

## **Traversing immersion: the psychedelic experience in recent music videos,**

videos by Years & Years, Flume, Kouhei Nakama, Major Lazer, Tame Impala, Radiohead and Björk.

From prehistoric cave paintings to virtual reality today, psychedelics have played essential roles in many different cultural areas, such as in religion, philosophy, art, and technology. For instance, in prehistoric times, shamans used drugs, music, and dance to give themselves, as well as others, hallucinations and states of altered consciousness. According to South African archeologists Lewis-Williams and Jean Clottes (1988), cave paintings may be the oldest psychedelic artwork. They claim that prehistoric people saw the hallucinatory visions projected on cave surfaces and captured these visions as cave paintings. In such a way, hallucination became a part of everyday life in the prehistoric period as a representation of mythical beliefs. In modern society, digital technologies allow humans to experience psychedelic realities made of bits and bytes. These digital images and virtual realities are not experienced magically or psychologically – like in primitive religion – but as a physical reality.

One engaged in virtual reality mindfully distinguishes the unreal from the real, and becomes more than a spectator; instead, as a proactive immersant, the person moves to and fro freely between virtual and real worlds. Today, a psychedelic phenomenon does not occur at the scale of the individual anymore under the influence of drugs but is shared publicly in forms of art such as films, games, and other media. Among them, music video is a popular art genre reflecting the latest experimental trends. Below we review some of the most recent representative music videos from three aspects – visual effects, narratives, and symbolic performances – to show how psychedelic experiences are recreated and represented in the digital age, and how viewers get immersed in the expanded reality using music video as a medium.

### **The brain, body and visual effects**

Due to recent developments in neuroscience, the psychedelic phenomenon has expanded beyond just influencing the creation of art to being the subject of scientific research into human consciousness and the brain. For instance, scientists revealed that psychedelic compounds could make brains hyper-connected (Petri et al. 2014) and could “reset” brain activities (Carhart-Harris et al. 2017). Gilles Deleuze and Melissa (1998) also mentioned that “the brain is the screen,” thus relating cinema to the biology of the brain. This neuroplasticity of the brain, the psychedelic visions induced by it, and the images representing these visions are intimately related and operate together. These images can be recreated digitally – often appearing excessively realistic and sensuous, and furthermore, uncanny – through visual effects such as saturated colors, intricate and repetitive images, curved or warped patterns, seamless transformations,

weird distortions, hyperreal textures, and more. The images have already over-reached the goal to represent the world realistically, or rather, another reality of the senses, as Lev Manovich (2001) has stated: the “synthetic computer-generated image is a realistic representation of a different reality.” Similarly, in many music videos, the represented “different reality” using various visual effects provides hallucinatory images and psychedelic experiences. In fact, there are three music videos that generate similar visual effects experienced during the image cognition process in the brain under the influence of hallucinogens.

One is entitled *Desire* (Gryffin Remix) (2015), by the London-based electronica group Years & Years (Figure 1). This video is produced entirely by a program using artificial neural networks, the newest digital form of psychedelia since fractal images in the 1980s. The program enhances the patterns and colors of the video source, and as a result, creates an intensely hallucinogenic appearance to the extent where it can be considered as a hallucination or dreams of computers. These computer-generated images demonstrate that an artificial intelligence can effectively mimic the human brain’s hallucination.

Another music video, *Never Be Like You* (2016) (Figure 2), by Australian musician Flume, also depicts the altered sensations of bodies such as melting, warping and drifting. These sensations reflect one of the frequently encountered symptoms of psychedelic experience, which is the feeling that the body is heavier or lighter, has greater or lesser density (Masters and Houston [1966] 2000). The video aptly expresses the delirious dreamy atmosphere through flowing and fluid footages implemented using time displacement technique that distorts the images by shifting pixels across time. In other words, an actual “time distortion” occurs in the video similar to the altered sensation of a body induced by a brain.

Lastly, there is a recent work entitled *Makin’ Moves* (2017), directed by Kouhei Nakama, that expresses the sensations of body distortion more radically (Figure 3). Using highly detailed 3D scanning and generative motion graphic technologies, the video portrays realistic human figures becoming sliced, fragmented, and proliferated. The schizoid and collapsed body images hypnotically divide and disperse the mind of a viewer placing the one in-between a sense that there is a physical body and a sense that there is none. The uncanny visual effects and animations have successfully assimilated the feeling of hallucination. This music video demonstrates that psychedelic experience can be implemented through physical images, not just through illusion or delusion.



Figure 1. Years & Years, *Desire* (Gryffin Remix) (2015), still from music video. Photo: <https://youtu.be/NYVg-V8-7q0>.



Figure 2. Flume, *Never Be Like You* (2016), still from music video, featuring Kai. Photo: <https://youtu.be/-KPnyf8vwXI>, courtesy of the artist.



Figure 3. Kouhei Nakama, *Makin' Moves* (2017), still from video. Photo: <https://vimeo.com/218597363>, courtesy of the artist.

## **Narrative of traversing immersion**

In addition to the visual effects discussed herein, narratives can convey psychedelic experiences such as immersion and transcendence. According to Janet Murray (1997), a narrative can be experienced as a virtual reality, and the experience of immersion transports viewers to an elaborately simulated place. Immersion does not only occur mentally but also happens at a sensory level entailing a moment when the awareness of physical self diminishes and is surrounded by another reality. Similar to visual effects, narratives of immersion are also used engrossingly in music videos to lure and captivate viewers.

For instance, in the music video for *The Less I Know the Better* (2015) by the Australian band Tame Impala, psychedelic effects are maximized using the narratives that contrast technicolor scenes of teenagers' sexual fantasies with ordinary school vignettes. The story unfolds with a girl and a boy casting intimate gazes at each other, and falling into a surreal world. An important aspect of this narrative is that the protagonists come back to reality in the end after passing through a psychic experience. Through awakening, they - also the viewers - notice the de-realization of the other world more vividly, and furthermore, share the feelings that the furtive experience does not remain just as a fantasy but as a materialized sensation. In such a way, through an alternating narrative of immersion and awakening, the viewers are guided to traverse the world of psychedelia.

In another cinematic video, *Daydreaming* (2016) by English rock band Radiohead, a psychedelic experience of loops and transcendence is recreated through an obsessive, but poetic narrative. The video begins with a scene where a man comes into a dark tunnel. He opens a door, keeps walking, opens another door, keeps walking, and repeats. Throughout the repetition, he moves from one space to another that are illogically connected, and seemingly enters a different world. The repetition may seem obsessive and hysterical, but it brings release in the end. Similarly, in an actual psychedelic state, loops can often trigger a state of anxiety, but at the same time can also offer transcendental moments that provide a feeling of overcoming the limits of everyday life. The video depicts such transcendence through a dark forest and a mystical fire scene in a cave. In fact, a forest is one of the common symbolic settings for representing a drug-state drama (Masters and Houston [1966] 2000). Moreover, caves are often used to metaphorically express archetypal space as David J. Lewis-Williams and Jean Clottes (1988) had described it, "the mind in the cave and the cave in the mind."

Throughout the narratives in the two music videos mentioned above - interwoven with immersion, awakening, loops, transcendence and symbolic mise en scène such as forests and caves - viewers are taken back and forth traveling between virtual and real, other dimensions of space and time, and different states of consciousness. During approximately three minutes, viewers "traverse immersion"

by being absorbed into hallucination and being awakened again, facing infinitely recursive moments, and undergoing a total loss of self and transcendental state as if they were under the influence of psychedelics.

### **Symbolic performance as ritual**

In addition to the visual effects and narrative, performance – an integration of factors such as choreography, acting, costume, stage backdrop and more – helps to implement psychedelic effects in music videos. In anthropology, performance with a history dating back to the prehistoric times has long been a significant theme as a part of ritual events. According to an anthropologist Victor Turner (1974), these ritual events include a period of “transition” as a symbolic phase. Likewise, one of the extraordinary phenomena in a drug-state is a transitional experience where a subject starts to interact with the surrounding at a sensory level and ends up at a deeper level sometimes experiencing unity (Masters and Houston [1966] 2000). In many artistic productions, depicting the experience of surpassing the sensory into the spiritual phase is often considered an essential task. The following two examples provide the transitional experience through symbolic performances as if becoming a part of a ritual.

*Light It Up* (2016), by American electronic music group Major Lazer, consists of dancing performances of avatars, created with state-of-the-art animation techniques such as motion capture and dynamic simulation (Figure 4). The avatars are portrayed as faceless figures disassembled and reconstructed with various materials like fur, string, particles and more. While watching the figures’ rampageous movements dancing in a trance, the explosion of technicolor, and crumbling of materialized bodies, the figures appear as ritualistic existences – not human, nor animal, nor material, or conceivably all. Intriguingly, another version of the video for the same song features a Ghanaian traditional funeral ceremony like a documentary including religious and mystical mourning, crying, laughing, singing and dancing. Apparently, the vivid material-human figures’ performance is based on the Ghanaian people’s ceremony as a symbolic performance representing death, extinction, and rebirth.

Lastly, as an example of symbolic performance, there are the videos of Icelandic singer, songwriter and performer Björk, famous for their avant-garde, progressive and experimental nature. Her music videos often represent the exact experiences of “the symbolic level of the drug-state psyche” such as dying and rebirth, transition and transformation, transcendence, self-healing and more (Masters and Houston [1966] 2000). In one of her most intense and spiritualized music videos entitled *Black Lake* (2015), she walks through a dark black valley and at some point falls into an ecstatic daze (Figure 5). Throughout her trance-like music video, all elements of her performance including the song itself, her voice, dance moves, gestures, adornments, and majestic archetypal landscape backdrops, evoke overwhelmingly ritualistic and psychedelic atmosphere. Her performances symbolically represent rites and deeper level of

psychedelic states allowing the viewers to witness a mystic process of transforming the performer into a shaman and undergo a transitional experience. Her performances are considered as the prominent element that makes her music videos psychedelic and spiritual.



Figure 4. Major Lazer, *Light it Up* (2016), still from music video, featuring Nyla & Fuse ODG, remix by Method Studios. Photo: <https://youtu.be/r2LpOUwca94>.

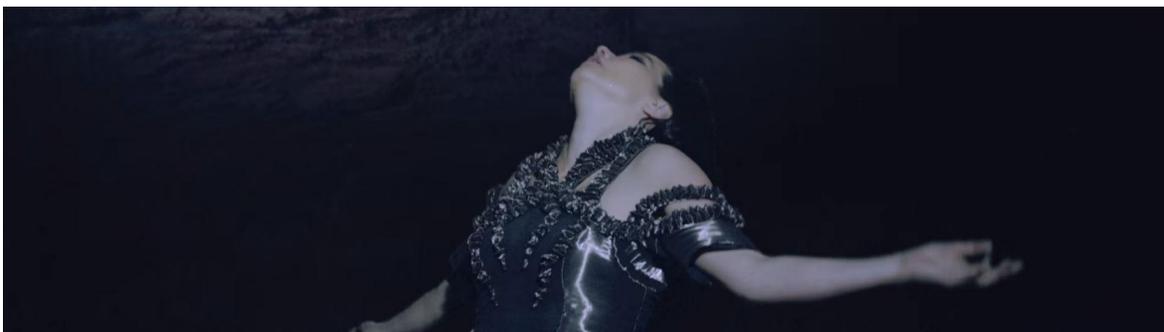


Figure 5. Björk, *Black Lake* (2015), still from music video. Photo: <https://youtu.be/YGn1pIjZw8>.

From mesmerizing visual effects to immersive narratives and finally to symbolic performances, the influence of psychedelic experience on music videos has shown how recent digital images can expand sensory perception and how the sense of immersion can be experienced more physically. As Roy Ascott (2000) coined the term “vegetal reality” to express the third axis of reality, humans live in transformed realities such as expanded reality and different reality. In the era when the creation of artificial life and intelligence, the hybridization of body and machine, the blurring of the border between virtual and real, and the emergence of the senses of another dimension manifest, researchers must investigate the emerging technologies and the matter of mind involved by them, and fully comprehend how the unveiled consciousness have pervaded everyday lives. Psychedelic perspective will be the starting point

for understanding the expanded reality and consciousness; and as a part of this accomplishment, psychedelic music videos have already represented the hyper-sensate realities, between art and entertainment, slipping into a potential gap of being misinterpreted as mysticism or the problem of illegal taboo.

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