


5-2002

Why Is America So Blue? A Performance Analysis of the Blue Man Group that Demonstrates the Deeper Cultural Significance within the Structure of its Performance

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**WHY IS AMERICA SO BLUE?
A PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS OF THE BLUE MAN GROUP
THAT DEMONSTRATES THE DEEPER CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE
WITHIN THE STURCTURE OF ITS PERFORMANCE.**

By

Sean A. Fidler

B.A. University of Maine, 2000

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

(in Theatre)

The Graduate School

The University of Maine

May, 2002

Advisory Committee:

Thomas J. Mikotowicz, Associate Professor of Theatre, Advisor

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Thesis Advisor: Dr. Thomas J. Mikotowicz

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented
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The performance artists known as the Blue Man Group have taken America by storm in their performances through the clever use of household products ranging from Twinkies to toilet paper and not through the traditional presentation of a play script. The Blue Man Group started in the late 1980's as three mute, bald-capped street performers clad entirely in black except for their heads, necks and hands that were covered with cobalt blue paint. Keeping the blue body paint but moving off the street, the group has grown and they have now established themselves in legitimate theatres in four major cities across the country: New York, Boston, Chicago, and Las Vegas. However, the group has not limited themselves to just the stage for performances. They have established themselves on the Internet and they have become the commercial television "spokespeople" for the computer chip company, Intel, and its *Pentium III* and *Pentium 4 Processors*. Also on television, they have appeared on the national news network CNN (Cable News Network), *The 2001 Grammy Awards*, and the late night talk show *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*. The Blue Man Group makes all of these audiences feel

right at home as they are bonded together by PVC pipe drumming and the knowledge that they are connected by indoor plumbing.

Articles and reviews have been written about them in local magazines and nationwide periodicals from WHERE/BOSTON to TIME Magazine but none delve into the overall structure and the cultural significance of the Blue Man Group performances. In fact, this research has revealed very little criticism and skepticism. No one has attempted to do a structural or cultural analysis of their performances in order to explain their grand cultural significance.

Current performance theory holds that there is liminality in theatre or rather that the line between ritual and theatre is often obscured. The Blue Man group has taken this idea and tried to shape a theatre performance into a ritual so that people may experience it more readily. Furthermore, the group has combined drama, dance, and multi-media to ritually bring the spectators into the common kinship of humanity by artfully constructing a postmodern, Dionysian comedy. They have taken an approach geared toward the mass market in order to spread the word of these experiences.

This study will begin with an introduction which focuses on the thesis and theories. This will be followed by Chapter 2 which describes a history of the group, its marketing approach, and a description of their performance. Chapter 3 contains several sections but begins with an introduction to Postmodernism, which is followed by a section on Theatre Anthropology and an application of its concepts to the Blue Man Group Performers. The following sections explore the connections between ritual and theatre using Semiotics and Performance Theory that demonstrate how the Blue Man

Group's show demonstrates these connections. The final chapter, Chapter 4 applies the results of the study to culture and discusses the significance of the group.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE THESIS AND THE THEORIES

The performance artists known as the Blue Man Group have taken America by storm in their performances through the clever use of household products ranging from Twinkies to toilet paper and not through the traditional presentation of a play script. The Blue Man Group started in the late 1980's as three mute, bald-capped street performers clad entirely in black except for their heads, necks and hands that were covered with cobalt blue paint. Keeping the blue body paint but moving off the street, the group has grown and they have now established themselves in legitimate theatres in four major cities across the country: New York, Boston, Chicago, and Las Vegas. However, the group has not limited themselves to just the stage for performances. They have established themselves on the Internet and they have become the commercial television "spokespeople" for the computer chip company, Intel, and its *Pentium III* and *Pentium 4 Processors*. Also on television, they have appeared on the national news network CNN (Cable News Network), *The 2001 Grammy Awards*, and the late night talk show *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*. The Blue Man Group makes all of these audiences feel right at home as they are bonded together by PVC pipe drumming, and the knowledge that they are connected by indoor plumbing.

Articles and reviews have been written about them in local magazines and nationwide periodicals from WHERE/BOSTON to TIME Magazine but none delve into the overall structure and the cultural significance of the Blue Man Group performances. In fact, this research has revealed very little criticism and skepticism. No one has

attempted to do a structural or cultural analysis of their performances in order to explain their grand cultural significance.

Where does one start an depth, all-inclusive study? What approach or approaches should be taken to study the Blue Man Group? A traditional text based approach describing the plot, character, and meaning of the text might focus on Aristotle's six elements of drama: plot, character, diction, thought, song and spectacle. However, once the performance is broken down into elemental forms, it is still not enough for a full explanation of the Blue Man Group's cultural significance.

It is important to recognize from the start that the Blue Man Group's show is a non-traditional, postmodern performance. A working definition of postmodernism could describe the performance as non-linear, multi-cultural, interdisciplinary, and intergeneric, and it contains separate yet simultaneous events. Such postmodern aspects demand an interdisciplinary approach in order to reach a better understanding of the performance. This interdisciplinary approach will provide understanding by looking at the performance from analytical and cultural perspectives using Theatre Anthropology, Performance Studies, Semiotics, and a knowledge of Postmodernism. Works by Eugenio Barba, a theatre anthropologist, contain information vital to understanding the skill of the performers. Barba's A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology: The Secret Art of the Performer, and The Paper Canoe offer the techniques to understand the training of the performers and how he or she functions onstage. Semioticians, such as Marshall Blonsky, or experts in Performance Studies such as Richard Schechner outline techniques to study and draw conclusions on the cultural significance of a performance. Some works in the field of semiotics are Theatre Semiotics (de Toro), The Semiotics of Theater

(Fischer-Lichte), The Semiotics of Performance (De Marinis), A Sociosemiotic Theory of Theatre (Alter), Theatre as Sign-System (Aston and Savona), and A Semiotics of the Dramatic Text (Melrose). Richard Schechner's Between Theatre and Anthropology, Ritual, Play and Performance, and his essay on "Drama, Script, Theatre and Performance" offer the techniques to study a performance and its structural function in a culture. Matei Calinescu and others offer knowledge of Postmodernism in The Five Faces of Modernity and other such works.

In his books, The Paper Canoe and A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology: The Secret Art of the Performer, Eugenio Barba examines what characteristics make-up a good performer. He explores the techniques that the performers use to create their performance as well as how they captivate the audience through their mere presence. Barba takes a worldview, studying performers from all over the globe. This global approach has helped him to comprehend the performer and to analyze aspects of performance techniques by describing a recurrence of principles. Barba has identified the following six recurring principles of the performer: *Daily and Extra-Daily Movements*, *Balance in Action*, *The Dance of Oppositions*, *Consistent Inconsistency and the Virtue of Omission*, *Equivalence*, and *A Decided Body*. He goes on to describe the performer's energy and presence, correlating how each recurring principle can be used to explain the process whereby an audience is directed or dissuaded from a particular performer. Barba is the current director and a co-founder of the International School of Theatre Anthropology. It is here that he studies and researches these techniques. He puts them into practice by mounting his own productions with the world-renowned theatre troupe the Odin Teatret. Barba's works on the training and use of the body by performers is

directly applicable to the Blue Man Group performers. By using Barba's analytic approach of the six recurring principles of the performer, it will be possible to determine the skill and training of the Blue Man Group performers. It will also demonstrate a correlation between Blue Man Group training and non-western performance traditions of training.

Semiotics is the scientific dissection of word and gesture that makes it possible to understand the cultural significance within a given audience. Semioticians diagram the words and gestures that the performers utilize in order to demonstrate how they are culturally embedded in the audience. That is to say, when a certain gesture and/or word is performed in a certain manner, the audience has a pre-programmed response to it. This is significant because it demonstrates something about the culture of the audience. The effective use of these words and gestures, either consciously or subconsciously, by a performer or performers also provides some insight into how they are culturally significant. By studying closely the semiotics of the Blue Man Group performance, it is possible to determine what is culturally significant about them and their audience.

Anthropologists Victor Turner and Colin Turnbull, and Performance Studies theorist Richard Schechner, have attempted to draw correlations between the ritual and theatre based on the structure of the performances. Victor Turner explores the similarities in structure in his essay "Are there Universals of Performance in Myth, Ritual and Drama?" Turner and Colin Turnbull explore the transformations of participants in performance from a normal mundane state to an "other worldly condition," known as liminality. They also describe characteristic separations between performances that are liminal events, such as carnivals and rituals, and their secular counterparts drama and art.

Drama and art are examples of liminoids, events that appear liminal but are more of a false image of the other worldly events. Applying the concepts of liminality will demonstrate how the Blue Man Group performance functions culturally as a liminoid event, but moreover, why its functioning in this way illustrates a deeper meaning for the culture that it exists in.

Schechner illustrates the correlative elements between ritual and theatre such as the performance space and costuming. Schechner has also codified an approach to analyze the structure of a performance by breaking it down into four parts: *drama*, *script*, *theatre*, and *performance* and describing how they function within an overall performance event. *Drama* is a “written narrative, text, score, scenario, instruction, plan or map. The drama can be taken from place to place independent of the person who carries it.” *Script* is defined as “all that can be transmitted from time to time and place to place; the basic code of the event. The script is transmitted person to person and the transmitter is not a mere messenger; the transmitter of the script must know the script and be able to teach it to others.” *Theatre* is set down as “the event enacted by a specific group of performers; what actually occurs to the performers during production. The theatre is concrete and immediate. Usually the theatre is the response of the performers to the drama and/or script; the manifestations or representation of the drama and/or script.” The last category, *Performance*, is defined loosely as “the whole constellation of events, most of them passing unnoticed, that takes place in both performers and audience from the time the spectator enters the field of the performance—the precinct where the theatre takes place—to the time the last spectator leaves.”¹ This codified approach will

¹ Richard Schechner, “Drama, Script, Theatre, and Performance,” Essays on Performance Theory 1970-1976 (New York: Routledge, 1988) 39.

yield the overall cultural significance of Blue Man Group, incorporating all of the other findings of the research and applying them within the context of the current culture.

Thus, this study will begin with a description of Blue Man Group's performance and a documentation of their history and success. This will provide a written image that can be analyzed using the various approaches. Following this will be a discussion of Postmodernism that will provide a broader understanding of the aesthetic of the performance and also provide the evidence needed to take a non-traditional approach to uncovering the cultural significance of Blue Man Group's performance. The research done in the field of Theatre Anthropology will follow and will provide analytical tools used to study the casting, training, and skill of the performers. Next, a semiotic approach to the signs and symbols will yield their cultural meanings. Finally, taking these meanings and placing them in the context of a ritual or theatrical performance will demonstrate how they are imbedded in the structure of the performance. The combination of these approaches will demonstrate that Blue Man Group combines drama, dance, and multi-media to ritually bring the spectators into the common kinship of humanity by artfully constructing a postmodern, Dionysian comedy.

Chapter 2

THE HISTORY AND MARKETING OF BLUE MAN GROUP FOLLOWED BY A PERFORMANCE DESCRIPTION

A History of Blue Man Group

So how did Blue Man Group grow to be so large and successful? A history of the group's creation and how the performance has evolved over the years can best answer this question. Blue Man Group started simply as a group of friends who met on Sunday afternoons in New York City in the mid-1980s to discuss art. As Chris Wink, one of the founding members, stated in an article in the New York Times, the group wanted to create:

This wonderful bistro salon scene, where all the beat poets would have congregated to the heir to Warhol's Factory, the heir to the Algonquin round table, the Left Bank, all would fuse together. Scientists would surely be meeting with people interested in New Wave, and the John Cages and Joseph Beuyses would be lecturing weekly.²

This group that later became Blue Man Group, formed Sunday salons in the style of their influences: the Algonquin Round Table of the 1910s; Warhol's Factory of the 1960s; and the Left Bank in Paris for more than two centuries. Each was a center of art and culture where artists and writers of all genres met to discuss and critique current approaches and ideas. Wink's reference to New Wave refers to pop music that is rooted out of "Punk" and blends style with electronics and art. This interest in discussing art, in the manner of John Cage and Joseph Beuyses (who were both highly influential artists and theorists in

² Vicki Goldberg, "Arts & Leisure: High Tech Meets Goo with Blue Man Group," New York Times Sunday 17 Nov. 1991: Blue Man Group on the World Wide Web <<http://www.blueman.com>>

the last half of the Twentieth Century) led them to create the group and, of course, the character of Blue Man out of their own Sunday salons.

The character of Blue Man was used in creating and performing short, public, improvised, haphazard bits, advocating against and poking fun at the pretentiousness of art and mass commercialism. One of the first major performances of this kind was of the three Blue Men holding a mock funeral for the decade of the 1980's in 1988 in Central Park. The funeral consisted of the burial of postmodern architecture, yuppie TV, and deconstructionism. In another street performance, Blue Man Group set up an outdoor dance club in front of the Copacabana where people danced around freely without any music.

In 1990, John Howell, a critic, from the journal Artforum International, took notice of them when they performed *Simultaneous Moments* in the basement performance space of Franklin Furnace located in New York City's lower Manhattan. Howell described several bits in his article. Some of which are still seen in the current performances by Blue Man Group. One of the bits is the intermittently viewed silhouettes of the Blue Men playing a "mock-epic theme" behind screens. Another, is "a take-off of Jenny Holzer's LED signs." Some bits performed were of different things oozing from their chests. Also, there was "New Agey" musical accompaniment on new instruments. At this time, only a single individual, Larry Heinemann, and not an entire band performed with them. There was also an overall emphasis of how tubes connect the human race. Howell unfavorably compared the group to Buster Keaton, an early silent film star, whose deadpan expressions, he claimed, were much better than those of the Blue Man Group. He also maintained that the shock value and antics were not nearly as

good as those performed by the Kipper Kids, another performance art group. He criticized the group as having an apparent “self-congratulatory smugness” at these antics and finally stated:

While not without a certain charm, this approach and the willy-nilly, string-of-beads structure made the performance feel like a series of interminable gimmicks (although the whole thing was only about 40 minutes in length). Blue Man Group needs stronger ideas if it is to work up any real shock value from its colorful, pseudo-outré acts.³

About a year after performing *Simultaneous Moments*, the group had made some changes and was now performing *Tubes*, the name of their current off-Broadway success, at the La Mama Cabaret Theatre. Lynn Swanson, of High Performance, reviewed the performance. *Tubes* contained many of the bits from the Franklin Furnace performance, such as the mock epic in silhouette, the Jenny Holzer-like LED signs, musical accompaniment and oozing goo. However, for this performance, Blue Man Group added a new instrument made of PVC piping, as well as a feast of Twinkies that they shared with a female audience member. The PVC instrument was used for percussion and lit-up as they played it. They also created a painting by literally spitting paint balls out of their mouths onto canvas. Additionally, a sculpture was created by one of the Blue Men spitting out cheese pellets. The Blue Man then placed a price tag of \$4,000 on it with the intention of it being sold after the performance.

Technical and performance demands had forced the group to start growing as well. It was no longer three Blue Men and a single musician but three original Blue Men,

³ John Howell, rev. of “Blue Man Group at Franklin Furnace,” Artforum International 28, Apr. 1990: 178.

two musicians, and a fifteen-person tech crew with a bigger use of the performance space:

La Mama's cabaret space was crowded with tables and festooned with dangling industrial tubes and huge rolls of paper toweling.... The stage was crammed with drums, props, table and chairs, more tubes, three screens hanging upstage and a marimba-like 'tube-a-phone' in three parts that Blue Man called "the PVC instrument."⁴

Swanson's final analysis of the performance positively described it as an "elusive brotherhood" for the audience.

The character of Blue Man has evolved over the years. The group maintains, without giving a reason why, that the cobalt blue body paint was an accident and that it has no meaning. However, they also say it is used to "transcend race and sex and could be any religion, putting Blue Man beyond the reach of styles and categories."⁵ It is also commonly known that the color blue signifies spirituality in modern art such as in Yves Klein's "living brush" paintings. Also, the Blue Men characters talked occasionally early on but now are mute and don't show emotion. They communicate through music, art, and streaming messages that represent their thoughts which are sometimes read aloud by an offstage voice or sometimes just read by the audience. The three Blue Men in each performance now work as one entity with three bodies.

Swanson must not have been the only critic who liked the performance because by November of 1991, Blue Man Group had established themselves at the Astor Place

⁴ Lynn Swanson, rev. of Tubes, by Blue Man Group, High Performance 14 summer 1991: 50.

⁵ Vicki Goldberg, "Arts & Leisure: High Tech Meets Goo with Blue Man Group," New York Times Sunday 17 Nov. 1991: Blue Man Group on the World Wide Web <<http://www.bluman.com>>

Theater in New York City with their soon-to-be smash hit, *Tubes*. The group proceeded to establish themselves in theaters in Boston, Chicago and, most recently, in Las Vegas. The small public performances in their earlier career have now evolved into the larger, scripted, seamless, ritualistic concerts created from the techniques of artists they parodied. The additional material has caused the cast to expand again and again; however, the original members still perform. Blue Man Group has grown from three friends sitting around talking about art and performing in the streets to employing more than 300 people with performances in major theatres. Aside from these open-ended runs in the four major cities, the group has been broadcast nationwide on network television on the 2001 *Grammy Awards* and on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* nine separate times.

Marketing

As of 2002, all the productions were still running to sold-out performances in each of their four respective cities across the country. This expansion of Blue Man Group into four separate cities caused the group to expand and create its own production company, Blue Man Productions, based in New York City. So how did a group of three street performers create a multi-million dollar commercial business with several hundred employees? Perhaps, they understood marketing and how to create an image that would sell. This understanding of creating and marketing an image is based on the background of the three founding members: Matt Goldman, Chris Wink, and Phil Stanton. Matt Goldman has an MBA and was an independent software producer for seven years. Chris Wink, who had been friends with Goldman since the age of 12, was a waiter, drummer in

post-punk bands, and worked synopsizing articles covering art, science, and trends for a Japanese magazine. Wink met Stanton as a fellow waiter at a catering “gig.” Stanton is the son of a Pentecostal minister and was a member of a children’s theater in Savannah, Georgia.⁶ Among the three of them they were able to create an appealing performance led by a iconic figure known as Blue Man. The image of the Blue Man sells it all. A loveable blue-skinned creature whose behavior and actions are like those of an innocent child. This is the image that they wanted to create and it manifests itself wonderfully on the marquis over their theatres. In the posters, there are enormous, curious eyes staring out into the world set against a sea of cobalt blue skin.

Once the image of the Blue Man was in place, the group used savvy marketing strategies to get the word out. These strategies often went against traditional marketing practices. For example, in Chicago the group created a series of mock ads to bring in spectators.

Several months before opening in Chicago, Blue Man Group began a “prank” ad campaign by placing ads in local papers for shows that did not exist. The idea was to make them as ridiculous as possible and yet still seem believable.... As opening night approached, Blue Man Group began placing real advertisements for the new show in the space next to the fake show advertisements. Over time, the Blue Man characters began to walk out of their own ads and into the others.⁷

In Las Vegas, Blue Man Group used different approaches to bring in spectators to the performances.

⁶ Vicki Goldberg, “Arts & Leisure: High Tech Meets Goo with Blue Man Group,” New York Times Sunday 17 Nov. 1991: Blue Man Group on the World Wide Web <<http://www.bluman.com>>

⁷ http://www.bluman.com/feature/fake_ads.shtml

Not that they're reinventing the game of Vegas marketing. Blue Man billboards are all over town, and the troupe gave away tickets to cabdrivers and hotel employees to help kick-start the buzz. It worked: the show is doing better than 90% of capacity, and surveys reveal that more than 20% of those who attend are locals—who don't come to the strip for just any washed-up Motown act.⁸

The creation of the Blue Man image and their savvy marketing strategies not only brought them visibility but all the success they have achieved.

A Performance Description



Figure 1. Blue Men with Drumbone⁹

Blue Man Group's performance, *Tubes*, is comprised of three mute, bald-capped performers with blue painted heads and hands, clad entirely in black who create an entire performance by drumming on plastic plumbing pipes, mocking performance art and

⁸ Richard Zoglin, "Pipe Dreams on the Strip: Blue Man Group Arrives, and Vegas Gets a Little Bit Hipper." *TIME* 24 Jul. 2000: Blue Man Group on the World Wide Web <<http://www.blue-man.com>>

⁹ http://www.blue-man.com/image/briars_drumbone.jpg

popular culture, and bonding the audience together while doing it. The three blue bald-capped performers are called the Blue Men and they never speak over the course of the ninety-minute performances but communicate through drumming on plastic plumbing pipes (known as PVC), a series of blank stares, streaming video and messages, and by creating mock reproductions of art. The PVC piping is used to create drums that vary in size and shape in order to produce a variety of tones. Some of the drums change shape to give an even larger variety of tones while others change color with the changes in tempo and rhythm. The Blue Men have blank expressions on their faces throughout the entire performance. Their large penetrating eyes are made even larger by the blue face paint they wear. These eyes actively take in everyone and everything around them.

The group creates mock reproductions of performance art such as Jenny Holzer's LED signs and Yves Klein's *Anthropométries de l'époque bleue* that function in part as parodies of modern art and in part as the action, thoughts, and diction (words) of the performance. Jenny Holzer is a "political appropriation" artist who came to prominence in the decades of the late 1970s and 1980s. Political appropriation artists were artists who:

...wanted to intervene directly in events, serving as agents for social change.... Jenny Holzer, a participant in the "Times Square Show," appropriated the vehicles of advertising and graffiti for an ironic personal expression that undermines the stereotyped messages in the media. She started her "truisms" in 1977, printing (and later electronically encoding) phrases such as "Murder has its sexual side," "Raise boys and girls the same way," "Abuse of power should come as no surprise" on posters, flyers, T-shirts, hats and then electronic signs. Holzer's manipulation of "almost" familiar phrases displaces the clear presence of a personal voice—the words seem impersonal, underscoring the essential emptiness of the media and the strange isolation of people from one another in this society of mass-culture clichés.¹⁰

¹⁰ Jonathan Fineberg, *Art Since 1940: The Strategies of Being*, (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1995) 463-464.

Blue Man Group mockingly reproduces these signs by using a mounted digital message board to talk to the audience and to lead it in portions of audience participation. During one section of the performance, Blue Man Group uses the message board to lead the audience in a rendition of the Pop song, *White Rabbit*, by Jefferson Airplane. It is played to a beat provided by the three Blue Men on one of their PVC drums. “*White Rabbit* is released on June 24 (1967) and will hit #8 (on the Billboard LP charts). With its enigmatic drug references and re-tooling of *Alice in Wonderland*, the song becomes an anthem for the psychedelic era and counter-culture.”¹¹ At another point in the performance, the three Blue Men stand side by side each holding a set of messages that they simultaneously show the audience. They change messages at the sound of a beep so that the audience can only read one message at a time. At another point, the three Blue Men again stand side by side, but this time, with digital message boards that represent their thoughts, in order to deconstruct a fish.

A running display of their thoughts about contemporary art, in this case a fish pretending to be a trompe l’oeil painting, reads as if Jenny Holzer had invaded their unconscious, and a woman’s voice gives an anesthetized tour of fractal geometry, which she thinks resembles paisley ties.¹²

Yves Klein was a French a nouveau realist painter of the late 1950’s and early 1960’s. Blue Man Group parodies his “living brush” paintings.

The most celebrated public performance of his “Living Brushes” was on March 9, 1960. Attired in Blue formal wear and his ceremonial cross of the Order of St. Sebastian (an ancient fraternity of knights he had joined), he appeared before a seated audience at the Galerie Internationale d’Art Contemporain. He

¹¹ Jefferson Airplane/Starship History/<http://www.starship.pp.se/history/part1.html>

¹² Vicki Goldberg, “Arts & Leisure: High Tech Meets Goo with Blue Man Group,” New York Times Sunday 17 Nov. 1991: Blue Man Group on the World Wide Web <<http://www.blugman.com>>

gestured to the orchestra, and they began to play his *Monotone Symphony*—a single chord held for twenty minutes, followed by twenty minutes of silence. He gestured again and three naked women came out, smeared themselves with blue paint, and, under his direction, pressed their bodies against sheets of white paper on the floor and wall. Klein never touched the work, remaining at a pure, “immaterial” distance.¹³

Blue Man does a parody of Klein’s works by taking an audience member, hanging him upside down, painting him blue and pressing him against a piece of paper. All of this is performed backstage and filmed and shown to the audience via an onstage projection screen. These parodies that include those of Jenny Holzer and Yves Klein form the structure of the performances by functioning as the thoughts, words, and actions of the Blue Men.

If these examples are just partial moments of the performance of *Tubes*, then what does the whole performance look like? A full description of the performance must start outside the building of the theatre, then move inside to the lobby, into the audience section, and continue, finally, onto the stage. The performance begins outside the theatre on the walls of the building and on the sidewalks that are covered with blue handprints and footprints. On the marquis over the entrance to the theatre are two giant eyes of a Blue Man’s piercing gaze. Many returning visitors are also gathered outside to get rush tickets. Overall, their mood and behavior is similar to one that is attending a tailgate party for a sporting event, rather than a traditional, elegant evening of theatre. They are eager and excited to see their beloved Blue Man Group again. These returning visitors are also extremely friendly with each other and to newcomers with their jovial conversation and by happily and insistently ushering these newcomers and other ticket

¹³ Jonathan Fineberg, *Art Since 1940: The Strategies of Being*, (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1995) 226.

holders to the front of the line. There is a sort of camaraderie formed among the spectators before they even enter the building.

The lobby is the next step farther into the performance space. Melissa Erickson, a reviewer for the Downer's Grove Reporter describes the lobby:

The lobby looks like the laboratory of some mad scientist run amok, with elaborate industrial tubing snaking its way along the ceiling and down the walls. Grab hold of a piece and listen to the sounds that emit from it, from classical music to clogging champions. The foyer's eye-popping extravaganza includes playful visual images competing for your attention and illuminated silver torsos emerging from the walls.¹⁴

This elaborate lobby design immediately engulfs the spectators in the world of the Blue Man character.

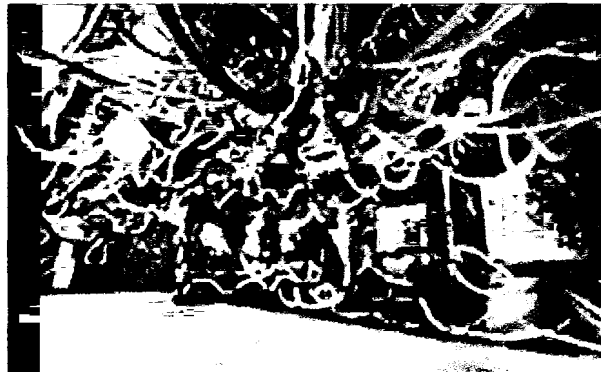


Figure 2. Blue Man Group Lobby¹⁵

The performance and set décor extends from the lobby into the audience. The house lights are on to reveal huge industrial pipes going all around. Large white tubes

¹⁴ Melissa A. Erickson, "Out of the Blue: Blue Man Group Simply Sensational," Downers Grove Reporter Friday 16 Jan. 1998: Blue Man Group on the World Wide Web <<http://www.blue.com>>

¹⁵ <http://www.blue.com/image/lobbypan/wide.jpg>

are attached to the ceiling horizontally, and rolls of toilet tissue are on rollers suspended overhead and behind the auditorium seating. The stage is more or less bare except for sections of scrim, a curtained-off area, and a projection screen. There is an electronic message board on stage right hanging in such a way that it can be read by the whole audience. Lighting instruments can be seen hanging about the theatre. Upon entering the auditorium, each spectator is given a piece of toilet tissue that he or she is supposed to tie around his or her head. The audience members in the first few rows of the orchestra seating section are provided with ponchos. The mood of the audience ranges from anticipatory anxiety, for those who have not seen the performance, to outwardly expressed cheers of fanaticism, from the audience members who have returned to the performance in an almost cult-like fashion.

The performance begins with the house lights on and with messages on the electronic message board pointing out members of the audience and leading the entire audience through visualization exercises as audience participation. At the end of the audience participation, the house lights go down and the introduction to the show begins as one Blue Man silhouette appears behind a screen, drumming. Then another Blue Man silhouette appears next to the first in his own silhouetted box, followed by a third, both join in the drumming. The light and silhouettes bounce individually from one to another, showing only one Blue Man at a time. Eventually, one of the members appears to grow an extra appendage because, as he is drumming with two hands, a third hand appears drinking a soda and smoking a cigarette. Soon the scrim is lit to reveal all three Blue Men drumming in silhouette. As the drumming reaches a climactic end, the scrim is raised to reveal the Blue Men. Next, they begin drumming again but this time they pour

paint on the drums to create splatter painting on a hanging canvas nearby. Then, the Blue Men disappear and a scrim, high up on stage right, reveals a backup band composed of a drummer, a bass player, and two electric guitarists. The band is revealed in dim black lighting and wears crazy glow-in-the-dark costumes so that they appear not to be human. When the band appears, a video begins on the screen and displays a sort of canal or tunnel with the three Blue Men inside it. A lighting effect occurs, something like a flash, and the three appear to emerge from the movie screen. The emerging Blue Men begin to behave with a sense of curiosity and discovery, the feelings that they convey for the remainder of the performance.

Once they “emerge” from the screen, the Blue Men engage in a number of short bits that range from the discovery of certain audience members to a sing-a-long, and finally, to a dance party. The first bit that occurs after the emergence is the discovery of a gumball machine, filled with paintballs (usually used for mock fighting with paintball guns) and a bowl of marshmallows. One Blue Man tosses marshmallows into another’s mouth until it is completely full. When his mouth is completely full of marshmallows, he spits it all out onto a plate to create an instant sculpture. Then he places a price tag of \$4000 on it to denote it as modern art. Another of the group catches paintballs in his mouth and then spits them onto a canvas, where they break and spread paint, to create another work of art. The group is about to do an even larger painting using a giant slingshot and paintballs when latecomers arrive into the theatre. They stop their activities in order to bring one of the latecomers, a woman, onto the stage. This woman is always a “plant.” They dress the woman in blue garb to denote her as one of them and then treat her to a meal consisting solely of Twinkies. Each Blue Man tries to impress her with a

series of silent comic gags with the Twinkies. Then goo, supposedly the digested Twinkies, starts oozing out of the woman's blue garb and then out of each of the Blue Men. After the trick, the woman is returned to the audience.

The Blue Men's interactions in the audience continue at another point when they start crawling all over the audience, in between the seats, exploring who or what is watching them. The parody of Yves Klein also starts with one of these ventures into the audience when the Blue Men take a member of the audience backstage, hang him by his feet, paint him blue and make a giant blue imprint on a large piece of paper. The audience is able to view these actions on the onstage screen that is being fed the images by a camera backstage. The same audience member reemerges later in a mold of Jell-O that explodes all over the audience in the first few rows of the orchestra seating. These "front row" audience members are at times covered by messy material from the stage such as the goo from the Twinkies that burst from the woman and the Blue Men as described earlier, "squirt(ing) snakes of (squished) banana," as well as splattering paint from another portion of the show.¹⁶ In one bit, the Blue Men eat bananas that spurt from their stomachs. In another portion of the show, paint is splattered on canvas and on some audience members as the three Blue Men drum on paint covered kettledrums.

More drumming occurs on the stage with the use of their instruments made from PVC piping. The playing of the PVC instruments always begins with slow experimentation on each instrument to convey a sense of discovery of each one's sounds and functions. Some instruments change in shape while others change in color. The

¹⁶ Kim Hubbard, "Master of Splatters May Turn Your Mood Indigo: You Ain't Seen Blue Till You've Seen Blue Man Group Get Offbeat Off Broadway." *People Weekly* 8 Jun. 1992: Blue Man Group on the World Wide Web <<http://www.blue.com>>

change in shape, however, lead them all to produce different tones. Sliding the pipes in and out of one another, to make them longer or shorter, changes the shapes of the instrument and alters the tones produced when drumming on them. The Blue Men gradually explore the different tones of each instrument and begin to play distinct rhythms using these different tones. While playing one of the PVC instruments, the Blue Men produce the rhythm and tonality of the 1967 psychedelic "pop-song," *White Rabbit*, by Jefferson Airplane. This particular instrument also changes colors in a psychedelic fashion, producing a hypnotic trance effect according to the musical rhythm that is being played. As the Blue Man Group continues to play the rhythm, the band begins to play the melody of *White Rabbit* along with them. The digital message board comes on, displaying the lyrics to the song, and encouraging the audience to sing along.

During a different section of the performance, the group simulates information overload. They create this overload by using the one mounted digital message board to instruct and lead the audience. At the same time, each of the Blue Men holds a digital message board in his hands to display his thoughts on a fish. In a similar section, each of the Blue Men simultaneously holds up a series of messages that the audience is supposed to read. The audience is told to read only one set of messages and is only given enough time to do so before a beep is heard and the next series of cards is shown.

They simultaneously flip through three stacks of posters too fast for the audience to read all the messages at once; these run from such tidbits as, "a weekday edition of The New York Times contains more information than the average person was likely to come across in a lifetime in 17th-century England" to, "once again you have chosen the wrong poster to read. While the people next to you read useful information, you are stuck with the equivalent of junk mail, as usual."¹⁷

¹⁷ Vicki Goldberg, "Arts & Leisure: High Tech Meets Goo with Blue Man Group," New York Times Sunday 17 Nov. 1991: Blue Man Group on the World Wide Web <<http://www.blue-man.com>>

Popular culture reveals itself in the show in the form of food and a short film. Blue Man reveals the popular culture aspect of food by eating and playing with common household food products such as Twinkies, as mentioned earlier, as well as Captain Crunch cereal. As a critic Hubbard stated, “they perform a symphony for teeth and Captain Crunch cereal.”¹⁸ The Blue Men perform a percussive rhythm by crunching their Captain Crunch cereal at varying degrees of volume. More popular culture is revealed by a film that is reminiscent of air raid and nuclear holocaust films that would have been shown to students in schools during the Cold War decades of the 1950s and 1960s. It begins by speaking about a series of lines that twist and turn to connect everyone in the country together. The audience is first led to believe that the film is speaking about phone lines or the Internet only to be “lambasted” with the film’s true subject, indoor plumbing. The film illustrates how everyone is linked to one another through indoor plumbing.

All these bits lead to an ultimate climactic concert. The lights are lowered and black lights are turned on while the large white tubes that were hanging horizontally throughout the show, are given color by the black light and dropped to a vertical hanging position to be spun around. A few other lights flash and circle around to create a sense of a “rock concert.” The Blue Men and the stage crew hand the rolls of toilet tissue to the audience, which unrolls all of it down to the orchestra seating level, forming a “sea of toilet tissue.” The Blue Men return to the stage and begin dancing. Everyone is encouraged to get on his or her feet and dance along with the Blue Men, to a popular

¹⁸ Kim Hubbard, “Master of Splatters May Turn Your Mood Indigo: You Ain’t Seen Blue Till You’ve Seen Blue Man Group Get Offbeat Off Broadway.” People Weekly 8 Jun. 1992: Blue Man Group on the World Wide Web <<http://www.blue.com>>

dance club tune. The unconventional dancing by the Blue Men consists of ground stamping and erratic, yet rhythmic, waving of their arms.



Figure 3. Toilet Paper Dance¹⁹

As the dancing slows down, the three Blue Men revert back to the way they started. They reenter the movie screen tunnel and journey back to their silhouetted positions and finish with one last bit of drumming. The drumming ends, the lights come up, and the performers take a curtain call. During the curtain call, each of the three Blue Men remains in character. The rest of the performers: the band, the camera man, and the crew all bow as themselves. The audience exits, but as they do they encounter the three Blue Men, scattered about the lobby, still in character. The Blue Men sort of give out autographs as cobalt blue kisses on the cheek or as a blue “print” from their hands or fingers on paper as souvenirs of the show that they call “bleshing.” Bleshing is a word

¹⁹ http://www.blue.com/theatres/charles_paper.jpg

they created from two words: *blend* and *mesh*. The word was inspired by Theodore Sturgeon's novel, More Than Human.²⁰

Blue Man Group's production of *Tubes* is performed in three separate cities: New York, Boston, and Chicago. The group also has another production running in Las Vegas at the Luxor Hotel called *Blue Man Group – Live at Luxor*. However, though the show has a different name, one reviewer remarked how the show has not changed much from the original *Tubes*.

The three bullet-headed blue men with the deadpan insouciance of Buster Keaton have changed hardly at all. They still do the trademark bits from their quirky, eight-year-old off-Broadway show: tubes of paint are poured onto a drum, and the resulting splashes form instant abstract art; an audience member is dragged onstage to join the Blue Men in a Twinkie banquet, which gets icky when the cream filling bursts out of their stomachs. But the stage at the Luxor Hotel, where Blue Man Group has been playing since March, is four times the size of the troupe's entire theater in New York City, and the show has become Vegas-big as well. A third of the material is new--neon figures come to life onstage in one Western-themed bit--and the pipes-and-percussion music is a more prominent part of the show. The crowd reaction is bigger too--wild and happy, like a rock concert.²¹

²⁰ Vicki Goldberg, "Arts & Leisure: High Tech Meets Goo with Blue Man Group," New York Times Sunday 17 Nov. 1991: Blue Man Group on the World Wide Web <<http://www.bluman.com>>

²¹ Richard Zoglin, "Pipe Dreams on the Strip: Blue Man Group Arrives, and Vegas Gets a Little Bit Hipper." TIME Magazine 24 Jul. 2000: Blue Man Group on the World Wide Web <<http://www.bluman.com>>

Chapter 3

THE POSTMODERN AESTHETIC AND THE HIDDEN CULTURAL ASPECTS WITHIN THE BLUE MAN GROUP PERFORMANCE

A Postmodern Aesthetic

Blue Man Group's performance would be classified aesthetically as Postmodern and it is in this spirit that a cultural analysis can be made. There are two major obstacles in classifying the performance as Postmodern. The first obstacle is that there are varying theories on what Postmodernism is. However, for the purposes of this paper, Postmodernism will be defined as a multicultural, interdisciplinary approach using the combined definitions of Matie Calinescu, Oscar Brockett and Ortega y Gasset. None of the three definitions contradict any of the other two, but each offers other characteristics pertinent for creating a working definition of the Postmodern aesthetic. The second obstacle is that their performance is often confused with Modernism, Avant-garde, Decadence, or Kitsch because of the differing theories on what Postmodernism is as an aesthetic. An understanding of each aesthetic will show that the performance is Postmodern and that any confusion would derive from the characteristics each aesthetic shares with Postmodernism. Modernism can be defined as being anti-authority, anti-elite, and progressive. Avant-garde shares these three characteristics with Modernism but is much more militant and extreme and often self-destructive. Decadence is an aesthetic of art for art's sake based on the unification of the arts. Kitsch is the creation of art based on whatever is popular at the time of its creation. For the purpose of categorizing the Blue Man Group performance as Postmodern, it is necessary first to disassociate it from these

other aesthetics and thereby aid the definition through descriptions of what Postmodern is not.

A Modern analysis calls for a disassociated viewing of a performance by the viewer in order to find its meaning through a cross-section of the performance. This means that the analysis is done from a purely traditional, formalist, voyeuristic standpoint that dates back as far as Aristotle. The search for meaning has been used by modernists because the modernist viewpoint is one that assumes didacticism is inherent in all works of art in the form of a singular authoritarian meaning. Blue Man Group works contrary to the rules that have been established by Modernism because they may have didactic aspects, but the performance is designed to be an experience as much as it is to find a sought after universal message.

This is not to say that Postmodernism is a complete break from Modernist theory. In his book, The Five Faces of Modernity, Matei Calinescu clarifies the similarities and differences between Modernism and its other faces, namely, the Avant-garde, Decadence, Kitsch, and Postmodernism. A clear comprehension of the differences among the aesthetics is what enables Blue Man Group to be labeled Postmodern. Calinescu states that "Postmodernism is a face of modernity. It reveals some striking likenesses with modernism (whose name it continues to carry within its own), particularly in its opposition to the principle of authority, an opposition that now extends to both the utopian reason and the utopian unreason that some modernists worshipped."²² Blue Man Group is both Modern, but moreover Postmodern in its opposition to the principle of authority, the accepted norm of criteria on which art is critiqued in any given period of

²² Matei Calinescu, The Five Faces of Modernity, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987) 312.

history, especially in Modernism. The group breaks with Modernism, today's principle of authority, in order to create its performance. However, this makes it very similar to the Avant-garde, its mistaken "twin."²³ It does this by shaping its performance with parodies of modern artists. Calinescu states: "we may think of the avant-garde as, among other things, a deliberate and self-conscious *parody of modernity*."²⁴ Blue Man Group parodies several prominent performance artists over the last half decade. For example, the group performs parodies of Jenny Holzer and LED signs, and Yves Klein when they take the audience member backstage and hang him up by his feet, smear paint all over him and toss him against a canvas. They mock instances of process over product in the creation of artwork by spitting out marshmallows and then selling the resultant sculpture for \$4,000. This can be seen as an Avant-garde jab at the Modernist movements known as Dadaism and Decadence.

However, one should not be duped into thinking the whole performance is Avant-garde. They also revel in their use of pop-culture such as eating Twinkies and Captain Crunch Cereal and leading the entire audience in a Blue Man rendition of the song *White Rabbit* by Jefferson Airplane. It is these instances that keep Blue Man Group from being labeled Avant-garde because of the elitist and militant tendencies of the Avant-garde movements against popular culture. But these pop culture references are also what may confuse the group as being Kitsch, "the popular code that it conspicuously uses can also make postmodernism look very much like kitsch or camp, with which its adversaries

²³ Matei Calinescu, The Five Faces of Modernity, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987) 312.

²⁴ Calinescu, The Five Faces of Modernity 141.

deliberately identify it.”²⁵ This idea of Kitsch also aids in keeping Blue Man Group from being considered Decadent, “postmodernism’s refined eclecticism, it’s questioning of unity, and its valuation of the part against the whole in this fin de siècle may remind one of the “decadent euphoria” of the 1880s.”²⁶

Oscar G. Brockett, a theatre historian, presents another viewpoint on postmodernists who “collapsed categories which under modernism had been treated as distinct; boundaries were breached between the sexes, the arts, cultures, dramatic forms, and performance styles.”²⁷ Blue Man Group fits this description of Postmodernists as well. The arts and performance styles boundaries are crossed when they create paintings by drumming and when they create marshmallow sculptures through the clowning technique of catching food in one’s mouth. The group says the blue body paint is used to “transcend race and sex and could be any religion, putting Blue Man beyond the reach of styles and categories.”²⁸ Thus, another way to view this is that their performance is multicultural and interdisciplinary.

Postmodernism is, as defined by the philosopher, Ortega y Gasset, “anti-elitism, anti-authoritarianism. Diffusion of the ego. Participation. Art becomes communal, optional, gratuitous, or anarchic.”²⁹ The Blue Man Group has already been discussed in terms of anti-elite and anti-authoritarian. Perhaps, the most striking characteristic of Blue

²⁵ Calinescu, The Five Faces of Modernity 312.

²⁶ Calinescu, The Five Faces of Modernity 312.

²⁷ Oscar G. Brockett, History of the Theatre, (585)

²⁸ Vicki Goldberg, “Arts & Leisure: High Tech Meets Goo with Blue Man Group,” New York Times Sunday 17 Nov. 1991: Blue Man Group on the World Wide Web <<http://www.bluman.com>>

²⁹ Calinescu, The Five Faces of Modernity 142.

Man Group, that makes it postmodern, is its approach to art as communal and participatory. The interactive play and audience participation within the Blue Man Group performance is what makes it strikingly postmodern. The audience, sings, reads, dances and creates right alongside the performers making the audience as much a part of the performance as the Blue Man Group performers. This is why the performance appears to be ritualistic and it has been called communal by reviewers. "It was like being in a tribe, performing simple rituals, celebrating the very essence of being."³⁰ "The salon idea had been a response to a yearning for community and communication, a theme that crops up reputedly in 'Tubes.'"³¹

The genesis of BMG (Blue Man Group) was worked out on the streets of Manhattan before finding its way to the Astor Theatre, where attendance has become as much a ritual as what we see on the stage. Many couples plan annual sojourns to celebrate their first night at the show.³²

Therefore, in order to understand a performance such as Blue Man Group, one should employ a postmodern interactive analysis in order to mirror the subject of study. In the case of the Blue Man Group, a holistic analysis would consist of both Modern and Postmodern approaches based on the fact that Postmodernism itself does not separate itself fully from Modernism in its characteristics. Theatre Anthropology provides the tools

³⁰ Erin Auerbach, "Blue in the Face: The Blue Man Group Has Created a Community as Unique as Its Skin Tone." Las Vegas Weekly 23 Mar. 2000: Blue Man Group on the World Wide Web <<http://www.bluman.com>>

³¹ Vicki Goldberg, "Arts & Leisure: High Tech meets Goo with Blue Man Group." The New York Times Sunday 17 Nov. 1991: Blue Man Group on the World Wide Web <<http://www.bluman.com>>

³² Roy Leonard, "Blue Man Group, Feature Review." Roy Leonard's Going Out Guide Oct. 1997: Las Vegas Weekly 23 Mar. 2000: Blue Man Group on the World Wide Web <<http://www.bluman.com>>

necessary for an analysis to be made about the performers' skill, based on a formalistic, Modern, perspective. Combining this approach with the Postmodern approaches of Performance Studies and Semiotics, a holistic analysis can be performed. Performance Studies, and Semiotics depend on the audience present at the performance and its interactivity with the performers to provide social scientific meaning and interactive analysis. These approaches seek to evaluate the cultural significance of a performance as it functions in the present social and cultural context. This is opposed to the Modernist's quest for novelty and progressive ideas that may be contained within a performance.

Uncovering Postmodern Casting through Theatre Anthropology

Theatre Anthropology provides tools for a formalist analysis of performers to determine their skill and level of training. Much of Theatre Anthropology is based on the work of Eugenio Barba who has studied both western and non-western performers and performance styles. Blue Man Group can be studied using the tools of Theatre Anthropology in order to draw conclusions about the skill and training of the performers. This can then reveal what is culturally significant about the way they train.

The skill, training, and structure of the cast and crew are what allow Blue Man Group to reproduce their performances on a large scale. The system that they use to cast is very different from the traditional western casting.

In the American theater students learn techniques appropriate to “approaching” roles, “preparing” roles, “building” characters—all done in school “as practice.” But what is being practiced is not what will be performed later in life. The students may or may not play the same roles after they finish school. But they certainly will not play those roles as practiced: the whole intent of

rehearsals is to find new ways, surprising ways, original ways of playing roles and staging plays.³³

Training of the Blue Men has as much to do with how well they drum and the way they move and look, as it has to do with how well they can deliver a monologue in a unique and individual way. This is to say that they train and perform from what they call a “template.”³⁴

Theatre anthropologists such as Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese have categorized and empirically studied the training of performers in both western and non-western traditions. The intercultural approach to understanding training and casting based on a template or a stylized character created through specific movements, actions, and speech developed by the theatre anthropologists can be used to understand Blue Man Group casting. Barba breaks down the performer’s art and training into recurring principles that he characterizes into six categories of the performer: *Daily and Extra-Daily Movements*; *Balance in Action*; *The Dance of Oppositions*; *Consistent Inconsistency and The Virtue of Omission*; *Equivalence*; and *A Decided Body*. These categories are interconnected and have to do with the movement or shaping of the body-mind of a performer.

Daily and Extra-Daily Movements deal with how the movement of the body or the energy expended in the movement of the body is different in performance than it is in ordinary life. The Daily Movements are every day movements, gestures, and small nuances of behavior that are expressed for maximum result that expend very little effort.

³³ Richard Schechner, *Between Theatre & Anthropology*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985) 222.

³⁴ Aumiller, Tim. Telephone Interview. 7 December 2001.

Daily Movements are socially based and unconscious. The Extra-Daily Movements are the contrast to the Daily Movements; the expenditure of a great deal of energy for a minimal result. The Extra-Daily Movements are often learned as technique and utilized by most dance forms, mime and stylized theatres such as those of Asia. They express a very literal message using the form of the body. In the Blue Man template the performers are trained to express, non-verbally four specific messages: “*What is that?; Oh Shit!; Wait.; Yes this is wonderful or yes that’s it.*”³⁵

Balance in Action is the conscious manipulation of the performer’s balance for use of exuding energy or presence. For Barba, Balance in Action is the “conscious and controlled distortion of balance.”³⁶ Balance in Action is the technique provided by the performer for the expression of different character types in occidental or non-stylized theatre. It functions in other ways for other theatre and dance styles as well. It can separate the school in which a performer studied within a particular performance style as happens with the schools of Kanze and Kita in the Noh drama style.

The Dance of Oppositions is tied closely with the Balance in Action because of Barba’s fundamental view of the essence of a performer. This is derived from his lack of distinction between actors, dancers, and mimes. Balance in Action is the conscious control of movement that is derived from the training of the performer. In training, the performer learns the principles described by Barba as the Dance of Oppositions. Trained performers understand (as do their teachers) the importance of opposites. The use of opposites suggests a conflict and tension between two forces that captivates the

³⁵ Aumiller, Tim. Telephone Interview. 7 December 2001.

³⁶ Eugenio Barba, *The Paper Canoe* (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hill Inc., 1995) 21.

spectator's attention. "The performer's body reveals its life to the spectator by means of a myriad of tensions between opposing forces. This is the *Principle of Opposition*." He cites examples of this principle in practice:

The codified movement system of the Peking Opera is built on this principle: every action must begin from the direction opposite to that in which it will be carried out. All forms of traditional Balinese theatre are based on the construction of a series of oppositions between *keras* and *manis*. *Keras* means strong, hard, vigorous; *manis*, delicate, soft, tender.³⁷

He also mentions that often pain is used as a gauge in the practice of this principle. Many teachers of ballet and other forms tell their students that if the dance position does not hurt then it is not correct because it is not producing that conflict in balance. However, Barba also mentions that they generally footnote the direction with "but if it hurts, this does not necessarily mean it is correct."³⁸ The template of the Blue Man can be seen using something like *Balance in Action* and *the Dance of Oppositions* in the specified movements and actions that makeup a Blue Man performer. Specifically, they demonstrate these principles by the conscience manipulation of tensions in their eyes, neck, and limbs in order to produce the desired emotion or message.

The Principle of Opposition is also very pertinent to the energy of the performer. To work in oppositions is very difficult. It expends energy as well as exudes energy. He mentions that the translation of the Chinese *kung fu* is 'the ability to hold fast, to resist.' Barba believes that *kung fu* can also "be translated by the word 'energy,' the ability to persist in work." This work is manifested in the principle of Extra-Daily Techniques that

³⁷ Eugenio Barba, *The Paper Canoe* (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hill Inc., 1995) 24.

³⁸ Barba, *The Paper Canoe* 24.

“bring into view for the spectator, and therefore render meaningful, one aspect which is hidden in daily behavior: *showing* something engenders interpretation.”³⁹ An example of this in the Blue Man Group performance is the Feast of Twinkies in which the performers are shown eating and squirting Twinkies. This can be given any number of social or sexual interpretations.

The Extra-Daily Techniques that describe something that engenders interpretation extend to all styles of performers and are bound together by the idea of *Consistent Inconsistency and the Virtue of Omission*. The Extra-Daily Movements of a performer are not ordinary movements, rather they are controlled representations of ordinary movements made to stand out to the audience. These movements in both styles of performers, North Pole and South Pole respectively, are inconsistent with the movement of daily, ordinary life. For the trained performer, however, these inconsistent movements combine to make an artistic beauty.

The (North Pole) performer through long practice and continuous training fixes this ‘inconsistency’ by a process of innervation, develops new neuro-muscular reflexes which result in a renewed body culture a ‘second nature,’ a new consistency, artificial but marked with *bios*.... South Pole performers, when they are at the peak of their craftsmanship, know how to overcome the blocks resulting from the artificial situation of the stage and succeed in making their actions and reactions flow, even down to those most minute processes governed by the refined automatisms of daily life.⁴⁰

The fluidity that descends from both the artificiality and the great control over the daily movements is the connection to Barba’s idea of *The Virtue Omission*. He points out that it is not always what happens onstage as it is what is not happening onstage that

³⁹ Eugenio Barba, *The Paper Canoe* (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hill Inc., 1995) 25.

⁴⁰ Barba, *The Paper Canoe* 24.

engages the audience. The virtue of omission is when a performer performs an action but the action continues after the movement through space is complete. An example would be if an actor draws a gun and points it at another actor. The act of pointing does not entail a movement, but it still expresses that an action is continuing because, after the act of drawing the gun, the act of pointing continues in non-movement. Barba cites another way that performers use the Virtue of Omission in a non-western tradition

This way of thinking and proceeding reaches its extreme manifestation in *i-guse*, a particular sequence in Noh. The main performer, the *shite*, is seated in the center of the stage, as immobile as a rock, his head very slightly inclined, while the chorus sings and speaks. To the uninitiated spectator, it seems as if the *shite*'s position is inert and that it does not require any ability whatsoever. The performer, however, is dancing. Inside himself. Technique is negating itself, it is possessed and surpassed. It is theatre which transcends itself. The *i-guse* is called 'the action of silence' or to 'dance with the heart.'⁴¹

Consistent Inconsistency and the Virtue of Omission can be seen in the Blue Man Group's consistent use of mime or non-speech of the Blue Man. The non-verbal curiosity of the Blue Man creates a sort of curiosity for an audience and thus draws its attention to the Blue Man's actions.

The *Principle of Equivalence* is a key principle for analyzing the skill of a performer because it describes how the performer creates through conscience manipulations, something other than a presentation or representation of himself or herself. Barba uses mime as an example of how this principle is expressed by a performer.

⁴¹ Eugenio Barba, The Paper Canoe (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hill Inc.,1995) 30.

The action of pushing something is shown not by projecting the chest forward and pressing down with the back foot – as one does in daily action – but by arching the spine concavely, as if instead of pushing it was being pushed, and bending the arms towards the chest and pressing downwards with the front leg and foot. This consistent radical inversion of the forces characteristic of the daily action produces the work involved in the daily action. It is a fundamental principle of the theatre: on stage, the action must be real, but it is not important that it be realistic.⁴²

The last recurring principle that Barba discusses is *A Decided Body*. He stresses the importance for the performer to work with a whole consciousness and not with a divided one. This means that a performer cannot want to be doing something and doing it wholeheartedly at the same time. “When a performer has learned a second nature, this artificial way of moving s/he appears to have been cut off from everyday space-time and seems to be ‘alive’: s/he is ‘decided.’”⁴³ *The Principle of Equivalence* and *A Decided Body* can be seen in the way that the Blue Man’s movements are specific and provide a distinct character who expresses four basic states or emotions.

After carefully laying out these recurring principles Barba feels comfortable describing the essence of a performer. He breaks it into four parts:

- 1.) in the amplification and activation of the forces which are at work in balance;
- 2.) in the oppositions which guide the dynamics of movements;
- 3.) in the application of a consistent inconsistency;
- 4.) in the breaking of automatisms by means of extra-daily equivalents⁴⁴

These recurring principles are an important aspect to another of Barba goals. He

⁴² Eugenio Barba, *The Paper Canoe* (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hill Inc., 1995) 31-32.

⁴³ Barba, *The Paper Canoe* 33.

⁴⁴ Barba, *The Paper Canoe* 34.

wishes to explain the presence of performers. Every good performer has presence and he believes that the presence derives from the energy or thought of the performer. Essentially, the energy or thought of a performer is skilled mental or psychological manipulation of the environment internally and externally. The performer's mind is able to create, holistically, an artificial environment in the performance space that he or she, in his or her decided body, exists. This mental exertion over the self and the perception of the environment is a mental extension from the performer to the spectator. The performer brings the spectator into the environment and controls the focus of the spectator. A good performer is able to both mentally or psychologically take himself or herself out of (as well as put himself or herself into) focus for the spectator. Barba recounts this exertion of energy and thought by the performer:

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Kabuki performer Kaneko Kichizaemon, in a treatise on the performer's art entitled *Dust in the Ears*, refers to a statement made by Matsumoto Nazaemon: in certain performances, when only one performer is dancing, the other performers turn their backs to the audience, sit in front of the musicians and relax. 'I myself do not relax,' says Matsumoto Nazaemon. 'Even though I am there in front of the musicians, I am performing the dance in my mind. If I did not do so, the view of my back would be so displeasing that the performance would be brought to a halt.'⁴⁵

The strength of the good performer is his or her mind. For Barba, it is important that the world, or at least the theatre world, be able to distinguish between a trained performer and an amateur. His description of energy and his recurring principles define the means for identifying a trained performer. Essentially, a trained performer has a strong mind and a physically disciplined body.

⁴⁵ Eugenio Barba, *The Paper Canoe* (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hill Inc., 1995) 29.

Barba and Savarese have used these studies to attempt to define the presence of a performer. Theatre Anthropology can provide insight to what is really being done when casting and training within Blue Man Group by comparing it to practices of casting and training in the traditions of Eastern cultures. The Eastern traditions put much more emphasis on specific body movements, postures and gestures that range from the use of the legs and feet to the use of fingers and eyes. One eastern tradition that illustrates this is Kathakali in India.

Having mastered a concrete physical score, the artist is free inside this “second nature”—a second nature that has even reconstructed the way he stands, walks, moves, gestures, uses his eyes. And, under the immense costumes and ornate makeup of Kathakali, the artist is doubly transformed, first through training and massage in his basic physical being and then through makeup and costuming in his appearance.⁴⁶

These aspects create the presence for the performer. Blue Men are created using techniques of a similar nature. This is derivative of the need for Blue Men who perform the same role in a performance with a rotating schedule. This systematic molding of the performer into a stylized character is not new to the western theatrical tradition but currently it is very uncommon except perhaps in the cases of ballet and mime.

A specific list of requirements must be met in order to be considered to become a Blue Man. Blue Man Group posted a list of requirement for being cast as a Blue Man on their web-site. They were looking for men or women who fit this description:

- Between 5'10" and 6'1" tall
- Weight proportionate to height
- Excellent drumming skills

⁴⁶ Richard Schechner, Between Theatre & Anthropology, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985) 220-221.

- Excellent acting skills
- Excellent emotional range, meaning the ability to communicate great joy, great wonder and great depth
- Charisma
- Passion
- Eye sparkle
- And...the ability to catch things in your mouth

According to Tim Aumiller, the assistant director of *Tubes* in New York City, Boston, and Chicago (who has been involved in the casting of Blue Man Group), the process of becoming a Blue Man takes several months to complete. The first step is a drumming audition, in which those auditioning are asked to drum a couple of pieces from Blue Man Group's *Tubes*. From those who auditioned, eight to ten percent are selected to go on to the second audition. At the second audition, the auditioners are asked to perform a non-verbal monologue and to express non-verbally the four major actions or emotion of a Blue Man which are:

- 1.) *What is that?*
- 2.) *Oh shit!*
- 3.) *Wait.*
- 4.) *Yes this is wonderful or yes that's it!*⁴⁷

From this group, two are selected to go to New York City for the third phase of the audition. That is where all further auditioning and training takes place. They participate in a two-day workshop and are reviewed by the casting directors and the performer/directors, a group of five men (all trained by the original Blue Men: Chris Wink, Matt Goldman, and Phil Stanton) who perform or have performed the character of

⁴⁷ Aumiller, Tim. Telephone Interview. 7 December 2001.

Blue Man. The next final step in the audition is a two-week, paid workshop that determines who will go into training to become a Blue Man.

The training of a Blue Man takes eight weeks to complete. The first six weeks consists of learning the Blue Man Template that includes learning all the pieces from the show, the music, the timing and tempo of the show, and how to throw and catch food in one's mouth. Field trips are taken to the museum to understand the artworks that influenced and inspired the Blue Man Group creators. The trainees study sixteen hours of filmed footage of Blue Man created by Chris Wink, Matt Goldman, and Phil Stanton and scrapbooks on Blue Man Group created by other Blue Men.

The performers, extensive training physically and musically to learn the Blue Man character is much the same as it is for a performer in Japan to learn the different roles in Kabuki theatre. In fact most of the movements and gestures by Blue Man suggest some correlative examples of training in Eastern traditions. In their book, A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology: The Secret Art of the Performer, Barba and Savarese have compiled a reference guide for studying the techniques of performers. The book emphasizes things like the use of the eyes, face, and hands of a performer. The book also explores performance training techniques and theories.

One of the chapters focuses on the eyes and face of the performer. The eyes of Blue Men are an intricate part of the character they create because their use is greatly emphasized in performance. A Kabuki performer's eye training is just as important in his performance. Savarese describes the function of the Kabuki actor's eyes "one or both of the pupils cross, depending on where the actor wants to direct his, and therefore the spectators' attention. The pupil functions like a telephoto lens, zooming in on a character

shot.”⁴⁸ Each Blue Man uses his or her eyes as a way to orchestrate the performances by directing the audience’s attention in the direction of their gaze. They are essential to displaying the four basic Blue Man character emotions. The marquees, posters, and paraphernalia of Blue Man Group usually emphasize the bright, curious, and piercing gaze of a Blue Man. The strength of the gaze is aided by two factors. The first is that a performer’s skill, can be determined by the use of his eyes. The performance theorist, Vsevolod Emilevic Meyerhold, was quoted with reference to the performer’s eyes:

I can always distinguish a genuine from a poor actor by his eyes. The good actor knows the value of his gaze. With only a shift of his pupils from the line of the horizon to the left or right, up or down, he will give the necessary accent to his acting, which will be understood by the audience. The eyes of poor actors and amateurs are always fidgety, darting here and there to the sides.⁴⁹

The use of the dark cobalt blue face paint used by Blue Man Group aids in the accentuation of the eyes by its contrast to the white of their eyes. Many other theatre forms such as Kabuki, Yakshagana, Kathakali, and different forms of mime utilize makeup in much the same manner. “Mimes use a special (makeup) technique to pull the facial muscles and to carry expressivity beyond the limits of daily and conventional behaviour.”⁵⁰

The character of Blue Man is stylized with the shaping of the body as well. Blue Men appear to have a particular stance from which all their other movements begin. This expresses several different ideas set down by theatre anthropologists. From a technique

⁴⁸ Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese. A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology: The Secret Art of the Performer, trans. Richard Fowler (New York: Routledge Chapman and Hill Inc., 1991) 112.

⁴⁹ Barba Savarese. A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology: The Secret Art of the Performer 109.

⁵⁰ Barba Savarese. A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology: The Secret Art of the Performer 116.

standpoint, they appear to have a resting or starting position. It is based on the position of the spinal column. In The Secret Art of the Performer, Barba illustrates several different positions of the spine for different styles of performance. The stance of a Blue Man is a craning neck extending from a curved spinal column extending from a tucked in pelvis. The legs of the stance are set apart in a wide saddle-like stance with bent knees, and feet that flare out. The arms are bent at the elbow and the forearms and hand reach out above the waist (See Figures IV and V).

Figure 4. Blue Men on PVC Instrument⁵¹

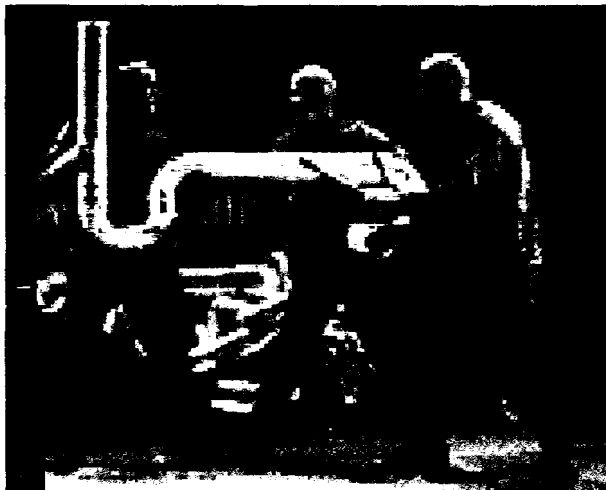


Figure 5. Blue Man Spinal Position



What this stance does besides acting as starting point is that it also expresses the tensions of and the dilation of the body of the performer. This tension and dilation shows an extra use of energy by the performer to hold and to move from that position. This extra use of energy, in forming the body, is called, by Barba, “Extra-Daily Technique.” It helps provide the performer with presence. The stance attracts the audience to the performer.

⁵¹ http://www.blue-man.com/about_bmg/about_music/tubes.shtml

From this stance, there is also the idea of “Pre-Expressivity.” An action of non-movement that shows both an act being presented and works as the point of departure for all other actions.

It is plausible to conclude that Blue Man Group creates the performer’s presence from a non-Western tradition because it is more suitable to the mass production aspect of the show. The creation of presence for the performer and the technique of creating a specialized and stylized character using a template (and not practicing how to create a character) are what allow Blue Man Group to systematically train performers for the same performances with different performers in different venues. And this use of a non-Western tradition to cast and train makes this method Postmodern because it breaches the boundaries of culture.

Connections between Theatre and Ritual Performances

Blue Man Group’s performance has been called ritualistic but what does it mean to be ritualistic? And what is it a ritual of? Performance theorists, Richard Schechner, and anthropologist, Victor Turner, have studied the characteristics that bridge ritual to performance. They believe that by studying the structure of performance one can reach a deeper understanding of the culture of that performance. In Turner’s words: “By their performances shall ye know them.”⁵² These scholars do not conclude that theatre and ritual are the same but that they are interconnected through similar characteristics. In his essay, “Are There Universals of Performance in Myth, Ritual, and Drama?” Turner states: “My argument has been that what I would like to call the anthropology of

⁵² Willa Appel and Richard Schechner, By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 1.

experience (abolishing the sharp distinction between the classical study of culture and sociobiology) finds in certain recurrent forms of social experience (notably social dramas) sources of aesthetic form, including stage drama and dance.”⁵³ Such a precedent allows for one to study a performance and find its correlative underlying currents that make it similar to ritual, a “social drama”, in Turner’s words. The currents of “interrelations” (Turner, Schechner) show culturally reflective elements within these dramas, social or stage. Therefore, Blue Man Group’s performance structure can be studied as a social drama to find the elements that relate it to ritual.

Costumes, makeup, and performance spaces are examples of similar elements between ritual performances and theatrical performances. In his essay, “Magnitudes of Performance,” Schechner diagramed these similarities.⁵⁴ One example in his diagram is a comparison of similarities between environmental theatres, like those created by Blue Man Group, and churches and Ramlila environments. Environmental theatres are theatres that encompass the spectators to make them part of the performance world by extending the setting and or action beyond the confines of the stage into the audience, lobby, or sidewalk etc.

Individuals in both a ritual performance and a Blue Man Group performance can also be compared in terms of makeup and ceremonial garb or costumes. The Blue Man Group obviously wears cobalt blue paint as makeup and black jumpsuits as costumes. The similarity of the costuming and makeup of Blue Man Group correlates to the masks

⁵³ Willa Appel and Richard Schechner, By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 1.

⁵⁴ Richard Schechner, “Magnitudes of Performance,” By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual, ed. Willa Appel and Richard Schechner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 20.

often crafted by performers of ritual that transforms the performers into something other than themselves. A quote, from Blue Man Group's founders, describes this transformation in an early draft of one of their educational handouts.

When we wear a mask, we are freed from our own identities, our own personalities, and own egos. We become less self-conscious. We stop thinking so much. When our attention can be removed from tending to our precious little circumstances, we become open to feelings and actions that are more authentic. All of the energy we normally expend to manage our appearance in the eyes of others becomes available for more creative endeavors.⁵⁵

Liminality: the Difference between Theatre and Ritual Performances

A performance like Blue Man Group's *Tubes* can appear very similar to a ritual in physical characteristics but differ in terms of liminality. Liminality is the "transformation," as Colin Turnbull describes in his essay "*Liminality*," from a "normal, material, mundane or secular condition to a liminal, other worldly, or sacred condition."⁵⁶ Rituals and carnivals would be considered liminal events but drama and art are considered liminoid events. Blue Man Group's performance would be considered a liminoid event. A liminoid event is a liminal one appearance only, functioning more as a reflection of a ritual than actually being a ritual. Further description of the characteristics of liminal versus liminoid events by Turnbull and Turner will show that Blue Man Group's performance is a ritual-like liminoid event and not an actual ritual process towards liminality.

⁵⁵ Blue Man Group, "Blue Man Group Education: Things to Think About/ The Mask." Working draft of educational packet, 7 Dec. 2001.

⁵⁶ Colin Turnbull, "Liminality: A Synthesis of Subjective and Objective Experience," By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual, ed. Willa Appel and Richard Schechner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 77.

Turnbull goes on to describe that the movement from a mundane to a liminal condition is a transformation into a parallel state of being. He uses transformation as a way of describing what occurs in the ritual process. And it is through a conscious effort in engaging in this ritual process that one is able to reach the liminal condition. It is his belief that liminality is:

...A timeless state of being, of “holiness,” that lies parallel to our “normal” state of being, or is perhaps superimposed upon it, or somehow coincides and coexists with it. It may be seen as essentially spiritual whereas “this” plane is essentially material. Liminality is a subjective experience of the external world in which “thisness” becomes “thatness.” It is integrative of all experience; in the liminal state disorder is ordered, doubts and problems removed, the “right” course of action made clear with a rightness that is both moral and structural since the inevitable discrepancies between belief and practice in the external world are among the many problems ordered and removed in the liminal state. It thus provides a charter for individual behavior and by extension, for communal, social behavior. The importance of this liminal state in societies that are aware of it, and have developed techniques for moving in and out of it, or of invoking it, is enormous.⁵⁷

Turner describes these subjunctive experiences of liminality as “framed” events in his essay, “Frame, Flow, and Reflection.” He explains the framing of liminal events:

To look at itself a society must cut out a piece of itself for inspection. To do this it must setup a frame within which images and symbols of what has been sectioned off can be scrutinized, assessed, and, if need be, remodeled and rearranged. In ritual what is inside the frame is what is often called “sacred;” what is outside, the “profane,” the “secular,” or “mundane.” To frame is to enclose in a border. A sacralized space has borders. These may be permanent, in the case of the temple, or situational, as in the case of many central African rituals I have observed where sacred space may be demarcated by an improvised fence

⁵⁷ Colin Turnbull, “Liminality: A Synthesis of Subjective and Objective Experience,” By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual, ed. Willa Appel and Richard Schechner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 80.

or merely by the anticlockwise circling of a tree or cleared areas by ritual adepts.⁵⁸

He suggests that liminal phenomenon were framed as carnivals and rituals that existed in agrarian and tribal societies. At that time, they were functional events that suspended class status and time for such purposes that would ensure a bountiful harvest, as occurs in seasonal rituals. Some rituals that suspended class status did so in order to criticize and, if need be, to change the current infrastructure of that particular society. These can be seen as updating and maintaining the status quo, or acting as the catalysts for change within a particular society.

He compares this to the liminoid events that he says are “historically connected with and often displace rituals which possess true liminal phases.”⁵⁹ The liminoid events frame out aspects and time within a society and can “share important characteristics with liminal processes and states, such as ‘subjectivity,’ escape from the classifications of everyday life, symbolic reversals, destruction—at a deep level—of social distinctions, and the like.”⁶⁰ However, what essentially makes liminoid events different from liminal ones is that they are participatory not obligatory, they function as reflections on a society, rather than existing as necessary functions that maintain or change social orders and structures. Liminoid events serve as societal assessments not as societal actions. Turner points out that in later industrial societies liminoid events are clearly distinguishable from

⁵⁸ Victor Turner, “Frame, Flow and Reflection,” *Performance in a Postmodern Culture*, ed. Michael Benemou and Charles Caramello (Madison, Wisconsin: Coda Press Inc.: 1977) 35.

⁵⁹ Turner, “Frame, Flow and Reflection” 50.

⁶⁰ Turner, “Frame, Flow and Reflection” 50.

liminal events because they are individually constructed in places of leisure such as a theatre to compete for financial gain in the competition for mass audiences.

Blue Man Group's performance is a liminoid experience though it may appear somewhat liminal. The performance is not obligatory, as is the case with most rituals, it is participatory and takes place in a place of leisure. The remnant characteristics of a ritual in the performance are the framed out borders of the theatres' secular walls.

Headbands, given at the beginning, intellectually represent communal bondage. They are not spiritual symbols of sacrifice. Finally, though the Blue Man Group performance comments on the society to which it belongs, it is not an engine or a formalized convention used to create changes within its society.

The shared or remnant characteristics between ritual and theatre are what make Blue Man's Group performance of a secular nature appear as a reflection of a ritual process. The conscious use of ritual elements by the group such as symbols and sacrifice and their semiotic representations are what provide the structure in the pseudo-ritualistic process. With this understanding, Blue Man Group can be seen as consciously and semiotically creating a postmodern liminoid event that appears as a type of bonding ritual attempting to reach, to some degree, a sense of liminality.

Description and Examples of New Ritual Attempts at Liminality

It is improbable that the Blue Man Group is purposefully trying to create a ritual or liminal event, however, there are those who attempt to create New Rituals in order to reach a liminal state. By looking at the creators of New Ritual it may be possible to find similarities between their ritual processes and the Blue Man Group performance in order to discover something about the significance of their performance.

The creators of New Ritual are those who attempt to reach a liminal state of being or another plane of existence by engaging in rituals of their own design, based on those that they have studied. Dr. Felicitas Goodman is a creator of New Ritual and a former professor of Linguistics and Anthropology at Denison University. She states that creators of New Ritual literally seek inspirations for their rituals by going into trances. An example of this is one of the ways that limininal events and liminoid events share similar elements of performance. The inspiration for those elements, however, exists on different planes of existence. Liminoid event elements are based on rational planning, while many liminal events obtain elements of their performances from other liminal experiences. One event used by creators of New Ritual (Dr. Goodman and her colleagues) was the creation of masks.

And if we wanted to create masks, why not go to the Lower World in a trance session and see which being may want to be represented in a mask and what that mask should look like? We tried this approach during our first masked trance dance in Austria in 1985...and it was so successful that we have continued with the same method ever since.”⁶¹

The creators of new rituals and their apparent transformations into liminality can be used later to compare and contrast the liminoidal event of Blue Man Group’s performance through a semiotic analysis of the performance.

A Semiotic Analysis of the Blue Man Group Ritual

In order to understand the semiotic relationship it is necessary to understand the idea of semiotics in art. Semiotician Marshall Blonsky states that: “Semiotics in general

⁶¹ Richard Schechner, The Future of Ritual, (New York: Routledge, 1993) 242.

is the study of signs as signifiers (not content, not signifieds).”⁶² Jindrich Honzl provides a clearer example of how semiotics can be studied in terms of theatre in his essay “*Dynamics of the Sign in the Theater*.” “Everything that makes up reality on the stage—the playwright’s text, the actor’s acting, the stage lighting—all these things in every case stand for other things. In other words, dramatic performance is a set of signs.”⁶³

Schechner has already provided correlative elements for ritual and theatre but now it is possible to see how the theatrical elements appear as ritual elements. For example, the performers are not the only ones who are costumed. Each audience member upon entering is given a piece of toilet tissue to tie around his/her head. It is perhaps this feature that makes the performance so much like a ritual. The headband is a sign that is a signifier of bondage, a symbol of sacrifice inherent in many rituals. Sacrifice is the violence that converges with sexuality and theatre in western traditions.⁶⁴ This sacrificial symbol of violence can also be seen in the exchange of rings in a wedding ritual. Schechner states: “Violence against the body is a strong theme in contemporary art and popular culture.”⁶⁵ Other signs of this symbolic violence in the Blue Man Group performance are the unraveling of the toilet tissue onto the audience members below and the splattering of paint produced by the Blue Men’s drumming.

There are other signs in the performance that allow for the idea of a Postmodern bonding ritual. The group uses the word “tubes” and then proceeds to show how society

⁶² Marshall Blonsky, *On Signs*. (Baltimore, Maryland: John Hopkins University Press) XXVII.

⁶³ Jindrich Honzl, “Dynamics of the Sign in the Theatre,” trans. Irwin R. Titunik, *Semiotics of Art*, ed. Ladislav Matejka and Irwin R. Titunik (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press 1976) 74.

⁶⁴ Richard Schechner, *The Future of Ritual*, (New York: Routledge, 1993) 231.

⁶⁵ Schechner, *The Future of Ritual* 231.

is connected through tubes. Tubes are suspended throughout the performance venue and are representative of the sewers as well as the tubes within each human being such as intestines and veins. When the Blue Men have their Twinkie feast, they demonstrate the symbolic sacrificial violence by having what is supposed to be the digested Twinkie squirt out of the woman. As a result, the woman becomes, in essence, a sacrificial lamb or even a participant in a symbolized sexual encounter.

The big dance party, at the end, is the point when the signs of ritual and the transformation into the liminal-like state finally coincide. The question is: What is this transformation and how does it occur? The transformation occurs by a total breach of the “fourth wall” in order to change the spectators into participants in the process. The ritual signs are created by covering the audience with toilet tissue and by having them dance symbolically in the sewers or tubes. This is signified by the Blue Man Group dropping the big pipes down from the ceiling. The audience is symbolically bonded through the united unraveling of toilet paper. The rhythmic dancing and drumming are how the liminal-like state is approached.

The practitioners of New Ritual have uncovered ways in which the liminal condition can be achieved by going into a trance. For Goodman the preparation for a trance state is done with a rattle being shaken for fifteen minutes during intense meditation.⁶⁶ For the Blue Man Group, the drumming that is present throughout the entire performance is done in a ritualistic mode and, even at one time in the performance, makes reference to pop-culture trance music by playing “White Rabbit.” The dancing within the ritual for Goodman is:

⁶⁶ Richard Schechner, *The Future of Ritual*, (New York: Routledge, 1993) 243.

There is a) an initial ritual in the *kiva*; b) a dance drama on the dance court; c) a metamorphosis dance, where everyone dances to the movements of his/her animal spirit and eventually experiences turning into it; and d) a brief conclusion, a farewell to the Spirits and return to ordinary reality back in the *kiva*.⁶⁷

Blue Man Group's performance is structured in much the same way. The theatre is the *kiva*, the sacred space so to speak, and the ritual initiation is the handing out of headbands to audience. The audience begins the performance by reading the running message board aloud to each other which summons the Blue Men. The dance drama on the dance court is the performance by the Blue Man Group up to the final dance. The metamorphosis dance is the dance party at the end of the show where everyone becomes like the Blue Man dancing to the animistic spirit that exists with each audience member. In other words, the audience members dance in whatever way the music moves them. The farewell to the Spirits in the theatre takes place as the Blue Men exit the stage the way they came in. They reenter the tube/toilet and are flushed back down the tube/toilet. However, this is not totally the end of the performance and return to a normal phase of life. The Blue Men wait outside in the lobby for the audience. As the audience leaves, the Blue Men "Blesh" them with blue kisses on paper, a cheek, or hand. This is very similar to many Christian churches where the ritual masses or services end by shaking hands or being blessed by a priest or minister as the congregation exits.

Blue Man Group attempts to take postmodernism in art to new depths by not only transcending disciplines within art but by transcending the barrier between ritual and theatre performance through a creation of symbols in a performance that refers to

⁶⁷ Richard Schechner, The Future of Ritual, (New York: Routledge, 1993) 243.

ritualistic signifiers. The performance is meant to be a performance and the images that are produced are liminoid reflections of ritual performances. The liminal-like phase may or may not be reached by everyone. There are those who choose to sit back and observe the performance as opposed to those who choose to openly participate in the experience. Whether anyone reaches the liminal phase or not is somewhat immaterial. Transcending the barrier of theatrical performance to ritualistic performance by creating a process in which a person can choose to consciously choose to achieve the liminal-like condition is the goal. Its overall purpose would fit into the Blue Man Group's objective of trying to create a sense of community for people.

Connecting It All with “*Drama, Script, Theatre, and Performance*”

A comprehensive understanding of the cultural significance of Blue Man Group can be aided by the ideas contained within Richard Schechner's essay “*Drama, Script, Theatre, and Performance*.” Schechner's definition of the words *drama*, *script*, *theatre*, and *performance* and how they function within an overall performance event, will help define the overall structure of Blue Man Group's performance and yield its cultural significance. *Drama* is a “written narrative, text, score, scenario, instruction, plan or map. The drama can be taken from place to place independent of the person who carries it.” *Script* is defined as “all that can be transmitted from time to time and place to place; the basic code of the event. The script is transmitted person to person and the transmitter is not a mere messenger; the transmitter of the script must know the script and be able to teach it to others.” *Theatre* is set down as “the event enacted by a specific group of performers; what actually occurs to the performers during production. The theatre is concrete and immediate. Usually the theatre is the response of the performers to the

drama and/or script; the manifestations or representation of the drama and/or script.” The last category, *Performance*, is defined loosely as “the whole constellation of events, most of them passing unnoticed, that takes place in both performers and audience from the time the spectator enters the field of the performance—the precinct where the theatre takes place—to the time the last spectator leaves.”⁶⁸

The *Drama*, in the performance of Blue Man Group, would be the scripted series of bits that occur throughout the show. It would appear more as an outline and list of instructions because there is no dialogue within the performance. A section of the outline or instruction list might read: “take the female latecomer onstage for the Twinkie banquet.” The outline could be travel from one place to another independent by anyone. In fact, the Drama known as *Tubes* has moved from place to place as it was originally established as a performance in New York City, then was established in Boston, Chicago, and, with a few added features, in Las Vegas as well.

The *Script* for the Blue Man Group performances is twofold. One part of the Script of their performance is the transmission of the knowledge of the Blue Man character. This occurs through teaching how to create the character of Blue Man, by existing cast members, to a new Blue Man Group recruit. The training involves learning to create a “second” nature of being, a Blue Man, much like the way the theatre anthropologists describe learning the “second” nature of being in the creation of characters in Kathakali.

The second part of the Script is the transmission of the knowledge of how to

⁶⁸ Richard Schechner, “Drama, Script, Theatre, and Performance,” Essays on Performance Theory 1970-1976 (New York: Routledge, 1988) 39.

perform the Drama by a scholar or teacher. The Blue Man Group performer/directors, people who perform the role of Blue Man but can also teach it to others, teach the trainees. Their teaching functions much like that of a priest or guru by passing on the knowledge of the ritualistic and communal process of Blue Man Group's performance. They teach not only "how" but also "why" Blue Man Group plays *White Rabbit*. The cultural significance of this ritualistic learning is that each Blue Man functions as a priest or guru within the performance. They transmit some of the knowledge contained within the Blue Man Group Drama to the audience.

This transmission of a ritualistic performance Script, in essence, changes the audience from secular spectators into a pseudo-congregation, a Blue Man Group cult, during the Theatre phase of the performance. As the audience is experiencing the Blue Man Group performance, they engage in the ritualistic processes created by the framework active onstage and in the audience. Whether an audience member becomes a member of the Blue Man cult depends on his or her liminoidal experience during the performances. It is a conceptual shift that must occur in order to be fully engaged in the evening's entertainment. It is a shift that is also the necessary means to reach a liminoidal experience. The choice to engage in the process and to return to the performance is what transforms them into a cult-like member of Blue Man Group. Some reviewers have documented both the liminoidal feeling and the existence of a sort of Blue Man Group cult. "It's extraordinary to think that an experience can awaken the senses so acutely that you leave the theater with a heightened awareness of everything surrounding

you, feeling elated, as if given a jolt of vibrant air.’⁶⁹

The Las Vegas production was the third time I had seen the show (which has a kind of cult following that comes back five or six times, as if ranking Blue Men somewhere between the “Rocky Horror Picture Show” and “Star Wars”) and every time, the audience, including me, laughed itself silly at the sneakily wise and eminently clueless, determinedly deadpan glee of the art riffs.⁷⁰

The cult aspect of this performance manifests itself by these sorts of documentations and fit into Schechner’s last category, *Performance*. The Performance exhibits itself by a sort of performing outside of the theatrical or ritual processes. The purchasing and displaying of paraphernalia of Blue Man Group is one such instance of performing outside the theatrical and ritualistic processes. The ritual or religious correlation, for a member of the Blue Man Group cult wearing Blue Man Group paraphernalia, is its similarity to a Christian wearing a crucifix or cross. The Performance continues and the religious aspect is passed on also in this regard if a Blue Man Group cult member attempts to get others to attend the show. This is much like a missionary trying to convert others to his or her religion by inviting them to partake in their liminoidal rituals. The crux of this conversion would be recruiting a newcomer by relating a liminoidal experience in order to draw the person in.

⁶⁹ Erin Auerbach, “Blue in the Face: The Blue Man Group Has Created a Community as Unique as Its Skin Tone.” *Las Vegas Weekly* 23 Mar. 2000: Blue Man Group on the World Wide Web <<http://www.bluman.com>>

⁷⁰ Vicki Goldberg, “Blue Man Joins the Vegas Collection.” *The New York Times* 30 Apr. 2000: Blue Man Group on the World Wide Web <<http://www.bluman.com>>

Chapter 4

CONCLUSIONS ON THE CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BLUE MAN GROUP PERFORMANCE

The Blue Man Group performance has revealed deeper cultural significance as a result of the analysis. This analysis of the performance from different perspectives demonstrated how the Blue Man Group is positioned in terms of aesthetic theory, casting, training, and performance structure. An understanding of where the Blue Man Group fit in within each of these categories has allowed speculation on just what has been accomplished by the group and how it is culturally significant. Perhaps, it has even raised a few new questions.

The aesthetic analysis of the performance demonstrates that it follows a Postmodern aesthetic by recognizing characteristics such as the anti-elitism, anti-authority, transcendence of artistic and cultural boundaries, and an emphasis on communal participation. Coupling this with the fact that the Blue Man Group is very successful, point to a cultural indicator about the current state of art and Blue Man Group's place within it. Blue Man Group has become a mainstream success artistically and this demonstrates that Postmodernism is a prevailing force in mainstream art. This is a sign of divergence from the ever popular and traditional musicals that are found in the mainstream. The mainstream musical is usually modern and exists mostly in the realm of realism. Does this mean that Blue Man Group is an anomaly in mainstream art or is it an indicator of the directionality of mainstream art? It is hard to find a true answer as many new musicals find their way on to the Broadway stages each year, but they are also accompanied by new Postmodern performances like *Stomp*. A group whose commercial

success has been credited, by some, to the success of the Blue Man Group who paved the way for this sort of Postmodern mainstream art.

The techniques that Blue Man Group utilizes to cast and to train its performers has shown a definite cultural shift from traditional casting and rehearsing in the United States, where most recruiting is done based on a prepared monologue, scene or screen test. Blue Man Group only uses these as their first step in casting that becomes more of a recruitment. Then, the group trains the recruits based on their physical acting and or drumming capabilities or potential. This is a markedly different approach to casting as most shows are cast based on the already trained skill of the performer. As was illustrated in an earlier chapter, this shows that Blue Man Group casts and trains from a more Eastern tradition. The significance of this, culturally, is that they have taken an Eastern system that is more efficient in mass producing the product they are selling. The Blue Man Group has mixed commercial capitalism with theatre in order to mass-produce it. They have effectively taken a multicultural approach in order to succeed in the West. This is Postmodern in every sense of the word. The question this raises is do artists now have to be able to mass-produce their work in theatre in order to be commercially successful?

Finally, what is the cultural significance within the performance structure? The structure has shown the performance to be as much a ritual as a theatrical performance. To start with, liminoidal experiences, by some members of the audience, appear to occur as evidenced by repeated pilgrimages to see the show. This seems to indicate that there is something that is craved, needs to be satiated, and can only be satisfied by returning to the Blue Man Group performances. Does this make the Blue Man Group a cultic ritual?

For some, it becomes cultic in their need to be part of the overall Blue Man Group community as they are more receptive and wish to participate in the ritualistic process that occurs. However, for most people that enjoy the show, a liminoid feeling could easily be described as a chill in the spine or some other small sensation, one that suggests an overall enjoyment of a good performance.

As a whole, the research seems to indicate an innate desire in people to engage in ritual processes. One example of this is someone who goes to church on Sunday to live and act according to Christian ethics and morals. However, for those, who do not wish to engage in the dogma or rules of a religion, they have the option of seeking ritual fulfillment through performances like those of the Blue Man Group. What is significant is not where individuals seem to get this fulfillment, liminal or liminoid, but that they desire to achieve it.

Current performance theory holds that there is liminality in theatre. The Blue Man group has taken this idea and tried to shape a theatre performance into a ritual that may be experienced more readily. Blue Man Group has combined drama, dance, and multi-media to ritually bring the spectators into the common kinship of humanity by artfully constructing a postmodern, Dionysian comedy. They have taken a mass production approach in order to spread the word of these experiences, for a profit, and have established missions and missionaries in major cities, on the Internet, and on television. Through all of this, Blue Man Group spreads the good news, that we are all connected by underground sewage and that, eventually, we all get flushed. They portray this because their mission is to show the world that in the end we are all, truly, equal.

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