(Dis)placing musical memory: Trailing the acid in electronic dance music

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ABSTRACT
The acid, a museme, is the unstable element in acid house. It is arguably both the spiritual and hedonistic apex of psychedelic music, enabling a shift in perception. In electronic dance music, the journey of the acid museme seems to have developed from Phuture’s “Acid tracks” during the mid-1980s in Chicago club the Muzic Box. The new sound of acid house, as well as acid’s implicit reference to the psychedelic drug LSD, inspired a moral panic in the UK during the late 1980s. By the early 1990s, acid house further influenced the development of trance music in Germany and elsewhere. Yet, a similar musical figure can be recognised in earlier electronic acid rock experiments of Tangerine Dream. The discussion first maps out the development of this museme by placing key-moments geographically. However, this paper concludes that musical memory seems to operate rhizomically, in a deterritorialised\(^2\) (displaced) manner.

KEYWORDS: memory; rhizome; acid; trance; electronic dance music.

INTRODUCTION
This paper traces a broken genealogy of the acid, a ubiquitous unstable and irregular synthesised sound sequence that can be heard in electronic dance music subgenres, such as acid house and trance. The acid museme, a basic musical figure or sign, appeared in Chicago during the mid-1980s as a central component of the acid house music genre, which was subsequently adopted in various forms of electronic dance music (EDM), in particular trance, especially the Goa trance...
subgenre, which gained global popularity as psytrance from the mid-1990s onwards. Here, I wish to focus on the *rhizomatic* and *deterritorialised* manner in which musical memory operates, with reference to acid moments in acid house, acid rock, trance and psytrance. “Acid tracks”, represented by, respectively, Phuture (Trax 1987); “Phaedra” by Tangerine Dream (Virgin Records 1974); “Acperience 1” by Hardfloor (Harthouse 1992); and “LSD” by Hallucinogen (Dragonfly Records 1995).

**Acid House**

In electronic dance music, *acid* refers to the modulating unstable sequence and synthesized sound generated by a modulating bass synth-sequencer, the Roland TB 303 Bassline. The unstable tonality and shifting textures of its squelchy sounds of the *acid* sequence create a sense of *jouissance*, comparable to Barthes’ description of hearing the “grain of the voice” (Barthes 1993). In the case of the grain of voice, the listener connects subconsciously of the body that generates the sound. However, in the case of acid house, the sound of the synth-sequencer, the machine, is foregrounded; the *acid* sound seems to suggest a displaced, dislocated, yet simultaneously *glocalised* experience of electronic technologies.

Phuture’s “Acid tracks” (Trax 1987) developed during the mid-1980s, after starting life (as many innovations do) as a type of accident. When Spanky (Earl Smith Jr., one of the members of Phuture) bought a Roland TB303 Bass Line machine, it was without pre-programmed sequences – as a result, when it was switched on for the first time, it generated random sequences, playing “something crazy”, as he explained to me in 1992,

> I had run across it and I called him [DJ Pierre] on the phone to come and listen to it, and he got to it and he started turning the knobs changing my frequency [settings of the EQ] of it, and that's what it started from. […] But the funny thing when the batteries ran out the same exact *acid* was coming back in. (Smith Jr. 1992)

DJ Pierre (Pierre Jones, co-member of Phuture), added to this, “Not ‘Acid tracks’ though. That has to be recreated every time. […] It would be the same notes of being the same order – it'd be there but it just might be going to a different beat in some parts” (Jones 1992).

“Acid tracks” became meaningful once house music drum programming, keyboards and voice were added, ready for DJ Ron Hardy’s club night at the Muzic Box in Chicago, of which Pierre remembers, “Parties – oh! Forty-eight-hour marathon parties at Ron Hardy’s […] a whole weekend straight, non-stop” (Jones 1992). A demo of the track was presented on cassette tape; needed to be played several times to convince the mainly African-American and Latino crowd, who were used to a mix of jacktracks (raw Chicago house) and electronic post-punk pop from Europe. Once used to the sound, it quickly became a local dance floor hit and a few years
later, in 1987, it was finally released, by the Chicago record label Trax Records, as “Acid tracks”.

**ACID ROCK**

Larry Sherman, owner-manager of Trax Records, claims to have bestowed this track the name “Acid tracks”, telling me in 1992 in the dusty office of his equally dusty vinyl pressing plant that it reminded him of acid rock, which mainly emerged from Germany during the 1970s. “Acid” connotes a psychedelic fragmentation of perception and dislocation of meaning due to a deconstructing effect on thought patterns that may also be induced and enhanced by psychedelic, or hallucinogenic, drugs, like LSD, Lysergic Acid Diethylamide, which is colloquially referred to as “acid” in the American-English speaking world. In the context of the creation of “Acid tracks” the term “acid” indicates this as a concept: a psychedelic subjectivity is produced, which is embraced in acid house, trance, as well as acid rock. The instability of sound texture, tonality and musical structure of the **acid museme** seems to produce a gap (or door) in perception; as such, the **acid** has a psychedelic subjectivity embedded within its very structure.

In this case, musical memory works rhizomatically. A similar musical figure can indeed be heard in electronic acid rock experiments of German band Tangerine Dream, in particular the title track of the album *Phaedra* (Virgin 1974), a novelty record that in the UK reached mass audiences beyond the new age scene with a peak chart position of 15 (ChartStats 2012). In the middle section, an unstable oscillator (sound generator) of a Moog synthesiser drifts, resulting in psychedelic electronic arpeggios that, in hindsight, are reminiscent of the modulated sequences of Phuture’s “Acid tracks”; listen, for example, to a section between mins. 9-9.30. Although independently created, at least a decade apart in different parts of the world, both recordings seem to articulate a bewildered feeling of the machine being out of control. Band member Edgar Froese recalls that:

> Technically, everything went wrong – the tape machine broke down, there were repeated mixing console failures, and the speakers were damaged, because of the unusually low frequencies of the bass notes. [...] ‘Phaedra’ was done in one go. Chris had pressed the button to start the bubbling bass note, but it wasn’t right, so after a while the bass drops out. Then he started tuning the bass note while he was running it, and all the time, the engineer was recording. So what you hear today was in fact a rehearsal! (Prendergast 1994)

Tangerine Dream’s later album *Force majeure* (Virgin 1979), features a tighter sequence on the second half of the track “Thru metaphoric rocks”; according to band member Chris Franke,

> It was a new phase, more structured. The music was more heroic, a little bit like art-rock again. We got some more keyboards, and our big Moog modular
was more stabilised inside -- new oscillators came in, and new envelopes.
(Prendergast 1995)

After a guitar rock introduction, a propelling sequence of arpeggiated sixteenth notes are combined with synthesised drone washes and dream-like sound effects for over ten minutes at 138 BPM.

**Hard house**

In the UK, the very term *acid* caused the start of a well-documented moral panic, due to the after-hours illegality of many of the dance events and the association of its name with psychedelic drugs. It may be argued that this media-amplified panic provided free advertising, popularising after-hours dance parties and with it, “acid” became a rallying cry for young people, eventually stimulating the popularity of rave culture (Thornton 1995; Rietveld 1993; Redhead 1990). During the 1990s *rave* became a global electronic dance music phenomenon (St. John 2009; Reynolds 1998), mostly accompanied by a version of electronic trance music.

When acid house gained popularity in the UK, British outfit KLF created one of the earliest examples of the trance genre with “What time is love (Pure trance 1)” (KLF Communications 1988), adding a four-to-the-floor techno beat to an arpeggiated sequence that sounds almost identical to the arpeggios in Tangerine Dream’s “Thru Metaphoric Rocks”. KLF’s dramatic trance experiment seemed to have been an isolated British moment, somehow too self-conscious, too ironically poppy, too post-punk situationist. Instead, the development of trance music, via hard house, may be attributed to a combination of Chicago acid house and a genealogy of the rave party format, rather than the cosmic krautrock of Tangerine Dream.

Hardfloor’s “Acperience 1” on their 1992 *Hardtrance acperience EP* (Harthouse 1992) is a mould-breaking example of how “trance revived the acid house sound of 1987-8” (Reynolds 1998, p. 184). This German instrumental track moves away from the minimalism of Phuture’s “Acid tracks” by multi-tracking and looping the modulating squelching acid sequences of the Roland TR-303 to produce ornate sonic shapes, exaggerating its psychedelic sensibilities into a tightly arranged infinite mirage – a virtual *acid* baroque. Breakdowns of the bass and drum patterns (the actual cutting out of these instruments, creating a break in the rhythm section) allow whooshing electronic textures of sequenced arpeggios to freely develop and dominate the sonic space that is opened up; listen, for example, between mins. 5.00-6.00 into the track. At the end of each breakdown, the kick drum is re-introduced by a rolling snare riff, running in sixteenths, that produce a sense of excited anticipation, like the announcement of an amazing circus trick. In this manner, this track offers a blueprint for the structure of trance, eventually providing psytrance with its sense of psychedelic drama.
Psychedelic Trance

In the development of trance, one cannot point to a single, unbroken, line of descent from acid house, yet the memory of acid house lingers on. As a dropout countercultural destination for young people, first from West Europe and America during the 1970s, the beaches of Indian province Goa became a focal point for an international party crowd. By the late 1980s, industrial post-punk and electronic dance music became part of the DJ’s soundtrack. Instrumental recordings were favoured, taking dancers on a subliminal electronic trip. While the monsoon moves across India, inspired musicians tweaked the sound back in their home countries, ready for the next dry winter season in Goa.

Where Goa trance indicates a specific locality, a sense of origin (not of production but as an inspirational crossroads), the term psytrance is preferred to address the global dispersion of this electronic dance music genre, in countries like Israel, Japan, Brazil, Australia or Finland. On the threshold between the formats of Goa trance and psytrance is the track “LSD” which can be heard on the album Twisted (Dragonfly Records 1995), by Hallucinogen, a.k.a. English electronic musician Simon Posford. Layers of modulated sequenced sixteenths do not represent but, rather, induce a twisted state of mind. In particular the break between mins. 2.00-2.30 brings together acid house wobbliness with the persistent accuracy of jittery digital programming and spoken voice samples that refer to psychedelic experiments. Here, the acid sound seems to have shifted in meaning, heralding a new relationship with technology, no longer one of mad machines but also of incontrollable information overload.

Conclusion

The popularity of versions of the acid museme in a range of loosely related music genres seems to indicate global parallels in subjective shifts within the relationships between (hu)manity and machine. The discussion has shown how such patchy musical associations and links act as both broken and flowing lines that give shape to the formation of musical genres and are paradoxically also their undoing, as they unwind and make new alliances, new connections in new localities and new contexts. Such a rhizomatic multiplicity of network connections demonstrates the displacement and dislocation of musical memory, which thereby behaves in a deterritorialised and nomadic manner within the communication networks of global cultures.

Acknowledgements

I thank the Centre for Media and Culture Research, London South Bank University, for supporting my research work and attendance to 15th Biennial IASPM International Conference, Liverpool 2009.

I also thank Dr Steve Redhead, back in 1992, of Unit for Law and Popular Culture, Manchester Metropolitan University, for enabling me to travel to Chicago and
New York, to interview the main house music producers. I hereby also thank DJ Pierre (Pierre Jones), Spanky (Earl Smith Jr.) and Larry Sherman for resolving any queries regarding the genre formation of acid house.

ENDNOTES

1. This paper was initially presented at IASPM 15th Biennial Conference Popular Music worlds, popular music histories, Liverpool, 13-17 July 2009.
2. Terminology adapted from Deleuze and Guattari 2004.
3. The terminology is adapted from Robertson 1995; a more detailed argument in this direction can be found in Rietveld 2010 and 2004.
4. This discussion is further expanded in Rietveld 2010.

REFERENCES


Smith Jr., Earl (Spanky). 1992 Interview with the author, June, New York City.


