosmos', Marc Tuters, in 'Weird Mediation: Deleuze and Guattari on Toxic Internet Subcultures', directs our attention to the shadow side of *techgnosis*. Arguing that the Internet can be imagined as a sort of psychedelic technology, in that it 'manifests' new realities, Tuters focuses on the particular manifestation of reactionary ideas, such as the far-right QAnon conspiracy theory, manifested on the notorious 4chan imageboard. The 'QAnon shaman' embodies how affective contagions of disgust can engender 'microfascist' subjectivities online (and offline, if we recall the storming of the US Capitol in 2021). Tuters discusses Deleuze and Guattari's influence on early cybertheory, analyses their 'weird' conception of mediation in dialogue with Gilbert Simondon, and recalls Deleuze and Guattari's productive misreading of Carlos Castaneda to identify fear, clarity, power and disgust as reminders of the dangers of the psychonautic journey.

Finally, in my own contribution, 'Psychedelic Aesthetics and the Body without Organs at the Limits of Perception', I focus on the aesthetics of the psychedelic experience as profoundly meaningful as such because it gives direct attention to the nonhuman otherness of the universe. Considering the aesthetic forms that the psychedelic experience as an 'ontology of intensity' offers, I turn to Deleuze's idea that psychedelic aesthetics provides an experience at the limits of perception to the point of ultimate abstraction of geometric figures and grains, and to the 'the genetic elements of all perception' (Deleuze 1986: 85). Drawing upon the works of two experimental filmmakers from two different generations

and backgrounds, Philippe Garrel's enigmatic *The Revealer* (1968) and Morgan Quaintance's *Surviving You, Always* (2021), I propose that these works are exemplary of how the nonhuman perception of the camera, its 'bodies without organs' and its affective intensity evoke a psychedelic, mind-revealing experience that may be necessary to create an ethics of 'becoming not unworthy of the event' (Deleuze 1990: 149).

The Deleuzian concepts that will be addressed in the following contributions reread Deleuze and Guattari's concepts with a particular emphasis on their psychedelic, mind-revealing insights: the rhizomatic image of thought in new materialism on an ideological level; a schizoanalytic approach towards desire in psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy; the redeeming qualities of the crystalline regime in cinema; the potentiality of becoming-metal in minor sciences (with and without ketamine); the immanence of life and of the spiritual experience in live performances; the dark sides of psychedelics that can be read through the concept of microfascism; and the body without organs in aesthetic experiences and a counter-actualising ethics are among the Deleuzo-Guattarian concepts raised. The selection of articles presented here is not exhaustive, and only the beginning of a much wider philosophical discussion necessary to accompany the current psychedelic revival. While acknowledging the need for a decolonising perspective on the philosophy of psychedelics (González Romero 2022), all articles offer a critical and analytical perspective on current developments, with an emphasis on the ethico-aesthetic dimensions of the psychedelic experience but do not always address the racial nor gendered questions involved in the psychedelic revival directly.

One of the recurrent themes throughout various contributions in this special issue is an emphasis on media and mediation. While this is a particular focus (admittedly at the expense of many other important issues that need to be addressed in psychedelic discourse), the reason why this is relevant is because our contemporary world is increasingly becoming one big media machine, which might cause what Kenneth Ring describes in the *Ketamine Papers* as a 'sense of profound metaphysical fright' (Ring 2016: 36). Ring is recounting a ketamine trip in which he embodied different characters from different times (in particular a Dutch tugboat captain from the nineteenth century who spoke English with a distinct accent), when he suddenly becomes aware that human beings are 'mere projections, like images on a screen' (Ring 2016: 36). Yet, he also acknowledges that the access to fantastically alluring worlds has a lot to offer precisely when in times of over-communication and over-consumption there is a proliferation and even 'Terror of the Same'

(Han 2018: 1), and where it is increasingly difficult to have a weird, magical or just simple encounter with the other that is different. As Han argues, ‘perception itself takes the form of binge watching. [...] The consumers are continuously offered those films and series that match their taste, and therefore please them. Like consumer livestock, they are fattened with ever-new sameness’ (Han 2018: 2). In light of these developments, the weird, the dark, the magical and the mystical in relation to psychedelic media and mediations (Davis 2019; also Davis 2018) remain of immense value in psychedelic discourse. But we may also remind ourselves of Marshall McLuhan’s words: that the attraction to psychedelic drugs has to do with adapting to our penetrating electronic environment (McLuhan in Norden 1969). In the 1960s this was television, but in the age of an increasingly artificial intelligence mediated environment we might need the psychedelics, as well as Deleuzo-Guattarian concepts that move our thoughts and insights beyond the human into the molecular and the nonhuman in equal measure.

## Notes

1. Small parts of this introduction have been published in Pisters (2023a).
2. The connections between Deleuze and Guattari and the Anthropocene were evaluated in an earlier special edition of this journal (Saldanha and Stark 2016).

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