

3.4 Heterotopia, liminality and everyday life: the Boom Festival as an epiphenomenon of otherness

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× **Abstract**

The concept of 'festival' has evolved into new connotations on the sociocultural field. A social effervescence around the transformational festival meme has emerged, triggering new perspectives on the cultural sciences. This paper examines those perspectives along with data analysis to expand social circumstances and cultural frameworks that configure the subjective dispositions and drive the demand for Boom Festival in Portugal. The research also addresses the properties at the festival that can be analyzed as heterotopic transgressive spaces in order to understand how the contexts of temporary life suspension and liminality imply a transformative power in the return to everyday life. *Boomland* is Boom Festival's territory and appears to be both a popular sanctuary and a pilgrimage site for fans of a global movement called psytrance tribe. The research involved an ethnographic approach, using digital ethnography and auto-ethnography, complemented by semi-directed interviews.

Keywords: boom festival, heterotopia, liminality, everyday life, psytrance tribe.

1. Introduction

We live in a transitional period where wireless tools and electric devices connect us all to a virtual reality. Two decades ago, the world and life itself, had a different meaning and reality didn't feel virtual at all.

We are away from each other and at same time all connected through digital platforms. Nothing new here as we have been digitally connected over the last decades, but we must consider that at the time the Do-it-Yourself (DIY) cultures started to emerge, the world was a different place to be. A funny aspect about it is: one of Boom Festival (BF) promotional videos from 2016 starts "first of all, we are all connected"², something Chiara Baldini reaffirms at BF 20 years documentary (Good Mood, 2017), but they aren't talking about this connection...

We are at the dawn of a 'digital era'. It is understandable that technology (r)evolution of the twenty-first century opened up doorways into new cultural movements and different ways of culture appropriation. At the turn of the new millennium sociological interaction spread out both in physical and virtual dimensions. Therefore, the concept of 'festival' redefined itself and adopted an important role in culture production paramount to the understanding of the contemporary societies, in what Bennett et al. (2014) identified as the festivalization of culture.

The social effervescence around the transformational festival meme triggered new perspectives on the social sciences (Oroc, 2018) allowing anthropologists and cultural scientists to concentrate their attention onto alternative cultural movements.

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2. Boom Festival 2016 – Diaries – Day 4. Internet. Youtube. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RhynECuHpvc>

The significant technology upgrades in the 80s and 90s allowed enthusiasts, Djs and ravers to experiment with new musical tastes (St John, 2009). With it, a new cultural movement emerged from the East to the West, from the shores of Goa – India, to Europe and America. Essentially expatriates, hippies and artists from Europe and America, found in Anjuna Beach, the place to grow a different lifestyle and a new way to get amused. This alternative movement particularly influenced by the so-called counter-cultural tendencies of the 1960s promoted a hedonistic vibe, a spiritual tendency and a high interest in the trade and consumption of psychedelics (St John, 2009).

Throughout the 1990s, the cult, promotion and success of a new electronic dance music based on Anjuna Beach 'vibe' crossed borders allowing Goa trance, also known as psychedelic trance or psytrance, to be followed and produced worldwide. This music genre is based on the electronic awakening (see Andrew Johner, 2011), digital interfaces and many other electronic devices (St John, 2009). Psytrance significance to the promotion and the spreading of psychedelic culture cannot be dismissed (St John, 2012; 2010).

The cult of psychedelic trance in Portugal started as an underground movement, in isolated locations, promoted in drug friendly raves and twenty years after is a movement of tens of thousands (Good Mood, 2017) making the BF one of the most prominent events around the world. Diverging from pop culture movement, BF embraces, guides and promotes (see Kosmicare, BF) in psychedelic drug experiences. This characteristic is widely regarded both with interested and despair (Oroc, 2018).

Psychedelic trance, an epiphenomenon of Electronic Dance Music Culture (EDMC), is not only the source of BF but it is the main feature which sets this festival apart from the rest of those on the international circuit.

This paper is about Boomland and the festival itself. It analyses the impact the BF experience can have on the lives of those who live it. The paper emphasizes identity modulations associated with the sociological process, i.e., practices and cultural fruition between individuals and groups in contexts of otherness promoted during the event. Simultaneously, it addresses the properties at the festival that can be analyzed as heterotopic transgressive spaces in order to understand how the contexts of temporary life suspension and liminality, imply a transformative power in the return to everyday life. In addition, it is important to identify neotribalism (Maffesoli, 1988) / heterotopia (Foucault, 1967) / ritual process (Turner, 1969) as the key elements to which this paper is built upon. As a result, it is vital to situate the BF in the contemporary sociocultural paradigm while keeping track on the impact of digital technology on the anthropological range.

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The research involved an ethnographic approach, using digital ethnography and auto-ethnography, complemented by semi-directed interviews. The empirical work underlined the three (liminal) moments related to the 2018 edition of BF – before, during and after the festival –, based on a 20 people discussion/ observation group, gathered on the digital platform Facebook, implying fieldwork both in digital and geographic territory.

2. A 'new' societal movement

The 'new' sociological movement that was (re)born and excelled at the beginning of the twenty-first century is an alternative movement, i.e., it promotes a psychedelic culture, which diverges from popular culture and mass media culture (Oroc, 2018).

From the late 1960s to the 1990s, the use of psychedelics was banned and brought almost to extinction by policies adopted by Richard Nixon (The War on Drugs - 1971) and Ronald Reagan (Just say No! - 1986) (Oroc, 2018).

Throughout the 1990s and especially at the beginning of the new century, books, visionary art, festivals and underground cults (Oroc, 2018) resurfaced the ideology and the psychedelic spirit, which led some authors to classify the movement as The Psychedelic Renaissance (Oroc, 2018; Sessa, 2012; Polan, 2018; Doblin, 2017). The use and trade of psychedelics associated with the counter-cultural movement of the 1960s, helped to crystallize a new lifestyle, different than cultural productions targeting the masses (St John, 2009).

The Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) created in 1964, aiming to study new cultural paradigms, followed subgroups with specific musical tastes and with distinctive cultural practices and representations (St John, 2009), yet according to St John (2008, p. 150): "trance as a countercultural EDMC has been little understood or studied".

The cultural studies carried out by the CCCS allowed a better understanding of contemporary societies and individuals as it proposed to analyze popular culture and 'everyday life' as an emanation of class conflict

(Gelder, 2005). From the 1970s to the 1990s, the great mark of late modernity (Giddens, 1990), some authors spoke about the deep reconfigurations and renovations operated in the individual and in contemporary societies, called by Bauman (1999) as 'the liquid effect'. With 'the liquid effect' Bauman (2007; 1999) suggested the current societies are volatile and swiftly mutable, thus nations are cultural hybrids. One of the members of the CCCS project, Hall (2006), formulated the idea that identities are in decline, pointing to what he considered to be a crisis of cultural identity. Nothing new for Maffesoli (1988) who argued the reuse of the concept of tribalism, this time, a new tribalism, in the form of urban tribes. By predicting the decline of modernism and the return to tribal-oriented social configurations in the postmodern period, Maffesoli (1988) opened up to what Bennett (1999) would come to identify as an opportunity for something new to emerge from post-great war consumerism, in which young people break away from traditional social class identifications, building alternatives based on individual experience and collective appropriation of distinctive symbolic elements (v.g. ways of dressing, language, musical consumption, new aesthetic references) (Hebdige, 2002).

Although contemporary societies may be 'liquid' (Bauman, 2007), BF success is due to a fundamental technology called memory. According to Halbwachs (1997, p. 230), "it would be very difficult to describe the event if one did not imagine the place". The place of memory and collective memory are paramount to the psychedelic culture and of course BF hype. Even though the advanced technology at our disposal to (re)live the event, to see what happens in Boomland, nothing beats our best memories and as a result, the promotion of BF by those who lived the experience. As Halbwachs (2008, p. 129) stated: "symbolic thought disconnects these places from their material surroundings and associates them with the beliefs of the group, and those beliefs alone. It is almost certainly the stability of the image that explains the persistence of the beliefs".

The ravers, who multiplied on the beaches of Goa in the 1980s and 1990s, found in BF a pilgrimage site whose object of devotion was the Goa trance, known today as psytrance. The first edition of BF (in 1997) was little known, even in Portugal (Good Mood, 2017). It emerged as a gathering of psychedelic trance habitués, for those who had been following the pro-hippie movement that originated in Goa. BF happened every two years since 1998 until 2018 and has been postponed since, due to covid-19 pandemic.

In 2002, Good Mood Lda (founders of BF) moved BF location to the countryside, Idanha-a-Nova, Portugal. In 2017, Good Mood paid over a million euros for a 150-hectare property³ and today the Herdade da Granja is known worldwide as Boomland (Good Mood, 2017). This private property at Marechal Carmona reservoir, holds BF every two years. Far from urban spaces, at Boomland, between the full moon of July and August emerges a seven-day city where technomad tribes (St John, 2009), hippies and enthusiasts reunite as a tribe to engage in a moment of love, mindfulness and communion, where safety and freedom belong together. It is important to mention Boom Festival is a global phenomenon of sustainability, electronic dance music, psychedelic culture and visionary art.

Although BF most prominent vein has been the "anarchist" one, it was essentially from its fifth edition (2004) that the festival gained the dimension of a global event, attracting people from all over the world to live the psychedelic experience of the moment, in Boomland. Regarded as one of the festivals focused on hedonism, spiritual ideology and where the trade and consumption of psychedelics is free, BF quickly established itself on the international circuit of similar festivals. Ironically, the Portuguese government, by decriminalizing drug possession and consumption in 2001, made BF the 'Mecca' of the international psytrance tribe movement (Oroc, 2018).

In 2004, the festival's projection exceeded all the expectations of the producers involved, as stated by Diogo Ruivo (Good Mood, 2017). BF represents an epiphenomenon because it is the result of the broader phenomenon of EDMC. It is possible to affirm that the emergence of EDMC, the new psychedelic revolution and the explosion of event-cultures are interlinked. This remarkable interconnection was due to an increasingly evolved technology, both in terms of sound and image recording and, above all, in the sharing of these contents globally through the world wide web.

This 'psychedelic experience' [one and collective] many have lived in Boomland crossed continents through the words of boomers who, every two years, packed their backpacks and began the pilgrimage back to Boomland.

Although BF first edition (1997) counted 3,000 participants (Good Mood, 2017), BF thirteenth edition (2020 –

3. Good Mood buys Herdade da Granja for over a million euros. April 2017. Available @ <https://www.dn.pt/sociedade/boom-festival-compra-herdade-em-idanha-a-nova-por-mais-de-um-milhao-de-euros-6245589.html>. consultado em 24/01/2020.

postponed till 2022) sold out (+33,000 tickets) in ninety minutes, doing more than 6 million euros in ticket sale alone. Boom festival is a place to be when you are into psychedelic culture.

This “new” societal movement with nearly two decades of existence which BF is part and benefits, maintains an alternative to pop culture, but it moves the masses (millions of participants) all over the world. For Cucho (1999) alternative cultures are a product of an alternative to mass culture, leading individuals and societies to build an identity according to their cultural preferences (Hall, 2006).

The psychedelic trance movement has its own cultural identity that reveals itself in the material and immaterial part. This ‘unusual’ identity is a byproduct of fables and imaginaries produced by the psytrancer infiltrated in a global movement. Rastafarians, brightly colored clothes, steampunk style (Bernstein, 2015) and the Do-it-Yourself motto (Guerra & Bennett, 2019) are some of the main attributes that characterize the natives of this cultural movement, as mentioned by St John (2010: 2):

Enthusiasts from a multitude of cities and regions make pilgrimages to Boom to become immersed in the identifiable timbral aesthetics of their obsession. But there is another strong motivation — participants are enthused to become exposed to difference. Festival culture illustrates a heterotopic, carnivalesque and synesthetic context in which participants may upgrade or retrograde their selves through national “flavours”, sonic “colours” and other available techniques of the self (i.e., drugs, dance, textile fashion, piercings, hair styling, tattooing, alternative diets, etc.). Indeed, this interest expressed by Boom participants is consistent with a disposition towards difference within psytrance more generally.

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3. A Post-Modern Ritual Process

Alternative cultures may promote transformative practices and representations. As mentioned before, the dimension and demand that festivals similar to Boom are reaching, lead to the (re)emergence of the concepts of ‘new tribes’ (Maffesoli, 1988) and *communitas* (Turner, 1969), boosted by technological (re)volutions and their respective capacity to promote social fruition and cultural representations. Boomland is a private territory where ‘spontaneous *communitas*’ evolve and correlate throughout a week. Turner identified *communitas* as: the (re)formation of affectual relationships with co-liminals. In “spontaneous *communitas*,” individuals

interrelate relatively unobstructed by sociocultural divisions of role, status, reputation, class, caste, sex, age, and other structural niches (...) *communitas* designates a feeling of immediate community and may involve the sharing of special knowledge and understanding — a flash of mutual understanding on the existential level, and a 'gut' understanding of synchronicity. This immediate and total confrontation of human identities occurs between fixed social categories (in liminality), on the edges of structured social life (in marginality), and beneath structure (in inferiority) (Turner, 1982, p. 48)

As mentioned earlier, BF proposes the single and collective experience that results, above all, from the collective effervescence (Durkheim, 2001) of a spontaneous *communitas* that gathers in an idyllic space, far from urban centers, to symbolically celebrate a 'return to the origins', a 'return home' in this heterotopic manifestation that occurs every two years.

Over the various editions, BF has given its participants the opportunity to create *communitas* that often go beyond the festival grounds and are maintained in the everyday life. This event-culture (St John, 2017) allows its participants to share a feeling of belonging, otherness and union seminal to the formation of spontaneous *communitas* while some participants do not find it in their everyday life, according to my research.

Alternative values may promote and empower in the participants transgressive ecologies in opposition to their everyday life. In this regard, Howard (1969, p. 50) identified plastic hippies as: "those who simply wear the paraphernalia of the outsider and adopt the requisite codes of rebellion, where the symbols which might at one time have powerfully expressed outrage at society's oppression and absurdity become merely fashionable and decadent". These transgressive ecologies are mainly caused by the liminal (or interstice) characteristics of these events associated with their short-term temporality. As pointed out by Hutson (2000, p. 43), "raves are good because they don't happen all the time", that is, alternative and/or transformational raves or festivals are limited in time and this property may be what awakens the liminal or the interstice experiences. In this regard, St John (2008, p. 154) states that EMDCs social interstices have the power to (re)produce "a sense of immediacy, safety, and belonging, outside and in between the routine habitus, conventional gender roles or the crushing ennui of workaday lives".

As mentioned before, BF experience represents a life suspension from the 'normal world'. A break in our everyday life. To better understand this important sociological feature of BF one must consider The Ritual Process (1969) defined by Vitor Turner, after the Rites of Passage of Van Gennep (1960).

Boomland is a liminal place. Liminality refers to 'in between' places or stages, a state of transition where the subject does not belong to any of the stages:

**the state and process which is betwixt-and-between the normal, day-to-day cultural and social states and processes of getting and spending, preserving law and order, and registering structural status (...) In the midst of ritual participation they are neither here nor there, but genuinely in between distinctions, beyond the limits of ordinary social sanctions, and unconcerned with the mundane affairs of everyday life. Temporarily defined by the ritual context, they are beings-in-transition, no longer what they were, nor yet what they will be (Turner, 1977, p. 33).*

Liminality is therefore the phenomenon of the Ritual Process. Turner (1969) identifies two different stages - Structure and Anti-structure - in which the individual submits himself and returns. Accordingly, I identified contemporary societies as the structure and BF as the anti-structure. In this regard, the participant leaves the structure (separation) entering the anti-structure (transition) and returns to the structure (re-incorporation). If a more graphic interpretation should be considered, I would say 'The Hero Journey' (1949) from Joseph Campbell is a nice fit.

Turner understood liminality as a ludic phenomenon: "It is the analysis of culture into factors and their free 'ludic' recombination in any and every possible pattern, however weird, that is the essence of liminality, liminality par excellence" (Turner, 1982, p. 28). According to Turner, liminality should be understood as liminal or liminoide, where liminal should be consider in archaic, agrarian societies, and liminoide in industrialized societies. In this regard, my research identifies BF both as a playground (ludic place) and a liminoide space where individuals initiate a quest for the excitement (Elias & Dunning, 1992) in the anticipation of a desired experience (Johansson & Toraldo, 2015).

Liminality is not an exclusive quality of BF. Guerra (2019, pp.56-57) understands music festivals are liminal spaces because "[festivals] are outside the everyday life and offer opportunities to experiment with extraordinary

and, in some cases, socially circumscribed identities". On the other hand, music festivals are more than a product of consumption. On site rituals apparently developed by the spontaneous *communitas* work an important role in the sociological experience of the festival-goers, capable of promoting a transformation in the return to their workaday lives (Guerra, 2019).

BF represents a multi-generation space and a post-national zone (Inda, 2000), where tens of thousands of people, natives of more than 150 countries (last editions), interact in an apparently tribal way for seven consecutive days. It is fundamentally this relationship of community, sharing and belonging that highlights one of the most transformational qualities of the BF rooted in the concept of otherness.

The BF requires a trip, i.e., leaving our home and starting a journey in search of the excitement (Elias & Dunning, 1992), over the anticipation of a desired experience (Johansson & Toraldo, 2015). Tourism, to which travel is associated, is a process of transformation, in which the individual renews the idea of himself and also the way others see him, as Graburn (1989, p. 23) reveals: "The experience of travel connects us with ourselves in meaningful ways that cannot be overstated". Accordingly, there is the perspective that the BF experience per se, given the Turnerian process of pre-festival (separation), festival (transition) and post-festival (re-incorporation) and the Graburnian sacred journey, completes itself within the liminoide cycle, as Graburn (1989, p. 23) adds: [travel is the] "best kind of life for it is sacred in the sense of being exciting, renewing, and inherently self-fulfilling".

4. Conclusion

BF experience may be understood as a post-modern ritual process where separation, transition and re-incorporation is part of a sacred journey to which the individual submits himself in search of the excitement in a private territory for liminal culture.

Although Jeet-Kei Leung (2010) identified Boom as a transformational festival along with Burning Man (USA) and others across the globe, I could not tell whether BF is transformational or not, but I am confident to say for many boomers BF represents a sacred journey.

Maffesoli suggested contemporary societies live out of the exchange with allowance to otherness, like urban tribes, polytheists and hedonists, where pleasure is the supreme good. According to my research, Boomland is the place to seize the day, *carpe diem* and that is crystal clear by the time you enter the gates. There is no time, no rush, there are no worries. It is time to embrace the present moment, in an organic, bucolic way. A simple experience in and with Nature and other participants, allowing oneself the process of otherness.

My research made me conclude, moreover, BF operates as a limen, a threshold between an idyllic place and the crushing ennui of workaday lives. In other words, it represents a heterotopic city limited to seven days of existence, after what participants may resume to their lives. This event-culture (St John, 2017) operates as a living sanctuary where boomers search for the community, spiritual enlightenment, healing and joy through rituals and mystic conceptions in what Durkheim (2001) defined as the collective effervescence. Moments of pure joy, I acknowledged on the field.

Memory plays an important role both in BF promotion and its success. The reconnecting experience boomers look forward every two years at Boomland, resides on what Halbwachs called place of memory and collective memory.

BF promotes feelings of otherness, community and symbiotic vibes between nature and human beings, through its ethos and pathos. In a short period of seven days, one is allowed to experience with something not allowed in the 'normal' world. Psychedelics are thus the substancial success of this event, feeding a global culture who returns every two years to the countryside of Portugal. Freedom and safety at Boomland speaks for itself when over 33,000 tickets are gone in 90 minutes. Boomers share the opinion that freedom and safety at Boomland are extraordinary. The experience could be understood as a life suspension from the ordinary world, that allows its devotees to experience something different from the world they know. A heterotopia, a non-hegemonic place of contact, clear of society judgment, promoting, in this way, a pure experience of freedom, disclosure and transgression, where you may find yourself recovered, loved and fully recharged to return to your daily life.

One must keep in mind it is all these sociological processes that reinforce BF experience as a sacred journey that reconnects body and spirit in a simple, liminal moment of joy.

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