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# Psychedelic Aesthetics and the Body without Organs at the Limits of Perception

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## Abstract

This article focuses on the aesthetics of the psychedelic experience. Aldous Huxley's *Doors of Perception* remains one of the few studies that investigates the aesthetic dimension of the psychedelic experience as profoundly meaningful as such, because it gives direct attention to the nonhuman otherness of the universe that is hard to describe in words, but that can be felt and sensed. Similarly, Deleuze and Guattari have investigated psychedelics as a perceptual, aesthetic, phenomenon. They argue that psychedelic aesthetics offers an experience at the limits of perception to the point of ultimate abstraction of geometric figures and grains. Drawing upon the works of two experimental filmmakers from two different generations and backgrounds, Philippe Garrel's enigmatic *Le Révélateur* (*The Revealer*, 1968) and Morgan Quaintance's thought-provoking *Surviving You, Always* (2021), the borders of the perceptual field by cinematographic means will be investigated. 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 and an ethics of—in Deleuze's words—'becoming not unworthy of the event'.

**Keywords:** psychedelics, ecosophy, ethico-aesthetics, BwO, doors of perception, cinema, Philippe Garrel, Morgan Quaintance

If the experimentation with drugs has left its mark on everyone, even nonusers, it is because it changed the perceptive coordinates of space-time and introduced us to a universe of micro-perceptions in which becomings-molecular take over . . .

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, pp. 248–9)

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## I. Aesthetics of Psychedelics: Perception and Attention to (Nonhuman) Life

In *The Three Ecologies* (2000), Guattari emphasises the ethico-political and aesthetic dimensions of his so-called ecosophy. Guattari argues for a tripled ecological approach towards our current condition that takes into account the transversal connections between the environment (or material ecologies), the social and political organisation of our interpersonal connections and power structures (social ecologies) and the ideas, desires and states of consciousness (mental ecologies). In his conception of ecology as heterogeneous assemblages he argues that artists 'provide us with the most profound insights into the human condition' (Pindar and Sutton in Guattari 2000: 8; see also Buchanan 2020). Deleuze, too, has frequently written about art, cinema and literature, and the collaborative works between Deleuze and Guattari are characterised by a prevailing eye on art works, aesthetics and sense perception. So, what does an aesthetic approach have to offer in understanding the psychedelic renaissance?<sup>1</sup>

If we want to know more about the psychedelic experience as an aesthetic phenomenon, Aldous Huxley's literary 'trip reports' remain a seminal artistic starting point. In *The Doors of Perception*, Huxley describes his mescaline experience with meticulous precision. He recounts how one spring day in 1953, he took a pill at eleven in the morning. An hour and a half later he saw the flowers in the vase on his dining table with new eyes: 'I was seeing what Adam had seen on the morning of his creation—the miracle, moment by moment, of naked existence' (Huxley 2004: 7). For the first time in his life, Huxley could just see the 'Is-ness' of the flowers, 'shining with their own light' perceiving

what the rose and iris and carnation signified was nothing more, and nothing less, than what they were—a transience that was yet eternal life, a perpetual perishing that was at the same time pure Being, a bundle of minute, unique particulars in which, by some unspeakable and yet self-evident paradox, was to be seen the divine source of all existence. (Huxley 2004: 7)

He describes how he saw the flowers breathing, 'from beauty to heightened beauty, from deeper to even deeper meaning' (Huxley 2004: 7). After that he describes how too the colours of other objects (such as the covers of the books on his shelves) had become so intense that they were intrinsically meaningful: 'they seemed to be on the

point of leaving the shelves to thrust themselves more intensely to my attention' (Huxley 2004: 8).

As Michael Pollan observes in *This Is Your Mind on Plants*, contrary to other psychedelics, such as LSD, psilocybin or ayahuasca, mescaline does not open to other dimensions (the past, the future, the cosmos), but it keeps you 'firmly planted in the frontier of the present' (Pollan 2021: 216). What both Huxley and Pollan describe is that the moving inward of the mescaline experience opens the doors to perceiving more attentively to the life of nonhuman entities. Also, the experience of place and distance transform into a profoundly significant experience of the 'intensity of existence' (Huxley 2004: 9), which Pollan describes as 'the immensity of existing things' (Pollan 2021: 219). Time equally becomes something altogether different, changing into the experience of a perpetual duration of presence. Compositions become pronounced: Huxley obtains the eye of a 'pure aesthete', beyond the utilitarian spectrum 'whose concern is only with forms and their relationships within the field of vision or picture space' (Huxley 2004: 10). And he adds that his purely aesthetic Cubist-eye view also gave way to a sacramental vision of reality, endowing everything with an inner light. Much of *The Doors of Perception* is a description of art and the ways in which artists are equipped with the power of seeing the expressiveness of the mysteries of pure being in their art work 'what the rest of us only see under the influence of mescaline' (Huxley 2004: 18). Van Gogh, Cézanne, Vermeer, Rembrandt, Japanese and Chinese landscape painters, musicians and many more artists are raised by Huxley to describe the profound psychedelic experiences that gave him at the same time a feeling of ethical responsibility and thankfulness towards existence.<sup>2</sup>

From Huxley's descriptions of the ineffable we can conclude that the aesthetic dimension in a psychedelic journey turns the world into an art work, and vice versa: it seems that artists are able to capture something of this altered dimension of reality in their artistic expressions. By emphasising the direct experience of 'life' in the act of perception, Huxley (as a writer) argues that the world is in profound need of what he calls the 'non-verbal Humanities', 'the arts of being directly aware of the given facts of our existence [which] are almost completely ignored' (Huxley 2004: 48). In *Heaven and Hell*, he adds that the otherworldly light and colours that are shared in all visionary experiences have an immediate meaning which is as intense as the colours and light: 'and their meaning consists precisely in this, that they are intensely themselves and, being intensely themselves, are

manifestations of essential givenness, the non-human otherness of the universe' (Huxley 2004: 61). Or, as Deleuze and Guattari suggest, what the aesthetic dimension of the psychedelic experience unfolds is 'perception in the midst of things' (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 282). We encounter here the Bergsonian premise that perception *is* something in itself and not necessarily the perception of something else, a preconceived idea, a recognisable image, a doxa, common sense (Bergson 1991: 67; Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 149–50). Also, the direct attention to the nonhuman otherness of the universe seems to hold an importance that is hard to describe in words, but can be felt and sensed in certain aesthetic experiences.

## **II. Ontology of Intensity of Psychedelic Aesthetics: Abstract, Weird, Threshold**

Let me move a bit deeper down the rabbit hole to find some more general aesthetic characteristics of the psychedelic experience and what it reveals to the mind (Lyon 2023). Huxley acknowledges that every psychedelic, visionary or mystical experience is unique (and not all substances, as argued above, have the exact same effect).<sup>3</sup> But he also insists that they share certain patterns and characteristics (Huxley 2004: 63).<sup>4</sup> In *American Trip*, Ido Hartogsohn argues that the highly malleable and singular effects of drugs, which for large a part also depend on set and setting,<sup>5</sup> are possible because of several common aesthetic perceptions and sensations that all belong to what he calls an 'ontology of intensity' (Hartogsohn 2020: 12–13). First, rather than a suppressant (like medical drugs such as antidepressants) that dampens experience, all psychedelic drugs tend to magnify, amplify, dramatise and intensify the content of one's experience: details become pronounced, larger or smaller, colours more vivid, sounds louder and closer, emotions deeper (which can be beautiful, but also totally weird or downright scary). The second fundamental aesthetic characteristic of psychedelics is a hyper-associative tendency which manifests and allows, for instance, synaesthetic perception (tasting colour, seeing touch) and other creative connections between usually dispersed objects or dimensions (for instance time travelling to ancestors, seeing the molecules of a plant, or moving inside the interior design of a machine, literally becoming-molecular). A third core aspect of psychedelics is the blurring or melting of boundaries, present at the level of perception (such as flowing or dissolving forms in sight and sound). These perceptive characteristics can also transform into a temporary ego loss and unification with nature,

the cosmos or other people (Huxley's heaven); or, in the scarier version, of the total eclipse of the self, paranoia or confrontation with demons or dragons (Huxley's hell). All these core elements of the intensified ontology of psychedelics manifest in variegated ways in response to different sets and settings, forming multiple feedback loops between the effects of psychedelic substances and society and culture.<sup>6</sup>

From these general patterns of the psychedelic experience, we can draw that a psychedelic aesthetics opens perception via intense colours and light, synaesthetic mingling of the senses, as well as liquification and molecularisation of perception. Mathematical abstractions, geometric figures, fractals and multi-perspectives are part of the psychedelic aesthetic pattern (Hartogsohn 2018). This level of aesthetic abstraction is often paired with (or is replaced by) another level which is more figurative, often in a weird way, full of bizarre figures, surreal objects or distorted bodies, symbolic images and archetypes that have their own dream logic or Alice-in-Wonderland-like dimensions. The acknowledgement of the sometimes bizarre and weird encounters that the contents of the psychedelic experience entails is just as significant as its other more abstract aesthetic elements. As Erik Davis argues:

Mediating weirdness is particularly true when we consider the question of psychedelic entities, which in some sense is one of the phenomenological elements that are the most unassimilable into the Western framework. You might do yoga and experience oneness or absolute peace with the universe, and you can still square that with what is happening to your endocrine system or blood flow or proprioception. That's fine. But if you have a conversation with a toad in a velvet jacket, there is not a lot of room to move with a materialist framework, except toward the basket of psychosis or hallucination. (Davis 2018: 124; see also Davis 2019)

This second dimension of psychedelic perception brings us to the more symbolic and perhaps even archetypal aspects of the psychedelic experience (see Powell 2007; Settle and Worley 2016).

Let me now first zoom in on the ontological intensity of the psychedelic journey and turn to Deleuze who, in *Difference and Repetition*, discusses intensity as an experience 'at the limits of perception' (Deleuze 1994: 144), at the point where the quality in the sensible turns into its transcendence (what Deleuze calls empirical transcendentalism). Intensity here is understood as 'pure difference in itself', as that which is

both imperceptible for empirical sensibility which grasps intensity only already covered or mediated by the quality to which it gives rise, and at

the same time, that which can be perceived only from the point of view of transcendental sensibility which apprehends it immediately in the encounter. (Deleuze 1994: 144)

Deleuze adds that when this threshold of sensibility is transmitted to the imagination, this 'phantasteon' is 'both that which can only be imagined and the empirically unimaginable' (Deleuze 1994: 144). As Settle and Worley argue, for Deleuze, sense is an event that takes place 'within the fragile environment of aesthetic affects'. This means that in this liminal aesthetic zone 'sense verges closely on becoming non-sense' (Settle and Worley 2016: 8).

In all cases, whether in abstract perception or in weird phantasteons of more figurative imagination, all begins with sensibility, with being able to perceive and to pick up intensities, which opens doors of perception allowing new thoughts to emerge, precisely because it might be weird or eerie, 'that which lies beyond standard perception' is 'often a sign that we are in the presence of something new' (Fisher 2016: 8, 13). The differential in thought arrives, therefore, through an encounter with intensity. Psychedelics are mediators of such intensities that are at the core of Deleuze's ontology that does not necessarily depend on psychedelics but certainly resonates with its aesthetics. We have to recall here Deleuze's quote from William Burroughs in the *Logic of Sense*: 'imagine that everything that can be attained by chemical means is accessible by other paths ... oh psychedelia' (Deleuze 1990: 161); and Deleuze and Guattari's reminder in *A Thousand Plateaus* that it is important to succeed getting drunk on pure water (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 286). I will return to the explicit references to the use of drugs further on; but let me first turn to Deleuze's take on perception in his cinema books.

### III. The Nonhuman Camera Eye

One of the reasons why Deleuze is interested in cinema is precisely because of its 'psychedelic' potentiality to offer a perceptual field of intensities (percepts and affects) that take us beyond strictly human phenomenology. Deleuze's Bergsonian cinema project takes film as a means for exploring aesthetic sensation as nonhuman and unnatural perception. In this way, cinema is not an apparatus that reproduces an illusionary perception of reality but, quite differently, becomes 'the organ for perfecting the new reality' (Deleuze 1986: 8). As is well known, in *The Movement-Image* Deleuze transfers Bergson's view on perception

to construct cinema as ‘machine assemblage of matter-images’ (Deleuze 1986: 85). He discusses how the image and the perception of the image is the same thing: perception is the image. While all movement-images combine perception-images, affection-images and action-images, it is important to note that perception-images are not only part of the matter-image assemblages but, in a way, they are also primordial to any perception at all, a sort of zero degree of cinema. All cinematographic perception-images move between two extremes: on the one hand, the subjective image, ‘seen by someone who forms part of the set’ (Deleuze 1986: 71); on the other hand, the objective image ‘when the thing or the set are seen from the viewpoint of someone who remains external to that set’ (Deleuze 1986: 71). Deleuze argues that cinematographic images actually always have a supple (free indirect) status oscillating between subjective and objective point of views, transformed by a camera consciousness, an inhuman camera eye.

In the perception-image we also encounter the limits of perception at the boundaries of the subjective and objective poles, where the empirical experience of the image encounters its transcendence. At one extreme, Deleuze refers to the liquid perception of the innermost (subjective) pole of perception: the delirium, dream or hallucination. Deleuze mentions, among others, German expressionism and the French school of water in the cinema of filmmakers such as Jean Renoir, Jean Epstein and Jean Vigo. In their films the rhythm and liquid abstraction of water signifies ‘the promise or implication of another state of perception, a more than human perception, a perception not tailored to solids [...]. A more delicate and vaster perception, a molecular perception, peculiar to a cine eye’ (Deleuze 1986: 80). At the other limit, Deleuze distinguishes the ‘gaseous perception’ of the outermost (objective) pole of perception, defined by inhuman editing techniques and impossible camera positions, as in Vertov’s cine-eye where the camera and montage bring the nonhuman eye in things, in matter:

what montage does, according to Vertov, is to carry perception into things, to put perception into matter, so that any point whatsoever in space itself perceives all the points on which it acts, or which act on it, however far these action and reactions extend. This is the definition of objectivity: to see without boundaries or distance. (Deleuze 1986: 81)

In this sense, cinema reached to the genetic element of all possible perception. Perception, now, becomes gaseous, ‘defined by the free movement of each molecule [...] attaining pure perception as it is in things or in matter’ (Deleuze 1986: 84).

Besides Vertov, Deleuze also refers to the experimental and underground cinema of Stan Brakhage, Michael Snow and Jordan Belson who all experiment at the limits of perception via a camera-consciousness.<sup>7</sup> Here, Deleuze wonders if drugs can have a similar effect of perceptive experimentation brought about by different means:

[T]o follow Castaneda's programme of initiation: drugs are supposed to stop the world, to release the perceptions of doing [...] to make one see the molecular intervals, the holes in sound, in forms, and even in water, [...] to make lines of speed pass through these holes in the world [...] beyond the solid and [even] the liquid: to reach another perception, which is also the genetic element of all perception. (Deleuze 1986: 85)

We see here that Deleuze endows the camera with nonhuman perception that at its limits of intensity becomes a means to create a psychedelic aesthetic experience with different, artistic and technological, means. So, there seems to be a profound connection between the camera, artistic perception, and drugs that goes beyond the representation of hippies in altered states of consciousness in exploitation films of the 1960s that are often associated with psychedelics in relation to cinema (Braunstein and Williams Doyle 2002; DeAngelis 2018; Pisters 2023b). Media and drugs both operate at the level of renewing perception, opening up the habitual patterns and potentially creating new creative energies.

Here Deleuze's Bergsonian theory of perception offers an insight into the psychedelic revival in our current times of crisis and transformation where we (consciously and unconsciously, individually and collectively) are looking for alternative ways of being in the world. Again, this is not new: in the psychedelic wave of the 1960s this link between cultural transformation and mind-altering practices was acknowledged. In a famous interview in *Playboy* in 1969 Marshall McLuhan argues that drugs 'are a natural means of smoothing cultural transitions, and also a short cut into the electric vortex' (McLuhan in Norden 1969: 13). McLuhan was talking about the revolutionary changes caused by electronic media such as television (which he famously described as a means of turning the world into a global village) that he saw in connection to the rise of psychedelics in the 1960s:

Drug taking is stimulated by today's pervasive environment of instant information, with its feedback mechanism of the inner trip [...] which are the basic needs of people translated by electric extensions of their central nervous systems out of the old rational, sequential value system. The attraction to hallucinogenic drugs is a means of achieving empathy with our penetrating



electric environment, an environment that in itself is a drugless inner trip. (McLuhan in Norden 1969: 13; see also Skinnon 2012)

McLuhan's words make it possible to draw a parallel and to speculate that the psychedelic revival also seems to respond to a time of crisis and transition, where (besides all other challenges of the Anthropocene such as climate change) digital media have entered even the smallest vessels of society and where artificial intelligence is taking over an increasing number of human tasks that demand new forms of perception to make sense of the increasingly techno-mediated (and in many other ways transformed) world to come.

#### IV. From Bodies without Organs to the Philosopher's Stone

In addressing perception, Deleuze points out how cinema transcends (or can transcend) common phenomenological embodiment. In *The Time-Image* Deleuze spends several pages on the work of Philippe Garrel and demonstrates how Garrel's films, which can be considered psychedelic as I will argue below, create a level of intensity through his cinematographic treatment and constitution of the body (Deleuze 1989: 198–202). Deleuze analyses how, throughout his work, Garrel always returns to a basic set of bodies: that of the man, the woman and the child, as a sort of sacred genesis of the 'holy trinity'. These returning bodies in Garrel's cinema are not of flesh and blood. Often filmed in black and white and treated more as figures in a milieu, they are 'primordial bodies' that are rather aesthetic gestures. More importantly, they are bodies that do not offer a real human presence. Deleuze refers here to the difference between the presence of actual bodies in theatre and of the absence of such present bodies in cinema. The films of Garrel demonstrate, par excellence, the inhuman quality of cinema yet again at the limits of perception, at the limits of what constitutes a body. It is a cinema that 'works with "dancing seeds" and "luminous dust"; it affects the visible with a fundamental disturbance, and the world with a suspension, which contradicts all natural perception' (Deleuze 1989: 201).

Perhaps an analysis of one of Garrel's early films, *The Revealer* (1968) can make the points mentioned more tangible. The film has a level of abstraction that makes the experience of watching quite psychedelic in that the film breaks with habitual ways of seeing. Shot in black and white and without sound, *The Revealer* (quite literally in terms of staging and camera movement) turns around a four-year-old child (Stanislas

Robiolle) and its parents (Laurent Terzieff and Bernadette Lafont) who move through the woods and desolate roads and landscapes, sometimes occupying an empty bedroom. Deleuze recalls ‘the fine opening’ of the film (Deleuze 1989: 199) that presents the three figures in chiaroscuro: first the child (on top of a bunk bed) is revealed in the darkness, its face low key lit; then a door opens and the father becomes visible against the bright white background of the adjacent room; and finally the camera moves downward and the mother appears sitting on the floor in front of the father. All is brought back to the minimum of what constitutes a perceptible film.

Throughout the film, we see the three figures moving in geometric patterns, creating lines and points in space, tracing circles, forming triangles, framed in rectangles and squares. Sometimes they sit down, the child circling around them. The father turns around his own axis (identified by the photo algorithms when I took a screen shot as ‘a white bird in the dark’; a nonhuman perception by another machine vision). In a different scene we just see their heads, placed at three points against a white background in the shape of a triangle. And we find many rectangles and squares in the mise-en-scène, as in a scene where the child observes the parents on a theatre stage, or the opening scene described above. They traverse the landscape running through the dark woods at night, walking towards or away from the camera on a dark, empty, wet road.<sup>8</sup> Their bodies are like moving flecks of illumination in the dark. They are the ‘bodies without organs’ that Deleuze and Guattari describe in reference to Castaneda as a process of experimentation in becoming-molecular and becoming-animal (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 161). When the three figures crawl in barbed-wire grass, followed by the camera in a line along their trajectory, they move like animals (here the photo algorithm again could not identify the human figure, tagging this scene as ‘grass, outdoor, mammals’; a becoming-animal recognised by machine-vision). Deleuze and Guattari argue:

For the BwO is all of that: necessarily a Place, necessarily a Plane, necessarily a Collectivity (assembling elements, things, plants, animals, tools, people, powers, and fragments of all these: for it is not ‘my’ body without organs, instead the ‘me’ is on it, or what remains of me, unalterable and changing in form, crossing thresholds). (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 161)

In *The Revealer*, there is no narrative, there is no character development, no music, sounds nor dialogue. There is a sense of dread, of persecution. But there is also a sense of desperate caring for each other, and of loss. The child remains enigmatic. In a haunting scene, we see the child in the

back of a moving truck or a car, crop dusting some kind of gas from a spray can out the window. In the background in blurred focus, beside the driving car, the parents run along, reaching out to the unattainable child. The film ends with the child alone by the sea.

*The Revealer* is filmed at the limits of perception: in silence, in under- and overexposed black-and-white film stock, with only three characters that perform gestures and poses and trace lines or figures rather than act in any kind of realistic way. And yet, precisely because of all these limited conditions, the film becomes some kind of hallucinatory experience in itself. It penetrates the mind of the spectators who become aware of their own thoughts, their own bodies (and bodily sounds) and aware of the enfolded layers of the different bodies without organs that the film presents in relation to their body without organs-constellation beyond their habitual patterns and customs. Besides the trinity of the child, the man and the woman, there is the trinity of the filmmaker/camera, the characters and the spectator that is revealed. In a long sequence where the man, the woman and the child crawl and sneak through the high grass (where the movements make them enter into a becoming-animal), the camera sometimes follows them directly, sometimes waits for the characters to move forward to catch up with them a moment later. And at one moment the child waves at the filmmaker behind the camera, inviting him (and the spectator) to follow them through the grass. At other points the child looks directly at the camera, at us. We see here perception transformed through camera consciousness.

'Revealer', *le révélateur* of the French title, refers to the procedure of developing film negatives, and as such the child is also the revealing element of the film that makes visible the sometimes incomprehensible affects and percepts that are presented.<sup>9</sup> The film is shot in post-war Munich, where the spirit of the Nazi persecutions still lingered in the woods, and the disillusion of the post-May '68 revolutions are tangible in the (often intoxicated) bodies of the crew and cast, even if in the film itself there are no direct references to drugs. Nevertheless, one senses all these levels insisting and persisting onto the limited images and bodies on screen. In a way, we could say that cinema—in any case certain types of cinema that are not representational—produces quite literally bodies without organs, in that they become purely gestural and produce new ways of organising or composing the body, beyond human coordination (becoming-animal, becoming-molecular luminous flecks). Garrel's films produce a choreography of bodies that, as Deleuze argues, turn around the child as problematic point, 'an empty turning point, unattainable limit, or irrational cut' (Deleuze 1989: 199). Moreover,

the films of Garrel are hallucinatory and psychedelic, not only because actors, characters and filmmakers were often under the influence of substances (ranging from opium and weed to heroin) but precisely because the camera captures unhabitual forms of perception, returning its observations back to the spectators. It is a cinema that returns to abstract geometry such as lines and circles, but also alterations of over- and underexposure, hot and cold; ‘heat of the fire or a light in the night, the cold of the white drug’ (Deleuze 1989: 200) that compose the strange cinematographic bodies that penetrate our perception, provoking altered states of consciousness in a similar way that substances can do.

We can also add a more esoteric and alchemistic reading to the trinity of the mother-father-child and the trinity of the characters-camera-spectator, which is the trinity of body-soul-spirit (salt, sulphur and mercury in alchemy). Everywhere in Garrel’s work we feel that the circles his characters draw are ‘esoteric circles’ that contain a secret door to hidden wisdom at the limits of experience, and maybe even of finding the ultimate wisdom of the philosopher’s stone, which in alchemy is symbolised as a square, a circle and a triangle. Dennis William Hauck explains that this ‘squaring and triangulating of the circle’ is the cipher for the philosopher’s stone that first appeared in the early Renaissance, and recounts the formula for its creation: ‘make a circle out of a man and woman. Derive from it a square, and from the square a triangle. Make a circle and you will have the Philosopher’s Stone’ (Hauck 2013: 20).<sup>10</sup> Recalling Ralph Metzner’s *Searching for the Philosopher’s Stone*, where he compares psychedelics to the pursuit of the ultimate wisdom in hermetic, esoteric and alchemical traditions, we can recognise here one more way of understanding the hauntingly abstract aesthetics of Garrel’s cinema of circles, squares and triangles as the ultimate bodies without organs (Metzner 2018).

## V. Surviving Teenage Acid Casualties

Garrel’s films demonstrate that a psychedelic aesthetic in cinema does not need to involve swirly colours, dancing flowers and sixties pop music, but that an ‘aesthetics at the limits of perception’ can take an extreme abstract form, like the solemn and sombre but mind-revealing purple-brown-black monochromatic paintings in the Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas.<sup>11</sup> Morgan Quaintance’s short experimental film *Surviving You, Always* (2021) is a more contemporary example of a film that explores our habitual viewing patterns and the mind-revealing properties of a sober black-and white film stock.

However, where *The Revealer* opts for a minimal aesthetics without sound or narrative, Morgan Quaintance takes the spectator out of their habitual viewing situation by overwhelming them on three levels simultaneously. First, the image level contains four black-and-white stills, photographs from Quaintance's personal photo collection, alternated with abstract, grainy black-and-white 16 mm footage (fireworks, shadows and flecks of people in a school canteen, figures and faces in abstract contours, patches and dark circles). Second, there are subtitles that contain a narrative: the filmmaker's memories of LSD-infused weekends in South London in the 1990s when he was a teenager, and the recollection of a lost love ('I loved you before we met'). Third, on the soundtrack we hear the voices of Timothy Leary and Ram Das talking about the effects of consciousness-expanding drugs, alternating with a piano sonata by Franz Schubert, noise, a fragile singing voice, and a sample from 'A Human Certainty' by the LA punk band Saccharine Trust.

At first viewing, listening and reading, it is impossible to grasp the film's uncommon aesthetics. Actually, in its triangular construction addressing different registers of perception and understanding (seeing, reading, listening), this is a film that asks for *at least* three viewings, as one starts to feel, see and understand how it actually embodies the creation of a body without organs, 'bringing forth continuous intensities' by creating an assemblage of elements that 'connect, conjugate, and continue' (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 161). In an interview with Aman Sandhu for the International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR), Morgan Quaintance points out that by bringing these different elements together he wanted to address the high contradictions and mad juxtapositions of living as a working-class youngster in a multicultural metropolis. In the 1990s, London was not as segregated as it is now; many classes were interrelated, 'everyone on top of each other with intersecting lives, clashes and crossovers'.<sup>12</sup> A still image of one of the buildings in London where Quaintance lived in his youth testifies to this city of the past. Moreover, life is more complex than usually is accounted for, Quaintance argues in the interview. The working class is not just what is captured in the usual 'kitchen sink realism, where nobody has access to the transcendental'. So, addressing his own teenage experiences of psychedelics, his film opens up this perspective of raw and flattening realism. But it is not the usual perspective of the powers of psychedelics either. He juxtaposes Timothy Leary's description of his Castalia Foundation for Psychedelics and the search for the philosopher's stone (as Leary too calls the psychedelic quest) that would open the 'cellular

wisdoms of multiple realities' to the recollections of the filmmaker's sobering account of his use of LSD (and even butane gas) that made him 'see fairies in the woods', but also made him and his friends paranoid, detached and anxious: 'we were teenage acid casualties', one of the subtitles reads. In the IFFR interview, Quaintance explains that he wanted to interrogate the psychedelic experience (embodied by the voices of Leary and Ram Das) which was, and still is, by and large an orientalist experience.

However, the film is not just an oppositional counter-argument. The connections, conjugations and continuations are way too intricate for such a reading. Sometimes the relations between sound, image and words are oppositional indeed. For instance, Leary's characteristic voice describing the cushion- and tapestry-covered rooms in his estate clashes with the words over the picture of Quaintance's fourteenth birthday party when—as we read in the subtitle—he accidentally set his room on fire. Sometimes the different levels conjunct in synaesthetic ways: the grain of the images becomes like textures and cells of the skin, and relates to the story the filmmaker is telling about the woman we see in another still image, adding a level of intimacy to the images—a woman he loved, lost, but who is still part of him, as a memory, a returning thought, and an embodied feeling of running 'to avoid the rain' when leaving her house for the last time. The music is another element of the filmic assemblage that pushes the aesthetic forms towards its limits: the soft piano sonata is overlaid with the harsh sounds of a machine (is it a coffee grinder, a mixer?) calling forth a real location (a kitchen?); pulsating music translates a basic energy of life and a sort of metal vulnerability. The title of the film, *Surviving You, Always*, is an album title of Saccharine Trust, a band that combines blues, punk and avant-garde experimental music with an account of fragility of the human condition and experience. According to Quaintance, the title explains experience itself, in that it is a feeling that everybody, in one way or another, can relate to: 'everybody is surviving something. While it always remains part of you, you can wear the experience as a badge of honour, it is what allows you to be human', he explains in the IFFR interview. Saccharine Trust is one of Quaintance's favourite bands; it is particularly associated to the memories embodied in the photographs and the story, though never explicitly addressed. But one does not need to know this personal dimension to feel the continuation of the intimacy of the abstract textures of the images and harsh fragility of the sounds and music, the deeply private recollections, and the collective memories of the psychedelic legacies of the 1960s.

Like a true BwO that always contains an impersonal dimension, *Surviving You, Always* is more than a personal story, and more than a habitually recognisable narrative. By pushing all the limits of our sense perceptions, it is a body without organs that Deleuze and Guattari relate to Castaneda's psychedelic experimentations, the construction of 'a little machine' that 'can be plugged into other collective machines' (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 161). A conceptual conjugation between film and philosophy can be made, where Morgan Quaintance in his aesthetic approach shows how to 'make yourself a body without organs':

Lodge yourself on a stratum, experiment with the opportunities it offers, find an advantageous place on it, find potential movements of deterritorialization, possible lines of flight, experience them, produce flows of conjunctions here and there, try out continuums of intensities segment by segment, have a small plot of new land at all times. (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 161)

As Deleuze and Guattari argue and Quaintance shows us, the creation of a BwO is the creation of a 'diagram' full of intensities and thoughts that escape the signifying and subjectifying machines of the stratification of (identity) politics, while at the same time offering a critique of 'the usual subjects' (such as Leary and Ram Das, but also the neo-orientalism of much of the current psychedelic revival).

## VI. Embodying the Wound at the Limits of Perception

Drugs, if employed with the necessary caution, are for Deleuze and Guattari mind-revealing tools that can be understood at the level of the direct investment in perception, '[where] the imperceptible itself becomes necessarily perceived at the same time as perception becomes necessarily molecular [and] invests desire directly: arrive at holes, micro-intervals between matters, colours and sounds engulfing lines of flight, world lines [...] Change perception' (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 282). Deleuze and Guattari speak of a 'pharmacanalysis' that immediately addresses an immanent 'perception-consciousness system' where experimentation replaces interpretation (of the Unconscious of psychoanalysis): 'drugs give the unconscious an immanence that psychoanalysis has constantly botched' (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 284). Instead, they propose the creation of a body without organs.

However, Deleuze and Guattari do not simply promote the use of drugs as such because, they warn, there is a danger of dependence on 'the hit and the dose, the dealer' (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 284), and, more importantly, of the possibility of the black hole of self-destruction

(‘each addict a hole’) where the making of a rich body without organs full of intensities gives way to an emptied or ‘vitrified body that turns into a line of death’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 285). Drugs are too unwieldy, Deleuze and Guattari argue, to guarantee a vital life-assemblage. They do not reject psychedelia and other substances, but they maintain that the issue with drugs is to reach the point where ‘to get high or not to get high’ is no longer the question, but rather ‘whether drugs have sufficiently changed the general conditions of perception so that nonusers can succeed passing through the holes in the world’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 286). Film can be one of the possible ways of investing perception directly to reach a general condition. But, here again, we also have to acknowledge that film and other media forms may pose their own forms of addiction (McKenna 1992; Enns 2006; MacDougall 2012; Alter 2017).<sup>13</sup>

And thus, taking into account the dangers of any limit experience, the immanent power of cinema and psychedelics alike is valued by Deleuze and Guattari as an essential quality for the emergence and creation of the new, which always involves a hermetic mystery that involves entering a symbolic esoteric circle. As Joshua Ramey explains, in valuing artists in this esoteric way, ‘at work here is a deeply ethical program, in the Spinozistic sense of ethics as expansion of what a body can do’ (Ramey 2012: 149). Artistic and psychedelic experiments can bring about change, to see the world and our lives in a new light. Huxley was rather prosaic and direct when he addressed the transformative powers of the psychedelic experience:

But the man [*sic*] who comes back through the Door in the Wall will never be quite the same as the man who went out. He will be wiser but less cocksure, happier but less self-satisfied, humbler in acknowledging his ignorance yet better equipped to understand the relationship of words to things, of systematic reasoning to the unfathomed Mystery which it tries, forever vainly, to comprehend. (Huxley 2004: 50)

We know that ‘success’ is not a guarantee and that psychedelics have a dark side and contain their own dangers, as described by Daan Oostveen and Marc Tuters in their contributions in this volume. In Garrel’s work the effects of a ‘psychedelic’ encounter in art is more ambiguous; we do not know how to respond to the feelings of desperation and dread but we can feel that the circles his characters draw are often ‘esoteric circles’ where the ‘magic’ of the new might happen, even if it is completely obscure.<sup>14</sup> In Quaintance’s film we begin to grasp how a different organisation of our bodies, the creation of a body without organs, invites



new perceptions that allow memories of loss to be carried like vulnerable ‘badges of honour’. Or, to quote Deleuze from *The Logic of Sense*, psychedelic art may help us to overcome resentment and ‘not to be unworthy of what happens to us’ (Deleuze 1990: 149).

So, to conclude, I want to return to the psychedelic revival, and the question of what Deleuze and Guattari have to offer in understanding psychedelics today. As indicated in the introduction of this volume, the renewed interest in psychedelics is no longer predominantly about freedom and rebellion but about healing and reconnecting to forms of life that we, by and large, have been inattentive to. It is not only about finding a cure for depression (even though this is one of the very concrete potentialities of certain uses of psychedelics). It is also about finding remedies, or rather, new ways of living in and with a wounded world (Hallowell 2012: 251; Badiner 2017). Art points to the ‘anorganic life within life’, and aesthetics point to these ‘nonhuman dimensions and becomings of man’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 169). What Deleuze and Guattari can offer is a philosophical understanding of the psychedelic experience as aesthetic experience at the limits of perception and the creation of a body without organs that points to an ethics of carrying or counter-actualising our (individual and collective) wounds and creating new ways of seeing and thinking that include the nonhuman and the (normally imperceptible) molecular forces that are part of the world (Deleuze 1990; Buchanan 2000; Lapworth 2021). The psychedelic bodies without organs conjured by the experimental films of Garrel and Quaintance demonstrate that this radical ethics implies becoming worthy of the event and acknowledging the limits of our own perception, for users and non-users alike.

## Notes

1. An earlier and slightly different version of this article was published in Pisters 2023a.
2. Michael Pollan rightly points out that Huxley, as a Western intellectual, describes a specific understanding of mescaline: ‘The set and setting of his experience could hardly be more Western, or more white. Yet, the molecular hero of Huxley’s book came to the West from the Native peoples, and native flora, of North America – call it a gift, or, as some might now, a theft’ (Pollan 2021: 169). Pollan would describe his experience of synthetically composed mescaline, and a sacramental ritual with the San Pedro cactus (which is widely available). But after consultations with Native American leaders, he decides not to (even try to) participate in a peyote ceremony as peyote is a holy plant for Native Americans and at risk of extinction when harvested inappropriately. He takes the words of Sandor Iron Rope, president of the Native American Church,

- to heart: ‘Sometimes the best way to show your respect for something is just to leave it alone’ (Pollan 2021: 210).
3. Peter Sjöstedt-Hughes, for instance, describes the ‘5-MeO-DMT Phenomenology’ and compares it to Spinoza’s *amor dei intellectualis* and his description of ‘the white sun of substances’ (Sjöstedt-Hughes 2022). And Richard Doyle discusses the ‘plant power’ of various hallucinogenic plants as described in trip reports, literary sources and ethnobiological studies (Doyle 2011).
  4. Huxley refers among others to the *Tibetan Book of Dead*. See also Timothy Leary’s classic descriptions of the psychedelic experience based on this ancient Tibetan text (Leary, Metzner and Alpert 2008).
  5. After Timothy Leary, in 1961, introduced the concepts of *set* and *setting* in psychedelic experiments, they have become an integral part of psychedelic practices and discourse. Set, or mind set, refers to the personality, expectation and intention of the person taking a psychedelic substance. Setting indicates the social, physical and cultural environment in which the experience takes place (Leary, Metzner and Alpert 2008).
  6. In this way, Hartogsohn demonstrates that the notorious bad trip became more prominent as an experience ‘after the media started to report more on this phenomena and societal and political consensus moved towards the war on drugs’ (Hartogsohn 2020: 206).
  7. In his seminal book *Expanded Cinema* (2020 [1970]), Gene Youngblood equally discusses the geometric ‘cosmic cinema’ of Belson, and the abstract works of Brakhage, Snow and other experimental filmmakers in relation to both new media technology and the camera eye, and mind-expanding drugs.
  8. *The Inner Scar* (*La cicatrice intérieure*, 1972) is another Garrel film where most of the movements of the bodies form geometric points, lines and especially circles. We also find again the primordial triangular set of bodies of a woman (Nico), a man (Philippe Garrel, who after the first scenes is replaced by Pierre Clementi) and a child (Christian Pääfgen, Nico’s real-life son).
  9. In *The Secret Son* (*L’enfant secret*, 1979) the child is equally connected to the act of filming. The child (Xuan Lindenmeyer) is the child of the woman (Anne Wiazemsky), who has a love affair with the man (Henri de Maublanc) who is a filmmaker (his ‘secret child’ is the film he makes).
  10. ‘The square is a symbol of masculine consciousness and signifies earth and the Four Elements. It is the four-square mindset of logic and the aggressive energy of spirit. The circle is a symbol of feminine consciousness, the unitary impulse to contain and nurture. It is the all-inclusive mindset of intuition, empathy, and the passive energy of soul. The triangle is the cipher for Fire, which is the agent of transformation in alchemy. In this symbol of the philosopher’s stone, the triangle integrates the masculine and feminine energies into a third thing, which the alchemists sometimes referred to as the “Child of the Philosophers.” This is the Quintessence of consciousness that unites the functions of thinking, feeling, sensation, and intuition in a new embodiment of body, mind, and soul now fused together in the fire. Finally, human consciousness achieves a divine union with the One Mind of the universe, signified by the greater circle encompassing all’ (Hauck 2013: 20–1).
  11. The Rothko Chapel in Houston, USA holds eight monochromatic paintings by Rothko and opened in 1971. Rothko made these painting at the end of his life, when the deep hues and colours of his earlier works gave way to the darkest colors just before pitch black. Meditating in front of the dark colors of the painting is an ego-dissolving and ‘psychedelic’ mind-revealing

- experience. ‘The Rothko Chapel’s mission is to create opportunities for spiritual growth and dialogue that illuminate our shared humanity and inspire action leading to a world in which all are treated with dignity and respect.’ See <https://www.rothkochapel.org/>.
12. See the interview at <https://iff.fr/en/iff/2021/films/surviving-you-always>. See also <https://morganquaintance.com/>.
  13. One of the most compelling films in which drug addiction *and* addiction to the film camera, directly investing the field of perception via the nonhuman eye, is the Spanish cult classic *The Rapture* (Arrebato, Ivan Zulueta, 1980). See Pisters 2023a for an analysis of this film.
  14. In *The Secret Son* (Garrel 1979), one of the chapters of the film is explicitly called ‘The Ophidian Circle’, which contains a secret door to hidden wisdom at the limits of experience. Deleuze raises the esoteric circle as the hermetic symbolism for eternal return of the new, the repetition of difference (1994: 91).

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