Psychedelic Affordances in the Music of Highasakite

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Abstract
The late Sheila Whiteley examined how different styles of psychedelic rock in the 1960s and early 1970s shared a common musical rhetoric (or “codes”) that, together with the socio-cultural context in which the music was presented and heard, conveyed elements of the psychedelic experience. In this essay, the author probes further the ways in which some types of popular music serve to represent the psychedelic experience, not so much through semantically stable stylistic codes but through the affordances these sound-shapes and their context provide. To illustrate the application of this expanded notion of psychedelic musical rhetoric, he examines the psychedelic aspects of some of the music of contemporary Norwegian pop band, Highasakite, whose work provides a good example of the post-millennial evolution of the musical vision of psychedelia’s earliest proponents.

Keywords
psychedelic coding, musical genres, Norwegian pop-rock, popular music

Introduction: Psychedelic Coding
In The Space between the Notes (1992), Sheila Whiteley examines how different styles of psychedelic rock in the 1960s and early 1970s shared a common musical rhetoric that enacted certain aspects of the psychedelic experience. This “psychedelic coding” in popular music of that era included such elements as the manipulation of timbres; upward and soaring melodies and harmonies; irregular, sometimes abrupt shifts in rhythm and in foreground / background spatial relationships; and “collages” of sound (ibid., 3–4). According to Whiteley, the psychedelic connotations of these musical tropes derived not only from the sounds themselves but from the socio-cultural context in which they were created and heard – in particular their association with, and reflection of, the countercultural interest in “alternative modes of living which involved, to a great extent, the use of drugs as a means of exploring the imagination and self-expression” (ibid., 3). Further, Whiteley explains, progressive popular music in the 1960s and early 1970s, including its psychedelic elements, placed an increased “emphasis on meaning … which was not simply tied to the lyrics, but spilled over into the sound itself” (ibid., 2). This “sound-shape,” along with the socio-cultural context in which it was embedded, characterised music that “was recognised as a symbolic act of self-liberation and self-realisation in which reality and musical experience were
fused” (ibid., 3). Moreover, the artistic boundaries of this experience stretched beyond the music to extra-musical elements, such as the way the musicians presented themselves through both their reputation and image, including the art that adorned the packaging of their recorded work. In her analysis of Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*, for example, Whiteley remarks that “Floyd's obsession with electronic sound and light shows is signified in the breaking down of white light by the prism” on the album’s cover (ibid., 105). Aesthetically, then, this “image can be seen as a … signifier of the psychedelic effect that Floyd hoped to achieve through the fusion of sound and light” in both their music and its performance (ibid.).

In the years since the publication of Whiteley’s study, other critics have enriched our general understanding of psychedelic musical rhetoric and the way these conventions reflect the psychedelic experience. In *Kaleidoscope Eyes*, Jim DeRogatis refines the analytical inventory of psychedelic stylistic tropes to include auditory bursts of swirling colour, as well as the elasticity of time and space, as conveyed through “sustained and droning melodies; reverb, echoes and tape delays that create a sense of space; and layered mixes that [reward] repeated listenings” (1996, 10). Further, he places additional emphasis on the inward-looking, even spiritual aspects of the psychedelic state, articulating a more specific context for what Whiteley posits as the quest for “self-liberation and self-realisation” (Whiteley, 1992, 3). “Psychedelic rock”, DeRogatis maintains, “is not necessarily ‘drug rock’, but rock that is inspired by a philosophical approach implied in the literal meaning of ‘psychedelic’ as ‘mind-revealing’ or ‘soul-manifesting’” (ibid., 12). In other words, psychedelic rock “offers something for the intellect as well as the body” (ibid.).

Russell Reising links these aspects of psychedelic rhetoric in popular music even more explicitly to psychological effects associated with the psychedelic state, whether drug-induced or otherwise actuated. Reising stresses the “aural synesthesia in which sounds seem to burst into vibrant colors, the buzz with which individual sounds seem to blend into pure sonic energy, the wash of sight and sound … and the elasticity of space and time which expand and contract seemingly to fit the mood or aura of the environment” (2009, 524). Reising, too, argues that psychedelia engenders “great interest in matters of the intellect, the spirit, ecstatic merging, hallucinatory clarity, and meditative innerness, even the fate of the species” (ibid., 525), what he elsewhere terms “psychedelic insight” (2008). In this more precise rendering of the spiritual elements of the psychedelic experience in its musical representations, Reising pinpoints the nature of this state as a transcendence of, rather than simply an escape from, everyday reality (2009, 525). This mindful transcendence of the everyday, through a kind of spiritual enlightenment or hallucinogenic epiphany, thus takes on greater importance in Reising’s interpretations of psychedelically nuanced popular music.

Of course, the use of recording technology to create pulsing, synesthetic sound collages is no longer unique in popular music in the way Whiteley and others have characterised the psychedelic genre at its inception. Most aspects of psychedelic coding have long since been absorbed into more broadly applied popular music stylistics: through continually evolving studio and stage technology; the routine incorporation of synthesised sound into pop mixes; and even the spread of world music, which brought previously unusual acoustic sounds and timbres into the mainstream of Western pop. Whiteley herself calls attention to this development, remarking that the techniques employed to reproduce psychedelic experience musically “quickly become conventionalised” (1992, 4). More importantly, perhaps, the meanings one associates with these stylistic cues also evolve. As Richard Middleton remarks, “Subcultural ownership of music is very hard to protect”, and the meanings initially assigned by the subculture become “oriented through the effect of the new context in
which they find themselves” (1990, 31–32). In other words, the socio-cultural context in which psychedelic music is created and heard today is significantly different than it was at the genre’s inception – and even in the 1980s and 1990s – and these changes affect the meanings we associate with it. Given these concerns, we might very well ask whether it is still possible to apply Whiteley’s model (and its extensions) to the analysis of post-millennial popular music in any kind of meaningful way.

In this essay, I probe more deeply this idea of psychedelic coding and its socio-cultural and paratextual contexts as means to recreate musically the effects of the psychedelic state, whether in its inebriate, clinical, or spiritual settings. To do this, I will examine further the situational, psychological, philosophical, and aesthetic aspects of this experience, with the goal of redefining psychedelic musical rhetoric in a manner that is still relevant today. To demonstrate the application of this revised and expanded notion of musical psychedelia, I will review some of the work of the contemporary Norwegian pop band, Highasakite, who, I believe, exemplify this evolution, while both maintaining and enhancing the original vision of the genre’s earliest proponents.

Set, Setting, and the Sublime

“A good piece of music … is like knocking a hole in the wall so that you can see out on another place you didn’t know existed” (Radiohead’s Thom Yorke, quoted in Lin 2011, 135–136).

In their manual for the use of LSD and other hallucinogens to explore rarely experienced realms of consciousness, Timothy Leary, Ralph Metzner, and Richard Alpert introduce the concepts of set and setting as key elements in psychedelic sessions. “Set”, they write, “denotes the preparation of the individual, including his personality structure and his mood at the time … Setting is physical – the weather, the room’s temperature; social – feelings of persons present towards one another; and cultural – prevailing views as to what is real” (1964, 11). The drug, they maintain, does not in itself produce the experience. Writing a few years later, psychotherapists Helen L. Bonny and Walter N. Pahnke elaborate:

The nature and outcome of a [psychedelic] drug session have been found to depend upon three basic variables: drug dosage, set and setting … “Set” refers to factors within the patient, such as personality structure, life history, expectations, preparations, ability to trust and relinquish control, and aesthetic appreciation of music and art. “Setting” refers to factors outside the individual, such as the physical environment in which the drug is administered [and] the psychological and emotional atmosphere to which the patient is exposed (1972, 65).

As two of these three “basic variables” that characterise the psychedelic state, it is surprising that the evocation of set and setting does not appear explicitly among the tropes that Whiteley and others include in their inventories of psychedelic musical coding. They do, of course, appear implicitly in musical attempts to evoke the quest for personal meaning and new modes of self-expression amidst the socio-cultural context of the 1960s and early 1970s that Whiteley spotlights. They also inform the philosophical perspectives that DeRogatis and Reising bring to their interpretations of psychedelic music as expressing “something for the intellect” or “psychedelic insight”. The importance of set and setting for the musical rendering of the psychedelic experience cannot be overstated, however, for their role in fostering the conditions for the experience is fundamental, as Leary and others maintain. It is also important to stress that I am focusing here specifically on the representation of set and
setting in the music itself, not the set and setting of its listeners. It is thus important to understand set and setting thematically as crucial catalysts for the commonly identified elements of popular music to express the psychedelic state. As Claire Rebecca Bannister astutely observes, any “attempt to explain what makes music psychedelic purely by delineating stylistic cues will be limited because it remains insensitive to set and setting” in the music’s presentation (2017). Thus, if a given piece of music does not adequately represent set and setting in its recording or performance, the extent to which it reflects psychedelic experience, and potentially communicates the elements of this experience to listeners, will likely be less successful.

What exactly do set and setting contribute to the effects of the “peak” psychedelic state – specifically, to those effects beyond the physiological alterations of sense perception that we so commonly associate with them and on which Whiteley’s early analysis of psychedelic stylistic musical cues primarily focuses? Bonny and Pahnke (1972, 69) have identified six psychological characteristics of the peak psychedelic experience:

1. A sense of unity or oneness (positive ego transcendence, loss of usual sense of self without loss of consciousness)
2. Transcendence of time and space
3. Deeply felt positive mood (joy, peace, love)
4. Sense of awesomeness, reverence and wonder
5. Meaningfulness of psychological and/or philosophical insight
6. Ineffability (sense of difficulty in communicating the experience by verbal description)

The first of these attributes describes more prosaically what Reising terms “ecstatic merging” (2009, 525). Albert Hoffman, the Swiss scientist who first synthesised and ingested LSD, comments on his first-hand experience of this sense of oneness, recalling that under the influence of the drug, “the boundaries between the experiencing self and the outer world more or less disappear” (1983, 95). In expanding his description of this phenomenon, Hoffman integrates two more of the effects cited by Bonny and Pahnke, when he states that a “portion of the self overflows into the outer world, into objects which begin to love, to have another deeper meaning” (ibid.; added emphasis). The personal and emotional specificity of these elements in a given psychedelic session derive from the particular circumstances of that session – that is, from the subject’s set and setting. It is also important to note that these psychological effects, including the second in Bonny and Pahnke’s list regarding the hallucinatory perception of time and space, involve transcendence of, rather than escape from, the everyday, a sense of plenitude and the feeling of being fully present in the phenomenal world, as determined emotionally by one’s set and setting. This is precisely why set and setting are so important and why – contrary to Bonny and Pahnke’s third point about “joy, peace [and] love” – distressing factors in a subject’s set and setting can turn any psychedelic adventure into a nightmare. This negative experience, too, can be approximated through the use of psychedelic musical tropes to render the fear and anxiety that result from an unnerving set or setting through musical effects, their associated lyrical motifs, and their commercial and/or socio-cultural context.

Bonny and Pahnke’s fourth and sixth psychological properties of the peak psychedelic experience – the sense of awe, reverence, wonder, and ineffability – signal another philosophical concept to consider in extending the taxonomy of psychedelic musical tropes. In their Varieties of Psychedelic Experience, R.E.L. Masters and Jean Houston recall a patient who, under the influence of LSD, “had an experience of the sensory transfiguration of her
everyday world so profound that she found it necessary to use the vocabulary of religious life to describe her experience” (1966, 261). This overwhelming sense of awe, often associated with peak religious states, suggests another mode of experience that is germane to the psychedelic state – that of the sublime.

In his *Critique of Judgement*, Kant famously observes that the sublime “is to be found in a formless object, so far as in it or by occasion of it boundlessness is represented, and yet its totality is also present to thought” (1951, 82). In other words, the sublime describes a perception or insight that, although accessible to human apprehension, challenges the subject’s capacity for comprehension. Further, Kant maintains, “the feeling of the sublime brings with it as its characteristic feature a movement of the mind bound up with the judging of the object” (ibid., 85). This aesthetic experience has traditionally been associated with responses to natural wonders such as the sea, the sky, mountains, or other majestic landscapes. It is often described in language by such qualifiers as “overwhelming,” “awesome,” “breathtaking,” and “unrepresentable,” all hinting at the “failure of the understanding and reason to capture the infinity that it invoked” (Battersby 2007, 1), as well as the inadequacy of language to express this infinity in less than broad, hyperbolic terms. In the Romantic tradition, writes Christine Battersby, there was an “emphasis on the potential of the sublime to enable man to transcend the limited framework of the space-time structures which shape our world” (ibid., 10; added emphasis). For some of Kant’s successors, moreover, “the delights of the sublime involve a displacement of the ego” in the perception of “an object or entity [that exceeds] the capacities of the human to imaginatively grasp or understand it” (ibid., 1; added emphasis). Key here are those qualities of the sublime that further link this chiefly aesthetic and emotive effect with the first and second psychological characteristics of the psychedelic state posited by Bonny and Pahnke: the “displacement” of the ego and the transcendence of time and space. Jean-François Lyotard adds further nuance to our postmodern understanding of the sublime when, in his commentary on the work of painter Barnett Newman, he states that the contradictory feelings of “pleasure and pain, joy and anxiety, exaltation and depression” often associated with the experience of the sublime ultimately resolve into a “joy obtained by the intensification of being that the event brings with it” (1991, 92). Moreover, the “joy” of this existential revelation is realised not in some imagined topos, but in the here and now of the immediate transcendence of the everyday, which the apprehension of the sublime initiates (ibid., 89–93).

Thus, we observe that the “nature and outcome” of the psychedelic session, as informed by the three key variables in Bonny and Pahnke’s analysis – drug dosage, set and setting – are coloured to a great extent by the impact of the subject’s aesthetic and emotional encounter with the sublime, which often accompanies the session’s “peak” moments, as these perceptions manifest themselves in the psychological facets of the experience. Moreover, in prompting a “movement of the mind” (Kant 1951, 85), the role of the sublime in the psychedelic state may well contribute to the sense of mind expansion or revelation of the soul often associated with this experience. I believe, then, that a fundamental factor in determining the extent to which musical psychedelia faithfully represents elements of the psychedelic experience is the degree to which it acknowledges the role of the sublime in conjunction with the set and setting in which it occurs. Thus, we might modify Bannister’s observation (2017) about the importance of set and setting for conveying the psychedelic experience through music to read: any attempt to explain what makes music psychedelic without taking into consideration its sensitivity to set, setting, and the sublime will remain limited.

Integrating the importance of set, setting, and the sublime into the description of psychedelic experience results in the following extended compendium of psychedelic musi-
cal rhetoric, all of which contributes to the degree to which musical works enact the psychedelic state:

1. The use of layered, distorted, or otherwise manipulated melodic, harmonic, timbral, rhythmic, and other sonic tropes to represent the perceptual alterations and synesthesia of the hallucinogenic state;

2. The socio-cultural context in which the music is recorded and performed, including the manner in which the musicians project and control their image, musical heritage, and reputations – or allow these factors to influence their approach to recording and performing;

3. The incorporation of imaginative, inward-looking, and spiritual themes in both sounds and lyrics (what Whiteley calls “sound-shape”) to convey the contemplative quest for meaningful, alternative perspectives and insights that are often associated with deep meditative states, including those induced by LSD and other hallucinogens;

4. The use of sound-shape to communicate a clear set and setting for the psychedelic atmospherics conveyed through the musical, lyrical, and cultural stylistic cues that inform the recording or performance;

5. The evocation of the sublime to render the awesome, transcendent, and often ineffable elements of the psychedelic experience.

The Music of Highasakite

“This band would be like KEY to everything in the late 60s. It might even be today” (Saturnmoonatalantis, comment on YouTube page, Highasakite 2012).

To illustrate how these various elements contribute to the psychedelic veneer of a particular song or collection of songs, I would like now to examine some of the work of the contemporary Norwegian indie pop band, Highasakite, focusing chiefly on their second album, *Silent Treatment* (2014) and, to a somewhat lesser extent, their third, *Camp Echo* (2016). While the group's other two albums (to date) – *All That Floats Will Rain* (2012) and *Uranium Heart* (2019) – are hardly devoid of psychedelic interest, *Silent Treatment* and *Camp Echo* are, to my mind, the most illustrative of the expanded compendium of psychedelic musical qualities outlined above.

The group's name provides a clear and immediate clue to their musical and socio-cultural orientation. As its members have frequently stated in interviews, Highasakite derived their name from a line in the Elton John and Bernie Taupin song “Rocket Man”: “And I’m gonna be high as a kite by then” (Håvik 2013, inter alia). While this clichéd visual image fits rather innocuously into the song’s narrative of space travel as everyday occupation, it also conveys connotations of drug use (Dalzell and Victor 2007, 331). The band's adoption of this phrase as their name can therefore hardly be considered inconsequential, given the provocative nature of its semantic history. Moreover, their cover of John's “Rocket Man” on Norwegian television in March 2015 reinforced this aspect of Highasakite’s image. Partially shot through a fish tank, with visuals that sometimes swirl and drift in and out of focus, the band's performance is imbued with appropriately atmospheric sci-fi phrasing, as well as psychedelic texturing from the synthesisers and vocals throughout, with frontwoman Ingrid Helene Håvik sporting a shimmering sky-blue coiffure (Highasakite 2015). The staging for the performance is, in fact, equally suggestive of a nostalgic late '60s environment as of rocket travel and outer space, which were often associated in that era with psychedelic experience (Bromell 2000, 145).
In an interview with *Ja Ja Ja Music*, Highasakite’s percussionist and co-founder, Trond Bersu, states that Highasakite’s ambition for their 2014 collection, *Silent Treatment*, “was to make music that would put us and hopefully the listener in a certain mood, to create images for the listener and make an album with depth – an album you can listen to several times and still discover something new” (Bersu 2014). In a subsequent interview, guitarist and horn player, Kristoffer Lo, explains that Highasakite’s music has been influenced by their native environment – mountains, fjords, snow, cold, harsh weather – to which Håvik, the band’s lead vocalist, songwriter, and other co-founder, adds “solitude” (Håvik and Lo 2014). Thus, the band were clearly alert to certain psychedelic elements, including set and setting, intimations of the sublime, and a depth of sound that would reflect imaginative contemplation, during the creative process for their second album.

The cover art for *Silent Treatment* is suggestive of the collection’s orientation. It consists of a black-and-white photograph of Håvik, lying on her side, gazing towards the camera. Her eyes are slightly closed, in sadness or sleepiness; however, with “Highasakite” and the album title inscribed directly above her face, one cannot help but associate her semi-closed eyes and dreamy expression with the possibility of her being “high as a kite” and in wordless reverie. Yet, there are no overt drug references on the record, nor encouragement for their use. The pivotal piece on the album, “Lover, Where Do You Live?” served as both opening track on the recording and the band’s opening number in live performances in 2014–2015. It likely represents the apogee of Highasakite’s psychedelic eloquence, at least in the sense of the analysis outlined in the theoretical part of this study and, for this reason, it will be useful to examine its psychedelic qualities in some detail.

Thematically, the song evokes a missing lover whose abode is, paradoxically, nowhere and everywhere in the vast expanse of “sky”, “clouds”, and “ocean”. This lover is at once physical (“And if I ever see you again, my love / All I’m ever going to do is send shivers down / That spine of yours”), while simultaneously universal and cosmically diffuse (“In the sky, in the clouds, in the ocean”). Thus, the setting rendered by the music evokes the transcendent expansiveness of the lover’s realm. The song opens a cappella, rhythmically unmoored in a hesitant *tempo rubato*, suggesting the temporal elasticity of this topos. Øystein Skar’s faint, sustained synth tone becomes audible mid-bar and is immediately joined by Marte Eberson’s piano and Lo’s bowed guitar. The instrumentation intensifies in the second verse, with additional synth tracks. The piece’s texture becomes richer still in the first iteration of the chorus (“And if I ever see you again, my love”) with the addition of helium-light, electronically distanced backing vocals, soon accompanied by Lo’s flugabone intoning a step-wise upward movement, preparing the way for Håvik’s dramatic, full-octave, upward swoop in the phrase “All I’m ever gonna do-ooo.” Bersu’s softly malleted cymbals enter the mix almost imperceptibly in the third verse, amidst even more panoramic ostinati and harmonies that generate a buzz of tones and overtones, creating a wash of sound, even as the lyrics invoke a half-hearted, more down-to-earth wish for the everyday domestic comfort of “couch”, “stove”, and “backyard”. This sonic saturation dissipates briefly with Håvik’s next repetition of the refrain, her voice cloaked with heavy echo, supported momentarily by a thinner, quieter soundscape: Eberson’s vamp figure on piano; Lo’s horn rising in the distance, as if heralding something eventful; and the growing sizzle of Bersu’s cymbals.

It is at this moment (2:04) that the band introduce their most powerful, peak “orchestral” sound. The volume of the recording increases, as we hear a flood of multi-tracked instrumentation of various timbres and an electronically generated choir of overdubbed, harmonised, and phased vocals flowing seemingly from everywhere. On the word “ocean”, Bersu’s bass and large tom enter the mix, augmenting the sound-shape still further. In live perfor-
manances of the song, the band’s bright white stage lighting intensifies, broadens, and rises to spotlight first the group as a whole, then the entire audience, reinforcing the sense of unity and oneness, as well as the synesthetic fusion of sound and light, conveyed by numerous aspects of the song’s sound-shape (Highasakite 2014). This rich, orchestral-style arrangement continues through several repetitions of the anthemic chorus, with unique bits of background vocals and instrumental riffs continually entering and fading away, with the hiss of Bersu’s cymbals building to an intense climax in every fourth bar, a burst of shimmering sound that recalls surf breaking on the ocean’s shore. On the fourth repetition of the chorus, the lead vocal ceases and the rest of the band gradually fade, drifting off into technologically altered musical space. On the last repetition of the refrain, we hear only Håvik’s lead vocal, Eberson’s piano, Lo’s bowed guitar, and Skar’s soft, sustained synth tone with which the song began. The guitar and synthesiser soon cease, leaving only Eberson’s piano figure backing Håvik’s final repetition of the last line in the chorus. In the end, we hear only Eberson’s counter-melody slowing to the slightly hesitant tempo rubato with which the piece opened.

The harmonic structure of “Lover” reinforces the extent to which the song is attentive to its emotional “set” and the singer’s sublime vision of her universal lover. Arguably in E♭major, the composition’s incomplete harmonic progression revolves around the scale’s IV, V, and vi chords, without ever settling on the tonic. Melodically, the vocal begins on the dominant (B♭) and ends on the subdominant (A♭). Thus, both harmony and melody remain “up”, floating, and unresolved, reflecting the singer’s uncertain longing for both the beyond and the hominess of a “couch, and a stove, and a backyard”. The question of the lover’s whereabouts also remains unresolved, with its focus directed towards natural spaces that are boundless, that challenge the understanding and reasoning to comprehend their realms, eventually giving way to the awe that characterises the sublime.

Thus, we hear in “Lover, Where Do You Live?” a full gamut of psychedelic stylistic cues – layered, distorted, and otherwise manipulated or unusual sonic tropes depicting the perceptual alterations and synesthesia of the hallucinogenic state – as well as an imaginative, inward-looking theme, a clear establishment of set and setting, and an evocation of the sublime typical of the awesome and transcendent elements of the psychedelic experience.

The presence of psychedelic stylistic cues is so pervasive throughout the other nine songs on the album that I will not attempt to catalogue them all here. Of particular note, however, is the technique of progressively increasing the intensity of a song to an aural apo-
gee, before returning through a gradual diminuendo to a soft landing, mirroring the psychological trajectory of an LSD session – a variation (with the crucial inclusion of a diminuendo segment) of the progressively thickening sonic texture of the “cumulative” or “terminally climatic” forms that characterise much post-millennial rock (Spicer 2004; Osborn 2013). The arrangements of several of the tracks on Silent Treatment begin quietly, build up to (often burst into) glittering crescendos and sound collages, then gradually diminish in intensity to conclude softly and reflectively. The album’s fourth track, “Hiroshima”, its sixth, “I, the Hand Grenade”, and its tenth, “Science and Blood Tests”, all feature this structure.

The thematics of Håvik’s other songs on Silent Treatment render set and setting and imaginative, inward-looking points of view well. The singer is troubled by a missing man or boy in “Since Last Wednesday”, with images of vandalism and weapons in what appears to be a typical suburban setting. In “Leaving No Traces”, Håvik fuses the aftermath of domestic violence with a post-nuclear dystopia. As in “Lover, Where Do You Live?”, the implications of this doubly determined scenario are cosmic: “The earth is the universe’s eyes / And you sett-
led for peace, but got nuclear war / And bashed in the eyes of them all.” In “Hiroshima”, the setting is again an existentially threatening one: “Why should I know, why should I care? / That a tiny little thing like the sun will once be gone.” Her response to this insight is to flee, but inward, imaginatively down into the earth with a shovel, popping up in Portugal, before arriving in Hiroshima, which she mistakes for heaven (“just like earth only upside down”). In “My Only Crime”, the singer’s inner gaze takes the form of a dream in which she is a child of the Devil, who rides off to war on a horse. Thematically reminiscent of Highasakite’s earlier work, this track has a lighter aural veneer than the other pieces on the album, though the multi-tracking of Håvik’s vocal, heavy with reverb, and the exotic sound of her zither, accompanied by a distant electronic drone, give the song plenty of psychedelic atmosphere.

In “I, the Hand Grenade”, Håvik again merges personal domestic conflict with geo-political threats, staged “Right here in suburbia”, as she identifies herself as a terrorist, parasite, and ultimately a personified hand grenade, who bashes into furniture, bursts, and brings out the worst in her lover. “Darth Vader” evokes a hybrid childhood fantasy world of space travel and slaying dragons. In “Iran”, Håvik lays out a heavily ironic, complex moral position concerning the conflict between Western sexual freedom and the laws of radical Islam in a piece awash in Eastern timbres. “Iran” contains the album’s sole mention of intoxication, bringing “some booze” and going “on a bender”, although this image is hardly presented in a positive light. “The Man on the Ferry” presents another oneiric fantasy, in which the singer is “on top of the world”, but in “well-known catastrophia[?] lands”, and follows the ferryman with “a penny on each of [her] eyes” to the “far end of the world”. This imagined deathly voyage is “as close as the stars to the moon” and “as far as the mountains to the moon” and evokes vast spatial realms. “The Man on the Ferry” is uniquely psychedelic among the tracks on Silent Treatment for two reasons. First, its aural texture contains a number of sounds that can best be described as bent: wobbly background vocals and distorted, twangy instrumentation that suggest an elasticity of present time, both backed throughout by a persistent electronic buzz. Second, following more than five minutes of silence tacked onto what is ostensibly the album’s final song (“Science and Blood Tests”), we hear a reprise of “The Man on the Ferry”, played entirely backwards, a clear nod to the 1960s – possibly even to the Beatles’ Revolver, where we hear backward vocal and instrumental tracks, and references to “pennies on your eyes” (in “Taxman”) and how the psychedelic experience “is not dying”, among other references lifted verbatim from Leary, Metzner, and Alpert’s Psychedelic Experience in that album’s final song, “Tomorrow Never Knows”.

“Science and Blood Tests” closes the album’s official playlist, with an evocation of the end of the world, when “all the trees will fall”, “all the birds have flown”, and the singer might be “the only lover left”. In this sombre restatement of the idea of the absent lover that opened the album, we hear some of the collection’s lushest psychedelia, with lavish layers of sound, including heavy reverb on both the lead and the soaring background vocals.

While Silent Treatment as a whole benefits from a kind of afterglow of the sublime psychedelic experience that is enacted in the album’s opening track, the nuclear and environmental apocalyptic visions that are repeatedly invoked throughout the recording suggest a more nuanced manifestation of the sublime, ideas that are almost too overwhelmingly frightful to be conceived and definitely too horrific to be rationally understood.

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1. This is not the only direct echo of 1960s and early 1970s musical psychedelia in Highasakite’s oeuvre. The blend of “physical and cosmic eroticism” suggested in “Lover, Where Do You Live?” recalls Jimi Hendrix’s line “Scuse me while I kiss the sky” in “Purple Haze”. And the “growling, pulsing” instrumental arrangement on Camp Echo’s “Chernobyl” recalls that of Pink Floyd’s “Welcome to the Machine” (Russell Reising, email message to author, 26 January 2018).
This subtle transformation of the sound-shape of the sublime from that of an emotionally positive transcendence of the everyday to an ominous vision of catastrophe and terror does not diminish the aesthetic pleasure rendered in the album’s psychedelic musical effects, for, as Lyotard observes, one still relishes the “intensification of being that the [sublime] event brings with it” (1991, 92).

This unnerving quality of the sublime prefigures the more overt disturbing mood of Highasakite’s 2016 offering, *Camp Echo*, which Eberson describes as “dark, electronic pop music” (Håvik and Eberson 2016). Indeed, while enhancing their psychedelic sound still further in this collection – in part, through the use of “hundreds” of recording tracks in an effort to create sounds “never heard before” (Bersu, Lo, and Vestrheim 2016) – the vibe of much of this material is both more aurally intense and intellectually distressing. The album’s title refers to one of the seven detention areas at the Guantanamo Prison (Håvik 2016). Håvik has claimed that the events of September 11th, 2001, the Iraq War, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), the threat of environmental disaster, and a “godless existence” had a great impact on her compositions for the album (ibid.). To support this thematic goal, the songwriter integrates several extratextual references into *Camp Echo* that situate the album’s heavily layered auditory approximations of sensory psychedelia squarely within a present-day socio-cultural context. In the album’s opening track, “My Name Is Liar”, Håvik incorporates words from a speech by former U.S. president, George W. Bush (2001), while assuming a cynical mantle of world politics gone awry. To reinforce the album’s interest in the effects of war on the individual psyche, she draws on the unsettling account of the Second Battle of Fallujah during the Iraq War by ex-U.S. marine, Grant Collins (Collins 2008; Håvik 2016). We hear Collins’ words in the eerie “My Mind Is a Bad Neighborhood” (“We started lighting up the city like you wouldn’t believe”), amidst an ominous arrangement containing electronically generated siren shrieks, distorted samples from two-way radio communication, and Håvik’s metallic, upwardly swooping vocals at the conclusion of the song’s final chorus. Unlike her soaring octaves in “Lover, Where Do You Live?” these vocal gestures convey panic rather than ecstatic longing. Lyrics in “Someone Who’ll Get It” and “Golden Ticket” reprise the first two lines of a poem by Norwegian writer Gunvor Hofmo, a woman deeply scarred by the Nazi occupation and the death of a friend at Auschwitz during World War II. Hofmo’s poem begins: “Gud, hvis du ennå ser: / det er ingen hverdag mer” (1946, 39 – “God, if you’re still watching / there’s no more everyday”). Håvik explains that “It’s a very famous verse, and was used a lot around the time of the Norwegian terrorist attacks [in Oslo and Utøya, 2011]. The song is very much about escapism, both escaping yourself and the world; just wanting to get high and get out” (quoted in DerwS-werve 2016).

If the majority of *Camp Echo* is ironically upbeat in terms of sound and tempo, two tracks are decidedly not so. The album’s fifth cut, “God, Don’t Leave Me”, opens with a slow digital keyboard figure, followed by the most intimate (and unadulterated) lead vocal on the album. The singer softly petitions a seemingly silent God in a moment of late-night suicidal panic: “God, don’t leave me, I’ll freeze / A needle is a shitty way to leave”. The song develops in three stages and, as is typical of many of Highasakite’s parabolically cumulative arrangements, progresses from a soft, ruminative overture to a fuller, larghetto choral uplift (in this case, followed by several bars of soaring synth tracks), then a return to its deceptively serene instrumental point of departure. The vocal effects an unnerving moment as the singer wearily beseeches the absent divinity for “only but a second of your time”, which immediately precedes the entry of an expansive choral refrain, as if underscoring the distressing sublimity of God’s awesome silence. The vocal pace of the album’s concluding track, “Cher-
nobyl”, is also slow, even dirge-like, though backed by a faster electronic ostinato that adds tension to the song's tempo. Like “God, Don't Leave Me”, the piece begins relatively quietly, though with swelling siren effects and an ominous, spatially shifting synth riff. Håvik's voice, channeling that of a homeless person, is slightly distorted and slurred, as she tells her “baby” about a dream in which the latter left her “a bottle of wine” and a “note”, then departed. The PTSD in this case is not occasioned solely by war, but by nuclear disaster. Recapitulating the overarching theme of the subject's sense of existential guilt, the singer identifies herself with “the bomb” (as she does with the hand grenade on Silent Treatment). The instrumental tracks intensify as the piece progresses, with Bersu's booming drums and Lo's slashing guitar licks punctuating the heavily electronic chorus. As the song develops further, we hear electronically distanced backing vocals and an increasingly full, synthetic sonic wash. As the piece winds down, the singer's bad dream mercifully ends, but gives way to an even more ominous conclusion – to the song and to the album: “I dream of nothing”. Once again, the sonic layers thin before fading to silence.

This brief review of some of Highasakite's work from 2014 through 2016 reveals a spectrum of ways in which the sound-shape and extra-musical wrapping of a pop band's idiolect can recall the psychedelic experience. Moreover, the sound-shape of this work is sonically dense enough to “[reward] repeated listenings” (DeRogatis 1996, 10) and lyrically stimulating enough to “offer something for the intellect” (ibid., 12) – a sound-shape that frequently suggests a sense of unity and oneness, the transcendence of time and space, deeply felt emotional and psychological insights, and an atmosphere of reverence and awe, as well as routinely evoking a set and setting as the point of departure for its cumulatively soaring and corresponding gradual descents. As such, much of Highasakite's oeuvre constitutes a particularly rich example of post-millennial psychedelic music in a spirit that recalls that of the genre's earliest proponents, but technologically and culturally updated for the current era.

**Psychedelic Affordances**

“The best psychedelic music achieves the same effect without drugs” (Led Zeppelin's John Paul Jones, quoted in DeRogatis 1996, 189).

But can we still refer, properly speaking, to the psychedelic interest generated by the music of artists such as Highasakite as an instance of what Whiteley terms psychedelic “coding”? Middleton notes that “codes set limits to meaning – 'objective possibilities' – while at the same time they leave open a space within which the operation of other elements in the music, its context and reception, can pull them into a more specific place in the network of social meaning” (1990, 32). These musical elements “do not lose the overall parameters of meaning which they bring with them, but the precise meanings these take on are orientated through the new context in which they find themselves” (ibid.). In other words, the coding that Whiteley and others have delineated in relation to the psychedelic rock of the 1960s and the years following has gradually lost its earlier “precise meaning[s]”, as the “objective possibilities” inherent in this coding have evolved with the cultural context in which the music is presented and heard. Further, as Moore remarks, the “sense that audiences make of music does not result from the decoding of any previously encoded message, but from the making of sense, by listeners, within a range afforded by the music they receive” (2001, 191). It is these affordances with which this study is mainly concerned, the extent to which music reflects the psychedelic experience to those listeners who are predisposed to identify it as
such on the basis of the music’s lyrical and sonic rhetoric and its context. It is, therefore, more accurate to refer to these elements as psychedelic affordances rather than codes: qualities of the music, its presentation, its accompanying extra-musical material, and other paratextual signifiers that encourage listeners to identify (and identify with) music as psychedelic amidst ever-shifting socio-cultural contexts.

Along these lines, William Echard has recently argued that since the “features … originally linked to psychedelia have become so widely distributed in popular music as to be unmarked”, psychedelia in contemporary pop requires a focus on “examples that have a self-consciously applied neopsychedelic aspect … cases where the music is presented as something that should be heard within the lineage of psychedelia” (2017, 229). In addition, it is important to note that popular music from the 1960s is still relevant, not only from the point of view of nostalgia but because the “cultural attitudes that enabled the formation of the music [are] still prevalent” (Moore 2001, 192). Indeed, as John Covach observes, the “hippie aesthetic” that sought alternative modes of living was in great part a response to suspicions concerning “government, schools, churches, big business, the military, and the police” (2006, 256), all of which are still germane to post-millennial counterculture, even if their associations with 1960s drug culture are greatly attenuated. Thus, although the idea of psychedelic ‘coding’ to disclose meaning clearly and directly to its original intended audience may no longer obtain, embedding these tropes in music that presents itself as “something to be heard within the lineage of psychedelia” (Echard 2017, 229) allows for its reception as psychedelic “within a range afforded by the music” (Moore 2001, 191). This music will not resonate in the same way for every listener, of course, but these affordances prompt those listeners who are predisposed to the psychedelic sound-shape – whether through pure nostalgia or in response to contemporary socio-cultural circumstances that mirror those of psychedelia’s original context – to hear it as such.

Citing Friedrich von Schiller, Battersby remarks à propos of the sublime and terror(ism) that we are “‘ravished by the terrifying’”, but this rapture can engage us in a “‘spiritual mission’” that leaves phenomenal reality behind” (Schiller 1966, 199, quoted in Battersby 2007, 21–22). This “mission,” Battersby adds, commenting on observations from Karlheinz Stockhausen, pushes the subject beyond the “everyday” and towards “resurrection” (2007, 22). Thus, the fearful apprehension of terror(ism) itself can drive us outside ourselves in search of some kind of transcendence, some kind of uplifting “ecstatic merging” (Reising 2009, 525) in the face of otherwise terrifying, ineffable experience, whether in rapturous joy or an “intensification of being” (Lyotard 1991, 92) that leads to a “displacement of the ego” (Battersby 2007, 1) and a transcendence of the everyday, whether that reality is lived in joy or in suffering, in solace or in fear. Herein lies the intrinsic value of the psychedelic experience, a potency recently recognised in the resurgence of interest in the medical use of the drugs that induce this state to treat a variety of disorders, including addiction, depression, PTSD, and end-of life anxiety in the terminally ill (Pollan 2018, inter alia). Insofar as psychedelic music – across its half-century lineage, but perhaps especially in the post-millennial contemporary neopsychedelic recordings and performances of artists such as Highasakite – reflects this experience, it can offer listeners who are predisposed to its affordances a soundtrack that engenders an interest in matters of the spirit, “meditative innerness”, and “even the fate of the species” (Reising 2009, 525) for those who seek it. As Highasakite suggest in the sound-shape of Camp Echo, however, this is not the “naïve and hopeful innocence of psychedelia” in the 1960s (Covach 2006, 329), but a more sober search for peace of mind in a world under increasing environmental and existential threats, where the promise of a bright future and the reassurance of the everyday have become less and less convincing.
Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Claire Rebecca Bannister, Kai Arne Hansen, and Russell Reising for their important contributions to this study.

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