



Spring 2010

# Burning Man: the Man and the Myth

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# Burning Man: the Man and the Myth

**Disciplines**  
Anthropology

**BURNING MAN**

The Man and the  
Myth

America's Journey for the New American Myth

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An Honors Thesis In Anthropology  
by Molly Hude

Submitted to the Department of Anthropology  
University of Pennsylvania

Thesis Advisor Brian Spooner  
2010

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# Abstract

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*Burning Man is an annual festival held a few hundred miles outside of Reno, Nevada, near a small town named Gerlach, on a dry lake bed known as the Black Rock Desert. For 21 years, the festival has come back, to the same time and same place, but with more people. From its humble beginnings as a bonfire on a beach with a handful of friends, the festival has developed into a bonafide city, with a bureaucratic body, an urban infrastructure, and as of 2010, a population of 51,454 participants. However, the desert, is harsh, foreign, and unforgiving; the festival has a pricy entrance fee, lasts an entire week, is difficult to get to and even harder to leave; there are no running toilets, electrical outlets to speak of, and everything that you'll need for the week you must bring with you, since even with money, there is no place to make purchases, as the festival does not allow monetary exchange in any form. Even then, the nearest town is 11 miles away, if you have a way to get there. Despite these difficulties, the same devoted group comes back excited each year, ready for round 2, or 6, or 10...the pattern of growth and return is clear, and indisputable. What is the seductive element that brings people back (or draws them in?) What, ultimately, does it reflect about the current sociocultural state of American society? The following thesis will explore the cultural phenomenon that is the Burning Man festival, and the yearning for Intimacy, Freedom, and new cultural Mythos in American culture.*

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A5:

“this is dedicated to all of the people who have worked and played in this magical place.”

-Anonymous, *TimeLoveMemory* installation, 2010



## **Dedications and Acknowledgments**

A lot of people have been invested and involved in the two-year journey of developing this research. This thesis is dedicated to the following people, who have not only greatly influenced the development of my thesis, but of myself as a person, without whom I would not be where I am today.

I'd like to thank Professor Louise Krasniewicz, for cultivating my interest in mythological theory and teaching me to look for its presence in pop- and modern culture, and Professor Brian Spooner, for encouraging, guiding, and supporting me through the great feat of thesis-writing.

I'd like to thank Joe Graff for giving me the gift of my first Burning Man

I'd like to thank Clinton Graybill and Anthony Martin, for being pillars of creativity and inspiration.

I'd like to thank Tori Sigler, for being the flame I aspire to burn as fiercely and brightly as.

Thank you Josh Henkin, for leading the way and hanging in there.

Thank you Josh Carroll, for acting as editor-in-chief and 24-hour morale and tech support.

Thank you Stefano Corazza, for providing the opportunity to Burn, and allowing us to share and be involved in your art.

Finally, thank you everyone in my Disorient family. Without you, this would have been a much different paper.

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## Introduction: The Beginning of a Story

“The self I seek is the self that seeks”  
-Rom Harre, 2

“...the delicate issue of otherwise decent human beings occasional enjoyment of acts of completely fucked-up chaos...”  
-Brian Doherty, 174

## The Epiphany

In the spring of 2008, 3 years, ago, I was asked if -on the condition that my ticket would be paid for- I would go to Burning Man. I answered “yes”, and in doing so unwittingly, like Neo in the matrix, took the Blue Pill<sup>1</sup>. The world I encountered there (because 50,000 people in the middle of a 30mile desert makes its own world, in so much as the perspective of one person can handle), was unlike anything I had ever seen at home. In fact, it was unlike anything I had ever seen *anywhere*- no reality show, textbook, or photographic spreads in National Geographic had even so much as remotely *hinted* that there existed anything like this in reality. But as I soon learned, Burning Man *wasn't* the real world, nor was it meant to resemble it in any way, (in fact, if you were at all reminded of the real world by something when you were there, it was probably something you dug up from the playa-covered bottom of your suitcase) and that was what was most striking to me. That is, until I looked up and realized that I was not the only person afflicted by this jarring and in-ignorable contrast, but that nearly *everyone* was caught up, inextricably, in the same sense of wonder and surreality as I found myself in, and even more astonishingly that I

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<sup>1</sup> Wachowski brothers film, 2000, in which the antagonist, Neo, is given a choice between taking the Blue Pill, which will awaken him into the world of the Matrix, or the Red Pill, which will allow him to return, unharmed and without memory of the event, into his normal life (Gittes).

was only one of several tens of thousands of people, all radically different and engaging with their surrounding in radically different ways, and yet all experiencing a radically similar experience. I came home with all the same symptoms of having awoken from a dream in which one has an epiphany- like dreaming where you left your keys; very little had changed, such a small amount of time had passed, and yet I had changed completely, and through my new lens, so had the world around me. Just a week in the desert and already life would never be the same, but that was not when the epiphany came; the epiphany came when I realized that this same thing- this same dream- had happened to 50,000 other people, and that this same cycle (go to festival- Burn-come home- be revived) had been happening for 20 years. A RAGING, SCREAMING, AMPS-TO-FULL-SPEED PARTY IN THE MIDDLE OF THE DESERT WHERE ART SHOOTERS FIRE, DRUGS ARE FRIENDLY, PEOPLE ARE NAKED, NO RULES APPLY, BABIES ARE MADE AND LIVES ARE CHANGED!!!

And I'll bet you have never even heard about it.

And that how the two- my life and my academic interests- became inextricably linked, for little did I know that at the same time I had that epiphany, I started on a journey of what James Clifford calls 'ethnographic surrealism'<sup>2</sup>, and surely there's not a more appropriate place to start. I knew and, over time, came to understand the effect that the festival had had on me and why, but what I wanted to know was *why* it had affected so many other people, *what* was the cause, and *what did it mean?* Admittedly, these are all vague and ill-phrased questions, so let me explain

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<sup>2</sup> The act of observing or participating in a group whose life or style of life is vastly different than one's own (Hockett 80).

what it is that *I* mean.

- “Why does it affect so many other people?” carries the knowledge that I understand the festival and the aspects which affect me and are effected in me, but I am only one person and it's very unlikely that several many-thousand other people are reacting to the same exact aspects, and experiencing the same reactions to them, as me. But it remains that there is *something* significant and meaningful, and very personal, about the festival, which entices upwards of 40,000 people to attend each year, while maintaining an attendance rate that risen every year except for 2 (2005 and 2009)(“Burning Man”). So what about the festival is so significant that it causes people to return (and likely attributing to the growth, bring friends), but is also ubiquitous enough that it can have the *similarly significant* effect on such a high number of people from various walks of life?
- “What is the cause?” refers to the festivals effect on people. This question intends to determine, identify, and address specific aspects of the festival that directly attribute to the ultimate sensation of the festival, however subjective. The idea is that, although each experience is different and unique, there is a fundamental similarity underlying them all, which somehow, despite different trivialities, contributes to this overall *qualia*<sup>3</sup>, this feeling of *significance*.
- “What does it mean?” refers to *that* experience, the overall individual and collective experience at Burning Man, in contrast to the grander realm of experience, that in which we normally live our lives in society. For the sake of this paper, although there are many festival attendees from Europe and other parts of the globe, I am only concerned with the

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<sup>3</sup> The particular quality of an experience

greater *American* culture, as the festival was started in American, and was founded by and largely attended by Americans.

Thus it was that this was my initial impression of the festival, and it was these 3 fundamental questions that helped me over 2 more 'field seasons' (festival attendances) and 3 years of research to form my thesis and the bulk of this paper.

### **Anthropology and Burning Man**

Celebration has long been a topic of interest in anthropology. "With the rise of sciences, and especially the anthropology of the 1930's and thereafter...", researchers and scientists began to look at ecstatic celebration more open-mindedly and give it real consideration (Ehrenreich 9). Although the study of rituals is most stereotypical of cultural anthropology, claiming many of the more famous names in the discipline, such as Claude Levi-Strauss, Victor Turner, Mary Douglas, and Emile Durkheim to name a few (who subsequently all are given voice in this thesis), the two share many similar characteristics, even overlapping in some areas, and can also be likened to the study of festivals of Festal culture, which in a more recent context has given way to postmodern studies of holidays (in relation to festivals and celebrations). Regardless of their prestige or paucity in terms of critically-renowned thinkers, the study of rituals, celebrations, festivals and holidays are all meant to further the understanding of, and provide direct insights, both etic-ly and emic-ly, into a culture. Anthropology has, as one's of its primary foci, the study of a culture *in relation to* other cultures, acknowledging that cultures, since the more recent modernization of the world, are both susceptible to influence and capable of influencing the cultures in and around them. By 'in', I mean to say that it also included the study of subcultures. Since Burning Man

subsumes not one but all of these aspect of anthropology, in one way or another, I believe it is a fine subject for this medium of study in particular. As such, I mean to study it the appropriate fashion, that of *ethnography*<sup>4</sup>.

As a full *ethnography*, my work at Burning Man is still a work in progress. Although 3 years of attendance and participation with the art and the community, both inside of and outside the festival, have provided profound insights into the culture, there are still a large number of festival aspects I've yet to even *discover* (a week, even at full submersion, is not a very long time to see an entire city), and a host of integral planners and participants whose insights would be valuable. I intend to continue my research and develop it into a full ethnography, although I think my knowledge and research are sufficient to support my thesis at present.

## **Thesis**

If we can understand Burning Man as its own independent subcultural entity, which is part of what I endeavor to establish, then we can also apply the framework of Emile Durkheim's understanding of societal development. Durkheim states that, "Societies typically respond and evolve as side effects to changes and evolutions in the societal structure, and are not deliberately changed." Contrastingly, Amatai Entzoni, a sociologist of community interactions, asserts that modern communities "are to some extent engineered and are subject to public policies that attempt to change the relations among ethnic, racial, and economic groups" (32). Although the two views don't agree, neither has to be incorrect; after all, they are looking at the problem from two different standpoints, one etic (Durkheim), and one emic (Entzoni). Furthermore, I believe

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<sup>4</sup> The in-depth study of a culture, involving integration, and direct observation-participation, normally lasting several years.

the aspects of the two can even exist in the same cultural environment. I believe that societies *do* respond and evolve necessarily in reaction to changes in the wider societal structure, and that sometimes this change *is engineered*, but not always by something as formal and inflexible as public policy, and I'd like to provide Burning Man, and it's soon-to-follow analytic deconstruction, as an example of one such environment. I posit that Burning Man is a subculture, formed voluntarily and meaningfully, by a group in reaction to the current state of American culture and society. My thesis seeks to answer two correlative questions:

- 1) What specific aspect exactly is it 'reacting' or 'adapting' to? (aka: What necessary cultural element(s) is society lacking?)
- 2) How has it adapted? (aka: What necessary cultural element(s) does it provide?)

These questions, if answered, are sufficient to explain the festival's seemingly spontaneous creation in its time and space, and the reason people are so tremendously affected by it, which also explains it's prolonged existence. Burning Man on the whole has accrued an infamous reputation, rife with shocking stories of nudity and drugs, and all assortments of unruliness in the desert (which is certainly quite true, if not some of its strongest points). The press often takes the reigns in establishing such an image of an "orgy in the gunsights", emphasizing *only* free wheeling nudity, sex and danger (Doherty 101). But admittedly as Lee Gilmore, co-editor of *AfterBurn*, states, "we need to recognize that megaparties are available in much less daunting locales" (10). With this in mind, there is a particular reason, a bedrock underlying all the individual motivations to drive hours into the desert, out of comfort and communication, and stay there for a week. There must be something there that is worth the time,

effort, money, and discomfort (which happen to be 3 of America's top culturally valued forms of capital, and one that it's very standards of ease and convenience are built on avoiding). This assuredly will be hard to pinpoint, as even longtime veterans can't tell you exactly what it 'is' about Burning Man that entices them to go year after year (and even if they could it would only apply to their own subjective experience).

To do this, I will utilize research accrued over the past 2 years, both in active participation with and attendance at the festival itself, and in academic pursuit. I will use it to define the festival itself – what it is and what it is not. In order to understand the festival comprehensively and ultimately, we need to understand how and what each of these individual cultural festive elements contribute. Only by careful explanation of the historical, social, and contemporary meaning of its parts can we understand how these, in each of their own manifestations, create this necessary cultural element, and what exactly that is.

## **Methods and Intent**

The following thesis was researched over a two-year period in 2009-2010. I attended the festival for the first time in 2008, joining the Disorient camp, and decided to use the festival as my thesis work, both for the valuable research and writing experience, and to learn more about and better understand a subject that had grabbed my interest at an academic and personal level. I decided to pursue Burning Man as an ethnographic study, and I applied for and was awarded a grant by the University of Pennsylvania's Undergraduate Anthropology Board to return and begin my research. I attended Burning Man in the August of 2009 and formulated my thesis question. I developed a questionnaire, which I circulated via email to the people I knew to have participated in the festival. I continued to pursue research during the school year, focusing on different aspects of the festival via courses of Independent Study, taken the fall of 2009 and the spring of 2010. In the spring of 2010, I applied for and was granted a scholarship ticket, and contributed to the setup of an art installation, originated and created by Stefano Corazza. In the fall of 2010, I finally began compiling my information in digital documents and began the writing process in late November. Outside of this linear progression, and too numerous to mention individually, I pursued much independent research on the Burning Man and the elements I suspected to be involved/contribute to the festival's overall – and overwhelming – psychological effect on its participants. I also participated in as many of the regional (New York and Philadelphia) events as often as I could and whenever chance, time, schedule, and wallet allowed. My intent for this thesis is to address some basic misunderstandings of the festival and



propose a potential framework for its understanding.

I refer to my work with and at Burning Man as an 'ethnographic', as opposed to merely goal-oriented research, because for the past two years, I have been participating and contributing, as a glad and proud member of the Disorient and Burning Man communities, and I find to my delight that the more enthusiastic and involved I get, the more questions are raised, the more there is to discover, and the more fascinating and impassioned the adventure becomes! This thesis marks just the beginning of what I can only hope is a lifetime of research, discovery, and continued participation at Burning Man.

I  
Burning Man  
and  
Cultural Mechanisms

# Burning Man

“I will entice you into the desert, and there I will speak to you in the depths of your heart”  
(Hosea, 2:14, cited in Lee Gilmore, 54)

## **What exactly is Burning Man?**

Burning Man, in short, is a week long festival in the middle of the Black Rock desert outside of Gerlach, Nevada. The city (which it quickly becomes) has been described as a(n):

.... “ephemeropolis”; “promiscuous carnival of souls; a metaphysical flea market; a demolition derby of reality constructs colliding in a parched void”; an “ADD theater of the absurd”; the world's wildest party; “annual arts/hedonism festival”; a tribute to the weird; a living canvas of radical, pagan idolatry and puckish fun; an annual celebration that's a mix of Mardi Gras, Woodstock, and Alice in Wonderland; a temporary city of the odd; Mad Max meets Woodstock; a cross between a love-in, Mardi Gras, and the Doo Dah parade; a primitivist conflagration; the great escape; a festival for American misfits”, DesertPalooza, Weirdstock; “shanty town trailer-park tail-gate party”... (Bonin; Davis 16,17; Gilmore 3; Hockett 14).

As an entity in time and space, it has been called the “cybergeneration's answer to Woodstock”, and it's participants have been, (sometimes lovingly, sometimes hatingly), referred to as 'psychonauts', Zen inspired Pronoia<sup>5</sup> professionals, and 'zippies'<sup>6</sup> (Davis 21; Hockett 65; Huffstutter).

And that is just to name a few. And while there is some truth to these descriptions, as Jeremy Hockett comments, these monikers “automatically establish connotations that cannot come close to an actual description of Burning Man, and may in fact irreversibly distort its image such that it becomes difficult to take the event seriously or to find any utility in the experience it

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<sup>5</sup> Pronoia- the sneaking suspicion that people are conspiring to help you. (Huffstutter)

<sup>6</sup> Zippies- the 90's version of hippies, flower children plus computer geeks (Huffstutter)

provides” (72). Unfortunately, with anything much less than an entire conversation (or thesis), in so many words, this is as accurate a description as most people can generate, and these are a few of the more illustrative and creative ones. In order to properly understand Burning Man, you just gotta' be there! But on the fly, and without such a possibility, an thoroughly-informed and -detailed description of the events by a first-hand experienced narrator will have to do...

## **History**

Just as important to a culture's contemporary meaning is the story of its inception, the 'How' and 'Why' of its beginning, and so we will start the story of Burning Man in 1986, in its humble beginning as the brainchild of Larry (aka “Lee”) Harvey and Jerry James. On the night of the summer solstice, the two and some friends built out of plywood and burnt an 8ft replica of a man on Baker Beach in San Francisco, CA. As Larry would have it, at the time, it was “just an impulse; pure”(Bonin). More like a family picnic than a festival or a ritual at the time, the event was a success and well-liked by all who attended; the two decided they'd do it again next year!

The next year, it had a greater attendance, and the next year and the next year; more and more of Larry and Jerry's friends became involved in the Burning of the Man, from his erection to the construction, right down to the very burning of it, which became progressively more elaborate. The entire event had turned into a bit of a ritual, and it began to attract serious attention. The first few burnings were actually quite illegal and guerrilla in nature, which naturally eventually attracted the attention of the police, but it also attracted some unexpected spectators: the Cacophony Society.

The Cacophony Society was a San Francisco based spontaneous art collective, established for and dedicated solely to “experiences beyond the pale of mainstream society through

subversions, pranks, art, fringe explorations and meaningless madness” (Gilmore 6). They were devoted to a concept which Hakim Bey would likely categorize as 'poetic terrorism. The Cacophony Society found its own initial inspiration in the Suicide Club, a similarly-dispositioned but more boundary-breaking underground society. As local history and glory-days ex-members would tell it, the suicide was an “insane, illegal, wonderful thing with sense of moral purpose”, founded in juxtaposition to the increased consumerism of the time, that spent it's time and made its entertainment by (just to name a few) infiltrating cults, conducting spontaneous street theater, and hosting events like midnight raves, art, and dance parties in abandoned buildings (Bonin). But the Suicide Club eventually exhausted its own impish energies and disbanded, and so the Cacophony Society was officially formed in 1982 by stragglers from the Suicide Club who still weren't through with having their way with (or in) the system. Naturally, the Suicide Club loved the yearly incendiary event on the beach, held right in the open and under the radar of the local law, and in 1989 they decided they wanted to participate in the event as well (even early on, the event, as will later be explained, was already inspiring creativity and radical participation). Naturally, they printed a flier, and announced the event in their similarly underground newsletter, “Rough Draft” (Figure 1). The result: in 1989, the man stood forty feet tall for more than three hundred people. Unfortunately, that was the only year the man never burned. The police, drawn by such a large crowd and aware of the ritual from past years, deemed it a fire and safety hazard and forbid the ritual's execution. The crowd, largely made of passers by and people less invested in the Man than the spectacle, was raised to near-riot state of mind, and the man being set aflame was very nearly avoided. Even so, the yearly burning of the Man was already valuable and significant, there was “air of people that they had participated in something significant, profound, something that changed things, that people remembered” (Bonin). By now,

the Man had a quite the developing crowd and family, and the beach was no longer a suitable environment for a growing American phenomenon...

The Burning of the Man, if it was to continue, needed a more suitable environment- one where the Man could burn and the participants could enjoy their fun in peace, and where those who just wanted to watch (and were therefore less invested) wouldn't be incentivized to follow. Members of the Cacophony Society had long been using a completely removed environment for boundary-pushing events, like wind-sailing, gigantic wind-sculpture festivals, and croquet games of gargantuan proportions, using gigantic inflatable spheres and trucks (Bonin). Hidden in plain sight, on an immense expanse of 400 square miles of unending, undisturbed even-ness, the Black Rock desert was agreed upon. Burning Man 1990 was announced once again in the Cacophony newsletter, and the date was set, as it would stay here on, for Labor Day (Bonin).

The new location did, as intended, keep away the gawkers, and the first two years in the desert drew a more personal, intimate crowd. Even in the middle of the desert, though, the idea spread and drew people out, and slowly but surely, attendance was up again, and growing. As Chicken John, long-time promoter and attendee, put it, "people just went out there because they *needed* to celebrate" (Bonin). In 1993, 1000 people attended (Bonin). In fact, it was growing so steadily each year that some sort of order needed to be maintained. Prior to 1995, 'the playa' (as it came to be known), for the few days people could survive the wind<sup>7</sup>, the dust<sup>8</sup>, dust storms, and the heat, was governed by the non-law of 'anything goes'. As John Law, one long-time participant and organizer of the festival says of the pre-1996 days of Burning Man, what he considers to be the "ultimate metaphor for nature of the early days of Burning Man",

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<sup>7</sup> Top wind speeds were clocked in 1999 at 72mph ("Desert Flying")

<sup>8</sup> The dust is a nuisance all on it's own. Not only does it get into everything, sealed or not, and completely ruin machinery functions, it's also highly alkaline, which means it actively draws moisture out of skin. (Appendix B)

“- we'd go to the middle of the playa after we knew no one was out there and just drive. As fast as we could. Flying on mushrooms, drinking wine out of a bottle. With the lights out, only the moon and Milky Way lighting the way. And Vanessa and I would be firing and shooting guns out the window at the same time, Jane's Addiction blasting from the stereo. I consider this my peak American experience” (Doherty 63).

However, the dream in this case couldn't be sustained. A few people loosing Hell on the playa was one thing- it didn't have to be legal or reasonable, just no one had to die. But by 1994, Burning Man was 2,000 people strong, and if it continued to grow, the even lax “law” (which was the only real rule implied on the playa) of “don't harm your neighbor” would be difficult to sustain at such a high density. For the following year, 1995, the organizers (which still had no central agency) banned guns on the playa. The people who came to the event every year were now staying in tents, either independently or in groups of 'camps', and -splayed out in every which way- it was impossible to determine where to shoot without hitting one.

The year of 1995 was actually a tumultuous year for the minds behind the event- major ideological issues were at stake. With the guns as an example, just also the free-wheeling of cars and as many other high-risk acts of danger and destruction you can imagine, Larry and like minds feared that the festival was losing essence (whatever that was) to the risk-riders; the idea of “merry pranksters” only takes it so far... They decided that the festival should involve art, and in that, “radical participation”, not only in the art and performances, but with all of the 5 senses. The festival became united with the “Desert Sideworks”, an intentional community focused on art, led by Pepi Ozon. Additionally, in keeping with the idea of being centered on art, and to further inspire participation, Burning Man was given a 'theme' each year, in which participants could engage in any way they saw fit. With the new emphasis on art, and also with the newly bolstered attendance numbers, it was also decided that the event would collect a cover charge (to

help sustain the larger art, like the Man). Charging, prohibitions, and 'themes' were extremely controversial to those closely involved- money, rules, and conscription were against the basic tenets of what Burning Man was for, and inhibited the former freedom the event had once provided. The Burning Man family lost a few members that year, and many consider 1995 and 1996 as benchmarks for the compromise of its integral purpose, but it retained *something*, because in 1995, despite the cover charge, Burning Man's attendance doubled to 4,000 people. In 1995, it cost \$35 to enter Burning Man; the theme, appropriately, and perhaps a little reflective of the recent controversy, was 'Good and Evil'.

The prohibitions continued to pile up- in 1996, cars were banned<sup>9</sup>, and in 1997 the ground plan was solidified in a series of road and cross-roads, a semi-sphere with the Man at dead center. (the playa was no longer the Black Rock desert, but was now annually transformed into the newly-dubbed Black Rock *City*). In total, the undertaking had become much more civilized, and one final voice of protest called out. In 1997, Paul Addis burned the man early on Monday night, instead of the requisite Saturday night. Consequently, he was fined \$30,000 in damages and sent to jail for arson. This, combined with the exceedingly impressive attendance growth (now at 10,000 people) and other issues of sustainability, initiated the establishment of the Black Rock City Limited Liability Corporation. This company exists solely by and for Burning Man- funded by the entrance fee, it employs only 6 people a year to allot the remainder of the budget to art grants (through the ARTery<sup>10</sup>) and to 'rent' the land that Burning Man is held on from the Bureau of Land Management, which ensures the protection and restoration of the rare and government-

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<sup>9</sup> Once again, this ban was due primarily to the increasing presence of tents, although this time it was accompanied by tragedy when some participants in an off-lying tent had been undetected and run over by roving cars.

<sup>10</sup> The ARTery is the art-grant organization at Burning Man, in charge of allotting grants and on-playa art assignment (Gilmore 52).



protected piece of land it's held on. With art grants averaging at currently \$500,000 annually, and a total of nearly \$500,000 in BLM fees since 2000, while also factoring in porta-potty rentals (there are 1,000 porta-potties), medical supplies, scholarship/low-income ticket comps, and finally, the food/water needs of approximately 2,000 volunteers over a 2-month (and sometimes longer) period of setup/breakdown ), Burning Man despite the seemingly steep cover charge, in fact makes just exactly enough to cover it's costs with little to none left over (O'Duinn; Bonin).

As time progressed, the festival finalized much of its setup and budget. The city is set up in a semi-circular arrangement; the man is always in the center. From an aerial view, as if the entire layout area were a clock face with the man at the center, the streets coordinates align with hours and minutes, and the streets radiating outward are delineated alphabetically, with 'A' being nearest to the Man (Figure 2). The arrangements of individual theme camps vary from year-to-year, the bigger camps generally get placed on the 'esplanade', or the interior ring (road) closest to Burning Man and the 'big sound' camps (Opulent Temple, Root Society, Bass Camp) generally get place on the fringes (so that their sound is less imposing to day-to-day activities). The presence of the Temple began in 2000 and was brought back ever since, securing a fixed placement at the festival along with the Man and the Gate, and CenterCamp. The ticket cost rises incrementally each year, according to projected needs and crowd size. The ticket cost is sliding scale with several tiers (based on low-income, scholarship, and affordability), but the standard ticket sells at an average of \$230 (since 2005) ("Burning Man").

Burning Man has gone through several stages of development so far, and as the City grows, it becomes slowly more and more restrictive. The population and price have both gone up, and certainly the festival is not as free-wheeling and wild as it used to be, *but still the people*

come, by the droves and thousands, and there is merit in that fact! Despite the restrictions (cars, guns), and the massive increase in population, the festival still adheres to one basic rule in general (which is more like a guideline) “do whatever you want but don't bother your neighbor!”, and this rule, along with the ten basic tenets, allow an entire city to function not only successfully, but *harmoniously*<sup>11</sup>, for an entire week. One thing is for sure- Memphis could not do that. But this harmony is largely due to the ten basic tenets that it esteems to operate under...

### **Tenets: How it Works**

Burning Man has been described as “a pocket universe where radically different rules temporarily apply” (Davis 17). This no doubt hails from the structure of its Ten Basic Tenets. The 10 tenets represent the ideological foundations that the festival is structured on, and on which it operates. Burning Man is first and foremost, as Lee Harvey says, a “project in community building”. He elaborates, by saying:

“[Burning Man] is dedicated to discovering those optimal forms of community which will produce human culture in the conditions of our post-modern mass society. Within a desert wilderness we build a city, a model world composed of people who attend our event from all over the globe...living as we do, without sustaining traditions in time and ungrounded in a shared experience of place, it is yet possible to transcend these deficiencies” (Kazinets 89).

Through the progress of the festival, as the community *did* grow and flourish, the 10 tenets were developed and eventually became the mantra of the festival, the revered keys to the

<sup>11</sup> It can be noted that crimes *do occur* at Burning Man; things are stolen, rape still happens, and there are occasional arrests for drug use, but the highest arrest rate was in 2006, at 16 arrests, and although these crimes occur, the participants at Burning Man have sought no need to demand anything more than the already present protection of the Black Rock Rangers, who themselves are part of the massive volunteer force present. The Rangers go through mandatory training sessions, stressing non-confrontational problem resolution. Undercover police officers from the surrounding jurisdictions that Burning Man spans are also present (“Black Rock Rangers”).

delicate equilibrium of such a volatile city.

The Ten Basic Principles are as follows:

Radical Inclusion: A community built on *radical* inclusion is one in which people *voluntarily and knowing choose to join, based on subjective identification, enjoyment, or affinity found therein*. As opposed to a community that one is born into, such as a neighborhood or family, or one in which people enter voluntarily but, perhaps, don't have complete control over their role in it (a lower level job at a firm), a community that practices radical inclusion allows its members to choose their own role, in this case, by demonstrating and practicing a certain level of participation, which is entirely up to their own judgment. In this sense, roles are *subscriptive* rather than *prescriptive*. In this very basic sense, it is therefore entirely up to the participants whether or not they even want to participate; but rather than a culture accepting you, one only truly becomes a part of Burning Man when one *chooses* to include themselves, and accepts all forms of participation, from the subtle to the, as the phrase alludes, *radical*. Additionally, conversely, Lee Harvey also calls Burning Man an “intentional community built on non-exclusion” (Doherty 21). It is radically inclusive in that- should one choose to participate, all they need to do is jump in; and when and if they jump in, it is nonexclusive in that it will not turn away any effort of earnest participation. This is because Burning Man is not meant to *challenge* people into participating, by demanding that only the most radical participation be acceptable, it is meant to *foster creativity and encourage participation*. Therefore, if it hopes to engender the fostering of participation by allowing people radically inclusive, it must also in turn be radically nonexclusive.

Giftng: One of the most shocking features of Burning Man to those who've never been is that, for an entire week in the desert, *people live, interact, and function with a complete absence of money*. That is partially because the 'economy' at Burning Man, the system of exchange, is one of *giftng*. Giftng is, for some, an extremely peculiar practice to get comfortable with, because the exchange in giftng is not reciprocal, and does not necessarily require a greater or equal return. Gifts are given, freely and voluntarily. This is a very common practice at Burning Man, and although gifts are often given in return, it is never an expectation. Many people come unprepared their first year, and either don't understand to bring gifts, or don't know what to bring. Cheap gifts, though sometimes amusing, are considered callous and inconsiderate, and constitute almost a mockery of the concept. The majority of the gifts on the whole are home made, either a craft or food of sorts, and require much care and attention; therefore when they are given, they are a true symbol of openness, friendship, admiration and acceptance from the giver. The act of being 'gifted' is normally enough to encourage people to bring gifts of their own, if and when they return. Some gifts are quite elaborate, such as homemade jewelry or a ride in a plane, but these are in no way judged on a hierarchy- gifts do not a form of competition, and are devoid of the selfish mindframe associated with the Me-vs-You nature of competition. Because giftng is not associated with exchange or pursuit of value/acquirement, the principle of Giftng is closely linked with the subsequent principle, that of..

Decommodification: Decommodification achieves the same shock as the tenet of Giftng- it is very difficult for people to imagine an environment, a social community, where having something of value is appreciated and not desired, and vice versa. But the idea of decommodification implies more than the lack of opportunity to sell or consume in a normal

fashion- it also means the absence of a *seller/consumer culture*. At Burning Man, there is no commercial presence- there are no ads influencing you to buy something, persuading you to want to be a certain way, to view your life as lesser due to the lack of one or another items. There is no sponsorship, there are no commercials, there are no product plugs. Burning Man allows the consumer to escape the market and determine object value for themselves. More importantly, it allows them to determine the value of themselves and their lives separate from the influence of the value of the things they own (or don't). In an environment of de commodification, an individual is allowed to be valued, and value themselves, not for the objects they own but for the person they are.

Radical Self-Reliance: In conjunction with self-inclusion, and de commodification, radical self-reliance is the idea that a person is *responsible for themselves in entirety*. You are the only one you depend on. With this understanding, a person brings with them *anything and everything they would need to survive a week out in the desert*. This accomplishes several things at once. First, it teaches a personal self-reliance; complete independence and personal understanding of one's own needs and requirements. It also serves to teach one the value of simple necessities; food, water, sunscreen, and other things necessary for extremely basic and minimal yet healthy survival must be calculated *precisely*. This precision requires knowledge of one's self and reaffirms the value of objects often taken for granted. It also reinforces minimalism and simplicity; firstly, because it is very *difficult* to get even the bare necessities for living an entire week into the desert, therefore, you don't want to be bringing more than you need (what's more, it probably won't fit). Conversely, this also helps reinforce principles of conservation- by narrowing down to only the bare necessities, we are shown very clearly how much excess we normally

consume or have in our normal, everyday lives.

Communal Effort: Communal effort goes hand in hand with radical self-reliance by mandate of a combination of fate and Murphy's Law. More often than not, even with the most experienced Burning Man veterans, some key necessity or other is forgotten, over-looked, or under-packed, and even if one manages to come perfectly prepared, the unpredictable or unlikely always manages to creep up and present itself at the most inconvenient of times. In this situation, an individual becomes reliant on his surrounding social circle, his community, to help him in his time of need. This principle combines the ideas of gifting with fluid community functioning, and also seams together the singularity of radical self-reliance with the co-dependence and communication of community. Before a person can become a valuable, reliable member of a community, they must fully realize and understand their own abilities, limits, and potential. Once this is achieved, only then can they devote themselves and the full extent of their abilities to the greater good and bigger projects of the community, which will ultimately benefit everyone.

Civic Responsibility: Civic responsibility is a large part of what keeps people in line. The idea of civic responsibilities is that, in exchange for an environment that allows for complete freedom, because it does not have laws or obligations, it is up to the participant to attend its upkeep. There is no executive branch at Burning Man, there is no janitorial staff, there are no groundskeepers- those tasks are left up to the participant. Like a child learning to keep it's room neat, the participant quickly learns that no one is there to clean up after them, and they themselves are, truly, the only ones they can rely on to take care of their surroundings. This teaches a participant the value of their surroundings at home and the work that others put into it,

but also that they are directly attributable to the civic atmosphere of the social area they inhabit.

Leaving No Trace: Leaving No trace is an offshoot of civic responsibility, whose main job is to upkeep the physical environment of Burning Man, the very non-renewable and very delicate Black Rock desert. As the remains of a prehistoric lake bed, it is a unique environment, of limited quantity, which is not easy to reproduce in everyday life. Furthermore, it draws its name (Black Rock) from the presence of small black rocks in the sand, a phenomenon that is singular to that location. Hence, it is very precious, and furthermore, the dust, because of how fine it is, how arid the soil is, and the peculiar chemical alkalinity of the sand, is *especially* difficult to clean and absorbs liquids almost instantly. Furthermore, the daily dust storms mean that any and all debris will certainly be covered by the end of the day, which necessitates that any and all debris, however minute, be picked up. Leave no trace is therefore an extension of civic responsibility; the Bureau of Land Management grades the quality of the playa's cleanliness after Burning Man leaves, and if there is a dissatisfactory amount of debris left behind, the BRCLLC<sup>12</sup> is held at full responsibility and fined for misuse of the 'rented' land. Were this to happen, ticket prices would excel, or in the worst-case scenario, Burning Man would be banned from taking place on the premises. It is therefore in best interest of the individual, with the community in mind, to keep it as clean as possible and pick up any and all trash (even if it was not theirs). Furthermore, this reinforces radical self reliance, for not only are you expected to bring all your own needs, but you're also expected to clean up after yourself entirely; Burning Man has no trash collection service, which means that your garbage must *also* go home with you, which provides even further incentive to limit yourself to absolute necessities.

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<sup>12</sup> Black Rock City Limited Liability Company (Gilmore, 30)

Participation: Participation is present in every principle and every aspect of Burning Man. In fact, it is difficult to go and *not* participate- the energy to do, to move, to create and be and explore is overwhelming, and extremely contagious. Burning Man attempts to remove many of the hurdles that make communication difficult in everyday life, such as routine and lack of time, stress, obligations, and assumptions or judgments based on perceived socioeconomic class or strata- at Burning Man, everyone is just as invited to join and participate, everyone is just as capable of enjoying the art and surroundings, and everyone is covered, from head to toe, in dust. In this regard, Burning Man frees the individual up for an opportunity at unfettered communication, communication with no presumptions or alternate agendas. The only thing to be gained from participating with another is the pleasure of interacting with another person; the only thing to be gained by participation in the festival is cathartic enjoyment of the festival, the task at hand, and the moment itself. Participation helps reinforce ones own abilities and talents, but it also reinforces appreciation for the present and the full realization and enjoyment of the immediate, the Now.

Immediacy: Finally, as described in participation, immediacy is the full and unhindered realization, participation in, and appreciation of the moment at hand. By taking full responsibility of themselves, and feeling the weight of their actions in immediate effect on the community and the people around them, and vice versa, the individual is given an extremely heightened sense of the moment- they are more invested in the task at hand, because it speaks as a direct testament of their respect for themselves and the respect for the community and the environment they are in. Immediacy is also unusually sharp at Burning Man because, amongst many shocking deficits of



technology, Burning Man also has no publicly displayed clocks. Unless you bring a watch, there is no way to tell time, and many people would attest that, indeed, part of the experience is taking the full step away from modern life; this includes taking the watch *off*. Experiencing a week of un-calculated time, being allowed the experience to re-measure and re-modify units of time to the natural rhythms of the environment and community, is a singular experience and is both liberating and refreshing.

(from "Ten Principles")

As was said before, Burning Man has no rules and no laws, at least constricting moral or social behavior, and that is true. The few prohibitions that apply are mostly for the sake of the land it is held on and for the sake of the physical well-being of the participants (aka: outlawing things that have an extremely high risk for dying or causing death; ex. Pets, guns). However, this line is murky; much of the art is several stories tall and meant to be climbed, with no apparent safety nets; much of the art and cars are meant to at some point be aflame, but there are no fences or boundaries, and although pets aren't allowed at Burning Man, there you can still find plenty of babies and pregnant women.. The risk at Burning Man is present even at a fundamental level- not only did it hail from a society of risk takers, but the event was migrated to the location they used to come specifically *to participate in high-risk and dangerous behavior*. Inherently, being in the desert is a risk itself; the exposure alone can kill you, and that's without the sand being alkaline. Still, despite not having laws, and despite being an incalculably high-risk environment, Burning Man has proven that 50,000 people can live successfully and harmoniously together. Not only can people live harmoniously together, but the experience is enough to make a keen and clear impression on them.

Run and founded upon these tenets, Burning Man has reached countless thousands of

people on a fundamental level, creating at a minimum a lasting impression and at most, and most importantly, a new American subculture.

### **A Lasting Impression: Separating What People Say from What People Mean**

As I've mentioned, the Burning Man Festival is extremely high risk by nature; nearly every element of it has a harsh and glaringly dangerous potential. In fact, "in order to survive, people have to become communal" (Bonin). But it goes equally true that people also have to become very in-tune with their *own selves* in order to survive. And there is something inherent in this process that causes people to develop a very singular view and opinion toward Burning Man. People react to this festival like little else I have seen or heard of, except perhaps Europe or a particularly influential drug-related experience. As Rosa Anna DeFelippis said in Olivier Bonin's documentary *Dust & Illusions*, you "come back and you're like a missionary", and to this both myself and very close friends can attest. And "this...", Brian Doherty says, "...is the Zen of Burning Man: It is almost unbelievably difficult and trying, and almost unbelievably wonderful and fulfilling. For that reason, people manage to both hate and love Burning Man as they've never hated or loved before. That sort of intensity is something people will go a long way and pay a fair chunk of change to experience" (186).

However, conveying that experience to others upon coming home can prove to be an even more trying task than enduring the festival itself, and apparently it's a task which no one can live up to. Even Burning Man's official website admits in its mission statement,

"Trying to explain what Burning Man is to someone who has never been to the event is a bit like trying to explain what a particular color looks like to someone who is blind." In this section ["What is Burning Man?"] you will find the peripheral definitions of what the event is as a whole, but to truly understand this event, one must participate" ("What is Burning Man?").

Unfortunately, this range of overwhelming, overlapping, interlocking, simultaneous, all-inclusive, euphoria-inducing, immersion communal survivalist experience is...quite a mouthful, and understandably quite a lot more than most people know how to put into words. Even on paper, it's difficult to write about: descriptively evasive, far too all-encompassing for sufficient generalizations.(Doherty)Coming from first-hand knowledge, the lexiconal demands of our day-to-day lives simply don't prepare us to describe such an experience; descriptions of fantastical things and alternate lifestyles and alien landscapes are usually the stuff of stories, and therefore we are forced to resort to story-book vocabulary to describe it, which already compromises the integrity and reality of the experience, and therefore mitigates its real-world value. Not only can we barely describe this mystifying experience to other people, but even slimmer are our chances of having them believe it, and it is because we lack the rhetoric to accurately and realistically describe this experience that we are forced by default into using metaphors to the things that most closely resemble it: religion, politics, and ideology.

Burning Man is very much a “reflexive ethnographic experience”; the individual experience is personally reflexive in new roles, and free association breaks down mundane routine; with social reflexivity, the “new” individuals reintegrate into re-formed social dynamic, and ethereal experience then becomes juxtaposed with the real world upon reentry (Hockett). The whole transition, and compression of the time in which it takes place, is an extraordinary experience unparalleled by anything we should chance to come by in the regular throng of society and existence, and we've only one way to describe it. As Victor Turner says, “Language is, no doubt, only the top of the inter-subjective iceberg, the dead husk of the living celebratory

fruit, but it remains the most efficient means of expressing and communicating thoughts and feeling among members of a human community” pg(1989, 19). Unfortunately, it is the only medium we have to express it, and as such, we run into a lot of complications, the most glaring one being, as Richard Pocklington, a Stanford anthropologist points out, “nearly everyone denied that Burning Man had one singular meaning” (Doherty). Surrounding Burning Man, there is:

“a swirl of claims, some contradictory, runs through the endless conversation that Burning Man engenders in its devotees and detractors. You'll hear them over and over again at parties, jubilees, raves, fundraisers, late night welding sessions and tugboat soirees, intimate desert rituals: Burning Man creates artists, Burning Man is self-indulgent play, Burning Man renews lives, Burning Man destroys lives, Burning Man changes the world, Burning Man is dangerous catastrophe” (Doherty 153).

“The festival,” Bronislaw Baczko says, “when it comes right down to it, really stems from the way in which it is experienced and lived by its participants. This “shock” and essential faction of the festival is also its most ephemeral, its most subjective and variable aspect, and hence the one most difficult to determine”(52). In my own experience, I've heard countless people call Burning Man a cult; some think it followers follow Lee Harvey and that he planned the entire festival a selfish- egoistic plot for leadership; others think it's a Fire cult. Some people think the entire festival was set up as a safe-haven for people to do a ton of drugs and dodge the law. Some think it's just “that big hippy festival in the middle of the desert”, and that's where all the 'peace love happiness” preachers have gone. The majority of people, especially those who've never been , have a skewed conception of it or boil it down to one or another simple, stereotypically 'radical' ideas, but even those who've gone can be under false pretenses. I actually sat and argued with someone for nearly half an hour, a participant, about how Burning Man was *not* a religion; and this was a mere *hours* after the festival- lack of qualitative memory, in this case, was not a factor. Burning Man is nearly impossible to describe because there's general lack in the modern

vocabulary, but that may only be the tip of the iceberg: it's not that only we, the veterans of Burning Man, can't describe the experience- we *don't even know what it is*. We don't simply lack the lexical vocabulary, we also don't have the 'vocabulary' of comparable experiences. Maybe this is because we in the United States don't have similar communal/festal experiential environments anymore, or what's more, maybe we never had them to begin with.

To begin to understand what exactly it is that the festival is providing that incites such strong loyalties and emotional affections, we have to dispel misleading beliefs about the festival itself, and how exactly these misgivings begin. To look at Burning Man in a cultural context the pattern of thought must be split into two comprehensive sections. The first section will help the reader and the participant both to understand Burning Man from an anthropological perspective. I'll first expound upon and support my belief of the festival as a 'subculture' (Ch 2); then we'll look closely at Burning Man's cultural-crossovers in Religion (Ch 3) and Ritual (Ch 4) and how Rule/Order (Ch 5) and Otherness/Liminality (Ch 6) effect how the festival is experienced. The second section involves understanding the festival in terms of understanding the Individual (Ch 7 &8), the Individual in Society (Ch 8&9). Finally, with the understandings evinced along the way throughout the course of the thesis, understanding the elements of the festival and understanding the way the individual forms and learns, both within society and without, in the third section I will attempt to fuse together theme elements to create a rhetoric that explains the connection between the effect of the festivals and the insufficiencies of the current cultural quality of American culture.

# Subcultures and Communities

“Jeans”-  
“you're not conforming to our non-conformity”  
“doesn't that make me a non-conformist?”  
“ No, that makes you a party-pooper”  
(Conversation at Burning Man, in *Dust & Illusions*, Olivier Bonin)

## **Introduction: Community**

Burning Man is, for all intents and purposes, a full-service fully-functioning subculture, even if it only meets for a week, but before it is even that, Burning Man is at its most fundamental level a *community*. As Lee Harvey stated, the festival was established as and for the purpose of being an “experiment of community building” (Kazinetz 89). So before we can begin to understand how Burning Man is a subculture, we need to understand how it is a community. And before we can understand how it is a community, we need to understand what a community is.

Community “...is a powerful everyday notion in terms of which people organize their lives and understand the places and settlements in which they live and the quality of their relationships” (Jenkins 109). This organization leads to categorization, which Jenkins states, “ is a routine and necessary contribution to how we make sense of, and impute predictability to, a complex human world of which our knowledge is always partial” (82). So communities are a method of social categorization we use to group and make sense of the world. Within society, symbols are also important vehicles of the categorization and organization of information about the world; and there is also a 'symbolic construction' underlying community.

Cohen observes that this symbolic sub-structure helps generate a sense of shared

belonging, share a “similar sense of things” and participate in the common domain with other members, and draw upon rhetorically and strategically (Jenkins 111-112). Burning Man is rife with symbolism, but the two most widely identified among the community are the two crescent lines topped with a triangle, a very simple pictorial representation of the Man with arms upraised (Figure 3). Other objects have also grown to symbolize Burning Man: the radial blueprint of the city from an aerial view and the sculptures of oft-returning and large-scale artists, Dan DasMann, as well as art-cars, fire-spinning, and body-painting (Figures 4 and 5). This symbolic network, however, is created through *action*; only by creating and performing these signature elements, time and time again, could they become habituated enough to become representative and stereotypical. Although in the modern rhetoric 'stereotypes' often have a negative implication, by definition, “stereotypes are extremely condensed symbols of collective identification” (Jenkins 128). Boasting a strong community of participation and a budding network of symbols and symbolic objects, Burning Man is off to a good start and is most affirmatively a community. But is it a culture?

A culture, again as Cohen defines it, is “the community as experienced by its members- which does not consist of social structure or in 'the doing' of social behavior. It inheres, rather, in the thinking about it. It is in this sense that we can speak of the community as a symbolic, rather than a structural, construct” (Anthony Cohen, cited in Jenkins 111). This definition implies that Burning Man has not only to consist in the existence of the community, but in the *belief*, held by the community, that it is its own separate social entity, with similar feelings towards specificities of thoughts, views, preferences, and behaviors. In Jenkins summary of Turner's 'social identity theory', he lists support for the creation and sustainment of cultures as “individuals and groups

with unsatisfactory social identity seek to restore of acquiesce positive identification via mobility, assimilation, creativity, or competition” (Jenkins 89). In a culture voluntarily made, then people are most likely attracted to groups with a certain sense of “mobility, assimilation, creativity, or competition”. Burning Man is host to all of these reasons, excluding competition. In turn, these cultures reflect back onto us; through interaction, communication, and *participation*, we learn about ourselves and the world. As Charles Taylor says, this reflexive property of culture, as always but most especially in the modern element, is...

“This crucial feature of human life is its fundamentally *dialogical* character. We become full human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence of defining our identity, through our acquisition of rich human languages of expression. - not only the words we speak, but also other modes of expression, whereby we define ourselves, including the “languages” of art, of gesture, of love, and the like. But we learn these modes of expression through exchanges with others. People do not acquire the languages needed for self-definition on their own. Rather we, are introduced to them through interaction with others who matter to us- what George Herbert Mead called “significant others” (Taylor 30).

Culture, in this light, provides us with the means for a fuller psychological development, itself acting as a grounds for self-understanding and improved methods and techniques of expression.

Cultures of antiquity have bonded together and become close in order to survive; they formed, according to their environment, a necessary structure of behaviors and patterns on which to find the greatest success living. However, mankind has, for the most part, advanced to the point where culture for survival, in terms or mortality, is no longer necessary; man could if he so chose, live and exist and possibly thrive living more or less by himself, separate from a 'culture'. Because this is the case, and cultures aren't mandatory tools for strict survival, this allows a person the opportunity to choose their own culture, based on what they perceive their particular sociological/cultural needs, wants, desires, and preferences to be. However, these 'interest-group'



cultures, often the second degree of culture, happen within and under the supra-cultural structure to form a more finely chosen and selected 'subculture'. In this case, the participation in Burning Man, which combines elements of culture-by-survival and culture-by-ideology, is clearly defined choice by those who go, the entirety of which happens inside of and as a much smaller conglomeration of American culture. In this way, Burning Man does represent a subculture. In this way, burning man fulfills the bare-bones requirement of what it means to be a subculture, but is there more to it than that? Is that sufficient?

### **Subculture:**

According to Jenkins, there can be two possibilities for collectivities: "In the first, the members of a collectivity can define themselves as such: they know who (and what) they are,. In the second, members may be ignorant of their membership or even of the collectivity's existence" (81). The first possibility possesses the potential to become a subculture; the second does not. This is because, as Cohen states, the base of group identity is that it is "the product of collective internal definition" (Jenkins 82). A group cannot rally on similarity of likes and thoughts if it is not aware of its cohesion, or if it does not possess the cohesion to produce a definition of itself. According to Hebdige in his 1979 work on the study of 'subcultures', a subculture "stands apart- a visible construction, a loaded choice. It directs attention to itself; it gives itself to be read" (101). If the members of a subculture bond together over *similarity*, this conversely implies *difference*; if the members of a subculture unite because they discover in each other the reflection of like-minded thoughts and ideas, then it implies that they are in someway *different* or *at odds* with the over-arching culture- this difference is a social construct, which puts them in the category of "Other" in comparison to the main bulk of society. However, once a subculture of like minds and

interests is found, this quality of 'other-ness' is shifted to the supra-culture, which now creates the periphery of the subculture's boundaries (Jenkins 79). In this regard, because subcultures are based more around similarity of ideas, rather than a similarity of *location*, they are said to inhabit a "psychic realm", consisting of a "collective Mind, the whole", which is "not present in any one, but persists through individuals, over generations, as time changes" ( Durkheim).

Subcultures are then social tools, used to combat feelings of 'other-ness' caused by one's root culture; subcultures provide the support and expressive techniques that cannot be or are not found by the individual in the larger culture and allow for them to live a more full and socially-interactive life.

However, within the corpus of anthropology there exist many different types of subculture. These types are based on specific details of the group's composition and how it functions. The 'clan', for example, was a very early delineation of the larger culture, and was populated largely by members of one or a few closely bonded families. Emile Durkheim proposes two differentiations of clan, from *The Division of Labor in Society*: one based on familial ties, the other based on skills and talents, which he refers to as 'organic' vs 'mechanical' solidarity (Durkheim). Burning Man blurs these lines as well, in some ways; many people would tell you that they consider their friends or camp at Burning Man to be their 'family'. However, I believe Durkheim refers only to true familial relations, and so even though those at Burning Man *may consider themselves* as a make-shift family, in truth the festival is much more aligned with a mechanical solidarity. From start to finish, from the erection of the Man and the camp sites, to building art and keeping machines functioning in the middle of the desert, Burning Man's strong demand for mechanical expertise and involvement (participation) proffer it as an unequivocal example of a mechanical collectivity, it's members rallying around astonishing feats of

impromptu civic engineering (the city structure and maintenance) , striking ingenuity and realization of fantastical ideas (the art, art cars, and theme camps), and un-augmented efficiency (trouble-shooting, crisis-aversion, and MOOP<sup>13</sup>).

Another representative niche-subcultural archetype is what Victor Turner has coined “*the communita*”. With an obvious root in the ideology of community, Turner explains *communitas* as “the state of oneness and total unity that neophytes living outside the norms and fixed categories of a social system share during liminal periods”. This is contemporaneous with the definition of subculture, which affirms it as a type. However, a *communita* is not merely a subculture, but a subculture based around particular aspects, specifically “equality, undifferentiated humanness, androgyny, and humility” (Levi-Strauss 117). Anyone who has ever been to Burning Man will confirm that within the festival's boundaries, there is no lack of “humanness”, and certainly a confounding presence of androgyny! The rest of the qualities- equality, *undifferentiated* humanness, and humility- are taken care of and overseen by the principles governing Radical Self-Inclusion, Self-Reliance, Self-Expression, and Communal Effort. The principles as Burning Man are a near-perfect fit for the characteristics of *communitas*, and provide an environment that allows for them to be freely expressed and flourish. This itself provides enough evidence to confirm Burning Man as a *communita* by definition, but what's more, the two share a very key and unique feature. Burning Man and *communitas* both are environments which collective effervescence, an increasing rare social phenomenon, can be found. The term and idea of collective effervescence will be explored more in-depth in a later chapter; however for our purposes at present, it is enough to know that it serves to fundamentally connect the two. Victor Turner “recognized collective ecstasy as a universal capacity and saw it as an expression of what

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<sup>13</sup> Matter Out Of Place- refers to garbage, debris, trash, and anything that's not a natural product of the desert.

he called *communitas*, meaning, roughly, the spontaneous love and solidarity that can arise within a community of equals” (Ehrenreich 10). That this occurs at Burning Man as well, in addition to the commonalities of basic principles already discussed, identifies Burning Man, for all intents and purposes, as a *communita*.

The similarities and crossovers that exist between Burning Man and the concept of subcultures, in various different forms no less, seems sufficient evidence to confidently assert Burning Man, by definition, as an independent -albeit ephemeral- subculture, standing on its own distinct from other subcultures and the over-arching supra-culture of the American environmental. However, Hebdige seems to think that, along with simple definitional relevancy, that there is merit involved with not only *what* a subculture consists of , but *how* it is formed. Must 'subcultures' stem from similar impetus? If so, does Burning Man still qualify?

### **Formation: Reasons for the Subculture**

Hebdige in the opening pages of his book, *Subcultures*, discussed the creation of the Reggae subculture in the U.K. For the Africans at the time, themselves being the generation after the African immigration to England, found themselves questioning the capabilities of their race. What's more, in this time of their own internal insecurity, the dominant culture of the native Europeans were having the same thoughts and similarly questioning the competency and abilities of this foreign race. As a solution, English-Africans developed the ideas and attitudes associated with Reggae culture; it was not only a strategic move at the time (to maintain their morale and existence in the face of a much more powerful culture) but an expression of the qualities that made African culture unique. Instead of being ashamed or hiding their cultural background, they wore it on their sleeve and announced it, providing new reassurance and sealing it off from the

encroachment of Anglicization (Hebdige 5).

Hebdige provides an excellent case for subcultural creation, because the subculture in question was simultaneously permitted (Africans were not forbidden cultural expression) and threatened (the culture was still viewed as dangerous, fearful, 'the Other'). This implies that subcultures are inherently begun *in reaction* to some part of the supra-culture; there is a 'difference' that creates tension. This difference can be detected both ambivalently or through antagonism, but “in either case, the relationship [between supra-culture and subculture] represents a crucial determining factor in the evolution of each youth cultural form and in the ideology both signified in that form and 'acted out' by its members” (Hebdige 44). The difference that creates tension is also quite frequently the 'difference' that is used to represent and summarize the particular stance of the subculture. Hebdige says that is this, “the communication of a significant *difference*, (and the parallel communication of a group identity)-”, that “-is the 'point' behind the style of all spectacular subcultures” (Hebdige 102).

However, the desire to seek acknowledgment for independence -for being different from mainstream society- need not only refer to small groups of people and exists on an individual level as well. We receive an array of identities at birth (political, physical, gender, familial) (Jenkins 53). As we develop into individuals, these pre-assigned identities may or may not be coterminous the identity we desire; what's more neither the identity we desires *or* the identity we received at birth may line up with the norms of mainstream society. When this happens, what options are left open to an individual to socialize successfully? As Mead and Goffman tell it, there are two motivations that inspire conforming behavior: the desires to be correct, and the desire to remain in the good graces of others. “Each contributes to the desire to belong...” (Jenkins 125). Subcultures, as much as 'conformity', are also the product of a desire to belong.

However, they provide an alternative to those whose identities do not run parallel to the norms of supra-culture by presenting an option for a different social/communal identity. Subcultural entry and participation is also voluntary, which allows a person to change ill-fitting identities provided to them by the supra-culture at birth. The subculture, then, is created in reaction to the social needs and desires of those whose identities, either prescribed or created, do not run parallel with the norms of the supra-culture, and provides an environment where they can fully enact their identities or, depending on the subculture they engage in, change them to freely express themselves and fulfill their desire to belong.

Subcultures fulfill two important factors, for groups and individuals both- identity and the need to belong, Burning Man goes above and beyond fulfilling both of these criteria. As Rosa Anna DeFelippis said for Olivier Bonin in *Dust & Illusions*, “you come back and you're like a missionary”. My own experiences support this, but what's more, the testimonies of friends and other Burners reflect this very strongly. Burning Man is set up as a haven, and was created precisely for that purpose- there is a reason you have to drive 5 miles out into the middle of the desert, and as it turns out, as the last 13 years have proven, it's not to shoot guns and drive cars fast- it's to be *yourself*. The first time you go to Burning Man, you're given a flash-initiation ritual of a role in its most primal and abundant element: *dust*. You get up, they dust you off, and tell you “Welcome Home”. There's a huge banner waving overhead that confirms this message, and you're waved quickly on, so that they can give the same message to each individual in the mile-long line of cars waiting to do the same thing. And they're all pretty excited too; after all, it's been a whole year since most of them have been 'home'.

### **Burning Man: A Subculture in its Own Right**

Burning Man is a subculture, and it's really no wonder. The festival in the middle of the desert hails from a long line of underground subcultures: the Suicide Club, the Cacophony Society. The Suicide Club turned into the Cacophony Society, and the Cacophony Society merged with the Man-burners of Baker Beach, and together they discovered the Black Rock desert; they pulled it altogether, and it grew and continued growing. The Cacophony Society's motto, "experiences beyond the pale of mainstream society", was certainly realized, and that is the basis of Burning Man's existence as a subculture (Gilmore 6). When people came out into the desert for the first time in 1990, they came because they were *different*: they wanted to burn wooden men, do drugs, drive fast, get drunk, make art and run around naked, something that just didn't jive with the supra-culture of America.

It's easy to imagine the *communita*-like aspects of Burning Man, especially collective effervescence. In a community and festival built around ecstatic principles like dance, music, art and expression, it's a wonder if you *don't* find yourself somewhere, some night or day, in the middle of a throng of people being lifted up to a level of ecstatic joy unlike anything you experience in normal life. That is collective effervescence, and that is certainly "beyond the pale of mainstream society". But Burning Man caters beyond the group, to the realm and needs of the individual. Burning Man is a liminal space<sup>14</sup>, outside of society, and being such, it is an environment of shift and flux, and -as part of its basic principles- the individual is allowed and even encouraged to pursue the utmost limits of their own personal self-expression. A person is allowed to be thoroughly who they are, or even change who they are into what they want to be. This is not something *festivals* inherently provide<sup>15</sup>, but is something that the culture of *Burning*

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<sup>14</sup> See Ch.3,4,5,6, and 8

<sup>15</sup> Although concepts like these are very involved in the ideology of festivals, discussed in Ch.11

*Man* provides.

Burning Man started out as a project, an experiment on community building. “Communities,” as Lee Harvey says, “are dying”. Burning Man was begun, “dedicated to discovering those optimal forms of community which will produce human culture in the conditions of our post-modern mass society within a desert wilderness we build a city, a model world composed of people who attend our event from all over the globe...living as we do, without sustaining traditions in time and ungrounded in a shared experience of place, it is yet possible to transcend these deficiencies” (Kazinets 89).

Burning Man certainly built a community- in 2010, a functioning city with 50,000 people- it wasn't just successful, it got more than it bargained for. Burning Man wasn't just a community built on those 10 principles, it was a subculture, a living cultural entity, and though it only came together once a year- even spread out, it lived by those 10 principles. Burning Man has existed for 21 years, 18 of those years involving the same ten principles. For those who came, year after year, the principles habituated, and the symbols took concrete form in the festival's conscious. This symbolization aids in community identity, and “generates an imagined similarity which permits difference and heterogeneity to prosper” ( Anthony Cohen, cited in Jenkins 124). People have come to recognize the image of the Man, and this unites them; there's a real sense of unity that comes from having been 'there', in the same time, same place, but more importantly, experiencing the same thing, and seeing the same incredible sights.

Burning Man may be a festival in a physical sense, but it's become much more than a festival, than a week of sand and sound and sex in the desert. What began as a festival has took hold in the psyche of the people who came and blossomed into a full-fledged, maximum-strength subculture. “It happened because people wanted it to happen people made it happen, and no one



stopped. It was a spontaneous flowering of a felt need of a free people”(Doherty 3);“this whole experiment we're running is an effort to recreate culture in our modern world” (Lee Harvey , cited in Kang). And so far, it looks like it's working.

# Religion

“All great religions begin with an overwhelming new experience”  
(Davis, 25)

## **Introduction**

Any anthropological analysis of Burning Man must necessarily discuss the festival in association to Religion. Even in the intermediate stages of the festival, burning the man on the beach, invited comparison to ritual and religion. As the festival continued to develop, religious connotations didn't go away; in fact, they got worse (or at least more frequent). To the public's credit, the Festival *does* incorporate activities, practices, and even sometimes a mentality, *akin* or closely *resembling* those of religion. This is an excusable mistake for the public to make; however, I've even heard *Burners* making this comparison, and they don't just *compare* it to religion- some Burners think that Burning Man *is* the new religion. I don't believe this is the case, but then again, it's a very difficult case to argue. After all, a culture is only what its participants make it and perceive it to be, so if enough Burners tell me that Burning Man is a religion, who is anyone to argue? Fortunately it's not gotten to that extent yet, but the data is adding up. Burning Man has recently been a subject of great academic intrigue, and much of this focus centers around the pseudo-religious elements of the festival. Whole papers have been devoted to this subject, but for my purposes we need only explore what religion is, and how it contributes to the overall mystery/experience of the Burning Man festival, and whether or not this contributes to the *individual's* overall emotional experience.

As was previously mentioned, the festival is infamously *difficult* to describe; however, so

is much religious expression. Is there any connection between the two? More than likely, is this connection primarily religious? It's hard to say. Certainly not contributing to any analysis based on testimony is the vague of the terms most often used to describe such experiences, such as 'spiritual', 'ritual', and 'religious' (Davis). I originally hypothesized though, in previous papers, that the reaction that participants had to Burning Man was due to the rapid decline or altogether absence of religion in much of modern American culture; however, that's not entirely true, and there are many places, such as the deep South, that maintain a thriving religious community. Furthermore, even if it was the case, as Emile Durkheim notes, "religion seems destined to transform itself rather than disappear" (121). Finally, while on the one hand I've met Burners who think Burning Man *most certainly is a religion*, on the other hand I've met many Burners who say *it has nothing to do with religion at all*. This brings us a good example of what Erik Davis means when he astutely notes "in matters of the spirit... you cannot always believe what people say" (16). Hopefully this section will help in clearing up some of these matters, and connecting the dots between Burning Man, Religion, and religious experience.

### **Meaning of Religion in Society**

The first step of understanding how Burning Man incorporates religion (even un- mindfully), and how these incorporations in turn affect the participant's experience and the overall structure of the festival, is understanding the nuances of religion (as generally as possible) and the 'religious experience'. In terms of communities, how is religion related and what are the effects?

Firstly, it's long been noted that religion has a very psychological effect on its participants; "the church subjugates the souls and minds of man, the sword the body" (Baczko

88). This effect is so strong that, in conjunction with other elements of the church, it's considered to have been an important tool, like myths and folk tales, in training its members to correct social function in society (Weber). Religion teaches us to draw distinctions between good and evil, sacred and profane, and how to identify what objects and actions are which. Most importantly, religion's role in the process of cultural instruction is the establishing of the moral rules of a culture. Religion centers around a god (or gods); "there is doubtless, in the invention of a supreme being, a determination to define a value that is greater than any other" (Bataille 34). It is not the mission of this paper to determine whether or not these entities are real. This fact is irrelevant, because very rarely is the figure of worship physically present to receive worship and communicate moral values; instead, these are learned and transmitted through *stories*, famous parables of their significant journeys and adventures. These stories – again, whether they are true or false is irrelevant – contain *morals*, prescriptions of ideal cultural and moral behavior, that reinforce, produce, and display particular values (Collins 134). Religion also transmits correct moral and cultural behavior through the ritual process. This will be described in greater detail later, but for now the importance of ritual is that it draws a distinction between ideas of sacred/profane, moral/immoral, order/disorder. In terms of cultures, it defines members vs. non-members, Self vs. Other.

Religion teaches morals, and by doing so also provides the ability to identify members and non-members by a diagnosis of their moral behavior – are they acting morally or aren't they? Behavior and objects are viewed as moral, and therefore 'Self', when they fall under what is considered 'sacred'; conversely, things are immoral, unknown and 'Other-ful', when they are 'profane'. The sacred is that which resembles the divine, the profane is that which defies the divine, and so on and so on. According to Georges Bataille, "...the immanent sacred is predicated

on the animal intimacy of man and the world, whereas the profane world... no intimacy to which mankind is immanent” (72). This would suggest that man, at his basic and most fundamental, is sacred, and things that are unrelated to man – crude objects, inanimate objects, etc. – are profane. Within this there develops even more strata, “the sacred is itself divided: the dark and malefic sacred is opposed to the white and beneficent sacred...” (Bataille 73). This lends itself to a more contemporary, and the more common, understanding of the terms, in which the 'profane' refers to the “secular” routine of daily life, the conduct of instrumental activities at work and the carrying out of household chores. As Durkheim puts it, “in the world he languidly carries on his daily life; the other one that he cannot enter without abruptly entering in relation with extraordinary powers that excite him to the point of frenzy. The first is the profane world, and the second, the world of sacred things” (112). This provides the individual with a measure of where to place himself in regards to other individuals, the community, the culture, and the world in general.

Religion also helps in the establishment and solidification of communities. “All types of mysticism tend toward the formation of communities”, says Weber. In this model, the community is based around the 'mysticism' in question, and is the result of the emotional reception of the religion (read: 'mysticism') in the community (Weber). “We know that in them religion pervades the whole of social life. This is because social life is made up almost entirely of common belief and practices that draw from their unanimous acceptance a very special kind of intensity” (Durkheim 66) This common belief lay in the central object of worship and the associated narratives, but also is located largely in the catalog of common symbols. Society is held together by values and morals, both of which are recognized by and infused with emotions. These emotions, in turn, are transferred to the common symbols established by the religion, through the rituals and narratives; “because this emblem (the symbol) is the object of religious respect, they

too should inspire respect of the same kind and appear as sacred” (Durkheim 115). “Imputing the emotions to the image (symbols),” says Durkheim, “is all the more natural because, being common to the group, they can only be related to a thing that is common to all” (114).

Furthermore, their effects and meaning can be made real only within and by them; their existence must be acknowledged and confirmed by the culture en masse to translate into actual effect and influence on the actions of real people in the lives. The sacred and profane, and symbols and their imbued meanings, help determine members of the community and provide a bonded system of shared symbols with which they can derive meaning and create a shared rhetoric from. Using the system of symbols and participating in a common rhetoric “involves the unity of a common project, a common self” (Taylor 49). This explains the creation of bonding and communities via religion, but it does not yet explain the religious experience.

### **The Religious Experience: Comfort, Closure, and Collective Effervescence**

Religion is an inherently mysterious thing; it often involves a singular god, or even a pantheon of gods, who are never witnessed, performing deeds and actions never experienced first-hand, who live in or come from a world that is not this one. Yet somehow, despite the lack of conclusive fact, existence, or confirmation, religion still inspires some of the fiercest loyalty experienced by mankind, and some of the most unquestioning faith. Outside of the fact that we are told to do so as children, why do people believe so strongly in something that, for all intents and purposes, exists solely for us as stories? Why are we willing to accept them as fact, and what is the concrete element that affirms this for us? It is my belief that the religious experience, in comparison to everyday 'profane' life, is novel and awakening, accompanied by aspects of providing comfort different from and outside of our normal routine, via collective effervescence

and answering life's question to provide closure.

As Erik Davis once said, "All great religions begin with an overwhelming new experience" (25). This experience, whether individual or communal, is striking and profound, leaving a lasting impression. As an individual, this feeling of being 'overwhelmed' will cause the subject to seek understanding and empathy with their peers, and if the experience is communal, it provides a context for discussion, circulating ideas and beliefs around the group and inspiring communal sympathies. "By themselves," Durkheim says, "individual consciousness are actually closed to one another, and they can communicate only by means or signs in which their inner states come to express themselves" (118). Thus, the individuals are given a context with which to practice and utilize the common symbolic systems and test their understanding. Similarly "this concentration takes place when a clan or a portion of the tribe is summoned to come together and on that occasion either conducts a religious ceremony or holds that in the usual ethnographic terminology is called a 'corroboree' (Durkheim 109). The ritual calls into a conscious and personal sphere the distinctions between sacred and profane items. "In the world he languidly carries on his daily life...", says Durkheim, talking about a typical man's normal routine. "The other one," he says, referring to the liminal world of the ritual, "...he cannot enter without abruptly entering in relation with extraordinary powers that excite him to the point of frenzy. The first is the profane world, and the second, the world of sacred things" (112). The ritual, in this way, is a conductor for communal bonding and divinization. Durkheim continues:

"The very act of congregating [as in ritual] is an exceptionally powerful stimulant. Once the individuals are gathered together, a sort of electricity is generated from their closeness and quickly launches them to an extraordinary height of exhalation. Every emotion expressed resonates without interference in consciousness that are wide open to external impressions, each one echoing the others. The initial impulse is thereby amplified each time it is echoed, like an avalanche that grows as it goes along" (110).

This feeling, this “electricity” Durkheim also refers to as “social effervescence”. It is the feeling of ecstatic joy, communally inspired, received like a highly contagious emotion from those experiencing it around you. It is the feeling of lightness, of blissful unity, satisfaction and completeness. It is the ultimate communal 'high'. This feeling of euphoria is often explained, in a religious context, as 'heavenly bliss', and is extremely emotionally powerful. Collective effervescence, therefore, carries very weighted experiential potential. “By compressing itself almost entirely into circumscribed periods,”, Durkheim submits, “collective life could attain its maximum intensity and power, thereby giving a man a more vivid sense of the twofold existence he leads and the twofold nature in which he participates.” (1989, 112). By this, he's suggesting that, by participating in and experiencing collective effervescence, a culture can attain greater insight into and understanding of the dichotomy of the sacred and profane. By participating in and experiencing collective effervescence first-hand, we are experience a moment of clarity, in which our own lives and roles, in the culture and in nature, make a sense and are revealed to us in the moment of revelry. This considered, Victor Turner remarks, “perhaps, paradoxically, we confront our own personality, singular depths more fully in these collective forms than we do through introspection...”. This mirrors and confirms his theory of culture's self-reflexive method of learning and teaching. He continues, stating that “...they [self-reflexive realizations] arise from a heightened sense of our shared humanity, even if they do themselves in the guise of a thousand different cultures” (1989, 14). William concludes this segments, with perfect phrasing:

“a view of reality and a corresponding view of self are thus established though ritual, creating a subjective psychological state that restructures meaning. This is the work of ritual and the way it provides solutions to problems” (Levi-Strauss 129).

This ability to solve problems -thus bringing closure- in addition to the experience of



collective effervescence, simultaneously provide comfort and, through a combination of all three -comfort, closure, and collective effervescence, makes religion a very powerful concept.

However, it is also expressed here that the religious experience is at once separate from and common to all religions, separating it from the context and details of the religion itself. With the understanding of the qualities that compose the religious experience, we can now search for similar scenarios, the 'religious experience', in other cultural settings.

### **Changes: Euphoric Religion/Sober Religion, Polytheism/Monotheism**

Religion as we know it today, and as it is for the majority of American culture, is a very sober experience. Churches and graveyards are places of severe solemnity and respect; the expression of joy or merrymaking in a place of the Lord is downright disrespectful. The worshipers sit, and their only form of participation is voluntarily following the orders of the preacher. There is one god, to whom we owe eternal gratitude for dying for our sins; his blood is the only alcohol admissibly imbibed inside a church-space. For American culture, this practice was no doubt brought from England and Europe, but this is not how religion always was. In religion's early days, it was a celebratory expression steeped in revelry; the gods had adventures and people danced and drank as tribute. Somewhere along the line, religion ceased to be 'merry', and we were left with the dry husk of a faith that we have today. As Barbara Ehrenreich notes, somewhere along the line, people realized that

“...Pan, the horned-god who overlapped Dionysus as a deity of dance and ecstatic states, had to die to make room for the stately and sober Jesus. Only centuries later did Plutarch's readers fully attend to the answering voices of lamentation and begin to grasp what was lost with the rise of monotheism” (57).

How was ecstatic religious culture displaced by the modern forms of religion, in particular the monotheism favored in American culture, and what was lost in translation?

“The Church” is the main villain, by and large, over all accounts. The earlier Greek and Roman, and even Middle Eastern cultures, were all ones highly incorporating festivity and revelry, especially dancing, drinking, and singing into their religious ceremonies. With the rise of Christianity and Judaism, however, the spirit of religion, and the power-holders, began to shift. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century, dancing was outlawed in an effort to eliminate what the Church authorities saw as its grosser, sensual parts and ‘spiritualize’ the church aspect” (Ehrenreich 74). “The Romans,” as Ehrenreich has it, “imagined Christians performing all the lewd acts attributed to the cult of Bacchus, with even more diabolical variations such as human sacrifice, infanticide, and cannibalism thrown in” (64). These were of course abominated, over-exaggerated fabrications, but they none the less did the trick. The public, via *strong suggestion* by the Church (but not necessarily mandate), learned to resist the temptations of the Devil via pleasure, and slowly but surely phased out celebratory modes of worship from the corpus of Christian practice. However, what most people were made to forget at the time, was that “most of what Christians of the first and second centuries actually did together- whether they even possessed a standardized form of worship, for example- is unknown to us today, but the general scholarly view is that “church services were noisy, charismatic affairs, quite different from a tasteful evensong today at the parish church”. They met in people's homes, where their central ritual was a shared meal that was no doubt washed down with Jesus' favorite beverage, wine. There is reason to think that they sang too, and that the songs were sometimes accompanied by instrumental music” (Ehrenreich 65). Backman retells from an *apropos* source, an account of ecstatic worship, practiced by the

early Christian community:“...[we] raise our heads and our hands to heaven and move our feet just at the end of the prayer- *pedes excitamus*<sup>16</sup> (Ehrenreich 65). In the early days of transition from poly- to monotheism, there were doubtless many accounts of an overlap of practices and mind-frames, but the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century, Catholic church had finally and once and for all eliminated this “unruly and ecstatic behavior” (Ehrenreich 77).

This tactic- the removal of joy and the conditioned association of pleasure/joy to evil, sin, and the devil- was perceived as the Church being determined to maintain its monopoly over human access to the divine (Ehrenreich 84). The Church control all entry ways and communication lines- the Church was the center for worship, the Bible the enlightening text, the hymnbook the source of praise in song, the confession booth the area of salvation, and the priest the mouthpiece to God. However, intellectual independence is slowly gained, and at a starting point in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, “the notion that human beings are endowed with a moral sense, an intuitive feeling for what is right and wrong” began to disseminate and take hold. This refuted earlier views, supporting the 'Church's monopoly over the divine' hypothesis, that earlier moral views, where being in touch with some source- for example, God, or the Idea of Good- was considered essential to full being. The realization that divine salvation was in man reflected itself even in the religious figures at the time, and even Saint Augustine saw the road to God as passing through our own self-awareness (Taylor 28-29).

Once again, to quote Durkheim, “however, religion seems destined to transform itself rather than disappear” (121). It was at this same time that the self was realized as a vehicle for religion that, via celebrations, in which the people of the Middle Ages discovered that, despite the church no longer taking part, “whatever joys they found were of their own, entirely human,

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<sup>16</sup> The Latin term for “dancing”.

creation. Huge amounts of effort and expense went into a successful celebration: Costumes had to be sewed, dance steps and dramas rehearsed, sets built, special pastries and meats prepared” (Ehrenreich 94). Festivals eventually lost steam too, and disappeared for some time, except in times of public celebration or, largely in the case of the French, revolt...

Religion in America was much the same way; inherited in part from England, America was also largely monotheistic, either Christian or Catholic. However, America was a culture whose very foundation lay in revolt, in distancing from the even greater supra-culture of England and European thought; combining inherited religious notion with the riotous spirit, there was formed a new atmosphere, an American 'spirituality', in which revivalist passions drew whole crowds into 'fits and feints'. This upsurge of emotion, although derived from riot-mentality, mimicked the contagion and uplift of collective effervescence, and festivals at the time also incorporated costumes and juxtaposition (although at the time it was a form of political statement, mockery, and protest). Slowly, as the tempestuous political atmosphere of the infant United States began to settle and solidify, so did the religious conduct. With the formation of a new government – and especially new democracy- America no longer needed rebel-rousing festivities of political criticism, as it would have been its own new creations it was mocking. Democracy allowed for the development and quickfire progression of capitalism, which ultimately led to new ideas and capabilities in business and progress. Part of this transition into the upper strata of capitalism, which America is now renowned for and predicated upon, and another unwitting cog in the spokes of the survival of religion, was industrialization.

Industrialization, without a doubt, increased the tempo of American life. The new speed at which tasks could be accomplished, and the new expectations that came with it, caused a backlash onto old concepts of 'leisure time'. Quicker production quickly led to assumptions of

quicker profit, and everyone from the white collar businessmen to the blue collar factory workers found themselves caught up in the 'race to the top'. However, this new pacing was in-consistent – and incompatible- with religious mind-frame. “On the 7<sup>th</sup> day he rested' had been a mantra and a model for Sunday's Sabbatical day of rest. Unproductive nature was on this day seen as divine nature. However, industry pulled the culture away from this concept, and new establishments in Protestant faith taught the worker that not only was it 'just' and 'righteous' to produce as much as possible, but accordingly, a waste of time and its subsequent un-productivity was a downright sin. Laziness breed evil; “idle hands are the devils' playground”. Ultimately, salvation could only be earned through the living proof of the fiscal reward of a hard day's work (Bataille). Through the early stages of America, religion was transformed, via cultural developments in business and economics and shifting views of success and accomplishment, into an effort, as Bataille says, to “clear consciousness”, and from there into the search for lost intimacy (57).

### **Modern Society: the Religion and Ultra-recent**

The last section guided us through a brief overview of the development from polytheism to monotheism, the subsequent shift from ecstatic- to sober-worship, and the acquirement and final shift within religion in the American culture and context. However, since the historical recent 'modernity' of the Industrial Revolution, the changes between the beginning of 'progress'<sup>17</sup> and the current climate of success and modernity today have been rapid, even (in the case of computer-science) improving exponentially (Bostrom). But this transition has by no means been seamless, and changes in the way American culture produced and operated did not come without

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<sup>17</sup> 'Progress' in this case is concerning that which has allowed America to grow in population and advance to its current footholds in the global community as a political and economic behemoth and, perhaps, anomaly.

changes to the fundamental humanity of American culture itself. Customary frames of mind and tradition were cut and fit to meet new cultural demand and rigor. Sometimes these were adapted, but sometimes the fit could no longer be made and they were altogether abandoned. Necessarily, religion was also subject to the poke-and-prod, snip-and-cut molding into new habits of daily life, and changes were immanent. This produced a noted effect on the psyche and a shift in the manifestation of religion in America, especially in places where the progressive shift of lifestyle was most poignant.

Firstly, it is understood that religion, based on subjective feelings of loyalty, belief, and sincerity, is highly identified with as an emotional experience. The 'religious experience' is one, as I have argued, that is based upon the experiential achievement of collective effervescence, (psychological) comfort, and closure. Modernity, though, has historically in one way or another always caused a rift in the 'religious experience in some way or another, affecting the psyche of the population, what Lionel Trilling calls, " a mutation in human nature". Though it is brought to greatest attention in the ultra-recent past of American culture, Trilling urges us to look beyond for an even more historical root. He says, " we cannot grasp the full psychological effect of this "mutation in human nature" in purely secular [for our purposes, American] terms. Four-hundred, even two hundred, years ago, most people would have interpreted their feelings of isolation and anxiety through the medium of religion, transferring self as "soul"; the ever-watchful judgmental gaze of others as "God"; and melancholy as "the gnawing fear of eternal damnation"(Ehrenreich 142). These feelings of 'isolating and anxiety' were manifestations of depression. Originally depression was detected in significant amounts (although no statistics are available) as a cultural affliction with the loss of religion to the Enlightenment and the scientific revolution in the 1600's. When the political power of ancient Rome shifted from polytheism to monotheistic worship,

“they had completed the demonization of Dionysus begun by Christians centuries ago, and thereby rejected one of the most ancient sources of help – the mind-preserving, lifesaving techniques of ecstasy” (Ehrenreich 153). Already religion as a psychological lifeline, had been severely compromised, but it still managed to make up in other ways. For example, Calvinism provided a metaphysical framework for depression - if you felt isolated, persecuted, damned, it's because you were (Ehrenreich). However, the change in American lifestyle, of quicker pace and more serious competition<sup>18</sup>, induced a strong individualistic and subsequently isolationist atmosphere, that seeped into American psyche. Although progress and 'modernization' is normally spires positive association, Yi-Fu Tuan observes that “the obverse” of the new sense of personal autonomy is “isolation, loneliness, a sense of disengagement, a loss of natural vitality and of innocent pleasure in the givenness of the world, and a feeling of burden because reality has no meaning other than what a person chooses to impart to it” (Ehrenreich 140). This is what Durkheim calls *anomie*, and, for all intents and purposes, is coterminous with depression. The *anomie* common to the American culture, due largely to new ideologies and practices that resulted in isolation, could conversely be attributed to the correlative lack of community and decline of religious culture, which being a non-ecstatic faith, was already compromised and vulnerable to these feeling to begin with. What these two cases- the decline of religion due to the development of science and the isolating consequences of modernization- seem to support is a positive correlation between the decline of religion -a source of communal empathy, support and existential closure- with the rise of depression and other feelings of isolation, anxiety, and removal from society (Ehrenreich 141).

1. As monotheism replaced polytheism, science largely served to displace religion in the

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<sup>18</sup> Based in and around capitalist acquisition, of both capital or objects of significant capital worth

modern age. "Modernity," Davis says, "has bequeathed to many of us a profound disenchantment with both the cultural and institutional forms of religion as well as the beliefs that sustain them" (32). Furthermore, with the development into America's modern self, aspirations, interest, and awareness changed and adapted with it. In religion, by and large, the people were no longer excited by Christianity. They did not need the same things as they did in the early 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, when the faith was in its prime (for American culture). With the dawn of science came a blatant disbelief. People were more involved with the study of the earth, and the study of people; they soon came to the realization that "the believer [was] not deceived when he believe[d] in the existence of a moral power upon which he depends and from which he receives all that is best in himself: this power exists; it is society" ( Durkheim, cited in Carlton-Ford 257). With the new-found discovery that the religious and moral self could be enforced by the group, a drastic phenomenon took place. Durkheim describes this event:

"That is how man had become a god for man and why he can no longer create other gods without lying to himself. And since each of us incarnates something of humanity, each individual consciousness contains something divine and thus itself finds marked with a character which renders it sacred and inviolable to others. Therein lies all individualism; and that is what makes it a necessary doctrine" (257).

Perhaps this is why, as Turner observes, "the sacra of other culture, often including the most beautiful and striking items in museum holdings, have always fascinated the Western public. Perhaps this is because they make visible what Westerners have thrust from conscious awareness in order to effect their rational conquest of the material world." (1989, 13) But ever relevant, we can still reference the words of Durkheim, reminding us that "religion seems destined to transform itself rather than disappear", and once again these words ring true (121). Even today, there exist *different spirituality*, albeit no longer specifically connected to the



Church, in which the individual pursue the essence of the religious experience, through “immanent mystics”- who find their religious meaning in the affirmation and the active participation in life”, and the “transcendentals”- who strive to unite themselves with higher reality by withdrawing from life (Hjelle 204). These are by no means the majority, and by no means has religion in its traditional form and practiced *disappeared*; however, the presence of these practices and these religious-centered rhetorics, and the current state of American cultural life seem to suggest that, involving religion, there is something left to want.

### **Religious Themes and Resemblance at Burning Man:**

One of people's first observation about the festival, and understandably one of the most popular assumptions, is that 'Burning Man's gotta be some kind of religion'. Come on, we dance naked, we sing and celebrate together, we have drug-related experiences together, we have an initiation ritual, we're earthy, we perform multi-people performances involving choreographed dancer and fire-techniques, , we have a temple, and finally, *we all gather on the peak night of the festival to burn an enormous man*. The art are our alters, and the dust is simultaneously our ash and holy water with which we become baptized and anointed. Even more strikingly, and appropriately I suppose, is Burning Man similar to and associated to *non-ordinary* religions, things similarly considered foreign, taboo, and dangerous, like totemism and cults; *scary, weird*. Is similarity to religion *really* enough to explain these crossovers? Or is there some serious earnestness in these practices? In the case of Burning Man, who's atmosphere is one of general absurdity, I'd argue that it's 'giving religion an earnest crack' is just as much a part of the joke as it is attributable to the splendor.

The murky waters we're about to enter involve the distinction between religiousness and

sacredness. I would even agree that sacredness has a presence at Burning Man, because sacredness, as a descriptive term, has to do with the integrity and quality of the experience it describes, but regardless of whether it's descriptive or religious, "sacredness is highly contagious, and it spreads from the totemic being to everything that directly or remotely has to do with it" (Durkheim 115). Burning Man is compared to religions of totemic worship because, like them, it centers around and even derives its name from the central worship of one or a few – but usually one in particular- 'gods', which don't necessarily have to be 'gods'-proper, but chosen objects, animals, or spirits that have been endowed with ritual, divine, and spiritual powers (Durkheim). This endowment could occur before hand, but is most certainly affirmed through ritual. When read in the context of Burning Man, this structure could certainly and easily overlap the structure of the festival. Furthermore, to reiterate, "sacredness is highly contagious, and it spreads from the totemic being to everything that directly or remotely has to do with it" (Durkheim 115). With this simple understanding, no further explanation is even required; this explains the entirety of the rest of the festival, because the Burning Man, his form and image and *symbol*, are such a *powerful* object at the festival, and has such an important part in the infrastructure, that it's presence alone, especially in it's symbolic central location, is enough to imbue all other pieces and elements involved in the festival with a fine coating of 'sacred significance' that radiates out from it. Durkheim hits it on the head: "Here, in reality, is what the totem amounts to: It is the tangible form in which that intangible substance is represented in the imagination; diffused through all sorts of disparate beings, that energy alone is the real object of the cult" (91). It's very easy to imagine how and why the festival could be interpreted as *totemic* or *sacred* in this context...too easy in fact, which is part of the problem, and the difficulty people have in

separating the *festival representation* of these aspects with their real-life counterparts<sup>19</sup>

Burning Man, being a largely *counter-culture* event, is populated most visibly by all sorts of extremists, freaks, and tribal weirdos (Figures 5-7), – “the decorations on various parts of his body are so many totemic marks” – which is also the domain that pop culture has assigned to *cults* (Durkheim 113). It is not surprising that Burning Man has been compared with, and is even assumed to be one. Durkheim defines a cult as “a passionate obsession, which we may come and go from as we please” (Davis 17). This divorces cult from the inherent demonicity it has come to be associated with, and actually opens it up to a parallel analysis and understanding with 'subculture'. Erik Davis, who also studied the presence and meaning of religion at Burning Man, distinguished and identified five “cults” within the festival.

### **Cults of Burning Man:**

In another publication, Durkheim also defines 'cult' as “system of diverse rights and ceremonies” (Carlton-Ford 338). This widens the range of application, and ostensibly opens the term up to describe not-necessarily-religious usage. “The real function of the cult”, Durkheim says, “is to awaken within the worshipers [participants] a certain state of self, comprised of moral forces and confidence...” (Carlton-Ford 431). Erik Davis identified five 'cults' at Burning Man, and it follows then that these would be dedicated to the aspect of the festival that most inspire these feelings/conditions...

Cult of Experience: The cult of experience is predicated on and best described by a quote

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<sup>19</sup> Festivities, the Festival, the Festal and their associated effects on groups, cultures, and meanings discussed in Ch.11.

from Burning Man originator Lee Harvey himself: “beyond belief, beyond the dogmas, needs and metaphysical ideas of religion, there is immediate experience” (21). The cult of experience encapsulated and epitomizes the common phrase 'you had to be there'. It's the aspect of Burning Man that actively engages the tenets of Immediateness and Participation. The Cult of Experience is about 'grabbing life by the horns', and using the opportunity presented at Burning Man, lawless wide open space devoid of time or obligations, to live out and live loud. The Cult of Experience also encourages full engagement in and appreciation of the spectacle that, through the interaction and engagement of so many people acting out and acting loud, presents itself in this particular space and time.

Cult of Intoxication: According to Ken Kesey, founder of Merry Pranksters<sup>20</sup> “although Avante-Garde spirituality has marked the West Coast since the turn of the century, it remained a small and esoteric path until LSD and other drugs offered people a dependable and immediate access to powerful and compulsively intriguing expanded states of consciousness” (24). The Cult of Intoxication at Burning Man encompasses the majority of the population, which seeks pleasure, enjoyment, bonding, or self-discovery through the use of drugs, alcohol, sleep deprivation, and all other forms of intoxicants. In Shamanic society, which makes ritual/social use of plants with various intoxicating effects, there is often a 'plant teacher', someone who teaches the other members of the group the correct use of these herbs. As is often noted and lamented by the 'intoxicant' users of American society, a large part of America's taboo against such things stems from misguided use or abuse. In the supra-culture, consumers are 'flying blind'

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<sup>20</sup> The Merry Pranksters, an outlawed, guerrilla 'counterculture'. Dedicated to the a similar lifestyle as the Cacophony Society (“Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters)

(27). The Cult of Intoxication is composed of and for people who desire to explore the regions of these intoxicants in a community which is safe and which will openly provide the necessary instruction and support.

The Cult of Flicker- The bonds between men and the integrity of cultural tradition is at times bemoaned to be losing the race against the glitter and spark of newfangled technologies. However, the Cult of Flicker represents the aspect of Burning Man – a festival largely centered around and even dependent upon man's interaction with the environment- that fully and completely embraces technology. Much of the art at Burning Man is incorporated, to either some of full extent- with mechanization, computerization, or fiber-optic technology. There is a drive, “spiritual as well as technological, to manifest the spectral machinery of mind in the world before our eyes” (28). The festival is predicated on a reductionist, survivalist, near-primal motivation to live in a world not fully-furnished to the needs and wants of man. However, the festival is also a celebration of art and wonder, and by incorporating the most recent advancements in technology, the art reaches a hybridized level of technology and scale that nears fantastic proportions and most certainly in some cases has never been seen or experienced before (Figure 8). The festival for this reason has been described as paleocybernetic, future primitive, technopagan (28). The Cult of Flicker, however, does not merely restrict its definition of 'flicker', that which inspires marvel and grabs attention, to *technology*. In fact, says Davis, “Burning Man's greatest aesthetic triumph is the creation of an immersive and chaotically collaborative space of expanded cinema that marries a wide range of visual media, both fancy and crude, with the most powerfully archaic flicker tech of all- fire!” (29).

Cult of Juxtapose: The Cult of Juxtapose are those devoted to the elements of Burning Man that make it truly subcultural, counter-cultural, or otherwise '*Other*' to society at large. The cult of juxtapose is the "aesthetic language" of Burning Man: the cult of juxtapose is the play-names<sup>21</sup>, the costumes, the theme camps, the art theme, the art cars, the mutant bikes, the mockery, and the irony. "These elements," -for example, the different camps and costumes-, "inevitably criss-cross in the turbulent, constantly flowing serendipity of a playa life" (31). Just as equally, they criss-cross and *cross-over* the true meanings of the ideas and objects in the real world; they mix them and match and switch them out until they create a new meaning, or until they mean *nothing*. Mockery or derision, serious or in the name of play and frivolity, allows provides the crucial distance for a necessary criticism, all the while maintaining a sense of open-mindedness and good fun. "In this context, juxtaposition allows people to invoke sacred forces while sidestepping issues of belief, earnestness, or responsibility" (31).

The Cult of Meaningless Chaos: As the last and final cult of Burning Man, the Cult of Meaningless Chaos is the one which most encompasses all the other cults, and also all elements left behind, but is also the one most devoid of dogma, mantra, ideology or.....meaning. As N.J.Girardot writes, "the Taoist accepts the fact of being born into a civilizational order but does not accept the possibility that civilizational values define what it means to be fully alive and human. The acceptance of phenomenal existence requires a more profound recognition of the fact that fulfillment and renewal of human life depends on a periodic return to a chaotic or primitive condition" (35). The Cult of Meaningless Chaos, then is devoted to Unrule of the festival; the

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<sup>21</sup> A playa-name is an alternate moniker, either made but usually given, that a person is or *becomes* while inside the Burning Man culture.

Cult of Meaningless Chaos revels in the liminal, the lack of Order, the pregnant potential that any given moment is born with, the “Be Here Now”-ers, and people completely absorbed in doing what they want, when they want for no other reason that it's what they wanted to do now.

### **Conclusion:**

Strange religion and alternative faith has cropped up more than once in history's past, and revelry has before been mistaken for religion. As Ehrenreich observes,

“France after the 1730's would have heard about the heretical Parisian 'convulsionary' cult, whose customary style of worship featured scenes as wild as anything that could be found amongst the 'savages'" (7).

Revelry, in all its many forms, has historically been mistaken for the religious experience, but why? The special treatment of an object or idea- it's celebration *or* contestation- no doubt play a part in it's interpretation as sacred, and 'sacred' is a term we're used to finding only in religious context. James Joyce viewed the role of the artist as that of a kind of priest who can convert the seemingly mundane “daily bread of common experience into the radiant body of everlasting, never-ending life” (Dark 26). James Joyce's analogy of a priest to an artist puts into perspective the connectedness of these similar yet vastly different “passions”, a simple comparison which provides a bridge for us, from the high tower of religion, to bring it down to and relate it to things, such as art, with similar purpose or structure. Such a comparison provides us with a perspective lens with which to view other subjects in terms of religion.

Bataille boldly asserts that “all people have doubtless conceived this supreme being, but the operation seems to have failed everywhere” (35). I do not agree or disagree with this statement, but rather use it as poignant example that mine is not the only opinion that believes

religion has significantly *declined* since, at very least, the establishment of the United States as a separate and politically independent entity; in fact, as his comment proves, some people think that it has “failed” the world around, all culture included. However, the idea of the sacred, which is divine or semi-divine, still exists and is relevant in the social discourse. Perhaps even subconsciously, Burning Man reflects the retention of the search for the sacred, even through its physical layout. The blueprint of Burning Man most resembles what Mircea Eliade coined an “*axis munde*”. An *axis munde* includes “a symbolic manifestation of the sacred center of the cosmos and the location of hierophany, the eruption of the sacred into the profane world (Gilmore 54). However, what composes this 'sacred' element, this 'symbolic power' that most assuredly resides in the image and structure of Man? Burning Man is devoid of any overt dogmatic ties to one or another established religion, and only partially in structure resembles a handful of different 'semi-religious' conglomerations (corroborees, totemic societies, cults, rituals). Perhaps the definition that most closely resembles is, and is most accurately described by, is *mana*. An obscure term, mana is decidedly difficult to translate, but an accepted definition is understood to be “value, not only magical religious values, but social value as well”, which, “represents an indeterminate value of signification, in itself devoid of meaning and thus their sole function is to fill a gap between the signifier and the signified” (Kang). Mana, then, is precisely the term we're looking for: “[mana] represents nothing more or less than that floating signifier which is the disability of all finite thought” (Kang).

Burning Man has more than enough to model from, should it so choose; representatives of Christianity, Satanism, Buddhism, shamanism, Tantra, Judaism, Wicca, etc, etc, forever and ever and still the list goes on, are present at the festival (Davis). These already come with their own set of rules, meanings, symbols, and dispositions. Burning Man is a space that simultaneously



acknowledges all variety of cultures and religions without committing to any to create a porous environment that can host creativity, individuality, and reshaping (Hockett). The power behind this, best described as 'mana', is the power to create new value, attribute new meaning; it is the power of the empty signifier, and it's provides a freedom to create and shape what is *needed*.

As for what is needed, Durkheim once said “a day will come when our societies once again will know hours of creative effervescence during which new ideals will again spring forth and new formulas emerge to guide humanity for a time” (119). Perhaps that time is now; certainly collective effervescence is present in quantities and frequencies that do not exist in the throng of mainstream American life. “All great religions begin with an overwhelming new experience” (Davis 25). Perhaps the 'zone trip' into the desert is just that. It is there that Burning Man provides a new setting in which to fulfill desires commonly conceived as spiritual: connecting, release, and renewal (Gilmore 60). If Burning Man is the center, maybe mana is the power, the mysterious vehicle of the sacred that keeps it alive. The human personae, collective, projects itself onto to readily available scenes, landscapes, images and actions: it makes morals, distinguished good from evil. But if this ability- to distinguish good from evil- was the sacra of religion, then perhaps it is the sacra of human culture? Perhaps in this way, we've found a way to derive what is sacred from religion while overriding the ideology, fulfilling the need for ourselves, from ourselves. This frame of mind, the Cult of Man, represents the pivotal act of communal Radical Self Reliance.

Burning Man is often discussed as a religious event at a glance, but upon further inspection, the festival is remarkably, astounding profane and chaotic, things that have no place amongst the sacred, the 'good', of any culture of the world (Davis 16). “[Steve] Mobia noted that the man inspired an awe that approached religion. Someone confessed to him an almost

irresistible urge to fall on his knees before its apparent immensity. If the Burning Man is an object of veneration, Mobia noted, it is healthy that he's burned. With the ritual annihilation of the sacred object, the worshiper is freed" (Doherty 36). Perhaps Burning Man is a festival of "Zenarchy". As Davis defines the term: "if you can master nonsense as well as you have already learned to master sense, then each will expose the other for what it is: absurdity" (Doherty 36). Absurdity, through '*the Cult of Meaningless Chaos*', in John Milbanks sense of the word, help provide the last element of of the 'religious experience'; being in the middle of the desert is confounding, but what's more so is being in a city -full of obscure individuals, rhythmic noises, blinking lights, art and dust and elements, enduring exposure and sleep deprivation, dehydration, discomfort, and maybe even drugs- it's a literal overload in the gravest sense of the term, but it truly helps to see things clearly, to once and for all definitely and undoubtedly understand that if a place like this that would take years to understand in the first place can just spring up from the ground in the middle of space (or even that it is amongst the range of human capabilities in any way), then you can know for certain that you will *never* understand *everything*. This invaluable moment of clarity is what John Milbank calls "non-mastery": "you have to believe that there is more than you can understand before you can begin to understand at all" (Dark 34). This final step adds the final missing piece of the puzzle to the religious experience: closure.

Burning Man may mirror religious aspects, it may align with certain elements and terminologies used primarily in religious setting, and it *may even* provide the emotional basis for the "religious experience", but Burning Man is not a cult, and Burning Man is not a religion. It is a blank slate, a *tabula rasa* -it is literally a place of desolation that we go and fill with meaning. The desert, the Man, the art, and the city are all just empty-signifiers, fueled by the mana-ic power of man, to mean whatever we want it to mean. If enough people want Burning Man to

become a religion, then that is what Burning Man will become, but for now, in the name of the Spirit of Juxtaposition:

“Burning Man is a self-service cult; wash your own brain” (Doherty 281).

# RITUAL

“Doing is believing- one may become what one performs”

(Mircea Eliade, cited in Levi-Strauss 128)

## **Introduction**

Ritual, alongside and subsequently entangled in religion, also is sensed very strongly at Burning Man. Much of the activities and actions, whether experienced alone or together, seem to attain an extra depth, a peculiar significance that relates them to something meaningful, something 'greater', so to speak. Especially in groups, and in key activities of the festival such as the Burning of the Man and especially the burning of the Temple, this 'greater' purpose is felt. This feeling is not by default felt every time a group of people come together for a common purpose; people do not get a feeling of a 'grander sense' going to the grocery store, even though everyone is there for the same purpose. This feeling is not even necessarily always felt during a sports game (although it can be), which presents a cohesive group or team all acting, in a predetermined manner, toward the same goal. But there is something in the element of communal participation. As Durkheim says,

“the very act of congregating is an exceptionally powerful stimulant. Once the individuals are gathered together, a sort of electricity is generated from their closeness and quickly launches them to an extraordinary height of exaltation. Every emotion expressed resonates without interference in consciousnesses that are wider open to external impressions, each one echoing the others. The initial impulse is thereby amplified each time it is echoed, like an avalanche that grows as it goes along” (110).

The key to the “exceptionally powerful stimulant of 'congregation' is in the “avalanche”,

the building momentum of the emotional current. This avalanche eventually grows into what Durkheim terms as *collective effervescence*, and is one of 3 fundamental factors of the 'religious experience'. This helps understand that rituals, then, provide a prime setting for a key element in the *religious* experience. But how does this occur, and in what other ways does ritual enrich and contribute to the *Burning Man* experience?

### **Ritual in Religion**

“In the world he [man] languidly carries on his daily life; the other one that he cannot enter without abruptly entering in relation with extraordinary powers that excite him to the point of frenzy. The first is the profane world, and the second, the world of sacred things” (Durkheim 112).

As was mentioned briefly in the previous chapter, ritual is an important tool of religion. It is used as a reflexive tool for acting out the proper or ideal 'sacred' ('moral') behavior in society. Says Durkheim, rituals are “actions made toward what is sacred” (Weber). Ritual very clearly identifies what is sacred and what is profane, including the parts of man. To refresh and reiterate from before:

“By compressing itself almost entirely into circumscribed periods, collective life could attain its maximum intensity and power, thereby giving a man a more vivid sense of the twofold existence he leads and the twofold nature in which he participates” (Durkheim 112).

Furthermore:

“If our society does not provide them [rituals] for us, we cannot we provide them for ourselves. For there is clearly a profound therapeutic value in the recognition and ritualization of recurrent problems involved in the maintenance and repair of human relationships and in assigning meaning to what subjectively may seem to be merely pain and loss” (Turner 1989, 26).

Rituals clarify and ascertain the roles of the individual and of other individuals in society,

and may also be a valuable method of cultural self-diagnosis/treatment. However, as identified by Durkheim, two of rituals' most unique and valuable features, and the two most relevant to the topic at hand, are 1) it's potential for collective effervescence and 2) transformation (Weber 41).

### **Collective Effervescence**

As was mentioned briefly before, a society is held together by values and morals, both of which are recognize by and infused with emotions. Emotional identity with a group is an important step in belonging; emotional identity creates a personal bond with the other members and an ability to empathize, and therefore share experiences communally (Collins). This emotional experience is its strongest and most effective when experienced as group euphoria, also known as *collective effervescence*.

Durkheim defines collective effervescence as “the ritually induced passion or ecstasy that cements social bonds and, he proposed, forms the ultimate basis of religion” (Ehrenreich 3). In the earliest evidence, we see collective effervescence present in religious-related activities; the “ancient Dionysian revelers and Christian *glossolaliacs*<sup>22</sup> believed that their moments of ecstasy were the gifts of a deity” (Ehrenreich 94). Collective effervescence has early ties to religion, as a novel experience unique to and most frequently found in religious activity. However, we've since identified group euphoria, often described as 'religious', in other settings, most recently in sports events (Ehrenreich 225). From this we can deduce collective effervescence to be an integral part of the 'religious experience', and also a product of communities.

When experienced by communities, collective effervescence can be a very strong bond-

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<sup>22</sup> “Incomprehensible speech in an imaginary language, sometimes occurring in a trance state, an episode of religious ecstasy, or schizophrenia” (Dictionary.com, “Glossolalias”).

builder between the members of the group. First of all, it requires a common group activity be taking place, in which everyone is participating; “implicit in Durkheim's phrasing [“*collective effervescence*”] is the notion that all individuals participate equally or nearly equally. He almost never entertains the idea that individuals can be variable involved in Collective effervescence...” (Weber 44). Participation in a group activity which results in collective effervescence is very strong positive reinforcement for the collective identity and individual identity. As Weber says, because group euphoria is and can only be experienced equally, as everyone experiences the same thing, it is *empowering*, rather than hierarchical or submissive. Being caught in the moment, a part of a positive emotional tidal wave, at once serve to erases any social discrepancies between individuals as well as provide amity towards the others in the group. Collective effervescence acts as an equalizer, a harmonizer, and a motivator. Because of the unusually high level of emotions experienced, the result is long-lasting. The memory of the event inspires positive emotions and empathy with the time, place and group it was experienced with (Collins).

## **Transformation**

Ritual is one of culture's most valuable vehicles for transformation. There are two types of transformation that can be achieved through ritual. The first affects the entire culture; the ritual is performed to achieve some transformation, or ease/success in transformation, in the culture itself; “rituals begin with a cultural problem, stated or unstated, and then work various operations upon it, arriving at 'solutions'- reorganizations and reinterpretations of the elements that produce a newly meaningful whole” (Levi-Strauss 121). A ritual for the culture is usually related to some

upcoming challenge in which the culture must avail itself. The second affects the individual, where similarly the individual must change to overcome some challenge. The two most notable forms of individual transformation are Rites of Passage (Ch.3) and The Journey. Ritual is necessary because it operates outside of and above the laws binding everyday life, and creates a temporary suspension, a limbo, a *liminal space*. As Roy Rappaport observes, “it seems apparent that ritual is not simply an alternative way to express any manner of things, but that certain meanings and effects can best, or even only, be achieved through ritual” (Hockett 73). Rites of Passage will be discussed further along; however, the Journey remains an excellent and extremely relevant example of ritual enactment at Burning Man.

'The Journey' is a narrative/ritual structure investigated heavily by Victor Turner. It consists of three steps – Exit-Liminality-Re-entry- and is a framework that can fit several types of scenarios. For instance, the ritual action of *pilgrimage* can be viewed as a 'journey'. The pilgrimage, like the journey, involves an initiate or loyalist (of whatever sort) *making a journey* to a holy or sacred space. The framework for the pilgrimage can be viewed as separation, liminality, aggregation and community (Gilmore). The scenario can also describe the act of going to Burning Man, like so:

Exit: The individual leaves his mundane home and travels, sometimes hundreds of miles, to a new place (the desert).

Liminality: The individual arrives at a place that is *liminal*, where the normal rules of the 'mundane home' do not apply, or are flipped on their heads entirely. This is a space of the Other, fraught with danger. Here is where the bulk of the transformation takes place. The Liminal is an



environment, again coined by Victor Turner, of “performative reflexivity”, in which the 'performance', while the performers is *acting out* the performance, reflects back on and takes root in *him* (Hockett 74). Burning Man is a liminal space in every sense of the word: it is in an 'opposite environment', where the rules of everyday life don't apply, filled with people who (in comparison to normal American culture) are the 'Other', and the environment is very hazardous. As for transformation, I'm sure there are people who have gone to Burning Man for the first time and not considered themselves, or the world around them, any differently. However, a week in that cultural environment is bound to change your perspective, and has for the majority of the people I've spoken with. In the 'pilgrimage' frame, the 'loyalist' is on a journey to get to the mythical 'city' (Black Rock City) and see the idol (the Man).

Return/Re-entry/Aggregation: Finally, the devotee travels *back* to the mundane world, this time a changed person, with a “renewed reality and understanding of self” (Gilmore 50). As Durkheim says, “after we have acquitted ourselves of our ritual duties [performed in the liminal] we enter into the profane life with increased courage and ardor, not only because we come into relations with a superior source of energy, but also because our forces have been reinvigorated... (Carlton-Ford 427). To corroborate:

“While not a practical world model, due mostly to economic and productivity issues, Burning Man is a shining example of how the world could treat each other; of just how good people could be if only they would be. Attendance gives me a spiritual recharge – assurance that the world is not predisposed to wickedness” (“Clockin”, cited in Hude).

Burning Man fits very well, projected over the framework of the ritual pilgrimage, which Kang describes in this way:

- 1) a ritualized journey to a

- specific, culturally imbued geographic location intended to
- connect individuals to a collective experience of
- something beyond their ordinary existence...and that can emerge in either religious or secular contexts.

It is repeated, in a similar fashion, every year, it is removed, requiring that the participants *exit* the realm or normalcy (unless they should perchance to live in a desert, then perhaps it is not such a remove). Additional exit is required, to leave the realm of normal rules and prohibitions/inhibitions- this comprises the Liminal aspect of the festival. Here people are allowed free range of activities and momentary reprieve from the constant pall and pace of the normal 'default'<sup>23</sup> world, allowing them to transform and readjust themselves or their perspective, which may also happen unconsciously, as they see fit. They then reenter the normal world and pick up their lives where they had left off, which may or may not be subject to their new perspective or, at least, remnant Burner-like behavior from the weeklong festival experience.

### **Additional Types of Ritual**

Ritual is a very anachronistic term, and in its classical sense is mostly outdated, except perhaps still in small pocket cultures in the corners of the globe. The images that are inspired when we think of 'traditional' rituals -dancing around a Burning Thing, bloodletting, sacrifice, séance, potions, graveyards, temples, etc.- are on the whole a mess of cliché and horribly outdated perceptions. Many of these simply don't apply any longer to the world today. With the

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<sup>23</sup> The "Default World" is common turn of phrase at Burning Man, referring to the normal world outside of the festival.

case as such, Weber and Wallace have developed a new method of viewing modern day rituals. These ritual types are Orgiastic, Western, Eastern, and Psycho-therapeutic, and neatly categorize and encompass the corpus of the rituals of today (Weber). We need not discuss all these to their full extent, and so we'll confine our descriptions to those that have a frame of reference, presence, or direct involvement in the Burning Man festival.

Orgiastic Ritual: Orgiastic ritual is categorized by rituals including and incorporating the use of music, dance, drug use, and/or sexual orgy. Probably confined more to an occultist arena, these rituals tend to aspire to a peak, resulting in of 'physical or psychic collapse'. However, when these elements aren't a mean in themselves and the 'enacted' part of the ritual, they are a tool used to “insure continuity of the religious mood” (41). However they're used, they result in very high, perhaps too high, levels of ecstasy. Orgiastic rituals, then, are rituals strategically using or meant to induce collective effervescence.

Eastern Ritual: Eastern rituals involve a much more centered and serene attitude. Meditation and yoga are techniques frequently found in eastern ritual, and involve a greater devotion to body and greater attention to Self, and a greater depth of self-knowledge. These techniques serve to “effect a planned evacuation of the consciousness” (538).

Psycho-therapeutic: Psycho-therapeutic rituals are much more individualistic. Whether or not they're performed alone or in a group, their focus is on transformation of the individual. “These groups focus on the individuals as the centers of purity and sacredness in contradistinction to a focus on the group”. Wesley calls psycho therapeutic rituals crucial features

to “cult-of-man” (42).

People discuss Burning Man as attempting a primal revival in culture, getting rid of technology and even time, to return mankind to a realm of existence we seem to have 'lost'. It attempts this, as one of the many facets of the festival, but simultaneously the festival could not be more 'modern'. With its bright lights and huge soundcamps, and the illumination of and choreographed firework display accompanying the Man-burn, the festival represents an epitome of technological excellence and mechanical ingenuity. Similarly in turn, it utilizes both some of the most ancient ritual elements, such as fire and immolation, but also involves a healthy smattering of modern day ritual techniques.

### **Ritual and Burning Man**

“Thanks to the play of symbols, the festival is a rite of unanimity and fraternity which results in souls merging together in a common enthusiasm” (Baczko 186). The festival is a journey, a pilgrimage made with friends (or to make friends). What's more, a lot of people are 'repeat users'; they come back year after year. These followers, the Burners, make the pilgrimage to Black Rock City a yearly ritual. It's not easy, and the trials and tribulations pile up fast: you need a car, and if you don't have a car you need to find a car, or rent a car, or find people *with* a car, and the ticket is expensive and the loads of little things you'll buy for outfits and gifts will add up quickly, you have to bring *everything* you need with you, you need to take a whole week off of work and your life, it's *hot* and there's dust everywhere, in everything, and the list goes

on...if there's any law at Burning Man, you can bet it's Murphy's Law<sup>24</sup>. However, “despite the numerous challenges and hardships necessitated by the location's harsh desert environment, and many return with the feeling that their lives have been irrevocably changed” (Gilmore 43). Burning Man is an excellent, effective real life version of the journey, a pilgrimage for those devotees of the Man, who follow not a wooden figure of a man, but an *idea*. This *idea*, this purpose, is revealed in Burning Man's most core ritual -this is why it's devoted are called 'Burners'- *immolation, the fire sacrifice*.

Sacrifice, to put it bluntly, has a really defamed reputation. Amongst the 'traditional rituals' mentioned earlier, sacrifice is the one with the worst associations; sacrifice has come to be associated with horror movies and cults, blood and babies and Aztecs, all of which have very little to do with history and very much to do with Hollywood. Bataille says, “The basic problem of religion is given in this fatal misunderstanding of sacrifice, Man is the being that has lost, and even rejected, that which he obscurely is, a vague intimacy”(56). Sacrifice is a purifying act; blood-letting cleanses the body, immolation cleanses with fire, and sacrifice via offering or deed cleanses the conscious. Sacrifice especially with fire, a symbol of purity, chaos, passion, and rebirth, is done to remove an object from the world of *things* (Bataille 43). As adverse as it may seem, in this American culture, in which commodity fetishism<sup>25</sup> runs rampant under the rule of capitalism, the sacrifice is crucial to the survival of the human psyche. The sacrifice of the man, and effigy of the human form, removes us from the realm of thinghood and reaffirms our identity and worth as *human beings* and as individuals! During a sacrifice, the sacrificer declares:

“Intimately, I belong to the sovereign world of the gods and myths, to the world of violent and uncalculated generosity, just as my wife belongs to my desires. I withdraw you,

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<sup>24</sup> Anything that can go wrong will go wrong.

<sup>25</sup> A term coined by Karl Marx, in where the object(s) become(s) more valued or valued as highly as people.

victim, from the world in which you were and could only be reduced to the condition of a thing, having a meaning that was foreign to your intimate nature. I call you back to the intimacy of the divine world, to the profound immanence of all that is" (Bataille 44).

And even if the Man represents 'The Man', the 'oppressive force' of bureaucracy, law, and the government that 'keeps the common man down', the practice of sacrifice can too adapt to this situation. "Whether or not the sacrifice represents a part of himself or an force of evil and wrong in his life, with the ritual annihilation of the sacred object, the worshiper is freed" (Doherty 56). "Sacrifice is made of objects that could have been spirits, such as animals or plant substances, but that have become things and that need to be restored to the immanence whence they come, to the vague sphere of lost intimacy" (Bataille 50); "the immanent sacred is predicated on the animal intimacy of man and the world, whereas the profane world is predicated on the transcendence of the object, which has no intimacy to which mankind is immanent" (Bataille 72). The object, dead and devoid of meaning on its own, must be sacrificed to shed itself of void, profane meaning and regain intimacy with man in the divine realm. In culture, if man has become, through his own devices, an object, then it is so, too, that he must burn himself, a metaphoric self-sacrifice, a Man in effigy. The Burning of the Man represents a desire to be removed from the world of things, and to be once again, as cleansed with the fire, reborn as himself, in his divine form at, at one with nature. The desert is one such 'nature', devoid of the presence of Man of his Meanings, where such a rebirth can take place.

## **Conclusion**

Not all rituals are sacred in other cultures and vice versa (Weber). A ritual is meant, in some way or another to invoke the sacra of a culture, to transform and unify its members.

Sacredness is a culturally subjective quality, and not all sacra has to do with religion; ritual can and does exist without Dogma (Gilmore). "But any circumstances in everyday life that focus attention in this way...[to the sacred] have the effect of producing a ritual situation"(Collins 139). Lukes provides an alternative definition for ritual, that being a "-rule governed activity of symbolic character which draws the attention of participants to objects of thought and feeling which they hold to be of special significance"(Weber 54). Be that the case, then as Collins says:

"Life is a series of small ritual situations, interactions, and undertakings that abide to either ceremonial or (other) rules, both of which reflect the values and emotions encapsulated within them. These provide emotions and feelings from without. Doing duty correctly should feel stimulated, from being in moral harmony with his neighbor, he gains new confidence, courage, and boldness in action" (141).

We live in a fast paced, cut-throat, extremely competitive culture and in an independent, self-reflexive society, collective participation may even be necessary:

"Just as the capacity to dream and fantasize, though not immoderately, is considered by psychologists indispensable for mental health, so likewise exposure to those objectified dreams and fantasies which are thrown up by celebratory enthusiasm, may be necessary for social health" (Turner 14).

After such an experience, Jeremy Hockett says:

"Many participants feel compelled to communicate what they have learned and experienced. Yet these things are difficult to describe because they stem from a lived transformative experience, built on a performative mode of communication for which language can supply no sufficient analogy"(77).

It is collective effervescence, the "performative mode of communication for which language can supply no sufficient analogy", the "celebratory enthusiasm" which unites these two statements. Collective effervescence is a need; it is the need to feel joy with other people, received from other people, and it is in fact *collective effervescence* that is the most important part in man's sacrifice of himself. It is crucial that man remove himself and take himself back,

cleansing him from the profane world of thinghood, but equally as crucial is, upon his return, an affirmation and acceptance inspired by and received from his community of fellow man. In the moment of collective effervescence, the individual, “encountering total saturation... transcend(s) their ego boundaries and their mortality in successive waves of ecstasy”(Fortunati 155).

“It is not difficult to imagine that a man in a state of such exaltation should no longer know himself, feeling possessed and led on by some sort of external power that makes him think and act differently than he normally does, he naturally feels like he is no longer himself. *It seems to him that he has become a new being.* And because his companions feel transformed in the same way at the same moment, and express this feeling by their shouts, movements, and bearing, it is as if he was in reality transported into a special world entirely different from the one in which he ordinarily lives, a special world inhabited by exceptionally intense forces that invade and transform him” (Durkheim 111-112).

This spontaneity, this totality of embrace, once again solidly reconstitutes an individual as a man and as part of his community, Mankind.

Thus profoundly changed, and yet just another version of the journey in itself, the individual leaves Burning Man, with a deeper sense of self, which upon re-entry to the 'default world, “heightens the social awareness in values and norms” (Hockett 74). The Burning of the Man is simultaneously as much a sacrifice as it is the performance of a sacrifice, like in a play or stage production, but even so it does not lose value. As Turner says,

“cultural performances are not simple reflections or expressions of culture or even of charging culture but may themselves be active agencies of charge, representing the eye by which culture sees itself and the drawing board on which creative actors sketch but what they believe to be more apt or interesting 'designs for living' -Victor Turner (Hockett 75).

Removing itself from the regular world, and the world of Rule and Order, “Burning Man facilitates a context in which this kind of “critical distance” can be achieved by spatial and temporal- as well as cultural and social- distancing, as participants are momentarily freed from



the abstractions and ideological proscriptions that predominate in 20<sup>th</sup> century thought in order to forge a new meaning in their world” (Hockett 80). A view of reality and a corresponding view of self are thus established through ritual, creating a subjective psychological state that restructures meaning. This is the work of ritual and the way it provides solutions to problems” (Levi-Strauss 129).

Brian Doherty says “Burning Man can feel decidedly New Age-y or pagan - there's lots of rituals...but then you can find lots of mockery and parody of all those things at Burning Man too” (11). It's a very spiritual project, at once to create community and on the other to create a tradition of pilgrimages in which the concept “shrine” has been replaced (or esotericized) by the concept “peak experience” (Bey 82). Nevertheless, all rituals begin with a cultural problem, stated or unstated, and then work various operations upon it, arriving at 'solutions'-reorganizations and reinterpretations of the elements that produce a newly meaningful whole” (Levi-Strauss 129). The 'rituals' at Burning Man are no coincidence- even subconsciously, they are the direct response to a gaping lack, an unfulfilled need, a *problem* in American culture. This problem -exacerbated by isolation and competition- is value of people losing ground to the value of things. The rituals at Burning Man, based on elements of collective effervescence and sacrifice, are meant to *remove* man from the category of thing, of commodity, and re-secure his place in humanity, in and with the world in which he lives. Burning Man is a project of community building ultimately because, in order for this feeling to last and be permanent and for the individual to retain his newly acquired humanness, there must exist a community that wants the same thing.

“we live at the edge of a paradox: We belong to both Nature and Culture, and we perpetually struggle to announce and renounce that ambivalent condition, to emphasize that we are at

once human and animal, that though we are born, mate, and die as part of our mortal heritage, we manipulate that condition endlessly, so that biology with all its imperatives and universals is often only faintly distinguishable beneath the template of symbolic and ritual understandings we lay over it” (Barbara Meyerhoff, cited in Levi-Strauss 110).

# Rules, Order, and Disorder

“You can be weird, do whatever, but respect your neighbor and it's ok.”  
(Anonymous, in *Dust & Illusions*, Bonin)

## **Introduction**

Rules have so far only been a footnote in this discussion. However, they are present, and necessary to the function of the elements we've discussed so far. Some rules are implicit, some are explicit. For example, the rules that govern whom will be granted full access/acceptance into a supra-culture/subculture are implicit- they may not be written down anywhere, yet they are something that the members of these communities inherently- implicitly- understand. The rules governing religion are slightly more explicit- for example, in the Bible there are the commandments (passive-explicit, more like guidelines), but morals are not explicit. Rituals are the most explicit, in their most formal setting involving training. To reiterate the alternative definition discussed in the last chapter,-”rule governed activity of symbolic character which draws the attention of participants to objects of thought and feeling which they hold to be of special significance”(Weber 54). However, rules that govern the smooth flow of society are not nearly as explicit; there is no rule book we get issued at birth. They must be learned gradually by assimilation<sup>26</sup> or observation over a lifetime.

As Jack Burnham says, “we are now living in a systems-oriented culture”(Kang). The 'rules' that we receive from society exist in the form of morals, as discussed and permeated through religion, but more socially, refer to 'frames', categories, and stereotypes. Rules are also

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<sup>26</sup> Assimilation- the learning of a culture through lived experiences and situations, picked up from other members of the culture.

useful, in that they reveal the system of Order/Disorder that exists within/without a society, and even further, outside of this, the meaning of Chaos. This brief section will endeavor to understand and explain the role of rules in society, and how their presence (or lack thereof) affects individuals and their social relations, and subsequently, what they mean in terms of Burning Man.

### **Rules in Society**

How do we begin to learn the rules of society? The assimilation of culture occurs naturally and subconsciously with development. As infants, we assimilate basic rules of language discursively (which *are* in fact written down, but don't affect our ability to learn as infants), and the body gestures that go along with it (Harre 38). Eventually, we can expand this learning into interacting with others, and then into understanding interactions between other people. We use several implicit rules, as tools, with which to quickly analyze and recall this onslaught of information from the world. Categorization is a very broad and basic tool-of-rule, the basis of which is thoroughly culture-based. Stereotyping is another tool-of-rule, which is a narrower way of categorizing, utilizing specific traits and behaviors to make snap judgments and decisions on a subject/object/person, etc. Finally Goffman suggests 'frames' – an experience or setting with understood rules (“enabling conventions”) – also as a way of learning (Jenkins). Similar to frames, institutions are “a pattern of behavior in any particular setting that has become established over time as 'the way things are done'”; institutions are thus an integral part of the human world, with reference to which, and in terms of which, individual make decisions and orient their behavior”. Institutions create habits, and are a primary form of social control (Jenkins 133-134). These three tools are just a few amongst a multitude, but they give excellent

examples of how rules, implicit and culturally specific especially, influence the way we view and synthesize the information in the world around us.

However, society is equipped with more explicit *methods* of teaching rules. Babies may learn language from assimilation and observation, but we have to be *taught* correct grammar, and spelling for instance. For this and other more rule-bound learning, it establishes institutions, where teaching can be centralized and regulated. Schools, academies, and the law to a certain extent, are all forms of cultural institutions, used to teach and transmit the rule of society. “Laws and government, education and religion,” Antonio Gramsci says, “are all agents to perpetuate prohibitions and constraints on natural needs and aspirations, property and prohibition.” Gramsci says too:

“...If every state tends to create and maintain a certain type of civilization and of citizen (and hence of collective life and of individual relations), and to eliminate certain customs and attitudes and to disseminate others, the law will be its instrument for this purpose (together with the school system, and other institutions and activities)” (187).

Organizations are a smaller delineation of this same idea, and similarly, “The public presence of organizations is an important dimension of their impact on members” (Jenkins 162). A way of identifying members can be accomplished through determining those who do know the rules vs. those that don't.

Rules teach a member of a culture how to act, in terms of behavior, but also in terms of official organizations. Rules can be enforced by members, through social techniques (bullying, bribing, example, instruction, interaction), or by more organized and forceful techniques, the best example of which is the law. However rules are kept, their maintenance is important because it maintains Order, and thereby prevents or regulates Disorder.

## Order/Disorder

Why is Order important to maintain, and what are the implications of disorder in societal context? Keeping the Order is the balance/continuation between *any* logic or principles that keep life functioning normally and understandably. Order is associated with the rational understanding of the world. The importance of rules and institutions –habitualized behavior – is providing a rational basis for actions and decisions. Richard Jenkins says, “The importance of habit and habituation in human life is well known. In fact, habit provides the space within which rational decision-making operates” (70). Order is crucial to the realization of rationality, and rationality is clung to in order to make sense of the world and understand our presence in it. Without order, the rational constructs that society was predicated upon crumble, creating Disorder and eventually Chaos.

The presence of Order as a necessary imposition on daily life suggests, predating the existence of such Order, the presence of its theoretical foil, Disorder. Order and the rules it maintains are only necessary so that we may categorize and understand the world. Mary Douglas seems to agree with this abstraction, and says also,

“for I believe that ideas about separating, purifying, and demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created” (102).

Law is meant to uphold the standards and edicts of Order, but you see, the whole logic is compromised from the start, because not only is the foundation for Order *Dis-order*, it *has* to be (Baczko). In order for Order to be drawn, there must first be Disorder, a mish-mosh, from which to draw it. This brings us neatly to the concept of Chaos.

## Chaos

So what is the difference between Chaos and Disorder? Intensity, and the state of transition it is in. Chaos and disorder are fundamentally the same thing: they could both be defined as a lack of Order. However, while *Dis-order* merely suggests that there is a presence of Order, but that it's just out of place, *Chaos* is the total and utter absence of Order in any sense of the word. Disorder is the transitional phase – liminal, if you will – between Order and Chaos. Chaos is what's present before the initiation of Order, and after its disintegration. Before Order, there is Chaos; chaos is the “primordial uncarved block, sole worshipful monster, inert and spontaneous, more ultraviolet than any mythology (like the shadows before Babylon), the original undifferentiated oneness of being still radiates serene as the black pennants of assassins, random and perpetually intoxicated” (Bey 1985, 3).

Hakim Bey is an especially clear voice on the topic of Chaos. On the subject, he says ““in effect, chaos is life. All mess, all riot of colors, all protoplasmic urgency, all *movement-* is chaos” (Bey 1994, 1). “Chaos is not entropy, Chaos is not death, Chaos is not a commodity. Chaos is continual creation. Chaos never died” (Bey 1985, 60). However, things and people and ideas do die, and “whether interpreted creatively or destructively, chaos, proclaims the impermanence of all forms” (Davis 36). In the realm of our Ordered lives, death falls beyond our control and becomes akin to Disorder, Chaos, and the Liminal because like them, death is not something we can force Order onto. We cannot control it, no matter how much Order and Rationale we impose. If rationale is central to our psychological-survival, then things like lie beyond the reach of its rational Order – and can therefore not be controlled – become a threat, and therefore quite dangerous.

As will be discussed in the chapter on Liminality, “Danger lies in transitional states,

simply because transition is neither one state nor the next, it is undefinable” (Douglas 102). This was made mention in the chapter on religion and ritual both; that there is a liminality involved in rituals, where transformation takes place. This area is dangerous because it is where we assign the Other to live, and is inhabited primarily by the Unknown and other things we don't understand. They are dangerous because they are not like Us, and threaten the establishment of *our* lives and *our* Order with a *different* one, and as long as a different one exists, ours is always subject to the possibility of, at any moment, change or hostile takeover. Always in Liminality, Chaos, and Disorder, there is a *risk*...

But it is, contrary to popular thought, *precisely this risk* which adds excitement to our lives. Even more so, “risk itself makes up part of the direct experience of pleasure, a fact noted in all insurrectionary moments- all moments of waking up- intense adventurous enjoyments: - the festal aspect of the Uprising, the insurrectionary nature of the Festival”(Bey 1994, 5). Think back- what do you know of that is risky that is *rules* and *Order* of society? Order is naturally averse to risk simply because *risk is irrational*. This is why transformation –*change* – is outlawed to the Liminal space; even if eventually it will be for the good, the process of change is the process of re-orienting, or *dis*-orienting one nature, and even this momentary Disorder-ing cannot be allowed inside the Order, because it would pose a risk, which is against the Rationale of Order to take...

So if the stage Disorder is the necessary stage in developing from Chaos to Order, what is the stage devolving from Order back into Chaos....

## **Apocalypse**

Apocalypse. By now half of you have thought of zombies, and maybe 1/3 of you have



thought of Mad Max or 2012, which means that 1/6 of you may or may not have thought of term in religious contexts. Certainly the word has roots and salience there, but that is not entirely the meaning of the definition of *apocalypse* that is most suited to this occasion.

To understand the use and meaning of 'apocalypse' within the framework or Rules, Order/Disorder/Chaos, I would like to draw upon the work of David Dark in *Everyday Apocalypse*. Throughout the book, he endeavors to isolate the meaning of apocalypse outside of religion to describe a fairly common phenomenon (or at least more common than 'apocalypse' in the biblical sense). He begins by comparing it's theological bearings, and noting that ““We apparently have the word “apocalypse” all wrong..” (Dark 10).

Most of us are used to the biblical version, which equates 'apocalypse' with Doomsday, the end of the world. “Our ability to recognize apocalyptic is, in our day,”, he says, “often most hindered by the popular, best-selling misunderstandings of biblical witness in which- “confusing redemption for escape, real injustice- political and personal- goes mostly unengaged, and the actual, everyday world gets left behind” (Dark 11). “In this view, apocalyptic is simply equated with disaster or destruction, and the biblical summons to full-bodied, incarnate witness against dehumanization is exchange for an almost nihilistic contempt for anything down-to-earth, or in the most meaningful sense, human”. However, in its root meaning, it's not about the destruction or fortune-telling, it's about revealing. It's what James Joyce calls an epiphany...” (Dark 10).

The epiphany is this: “Apocalyptic changes everything. Its intense attentiveness to the minute particulars, to the infinity forever passing before our eyes, can leave us feeling ashamed of our ongoing impenetrability to the immediate. It creates an unrest within our minds, and it can only be overcome by imagining differently, by giving in to its aesthetic authority, by letting it invigorate the lazy conscience...”(Dark 10). The once stabilizing and comforting order at once

turns mind-numbing. As was mentioned before, risk is an element of pleasure, risk contributes to the awakening. It is only through purposeful exploration of the Liminal, of conscious entry through Disorder into Chaos, that we can have the potential of un-structure to collide with an apocalypse, and 'epiphany', which 'destroys the world as we know it' ...and that knew knowledge, that transformation of self and worldly perception, is precisely the point, the intention of the journey. "When we bring our wits to bear upon apocalyptic expression, we find that it has a way of unmasking the fictions we inhabit by breaking down, among other thing, our constructs of public and private, political and religious, natural and spiritual" (Dark 15). In that way, perhaps it is *not* so different to religious apocalypse....

Apocalyptic, still, like Chaos, cannot be permitted inside the realm of Order. Apocalyptic is anathemic to "the powers that be", "the way things are", and "the way thing ought to be"- in short, the "realistic". That is what an awakening *is*. "Apocalyptic cracks the pavement of the status quo. It irritates and disrupts the feverishly defended norms of whatever culture it engages" (Dark 12). However, this brings us full circle in our construction- apocalypse is *necessary*, in the same way as Disorder; only once the world has been shattered (as if by some momentous awakening) can one begin to pick up the pieces and begin, once again, to find some Order in it...

Apocalyptic is a necessary force: "it keeps religion strange and ready to question the given 'reality' of the day. Without apocalyptic, no questioning occurs and the biblical voice is easily edited (or censored) to the point that it appears to support whatever sentimental soup or suburban self-improvement program it's pasted upon"(Dark 15). In a non-biblical sense, the same could be said for Rule, Order, and Disorder. "Apocalyptic, correctly understood, reminds us that the language of "the kingdom of God" isn't referring to some politically irrelevant eternity of otherworldly existence. To say that it is "at hand" or "here" is a directive to "repent" and enter

into a new way of life that aligns itself with the purpose of shalom” (Dark 14). The apocalypse, the awakening, can and must function in the here and now, if new Order is to be produced and progress in the realm of culture is to be had. “This realm, incidentally, will not be confined to an antiquated past, to some culturally captivated present, or to some future era that begins with people disappearing from airplanes, Instead, apocalyptic offers a world that is and was and is to come, a world spinning inside (and outside) this one” (Dark 12). Apocalypse represents an endless possibility of endless possibilities, which lie just under the thin veneer of confidence and control that we, as a culture, especially America, have right now...

### **Rules at Burning Man:**

It is quite true that Burning Man has, in the sense of socially *implicit* institutions, rules. It goes, grows, strives, and prospers by adherence (somewhat) to the ten tenets (mostly). However, the largest difference between Burning Man and the rules of regular culture is that there is no active enforcement of the principles- they are entirely voluntary, and entirely open to improvement, suggestion, customization, or complete ignorance. Order is maintained, but is in no way forcefully upheld. By this action (or inaction), Burning Man is already compromised, and vulnerable 24/7 that one week to Disorder, Chaos, and Apocalypse to their fullest extent....

But surprisingly enough, it doesn't really happen. Sure, Burning Man is a 'fringe' festival, and the norms of the default world are challenged, if not entirely stripped. “...at a glance,” Dark remarked, Burning Man is remarkably profane and chaotic” (16). How can this be? How can a world without Order survive, if that is the understanding of survival?...

Perhaps it is because the entire community is intentionally placed in a Liminal space, and this Liminal space, besides being disorderly by nature, is located directly on an ocean of a

different kind of Disorder- dirt. Mary Douglas says, in her study on Purity and Danger of the same title, "dirt is essentially disorder" (Douglas 101). She continues, "if we can abstract pathogenicity and hygiene from our notion of dirt, we are left with the old definition of dirt as matter out of place. Where there is dirt, there is a system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements", and notes that "...our pollution behavior is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications..." (Douglas 102). Not only must we adapt to survive in a social environment structured on Disorder (which, remember, can be the presence yet lack of Order), but we're surrounded by it's symbolic representation, which has effects similar to those, I would imagine, of real Chaotic Disorder: the dirt gets into everything, and interferes not only with comfortable living, but even the successful functioning of sometimes critical machines and devices. The dirt (or 'dust') caused frustration, panic, and a thorough sense, at times, of disorientation and disarray.... and *still*, the community functions.

Long time Burner Tyler Hansen remarks on the subject, "the way of Burning Man is constantly open to interpretation because there is no rule book" (Doherty 8). By not imposing it's own rules, Burning Man allows each individual to construct his own frame with which to view and interpret the world. Human nature, and thereby human culture, is extremely adaptive, and instead of all of these individuals' views colliding and creating Chaos, they instead bend and flow and adapt to the presence and possibility of one another and create a new kind of social Harmony. "There is a supposed tenet of social interaction at Burning Man that says you can do whatever you want (within the laws of the United States and the state of Nevada!) except interfere with another person's direct experience", and this principle gets the utmost respect, but it's not because anyone ever told anyone to follow it, or even that it existed. This is a new rule, a rule by play, not

laws (Doherty 241). It is the “effacement of rigid boundaries between private and public in favor of unscripted enactments of surreal alter egos and fantastic psycho-geographies (Gilmore 3). Every day is an 'apocalypse', a collision of thousands of sudden awakenings and realizations, and everyday the world doesn't end...David Dark and James Joyce both might be proud.

Living in the original state of Disorder takes away the ever-present fear of the loss of Order. Gary Warne says, “fears are a freeze on the future, a floodgate, that stops our imagination stops our imaginings” (Bonin). People may not necessarily agree on one particular way of living, and so cannot ascribe one set Order to it, but the community continues to thrive; “styles of Burning Man participation may vary, but it seems that their common point of agreement is that such a community can and should flourish without any agreement about explicit doctrine, in effect claiming that a heterotopian ideal of maximized elective affinities is the doctrine” (Gilmore 10). Burning Man, this “pocket universe where radically different rules temporarily apply”, was begun as an experiment in community building. Can a community thrive on Chaos, the lack of disorder (Gilmore 17)? It can, and it's not just a community that thrived, but an entire subculture that blossomed from the glorious wreckage. Coming from a culture that's had enough Rules and Order to go around, the festival is set up, by the people and for the people “trying to give them the power of taking their living into their own hands. It's not enough to observe: you have to know that when you need to, you can take control (Doherty 276). And they do.

“Whatever its manifestation, viewing any aspect of the world as an epiphany is, in her estimation, a gesture of hope” (Dark 35).

# Otherness and Liminality

A place where you could gain nothing or lose everything and no one would ever know”  
(Doherty, 48)

## **Introduction**

By now, the term 'Liminality' should be fairly familiar. The idea has been explained in piecemeal, in the discussion involving subcultures, religion, and Ritual. We now understand, roughly, what it is, and how and where it works. The social definition of what is 'liminal' according to Jenkins, is all and any “external factors that impinge upon conforming orientations vary according to local sense and knowledge, situational contingencies and individual point of view” (9). As a very basic definition, Liminal simply is a space that 'lays in between'. It is representative and characteristic of places or phases of transformation and change. The atmosphere in a liminal space is one of 'no rules', of lawlessness. As a side-effect, it's also associated as a place with high potential for danger, because in society, we often fear what we do not know. Liminality can be used as a device (ritual Liminal), or Liminality can be feared, cast-off or avoided (social Liminal). Burning Man is very tightly entwined in liminal nature, in fact, the two are indistinguishable. In most cultures, Liminality is present in one respect or another, but what does it mean when the subculture takes place and is lived *inside* the Liminal space?

## **Liminality**

To be beyond the boundaries of what is considered 'normal' or common-place is to enter the 'Liminal' space. People who cross this border, the 'threshold' between the two conditions are similarly affected. Turner says, “the attributes of liminality or of liminal personae (“threshold

people”) are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space” (2003, 110). The 'ambiguity' of these 'threshold people' stems from their presence in the 'threshold' (liminal) space. These “threshold” people (and philosophies of course) exist under similar yet different circumstances by the different elements of culture – which are present at Burning Man – that have been discussed so far. In Ritual, the threshold person is the one undergoing the 'transformation'; the pilgrim, the devotee (Burner), or the 'sacrifant'. In Religion, those people who lie outside the normal limits are the profane and the immoral. In Society, they are the foreign, the alien, the “Other”. Each of these foils – these diametric oppositions – are not only undesirable, they are *implicitly outlawed*. To be an “Other”, in any sense, is normally frowned upon, or at least not encouraged. So where do these *outlaws*, these “threshold people” go? 'Subcultures' are a normal habitat of 'threshold people'. As 'interest groups', they attract people whose 'specific interest' are not widespread, and therefore merits a separate, specially devoted group. However, subcultures are not a place one can 'inhabit'. Is there a *place* for the Liminals to live? Hakim Bey thinks so, and he calls it a “Temporary Autonomous Zone”.(Bey 1985).

### **T.A.Z, the 'Temporary Autonomous Zone'**

“T.A.Z” is the “Temporary Autonomous Zone”, or place of temporary autonomy (complete independence; freedom). Hakim Bey starts off solid: “The TAZ is somewhere”. This is good, already T.A.Z. is becoming a potential location for the Liminal people and mentality. He continues “it lies at the intersection of many forces, like some pagan power-spot at the junction of mysterious lay-lines, visible to the adept in seemingly unrelated bits of terrain, landscape, flows of air, water, animals” (Bey 1985,111). By “visible to the adept in seemingly unrelated bits”, Bey

means to imply that a T.A.Z is a community truly liminal, so liminal in fact that only the 'liminal' – those “adept” – can detect it through and amongst the seemingly 'unrelated bits'. “Liminal, even evanescent, the T.A.Z must combine information and desire in order to fulfill its adventure (its “happening”), in order to fill itself to the borders of its destiny, to saturate itself with its own becoming” (Bey 1985, 115). The TAZ gives life in the real world to that which can only be described as “chaos- as – becoming”, and “chaos-as-excess” (1). The TAZ represents “the generous outpouring of nothing into something” (Bey 1994, 7). It manifests the once purely ideological realm of the liminal into a real world husk, and like the Default World uses Rules and Order to implement its rhetoric, the T.A.Z uses other techniques such as ArtSabotage: “just as the banishment of illusion enhances awareness, so the demolition of aesthetic blight sweetens the air of the world of discourse, of the Other.” (Bey 1985, 11). The T.A.Z can be recognized by the free (from normal conventions/aesthetic conceptions) and truly creative use and display of art. In a truly apocalyptic sense, the T.A.Z is a Liminal space constructed to induce awakening on a common, everyday basis. However, although the T.A.Z *has the ability* to become real, its realness is often fleeting, so it remains largely hypothetical.

Bey's TAZ is very similar to Turner's *communitas*, in which the state of oneness and total unity that neophytes living outside the norms and fixed categories of a social system share during liminal periods”. Turner describes *communitas* as consisting of the qualities of equality, undifferentiated humanness, androgyny, and humility”, and additionally, “liminal space that encourages the generation of new meanings”(Levi-Strauss 117; Kang). The only difference is, in this case, that the TAZ is not a Liminal point in time or 'phase', it is a Liminal *place*.



## Conclusion

It's true that the TAZ is not a permanent place for the Liminal to live- the 'T', after all, stand for 'Temporary' – but! The T.A.Z., as opposed to some ambiguous, undefined and nonexistent 'fringe', *does*, or is meant to, exist, and Burning Man is a prime example of such an establishment in American culture. The sections prior to this present the various sociocultural elements that are most central to Burning Man's execution and felt experience. Each of these elements define members and outliers, "Others", most of which find representation or solace at Burning Man. Burning Man acts as a catch, a colander for the sub-cultural in American culture, for the profane in religion, the pilgrim, and makes itself a safe-place for growth, experimentation, and transformation. And of course, not everyone who goes to Burning Man is inherently 'deviant'- as I said, it's a place for necessary *transitions* to be undertaken. As Kai Erikson says, deviance "is inferred upon the 'norm' behavior learning about outside entities...if only because they need to sense what lies beyond the margins of the group before they can experience the special quality of the experience which takes place within it" (104). Like the ritual and the pilgrimage, for some the festival acts as liminal space, allowing them to see the 'other side(s)' of American culture, so that they may return and, having experienced both the normal world and the topsy-turvy world of Burning Man, find their place accordingly. But for some, Burning Man is 'home'; as the 'threshold people' of society, they've alighted on a place where they are the population and majority, and *their* rules are the rules of the place.

Burning Man is a home for America's "fringe", it's "Others", it's "Liminals", it's "threshold people", who create their own space, a full-fledged Temporary Autonomous Zone. It is at once a community based on the liminal concepts of transformation, experimentation, and the adventure of risk taking (or the risk of taking adventures), but also of finding meaning and

creating for oneself and Order which makes the world rational. Burning Man is a 'zone trip', a portal out of the normal conditions of culture, society, and even reality (Bonin). N.J. Girardot says "the acceptance of phenomenal existence requires a more profound recognition of the fact that fulfillment and renewal of human life depends on a periodic return to a chaotic or primitive condition" (Davis 35). This development, this realization –the fact that people willfully and freely create this community and have upheld it for 21 years-- signals what is quite possibly the beginnings of a transition in America culture itself, or at least makes clear that one is being called for. Turner describes liminality as occurring during transitional periods of history "when the past had lost its grip and the future has not yet taken definite shape" (Levi-Strauss 117). Victor Turner, who has been a well-heard voice in my path to understanding the Burning Man, takes a particular understanding of this development, and one which I believe to be true:

"I see the liminoid as an advance in the history of human freedom"(Victor Turner, cited in Kang).

II  
Identity  
and the  
Individual in Society

# Review and Introduction

## Section I: Review

In the first section of my thesis, I summarized the festival in general (as much as anyone could claim to) and discussed common misconceptions, held both emically (those within, the participants) and etically (those without, people who have never been). I then identified the parts of the festival that contribute most significantly to the festival, regarding both the festival's execution and the overall experience as perceived by the community. To refresh the readers' mind before the next segment, so that the transition may be better understood, let me give a brief overview of the parts and their purpose.

In "Subcultures", I defined the festival as a subculture. In it, I explained its transition from festival to community, from community to subculture. An understanding of the Burning Man as a subculture rather than merely a festival adds depth to the symbols and actions performed therein, because it denotes that they have a significant gravity over sheer frivolity. The festival then acquires cultural significance, as it is at once created with meaning and structured to impart on the participants a conscious and significant impact.

In "Religion", one of Burning Man's most infamous accusations is explored. An understanding of its 'religion'- or 'religious'-resembling parts help understand the festival's meaning, in terms of religion, whether or not it is Religious/A Religion, and if not, how it creates a religious-seeming experience.

In "Ritual", the ritualistic elements are explored, not only to determine whether or not these support/disprove allegations of theological presence, but also to determine their role in both

the Burning Man festival and the Burning Man culture.

In “Rules, Order, and Disorder”, the meaning of rules, in both American culture and the cultural-elements discussed previously (Ritual, Religion, Subculture), is discussed and compared to Burning Man's 'lawless' environment.

Finally, in “Liminality”, the liminal aspects of the festival are gathered and analyzed to determine the function and meaning of liminality at the festival, and how it affects its perception by and influence on the Burning Man culture ultimately reflecting the social significance of each of the festivals prominent cultural aspects.

## **Section II: Introduction**

The first section is a primarily social analysis, which helps understand how the festival operates and provides for the needs of a group, but doesn't explain how the festival affects the individual. In order to understand how Burning Man affects the modern individual as a member of American culture, we must first understand the individuals. To do this, we need to know what goes into the creation of an individual, regarding personal and social identity. This section will focus on the meaning, purpose, and creation of Individual Identity, the purpose and formation of group identity, and the function behind each. It will then explore Childhood, Play, Rites of Passage, and Maturation, in their symbolic and modern forms. Finally, we will look at the larger picture of American culture, in particular Capitalism, to understand its impact on affecting the development of individuals in the scope of modern American culture.

# Identity

“-identification is not always so routine or so trivial. It can shake the foundations of our lives.”  
(Jenkins 3)

## **Introduction**

Identity: it is one of the first 'frames' (Ch. 4) through which we see the world. We are ourselves- I understand myself intimately, and recognize myself as different from other people, and no one but myself as me. Everybody has an identity, and most people understand this. It is a seemingly very simple concept, and it is also one that is very taken for granted, and very overlooked. The assumption is that we are 'born the way we are; we are who we are'. Well, that is true, we are born with certain inclinations, talents, aversions, proclivities, etc, but there is a far more complex structure beneath the surface. As Jenkins says, “...identification is not always so routine or so trivial. It can shake the foundations of our lives” (3). Think, for instance, on some very basic, and very common, assertions on identity:

First, identity is who people are. Individuals are different from one another; people be who they want to be, and do what they want to do, and act how they want to act. That is what makes an individual.

But are most of us the people we want to be? Speaking about American society, the answer is 'no'. There are plenty of people who are unsatisfied with themselves, who are not doing what they want to do, or what they thought they would do, and are not who they want to be. In fact, many people may be things that they *don't* want to be, or wish they weren't. These examples are not so much to show how unsatisfied people are or aren't with themselves and their lives;

rather, it is meant to draw attention to the fact that there must be more at play in the structure of an individual's identity than just the individual. From birth, we enter the world with a set of prescribed identities: political, physical, gender, etc. (Jenkins 53). Institutions present in the culture can also produce, reinforce, or contribute to identity (such as marriage, career, residence, etc). As Jenkins tells us, "For many of us, however, the pursuit of new or alternative identities never gets beyond our daydreams" (9).

Identity is more than a simple matter of inherent selfhood. Identity is a matter of personal motivation –that change and person you make and see in yourself, and social reflection, determined by your function in society and through interaction with others. There is also identity, which is prescribed by the culture you are born into, that shapes your identity as well. This involves not only your places, but what the other individuals around you, your peers, friends, colleagues and rivals, think of you. Unless one is born a hermit, entirely isolated, the two identities are inextricably intertwined. However, they can be referenced separately; the 'self' is the identity, the 'inner you', that you recognize yourself to be, and 'social identity' is the identity you receive in some ways from or as a reaction to society.

The self and social identity are often somewhat at odds with one another, as satisfying the needs of one may not satisfy the needs of the other. Mead and Goffman, discussing social interaction, discuss two motivations which inspire conforming behavior: "the desire to be correct, and the desire to remain in the good graces of others. Each contributes to the desire to belong..." (Jenkins 125). Although the need to belong affect people differently and to different extents, it is a natural widely felt social need. However, despite this need to belong, sometimes a person's self is opposed to the requirements of 'conformity'. That is to say, sometimes the need to belong is strong, but the affinity to the group available to belong to isn't. However, change is possible.

Jenkins, summarizing Victor Turner's 'social identity theory', says, "individuals and groups with unsatisfactory social identity seek to restore or acquiesce positive identification via mobility, assimilation, creativity, or competition". This is also known as 'self-categorization theory' (Jenkins 89).

There can be no doubt that part of our identity is very socially centered, and socially constructed, and that this is not just an inconsequential byproduct of Being in Society, but in fact plays a crucial role in our psyche. However, there was a time in history when the focus on collective, and subsequently social identity, played a dominant role to the identity of oneself as an individual. This focus, note, was primarily culturally-controlled. Gradually, this focus shifted from the individual's primary identity being 'we' and 'myself in society, to 'I' and 'myself apart from society'.

As individuals, self-consciousness makes us human and removes us from 'thinghood' (Bataille). According to Lionel Trilling, "historians of European culture are in substantial agreement that in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, something like a mutation in human nature took place": "the rise of subjectivity or the discovery of the inner self" (Ehrenreich 137). Although this shift was European, and this thesis is concerned only with American culture, it was indeed an important step for American culture too, as much of our culture was disseminated and brought over from Europe, specifically England. Nevertheless, Ehrenreich notes,

"...and since it can be assumed that all people in all historical periods, have some sense of selfhood and capacity for subjective reflection, we are really talking about an intensification, and a fairly drastic one, of the universal human capacity to face the world as an autonomous "I", separate from, and largely distrustful of 'them'" (137).

Thus, the 'autonomous I' was a very crucial point in the development of modern methods of self-perception. In fact,



“So highly is the “inner self” honored within our own culture that its acquisition seems to be an unquestionable mark of progress- a requirement, as Trilling called it, for “the emergence of modern European and American man” (Jenkins 139).

However, this development of a new center of identity, “autonomous I” instead of “I amongst them”, had its drawbacks. As Yi-Fu Tuan states, “the obverse” of the new sense of personal autonomy is “isolation, loneliness, a sense of disengagement, a loss of natural vitality and of innocent pleasure in the givenness of the world, and a feeling of burden because reality has no meaning other than what a person chooses to impart to it”. Durkheim calls this feeling *anomie* (Ehrenreich 140).

This brings us back to the subject of Burning Man. We cannot understand why people are drawn to Burning Man, and what functions it is filling in for in society, unless we understand the form, function, and construction of the individual in society. In order to understand the individual’s relationship with Burning Man, we must first understand the individual’s relationship with the greater American culture, and the individual's relationship with themselves.

### **Definition of Identity**

First and foremost to understanding identity is defining it. Its development must be explained, and it's very important to understand that identity “can only be understood as a process, as 'being' or 'becoming” (Jenkins 5). Says Rom Harre:

“By the age of 3 a human being is beginning to develop the capacity for private discourse, and is thus enabled to perform complex cognitive acts for itself (retrospective and anticipatory commentary) – can review past life/imagine future life in accordance and understanding of new social language” (27).

This internal discourse provides us with a commentary, a way of synthesizing and

forming thoughts on the world. But we do not make these opinions up strictly by our own means and definitions; the understandings we have of the world are largely absorbed by us from society. Through discourse of a conversational/social kind, we learn about society and, simultaneously, acquire a social identity.

Some say that the collective/individual identities are separate and dissimilar. Jenkins disagrees, saying, "with respect to identification the individually unique and the collectively shared can be understood as similar in important respects" First of all, "the individual and the collective are routinely entangled with each other", this as a result of the way they are created. Both individual and social identity spurn from interactions with Other people. We would have no concept of ourselves 'as an individual' if we had never met another person. We would have an idea of ourselves as being different from rocks and trees, but we would not distinguish our distinct human qualities- say, to be impatient, or enjoy debate- unless we had something to compare to. Other people provide a frame of reference, and as a result, we create an inner mentality, a boundary that defines "I vs. They", much like the 'Us vs. Them' distinction in society (Jenkins 16-17).

People are often categorized or perceived as having 'strong' or 'weak' identities. Referring to more than just their character, 'strong' or 'weak' identities affect a person's life. Once identity solidifies (to the extent that it can, considering it is also an "ongoing process"), a person is often socially and personally more capable of living in the world. As Hjelle says, a person with a firm sense of identity is "more certain about relationships between past and present notions of self, has a lower degree of internal tension/anxiety, is more certain about validity of dominant personal characteristics, and is more stable over time in feelings about self." Ultimately, they are able to answer the question, "Who am I?" (82).

## What Identity is Made Of

Lest we doubt that there is biological basis to such developments, we must first consult the work of Freud. Quite famously, identity is said to be composed of 3 distinct parts in “the Structural Model of Mental Life”. Freud initiated this interpretation, and identifies these parts as id, ego, superego.

The id is “an innate component”, “the mental agency containing everything inherited, present at birth, and fixed in the individual's constitution”, it is the “immediate discharge of psychic energy produced by animal drives (esp. sex and aggression)”, the “immediate tension reduction” aka “the pleasure principle”, it “manifests as an impulse, irrational and narcissistic”, it “takes no precaution, doesn't recognize fear/anxiety, is associated with danger” , and “takes over for the instinctual needs and gives them mental expression” (Hjelle 25). The id is the narcissistic, selfish 'I', the 'Myself vs. the World' part of the self. If, as mentioned in the previously, our identities were only predicated on being who we were and doing what we wanted, then this, ostensibly, would be all that was necessary on a cognitive level. However, there are still 2 more states necessary to the construction of identity.

The superego, on the other hand, is the identity society builds. The superego is determined entirely by culture, it is the values retained from socialization (25). While the id is an identity of predilections and preferences natural to us, the superego is determined by outside culture.

Finally, the ego “seeks to express and gratify the desires of the id in accordance with the restrictions of both outer reality and the superego”(26). It is the mediator, and the binding force that inextricably links the individual self to the social self. Keep in mind that these forces are not

under conscious control; they develop over time and for a purpose. The superego's role in human development in societies is to “assure safety and self-preservation”, and obey the reality principle, or that which “preserves integrity by suspending instinctual gratification until either an appropriate object and/or environmental condition”. “The superego must continuously differentiate between things in the mind and thing in the outer world of reality.” (26)

The selves that develop, internally and socially, simultaneously are a result of and must cater to internal psychological forces. These forces help us determine, also, when an environment can no longer meet the needs of the id (ourselves), or when a situation is no longer acceptable according to the edict of the ego (too foreign, profane, etc). It is ultimately this system of checks and balance which can lead us to seek new social environments.

### **Definition of Self**

The Self, so far, has been used rather interchangeably. This probably had not affected your understanding of what's being discussed; however, it is important to realize that the two terms do *not*, in fact, mean the same thing. The Self is different from identity, first, because identity can be used to speak about the *intimate* identity *and* the *social* identity, whereas the Self refers, by itself, almost exclusively to the inner, personal interpretation of the self. The Self is the intimate you inside you, not necessarily communicated to or observed by the public. One's social identity and one's Self may be quite different. This is mitigated by one's *personality*. 'Personality' means *persona*, literally the term for the masks wore in Greek plays, which eventually came to include the role as well. Personality acts as the “governing organ, or superordinate institution of the body” (Hjelle 97). Not everyone will perceive you as having one certain 'personality'; you may

act differently towards different people in different situations. Whether governed by rules or social conduct, the *personality* can be understood to be the Self adapting itself accordingly to different social situations.

The Self is you, and you know yourself, but how did you become you? This is a subject of much philosophical debate, but for the intents and purposes of the thesis at present, “- the self, as the singularity we each feel ourselves to be, is not an entity. Rather, it is a site, a site from which a person perceives the world and a place from which to act.” (Harre 3) This Self an agglomeration of pieces of you that make you 'you', more specifically,

“...the biological, experiential and introspective attributes of a person are the necessary characteristics of one entity- without any of which it would not exist as such- but that entity is logically prior to and not the mere aggregate of these 3 sets of characteristics” (self 1&2) (Harre 7).

As Harre puts it, “so while each human being has a robust sense of living a singular life in time, the incidents that are offered to oneself and to others as constitutive of that are usually multiple”, which really hits it on the head, if curiously worded and needlessly verbose, as a way of saying that is it the comprehensive corpus of our experiences that make us who we are (9). Stern points out that bodily identity seems to play a predominant part in the making of Self, stating that “a living being is of such a character that it's total nature likewise remaining a whole in its incessant intercourse with its environment” (self one, organic) (Stern, cited in Harre 71). What he means by this is that, despite ceaseless interaction with things and other people, we remain and are confined to our bodies; naturally, we come to view them as a part of ourselves, if not our direct mental representation of us.

In *The Singular Self*, Terri Apter identifies three expressions of the Self, which he calls selves 1, 2, and 3: personal distinctness, personal continuity, personal autonomy (Harre).

Self 1: Personal Distinctness: This is the self “reflected in pronouns” (“I”, “me”, “mine”, “myself”), and represented by the body. This includes our powers of mind, capabilities, skills, etc. It is a way of acknowledging and identifying ourselves. This self is our 'point of view, our embodied self. This Self is not subject to change.

Self 2: Personal Continuity: Personal continuity is the 'us' that stays relatively stable over time; it is our self-concept and habits. This is what we are, inherently, and that we presume and perhaps want ourselves to be, but is subject to change.

Self 3: The Social Self: Self three is the social self, the Self/selves we present in social context, which also is subject to change over time.

“The royal route,” Harre says, “to an understanding of the sense of self and the unity of experience must be through the analysis of the ways these (the 3 distinct 'selves') aspects of personhood are publicly expressed in both speech and action” (9). Identity is different, almost opposite, to the 'self': identity (referring to the social, to use terms correctly), shifts and changes from setting to setting, from environment to environment, group to group. As Carl Rogers says, “the self [is] an organized, permanent, subjectively perceived entity which is at the very heart of all our experiences (Hjelle 24). Of course, the numbered selves (1,2,&3) *are* subject to slight change, but the Self is permanent in that we cannot become another Self, we cannot trade Selves or be another's Self, or vice versa. “The Self,” adds Gordon Alpert, “is what an individual really is, an 'internal something' guiding and directing all human activity” (Hjelle 24).

## Development via Society

Our interaction with, and even just our birth into, our culture has a large impact on the development of the social identity and self. Social identity is necessarily and obviously a direct effect of the workings of society; however, even the Self finds itself somewhat subject to our social surrounding, but more along the lines of 'nature/nurture'. If the Self is 'nature', that we are born being and knowing, to some extent, then our social and physical environment is the 'nurture'. James Lamiell states, that "what constitutes a person's 'self hood' (collection of attributes) largely dependent on location, conditions, presence of others (Harre). Social identity is gotten in a similar, but more direct way.

According to Vygotsky's conception of human development, "the higher cognitive capacities, including the ability to think about oneself, came into being during the course of interactions with Others. *At some point, one realizes one has a point of view, and that one is a being with all sorts of attributes*" (Harre 11). "The structure of the developed human mind comes about through the acquisition of skills in psychological symbiosis with others" (Harre 27). This is what Vygotsky calls "proximal development", "a time when child must mimic parents' correct actions to learn/develop mother tongue and culture. This represents one aspect of the social self, as one who is a member of a culture" (Jenkins 11).

However, there is another definition of social, that being "the ways in which individuals and collectivities are distinguished in their social relations with other individuals and collectivities" (Jenkins 5). Maxine Kensington Hong in her book, *The Woman Warrior*, famously says, "I am nothing but who I am to other people" (Harre 66). "That which people have called 'selves' are, by and large, produced discursively, that is, dialogued, and through other forms of

joint action with real or imagined others” (Harre 68). In conversing with people, either through the other persons direct transmittance of an opinion or derived from the role we take in the dialogue, we can learn how we are viewed from another's perspective and take it into account in our own formation of self. This idea of self-formation is called the Internal-External Dialect of Identification, which defines selfhood as “an ongoing, simultaneous synthesis of (internal) self-identification and the (external) definition of oneself offered by others” (self 2+3) (Jenkins 18). Two of the most common devices for identifying people in a social environment are names and pronouns.

Social identity can also be influenced by the pressure to conform and become part of the group. To this each member of a culture is vulnerable, because individuals are born (normally) with the need to belong; it is a survival instinct, leftover from the early stages of many. Each individual has a different propensity for this; “external factors that impinge upon conforming orientations vary according to local sense and knowledge, situational contingencies and individual point of view”. Whether an individual conforms or not, or gives into this social pressure, is a display of self-confidence, or a strong sense of Self. “Nonconforming behavior, (deviance) may come most easily to those whose group membership is secure in the mainstream. Insecure membership may thus encourage conforming behavior” (Jenkins 9).

As for man's identification with and as Human, the process is also social. “The community is only an intermediary, however indispensable, for men to identify himself with a totality which is the cosmic whole: nature, the universe” (Baczko 98).

“Perhaps, paradoxically, we confront our own personality, singular depths more fully in these collective forms than we do through introspection, for they arise from a heightened sense of our shared humanity, even if they do themselves in the guise of a thousand different cultures” (Turner 14).



David Abraham says that, in its own way as well, “social interaction within this community contributes to self-knowledge”- David Abraham (Kang). The Self and Other, therefore, complement and complete one another. “There is no Absolute Category, no Ego, no Society- but only a chaotically complex web of relation- and the “strange Attractor”, attracting itself, which evoked resonance and patterns in the flow of becoming”(Bey 1994, 3).

### **Conclusion**

The quote that was provided as in the before the introduction was quite apt; “- identification is not always so routine or so trivial. It can shake the foundations of our lives”(Jenkins 3). A person's identity is of central importance to them; it's continued survival not only refers to their physical body, but also their Self, the purpose they are in their minds. To lose one's identity is quantifiable with death, or non-existence; even if the body lives on, it makes no difference to the mind, which is no longer present. To allow for one's identity to thrive, then, it is important that one meet the basic needs of the Self. The Ego and Superego can be easily mollified; they are more or less determined by society, and therefore will change with a change of scenery. The id, however, is a much more permanent and primal center; satisfying the id is more difficult. If the id is not being satisfied, or not being able to be satisfied in the culture which is present, if too much of it needs to be mitigated by the superego in order to successfully create balance with the ego, then one must find an environment that *can* meet these needs, which may or may not be similar to looking for a needle in a haystack.

Burning Man, as discussed in the chapters IV and V, Rules and Liminality, is an excellent environment in this case, because Burning Man has no rules, except that there are no rules; the id is allowed to play, and surely does. For example, the “immediate discharge of psychic energy

produced by animal drives (esp. sex and aggression)” is present, as well as “immediate tension reduction”, “the pleasure principle, certainly “impulse, ir-rationale and narcissism”, and it could be described of the actions and interactions at Burning Man “takes over for the instinctual needs and gives them mental expression” (Hjelle 25).

By eliminating the social dogma, Burning Man also creates a ground receptive and conducive to the formation of new Selves. Firstly, it creates new assignments for the numbered selves, selves 1,2, &3. The first self, as mentioned, isn't susceptible to change, and thus stays the same. However, the other two can be changed if the individual so desires.

Self 2 is the presumed self, the self we consider ourselves to be, and Self 3 is the socially presented self. In real life, these two may not be the same; perhaps the culture wouldn't allow or accept the way we envision Self 2, or perhaps we lack the courage or conviction to be Self 2. Either way, if Self 2 is something that *can* be changed (i.e., being less shy, not changing genetically predispositions, like rage), then Burning Man is an environment that can allow that to happen. Burning Man is the “effacement of rigid boundaries between private and public in favor of unscripted enactments of surreal alter egos and fantastic psycho-geographies (Gilmore 3). It is often the case at Burning Man, that people take on a 'playa self'. This includes a 'playa name'; for example, my playa name is 'Molotov'. The playa name is important to the creation of a new Self, because it creates anonymity and the chance to create and establish a whole new Self (self 2&3) from the playa dust up. Elaborate outfits are also a large part of the culture, and can similarly allow a person to align the envisionment of Self, Self 2, with the social display of Self, Self 3. “By donning masks- by hiding ourselves- we find our identity” (Crocker 79).

Identification is culturally specific, and there is a whole new culture present at Burning Man. Burning Man is based upon, and encourages and supports, a culture of transformation. “We

change from day to day, not because our persons are un-singular, but because we may come to different understandings of our self-hood (self 2)” (Harre 84); “Identity can only be understood as a process, as 'being' or 'becoming” (Jenkins 5). Burning Man facilitates and encourages transformations of all forms, even if it's only more thoroughly into oneself. “In BRC, one's eccentricities are cheered and encouraged, not mocked or divided”, and “radical self expression” is encouraged (Doherty 224; Gilmore). We receive a new self-assessment from new community and its values (Harre 135).

“As societies become more voluminous, cohesive practice and traditions thin out and are no longer strong enough to resist individual interpretation (individuality). Becoming more and more specialized, eventually only thing in common will be our humanity (Durkheim 275). This is a fact that Burning Man recognizes, but the festival, instead of using that as a delimiting factor, creates a community – a culture – on this shared humanity by taking away as much of the material world as possible and instead replacing it with a free space to adapt in and create new ways of relating to and with each other. We are no longer things, we are people, and we are no longer defined by any culture except for the one that we have made and willingly entered. “If we are bound by any ethic or morality it must be one which we ourselves have imagined...” (Bey 1985, 67).

Finally, when it comes to the Self, and the needs of an individual, Burning Man is right on task with Maslow's hierarchy (concerning the needs of Self)(Figure 9). It defines these as...

1)Self Esteem- Receiving self-respect and esteem from other people, feeling worthwhile and capable (Hjelle 260).

2)Self Actualization- “desire to become everything that one is capable of becoming”. This includes the ability and full use and exploitation of talents, capacities, and potentialities, the drive for self-improvement, all of which requires a willingness to take risks, make mistakes, and break old habits. (Hjelle 261,263).

It is said that the identity of a place, and therefore part and parcel the identities of the people within it, are controlled by those who control it. What happens when no one directly controls it? At Burning Man, everyone indirectly controls the festival; by enforcing no overt rule or culture, people are allowed to make sense the world of themselves, for themselves. People adapt in and to this new environment, and as a result, it changes people, who change again, who reflect back on it to change it again, on and on until the end- in this case, one week.

“A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be at peace with himself. What a man can be, he must be. He must be true to his own nature”  
(Abraham Maslow, cited in Hjelle 261).

# Childhood and Rites of Passage

“The entrance to play is completely voluntary.”  
(Kang)

“An obvious matrix for immediatism is the party.”  
(Bey 1994,11)

## **Introduction**

Functionally, we've already discussed that Burning Man acts as an environment that is host to change and transformation. Burning Man is an *experiment*, but there are only a limited amount of scholars and/or participants who have looked into how it achieves its result. I'd like to point out and to posit that a large part of 'successful experiment' at Burning Man is through the element of Play and the reproduction, interpersonally and socially, of the condition of Childhood. As Victor Turner notes, “Although the span and range of celebration are highly variable, events are framed by it in such a way as to draw on the innovative potential of participants” (13). Within the Play frame, at once incorporating aspects of freedom *and* frivolity, the “innovative potential” manifests as the ability to simulate child-like relationships with the world and others. This function may prove to be a significant part of the festival's overall effect when we consider the symbolism of Play and the Childhood condition, as well as reflect it back onto their status in American culture.

## **Childhood**

To begin with, childhood is itself a liminal state. One of Turner's definitions for liminal describes it as the condition in which “the past has lost its grip and the future has not yet token

definite shape” (Levi-Strauss 117). This serves as an apt description of childhood, which is also a time of development, between states of existing in the world (birth) and existing as an independent, individual *Self* in the world.

During this transition into a whole and complete persona (which, as previously described, involves the intimate *and* social self), one also learns and is assimilated into one's native culture. However, as Baczko noted, adapting to the sociocultural environment, every generation is different, and “every epoch has its modes of imagining, reproducing, and renewing the imagination, as it has its own ways of believing, feeling, and knowing.” Education through the strata of local institutions also happens during this time, the process of which is very structured and restrictive, resulting in placing, as Backzo describes, “...constraints and expectations on individuals and actions”.

This reality, of childhood as a 'planned out' and stiffly scheduled, is not congruous with the affections that are widely held to childhood, as a nostalgic time of spontaneity and freedom. William Blake remarks that “childhood is unique because we experience everything under the canopy of eternity”; “that which have been and that which may be have no place in a child's outlook- the here and now is central” (Hoffman 8). With this embodied sense of *immediacy*, or rather, an ability to live without the constant presence and weight of past/future events continuously enveloping us, is a strong sense of *wonder*. As children, we are still exploring the world; it is still a new place, there is still mystery (Hoffman). As children, we create *narratives* to describe not only the world around us, but our involvement in it. This is because, as children, we are still the center of the world- we are learning about society, but the Social has not quite sunk its teeth in yet, and so we are the un-compromised means and ends of our day to day actions. As we grow up the mystery and *pizazz* of life tends to fade – we learn the science behind the mystery

of the world around us, we learn to put people into realistic perspectives, and we become part of a habit and routine, which, by definition of the nature of their performance (repetitive), lose captivating interest and become normal, pedestrian, and 'daily'. The “wonder” of childhood, then is linked to the “wonder” of religion; both allow for the existence of unquestioned beliefs, faith, and a feeling of being taken care of (Entzoni 66). At least part of this experience is mitigated upon maturation, when we are expected to be 'our own keepers', and develop a sense of reality and responsibilities. Religious faith can be maintained, but it can't be relied on to get the groceries, or get the job. A sense of reality – what will *actually happen*-- in your day to day life is a necessary frame that *must* be attained, but conversely makes the sense of 'wonder' very difficult to maintain. Like learning how a magic trick works, the understandings of reality take the 'magic' out of daily life.

As I said, childhood is a very nostalgic point in our lives, it becomes associated with a time and condition of life different, and more enjoyable and worry-free existence than that of adulthood. Whether conscious or not, there is often some quantity or quality of the 'quest for the inner child' that takes place at some point during adult life, whether it be from the 'mindlessness' and escape of a hobby, or the temporary suspension of self and responsibility that takes place at a gaming event or in a party. Whatever the manner of strategy, Edward Hoffman observes that “in a manner hardly imaginable a decade ago, an increasing number of people across North America and abroad are recognizing that strengthening the link to our childhood self is crucial for achieving greater happiness and balance in everyday life”, 'id' and childhood very closely linked (2). This is a contemporary condition, for majority of adults now are the children of the baby boom. This generation is significantly situated in time- they grew up during the prime-phases of America's industrial phase, and entered a world leaving the secondary industry of factory

production and manufacture into a fully-fabricated tertiary industry, an age of budding global trade and capitalism, a world of sales, clerks, receptionists, trade and management. It wasn't necessarily the *nature* of these jobs that was damaging to the psyche; it was the wholly immersive structure that careers and businesses had become built upon, which itself resembled the factories of the machinist era: "life in a world centered on function is liable to despair because in reality this world is empty, it rings hollow...", and with this comes the "atrophy of the faculty of wonder"(Mauss 3).

## **Play**

Play is one of the biggest associations with the nostalgia of childhood. Play is the opposite of work; popular associations with play include 'play includes friend', 'play is fun', 'play is free', and 'play is imaginative'. "The entrance to play is completely voluntary", play is not forced, play is entirely a faculty of Will and the 'pleasure seeking principles" (Kang). Play is a different frame, as opposed to our work frame, or our social frame, or even our personal frame, through which we see the world and reality. However, play frames are slightly different in that, instead of giving us a more accurate picture of reality, "the messages communicated in play frames, on the other hand, are held to be disengaged from "reality" and free the constraints of mundane existence" (Turner 28) "Furthermore, the very existence of play continually confirms the supra-logical nature of the human situation", freeing the body from the constraints of absolute rationality"(Kang). Play exists as a liminal mechanism, necessary to the transformation of child into adult, allowing the child to experiment with meanings and actions without the bounds of rationality and reality.



Play also fastens the link between childhood and religion. As was mentioned, play is a frame through which we see and understand the world, different from career frames, social frames, personal frames, etc, but religion *also* presents itself as a way for interpreting actions in the world. A cultural view of Play frames and Religious/ritual frames will reveal that they are very similar on a fundamental level. Culturally, the shifting of frames from Ritual/religious frame to a Play frame be represented by the simple insertion of one word; if ritual frames are require the understanding of “Let's believe”, Play frames are the understand of “let's *make* believe” (Turner, 27). This makes them similar, but they are ultimately differ because, whereas ritual frames depend upon “traditional, immemorial authority” (should, ought), Play frames “ see themselves as free to fabricate a range of alternate possibilities of behaving, thinking, and feeling that is wider than that current or admissible in either the mundane world or the ritual frame” (Turner 28). Both involve belief, and suspension of *dis*belief, but one involves agency and individuality, while the other involves preservation and collectivity.

Performances, as in theatre and play productions, are an excellent hybrid of social life , maturation, religion, and elements of play, of childlike belief and fantasy. Performances of all kinds present themselves as a narrative, teaching cultural values through the enactment of a fantasy story, which takes place in the real world, but requires a suspension of disbelief, an exit from the real world, by both the actors and the audience. Victor Turner returns to the argument at hand, remarking that “cultural performances are not simple reflections or expressions of culture or even of charging culture but may themselves be active agencies of change, representing the eye by which culture sees itself and the drawing board on which creative actors sketch but what they believe to be more apt or interesting 'designs for living' (Victor Turner, cited in Hockett 75). Play also follows the rules of society, but loosely, being that it is a film, a thin net of liminality, in

between society and self, childhood and adulthood and while play may *seem* “seemingly amoral”, in fact, “its moralism may cleave more sincerely and closely to the facts of contemporary life than to moralism of ritual, which can 'cover up' distasteful social and political facts, that is, become hypo-critical (Turner). Play plays an important role in the transformation and imminent socialization of a child into an adult, but it also has a role in the society as a vehicle for change and moralistic teachings.

### **Rites of Passage**

Play and religion interact and meet again, but this time in a more culturally-prescribed manner. Play serves as childhood and adulthood. Rites of passage, similarly, serve a mechanism of transformation and facilitate the transition between the person as 'autonomous' and the person as 'a member of a collective whole', 'a member of the culture'. Rites of passages, a certain type/function of ritual, trains the member to function as an individual in society (Weber) Rites of passage, as mentioned in Ch 3, are an interpretation of Tuner's 'Journey', and share a similar structure with pilgrimages. Rites of Passage are similar to play in that they both provide a space of liminality for and aid in the social evolution of a child<sup>27</sup>; Rites of Passage differ in that, in their moment of teaching, “society seeks to make the individual most fully its own”(Levi-Strauss 112). Rites of Passage, at least in culture, are often presented with a challenge; the liminal space provides a place where a dangerous activity, normally not condoned in society, must be undertaken. This simultaneously proves the individual is ready and, to some extent, worthy. Quite often in a culture, one is not considered to be of certain ranks (I.e, a veteran, a professional, a

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<sup>27</sup> Rites of Passage primarily refer to, and have in the traditional sense pertained to, adolescents entering adult hood. As an example, some famous rites of passage include boys becoming or being accepted into a fraternal order of men, or girls experiencing their first menstruation and being socially and physically acknowledged as 'women'. Spirit journeys are also Rites of Passage.

'hero') unless they have successfully undergone certain Rites of Passage (Levi Strauss 113).

These Rites are often quite anxiety ridden or dangerous, as the liminal space is used to provide a scenario that, either for danger or taboo-nature, is not admitted in the everyday actions of society.

This presents the crucial dissimilarity between these rituals and play; play is liminal, but also pleasurable and voluntary<sup>28</sup>. Rites of Passage do reflect back on the individual though, the result possibly being that:

“...the moral order is seen from a different perspective and the result may be alienation, social change, and/or individual self-awareness or Moral choice; creativity, and innovation are possibilities that emerge from the agony of isolation and the joy of *communitas* which may accompany the liminal stage in rites of passage” (Levi-Strauss 117).

Rites of passage serve reflexively then to re-enforce our individual and collective Selves simultaneously; “Rites of Passage announce our separateness and individuality to us and at the same time remind us most firmly and vividly that we belong to our group and cannot conceive of an existence apart from it (Levi Strauss 112). However, how are we to be reminded that we “firmly and vividly that we belong to our group” if we do not undergo these crucial social bonding and acceptance initiations? “In U.S culture,” says Hoffman, “[there is] no clear and succinct progression/divorce from childhood to adulthood”(Durkheim 78). Adolescence is a period of self-definition, and if undergone incorrectly, can result in or contribute to future role confusion. Hjelle supports this, noting that “American society offers a much wider latitude of potential life-styles to its young principle- consequently American adolescents are more vulnerable to identify problems precisely because they have more options”, and that “it is the democratic system in America that poses special problems in this regard, since democracy

<sup>28</sup> This view of play excludes games like professional sports and the like, which are often high-anxiety and possibly dangerous, but are also considered to be 'adult', and do not pertain to the subject of Play and Rites of Passage in children.

requires “self-made identities”. He continues, remarking that “the young people bear considerable responsibility in defining who/what they are” (87). Furthermore, as Hjelle points out, “when democracy is coupled with the technological sophistication of our social world, identity crisis are further intensified” (87). The more we advance in the realms of science and technology, and the more an individual hopes to succeed in these areas in society, the more they must extend their formal education (attending college and university), which in turn lengthens financial dependency (either on parents or loan institutions). Whatever the case, this development serves two functions regarding the status of Rites of Passage, and therefore childhood, in American culture. On the one hand, to eliminate what remnants of Rites of Passage America had possessed, in the idea 'graduation', the end of the education process in which one entered the 'real world' and became an adult, and of becoming financially independent and 'getting your own life'. On the other hand, this dependency serves to lengthen the interim and duration of childhood. As a result, and directly attributable to the vagueness and sparsity of cultural Rites of Passage, it has become increasingly difficult in America, especially for those pursuing a secondary education, to ascertain one's 'membership' and participation to American culture, and because this crucially important self-reflexive mirror is missing of, it becomes much more difficult to confidently establish personal identity.

### **Play and Transition at Burning Man**

At any point in time, says Carl Jung on childhood, “a man's present state may have come into conflict with his childhood state, or he may have violently sundered himself from his original character...in keeping with his ambitions. He has thus become un-childlike and artificial and has lost his roots” (C.G Jung, cited in Hoffman 1). This 'loss of roots' is especially viable in

light of the state of childhood and transition in American culture; 'ambitions' require a much longer path, and the distinction between 'roots' and 'tree', to continue the metaphor, was never clearly distinguished in the first place. Burning Man serves, by providing a liminal space, as a surrogate childhood.

There is more to Burning Man and its resemblance to childhood than simply the availability of liminal space. Burning Man restores the childlike sense of wonder. "Clearly," Hoffman says, "one key trigger of youthful ecstasy is exposure to the natural world's splendor..." (176). The desert environment is certainly awe-inspiring, and has certainly made a keen impression on more than one Burner in its day... Again, participant CG, playa name 'Clockin, can attest to this:

"As for the physical environment, it is essential to creation of the Burning Man experience. The Black Rock Desert offers us nothing. The world there is harsh and barren. Therefore, all that we have there is what we bring with us, and I aim this statement much more at the spirit than the things we pack in. It's the building of a new world for one week, a sketch on a black slate" (Hude).

Burning Man is also strongly founded on a communal sense of Play. The very establishment of the city and the city itself resemble Play, in that "play occurs in... a temporarily real world of its own, [that] has been expressly hedged off for it, from whence it continues to shed its radiance on the ordinary world outside, a wholesome influence working security, order, and prosperity for the whole community" (Pencak 126). Furthermore, "play's flexibility contains within it the possibility of exploring new ways of doing things", as does Burning Man's liminal qualities, its lack of edict over social or personal conduct within the 'rules' of decency or compromise (Turner 80). Burning Man applies this sense of 'play' to drug, sexual, and social experimentation, using taboo elements in a way that is like play; it may be enjoyable, but it is

also an educational act in which knowledge is gained through experience (Harre 113). The festival is most visibly an environment of play, testified by the art. Hakim Bey would label this environment a space of “Unbridled PLAY”, “at one and the same time the source of our Art and of all races rarest eros” (Bey 1985, 8). “Real art is play,” Bey says (1994, 9). I’m sure we all remember making art as a child. There are no rules governing the forms of the lines, or the colors on the page; it is an inherently creative activity, in which we can express unique feelings and images that have the potential to be novel within the span of human creation. Bey continues, “and play is one of the most immediate of all experiences” (1994, 9). Play translates as immediatism, because it involves spontaneous decisions that affect one's life in the absolute present, where all who are involved must be performing. Both play and immediatism enhance individuals by producing a matrix of friendship and, Bey notes, “an obvious matrix for immediatism is the party” (1994, 11)

This sense of Play produces Burning Man, in a literal sense, as a cultural play, a theatrical production, written and performed by the whole city. In fact, Burning Man has a history of giving productions. In 1999, artist and Burner Pepe Ozan wrote an opera, *Le Mystere de Papa Loko*, specifically for and to be performed at the Burn<sup>29</sup>. There was meant to be no audience; the performance included people who also came to the festival, and incorporated and encouraged participation from any and all lookers-on. Burning Man itself is a performance, a comedy and a

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<sup>29</sup> The performance involves participants as 'devotees' passing through 3 familiar stages:

Requiem for Time- taken out of the world of time, responsibility, and individuality.

The Breech- “liminal stage [in which] the devotees are betwixt and between the positions assigned by life and society. This ambiguous state is likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to bisexuality, and to darkness” (Gilmore 50).

The Ordeal- devotees rip clothes off and burn them in a final act of liberation from past and identity, reborn out original man-naked and bewildered, ready to descend their ancestral subconscious. (Gilmore 50).

drama, performed by the entirety of the city, as the mock-performance and imitation of a city. The city that is depicted is at once a farce, a reflection of the default world in which we live, and of the utopic world, enabled by the liminal aspect of the festival, in which we want to. This mimicry and inversion from the norm is a form of play in itself, what William Pencak terms as “serious play”. Once described as an “ADD theater of the absurd”, we can now understand the insight into such a naming (Davis 16).

The people who attend Burning Man are representative and diplomats of this need; they do and always have determined the particular ideological atmosphere of the festival. The age of the average Burner is between the mid-20's to early-50's; there are of course outliers, but this age-group defines the bulk of the festival. According to Erik Erikson's 8 stages of Man, this places the majority of the Burning Man population firmly in stage 7 (Figure 10). Stage 7 is what Erikson describes as the “middle years of life”. One of the characteristic phenomena of this stage of life is stagnation (Hjelle 75). However, another is also generativity, which he defines as “when a person begins to show concern not only for the welfare of the next generation, but also for the nature of the society in which that generation will live and work” (Hjelle 75). As people get older, their concern is raised not to their own physical preservation as much, but to the preservation of their life's work and the hopes and ideals which they lived by and for. Generativity, then, when present in a culture, “represents the older generations' concern in establishing and guiding those who will replace them” (Hjelle 75). Burning Man becomes invaluable not only as a realignment of childhood, and a reinstatement of Self, but as a rites of passage to usher in and reinforce a particular way of thinking and living. During rites of passage, in the liminal stage while an individual is open to ideas and vulnerable to molding, a society also has the chance to start again, so to speak. By using liminality to teach new values, Rites of Passage “may serve to resolve

social problems and perpetuate the social order directly as well as indirectly, through the integration and socialization of its members” (Levi-Strauss 112). Burning Man may then be an attempt to preserve a certain way of life, and improve upon the one that currently exists.

Hakim Bey says, “we miss the directness of play..., we miss smell, taste, touch, the feel of bodies in motion” (1994, 9). This is because play, as it was as a child and as it is at Burning Man, as a “voluntary activity outside the demands of ordinary life”... “is free, is in fact freedom” (Roberta Kvelson, cited in Pencak 126). Through active, unanimous participation, Burning Man produces the performance of its culture, and, Turner says, “whether laid down or crystallized in durable images and structures or expressed in the immediacy of social 'peak experience', a celebratory performance rejoices in the key values and virtues of the society that produces it...” (14). The values are transmitted through the performance, the interaction and adventures, of the characters, which in the case of Burning Man, is everyone there. This performance, done in liminality, and in the spirit of play, revivifies childhood senses of wonder and fascination with the world, and allows for the exploration – through the play, and through the performance – of the Self. As a space of liminality, acquired through Victor Turner's Journey, acting as a modern Rite of Passage, “the main trajectory of Burning Man is not one towards transcending, but rather towards transformation in the carnivalesque sense of the death of the old and the birth of the new” (Kang). “Play, imagination, and paradox, with all its possibilities come to the form, and along with them, an attitude of mind that is interpretive, self-reflexive, and self-conscious (Levi-Strauss, 117).

Jeremy Hockett said that “Burning Man facilitates a context in which this kind of “critical distance” can be achieved by spatial and temporal- as well as cultural and social- distancing, as participants are momentarily freed from the abstractions and ideological proscriptions that



predominate in 20<sup>th</sup> century thought in order to forge a new meaning in their world” (80). Surely the festival achieves this goal, but it may also, instead of creating new meaning in the world in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, act as an initiation, a rite of passage, to confirm people and ensure a *frame* of mind, an idea on life and living, that already exists.

# Capitalism and Consumerism

“The sacra of other culture, often including the most beautiful and striking items in museum holdings, have always fascinated the Western public. Perhaps this is because they make visible what Westerners have thrust from conscious awareness in order to effect their rational conquest of the material world.”

(Turner 13)

“...communities are ceasing to exist.”  
(Larry Harvey, in *Dust & Illusions*, Bonin)

“...as societies become more voluminous, cohesive practice and traditions thin out and are no longer strong enough to resist individual interpretation (individuality). Becoming more and more specialized, eventually only thing in common will be our humanity.”

(Durkheim 278)

## **What Does Capitalism/Consumerism have to do with Identity and Burning Man?**

Hakim Bey notes in *T.A.Z.* that there has been, over the span of social existence of mankind, “a global increase in the realm of technology and rational control” (1985, 83). Berger and Luckmann, social theorist team, are quoted as believing institutions to be a “primary form of social control (Jenkins 134). Within a society, many institutions are created to maintain cooperation, civility, functionalism, and order, many of which we've discussed up until this point. Subcultures are created to provide further social bonding through shared interests or needs, religion sets morals and provides the social/personal needs via the collective/euphoric devices of the 'religious experience', rituals perform necessary transformations, rules and institutions establish implicit/explicit rules and maintain Order, and liminal spaces provide a socially-accepted space for experimentation and change. America has variations of all of these institutions, and each of them effectively serve to shape and mold a specifically American

culture. However, America has yet another institutions of particular notoriety and noteworthiness which controls all forms of its international and local exchange, and largely attribute to its current world standing. That particular institution is the economic practice of Capitalism.

Capitalism is a relatively novel development, and America was one of the first global entities to really springboard to success as a result of this system. However, at what cost to the American culture? The other institutions, subcultures, religion, ritual, rules, and even liminality, all serve to reinforce the culture as a group (Durkheim, cited in Carlton-Ford 257). The individual is reinforced by and reinforces the group, which gives it *power*. Capitalism, on the other hand, does *not* reinforce a group identity. In fact, the very principles of capitalism, or competition and accumulation of objects for wealth, prestige, and profit, only result in the forced fracture of the group and incidental isolation of the individual. Victor Turner makes a note on the current state of American culture, stating that:

“With the increase in scale and complexity with urbanization, specialization, professionalization, job mobility, labor migration, stress on individualism, the omnipresence of the cash economy, and so on, the occasions of personal crisis multiply exceedingly as compared with “tribal” or rurally based societies” (25).

Jack Burnham says, “We are now living in a systems-oriented culture”, each one with its own set of rules, its own exertion of control over our actions and behaviors (Kang). Especially with the institution of capitalism and associated industrial systems –of production, marketing, and consumption – at what cost has our global market Titan-ism been on America's organic culture? When a culture's most influential industry is one that erodes at the mortar of communal and social bonds, what are the consequences?

### **The Decline of Community and the Rise of Industry and Capitalism**

Capitalism is destroying culture, and that's not just progressive, modernist angst talking. On a fundamental level, capitalism is designed to (incidentally) devalue and displace community. America is a country founded on capitalism; it came over with the British business owners looking to exploit America's virgin capital and resources, and really took off during the American industrial revolution. America switched to a culture of production- populations flocked to cities and urbanization was rampant. At the time, it seemed like capitalism would have been a fruitful host for culture: communal ties, varying by nationality, and neighborhoods, and socioeconomic status. Never was local community stronger. However, as capitalism flourished, and the wealth of the nation grew, so did the investments in research and science. Technology, which these first factories were predicated upon, became more efficient. It would seem rational that, if machines got more efficient, it means workers would have to work less. However, that assuming that the leaders of industries held the value of family and community over personal gain and profit. America was a land where people came, first and foremost, to make their fortunes. The idea was that this goal would serve the need of comfortably raising a family and being a respectable member of a community. However, as technology improved and efficiency increased, so did profit, and if a worker's machine could work faster with less effort, than putting in the same amount of effort would create a profit, and if the worker became more efficient as well as the machinery, then even greater profit could be made. Slowly, great emphasis was put towards pursuing a secondary education. However, creating more educational institutions, like colleges, universities, and business school, was both time and capital intensive, and progress in this area was slower. In the meantime, workers worked longer hours on more days of the week on more efficient machinery. Already improvements in science and technology and capitalism were creating a schism between the individual and family/community life. One had to work long and

hard, to generate enough income to buy things to make oneself and one's family comfortable. Comfort through acquisition of things, things being specifically engineered to allow a greater sense of ease and convenience in American life, suddenly became a goal that America became smitten and completely preoccupied with. In fact, often referenced in culture and literature now, America had not even realized that it had initiated the beginnings of what was soon to be a morbid cycle of “work/consume/die”.

Suddenly, there was a struggle to come together within the “busyness” of working schedule, and soon too, women entered the workplace. Although child labor laws were established in the early 1900's soon after the industrial revolution, but just recently, the newly-immigrated Americans was sending the entire family into the factory. Although the practice was outlawed, America's stood on a shaky ground of being of the habit of working itself to the bone. America's 5-day workweek, in place since the beginning unless mandated otherwise, didn't allow for much leisure time, or the establishment of cultural festivals. As Henry Cox remarks, “the industrial work ethic has blighted the impulse for communal festivals that enlivens much of the rest of the world” (Dorson 34). Barbara Ehrenreich says,

“The middle classes had to learn to calculate, save, and 'defer gratification'; the lower classes had to be transformed into a disciplined, factory-ready working class- meaning far fewer holidays and the new necessity of showing up for work sober and on-time, six days a week. The new industrialism required ceaseless labor, all year round”(100).

This led to a loss, or lack, of celebrations in general, which normally served as times of communal bonding and cultural reinforcement. Eventually, Amitai Enztioni summarizes the result of America's continuous-grind work ethics:

“In a society that has made economic advancement a key value while downgrading

others, people dedicate more and more of their time to work and commerce, and less to family, community, and holidays. Although per capita hours in the formal workweek have not increased much, many people work overtime and take work home, and, above all, more members of the family now work outside the household” (3).

To term it from a more Weberian perspective, “on weekdays, which are dedicated to work and commerce, people tend to abandon their commitments to shared values and communities; during holidays deteriorate, so do moral and social order. Durkheim hypothesizes that rituals correlate negatively with societal disintegration (defined as excessive individualism)” (Enztoni 8).

This is to say, rituals and other communal activity act to strengthen and reinforce the community, whereas the workweek and its necessary abandonment of traditional social interaction serves to help dissolve or “disintegrate” the community.

However, several technological advancements and change of industry predated this statement. After all, factory work could not be taken home. America as a production sector shifted, slowly, to America as a service-industry sector, replacing secondary industry in factories and fields with tertiary industry of providing, trading, selling and exchanging goods and services *produced* by the secondary industry. This was facilitated through step by step improvements in technology; improvements in transportation and shipping, refrigeration, communication via phones instead of telegraphs, and always, improvements in computational techniques. At first this manifested only as improved typing machines, adding machines, and cash registers. Eventually, the first computer was developed, in 1936 by Konrad Zuse (Bellis). By 1950, the first personal computer, the 'Simon' model by Berkely Enterprises, was being sold to the public and by 1962 there were over 40,000 computers being used for business in North America (“Personal Computer Milestones” ;“Computers in Business”). This was the “essential social technology for

negotiating and bringing about change” (Hockett 75). Computer in the working world meant that business and tasks could be accomplished much faster, and even more business could be done in a day. Of course, this progress was slow, but as time progressed so did technology, and the finer and finer specialization of computers meant the finer and finer specialization of people, which narrowed his skill set, and therefore commonality with his family/community. The technological milestone of computers was yet another hit to the American man's identity sustained in the march of capitalism. At first he was less present as a member of his community; now he was less relatable as an individual. Marx sees this particular effect of capitalism as a sense the psychic isolation, “the unprecedented inner-loneliness”, in a competitive, sink-or-swim economy (Ehrenreich).

The side effects continued. The increase in technology, paired with the capitalistic values of material gain, created a vision market-consumer industry. Companies needed a market in which to sell their newly produced products, and before America became a global market tycoon, it had to start at home. The market utilized two techniques of sale and influence in particular: media and advertising. Media used new technological advancements, like the television, to deliver new advertising campaigns and messages. The market, through techniques of advertising, was a milestone debasement of the individual in American culture. Advertising and media were vehicles of *commodity fetishism*, a frame in which the product was value as highly or higher than people. This, in turn, turned *people* into objects; objects to sell other objects to; “...insofar as he is defined by things, and is himself a thing” (Bataille 72). The media is also used to propagate other isolating mechanisms and methods of social framing to 'make the sale', such as Self vs. Other<sup>30</sup>. Markets also impressed the illusion of *scarcity* to inspire desire for a product which can,

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<sup>30</sup> As opposed to the global cultural Self vs. Other (which is more like Us vs. Them), this

as Georges Bataille observes, “only reproduce itself in un-fulfillment, negation, and alienation.” (Bey 1994, 3). Additionally, and also quite scarringly, advertising began *branding*, associating products with certain emotions, levels of achievement, and lifestyles. The result?

“This Totality [false consensus of public] isolates individuals and renders them powerless by offering only illusory modes of social expression, modes which seem to promise liberation or self-fulfillment but in fact end by producing yet more mediation and alienation” (Bey 1994, 27).

Finally, advertising used culture – foreign cultures as 'exotic' and subcultures as 'cool' – as a desirable, which fetishized the product, placing it at a higher value than that of people. This de-humanization of people and culture lent itself to the creation of a new system of judgments, where people were valued akin to their things and socioeconomic status and not necessarily in their value as friends, colleagues, or citizens.

In the modern present of contemporary America, we not only rely on technology in business, but in social interaction, and “with the technological sophistication of our social world, identity crisis are further intensified”(Hjelle 87). The perfection of the personal computer and digital and satellite networks allows people (with a computer-based or equitable) job to take work everywhere, and new technology means that, through phones, not only can *people* be reached anywhere, but that the *internet* and its impossibly wide net of social network capabilities can also be reached at a moment's notice, anywhere any time. As Entzoni says, “the rise of cyberspace presents a qualitative jump in the scope of opportunities to work and trade because it knows neither clock nor calendar nor holidays...only while on the Internet can one safely assume that

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rendition of Self vs. Other created and defined different strata of this concept *within* a culture, each product specific, which enticed you to buy or avoid certain products. This was a “a false dichotomy propagated through the Media of Control, and above all through language” (Bey 1994, 4).



time, day, and date do not matter” (3). This preoccupation with technology and constant job access makes it difficult to even meet face to face, and the new capabilities of communication have certainly made it less necessary but much harder to do so. Today's technology pushes the final nail in the casket of an individual's identity; with the world and the history of human knowledge and information at our fingertips, we've greatly reduced the need to venture out into the world in pursuit of *experiential learning*. Not only does technology push him away from man, and focus life on lifeless objects and careers, it pushes him away from the world and nature, which – like it or not - he has major roots in, stretching back nearly 200,000 years to his first *modern* ancestor (Khanna). As a result, the dualistic man sees himself as “opposite to archaic man in that there is no longer any intimacy between him and his world”, and, as Larry Harvey says, “communities are ceasing to exist” (Bataille 74; Bonin).

### **Capitalism = Consumerism**

“The sacra of other culture, often including the most beautiful and striking items in museum holdings, have always fascinated the Western public. Perhaps this is because they make visible what Westerners have thrust from conscious awareness in order to effect their rational conquest of the material world” (Turner 13).

American Capitalism and all its industrial, economic, and societal progression, has ultimately produced a hopelessly jaded consumer culture. Through the development of capitalism, and the simultaneous development of technology, society has become increasingly mediated and alienated. Technology, through media, video, virtual reality, computers, and recorded music, mediate an experience by removing it from the realm of the enacted, the interactive, the *immediate* (Bey 1994). Dom Deschamps lists “property” as one of the “principal vices that gnaw away at the state of laws”, and the statement has never been so true as in

America. Vice of property- “since property is the cause of all tyrannies and all the crimes that are rampant in our social state that man is only bad because of the iniquitous social state in which he lives” (Baczko 82). Capitalism has created a “world of transactional relationships based on economic profit where culture is commodified and marketed and passively consumed” and this passivity, in turn “actually shuts out or replaces creativity and self-expression. This suggests that consumers are submissive, acquiescent, weak, and uncreative...”(Kang; Kazinets 93). It has served to isolate the individual and conversely, orient the individual only to consider his own wants/needs.

Capitalism creates behavior in individuals that is unhealthy, if not harmful, to both the individuals' Self *and* the culture as a whole. “The brutish pursuit of individual ends is harmful to the ends and peace of all, to the rhythm of their work and joys- and rebounds on the individual himself” (Mauss 76). In this world, where the object has reduced everything to its own level, can “things and their production/accumulation supplant knowledge of self-search for the intimate” (Bataille 98).

Marketing has been in charge of setting the values in American culture since the inception of industry, repeating continuously the same idea: “only desire creates values”. “And so the values of civilization are based on the denial of desire” (Bey 1994, 2).

### **Reaction and Freedom**

So it was that capitalism and advertising, and the creation of consumer culture seeped in for a subtle yet complete takeover of not only American culture, but the establishment of personal and societal values. It isolated the individual from society, from nature, and finally, from himself. The individual became the ends and means, the purpose of living; such a high value was

suddenly placed on personal autonomy. However, as was mentioned previously, and as Yi-Fu Tuan observes; this was not without effect (besides those of being distanced from society and nature, and becoming *objectified*):

“The obverse” of the new sense of personal autonomy is “isolation, loneliness, a sense of disengagement, a loss of natural vitality and of innocent pleasure in the givenness of the world, and a feeling of burden because reality has no meaning other than what a person chooses to impart to it” (Ehrenreich).

Sartre, too, notes on the condition of man in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that “Yes, a man of the 19<sup>th</sup> century must be, and is indeed morally bound to be, above all a characterless person, a man of character, and on the other hand, a man of action, is mostly a fellow with a very circumscribed imagination (Barrett 195). But it seems that the ability to purchase one's identity and culture of choice, this open call for one to add meaning to life at one's own behest is not enough, and still... something is missing.

Burning Man is a space, an anti-consumer culture, which was set up as an experiment to confront these problems head-on. Lee Gilmore observes that:

“Styles of Burning Man participation may vary, but it seems that their common point of agreement is that such a community can and should flourish without any agreement about explicit doctrine, in effect claiming that a heterotopian ideal of maximized elective affinities is the doctrine”...(10).

Machiavelli described it best: “the very fact of power implies distrust and hatred among the prince and his subjects” (Machiavelli, cited in Baczkowski 83). The fact is, “people having a desire for freedom, because they are losing their freedom. It's not like it was before”. The consumer culture isolates us, against our true will and desires, by providing only options which prove fruitless, and only serve to exacerbate the problem. The fears that develop, these

inexplicable feeling of loneliness in a bustling world full of people, are a direct result of the isolating, discomfiting quality of capitalism. Of this condition, Garry Warne, long time Burner, says, “[these] fears are a freeze on the future, a floodgate, that stops our imagination that stops our imaginings” (Bonin). Furthermore, and more importantly, “the divisions are shown to be unreal and unsound. Our pretensions are undermined, and we're immersed in a world that delights in depicting the failure of our sayings and ideologies and the mockery they suffer in the throes of real life” (Dark 50).

Culture, and the culture at Burning Man, combats this condition by constructing “rituals and other kinds of celebration to handle such crisis [midlife, lack of identity within consumer society and the population]- those typical of our epoch and social condition” (Barbara Meyerhoff, cited in Levi-Strauss 25). Burning Man is not the first to attempt certain aspects of its composition: smaller 'marketless communities' have developed before within the 'market culture', such as Harley Davidson collectors, Star Trek fans, civil war reenactors, etc, and “rock and roll reopened the possibility of *ecstasy*, or at least a joy beyond anything else the consumer culture could offer” (Kazinets 102; Ehrenreich 224). However, neither of them ever attempted the construction of a physical location before, which makes Burning Man thus far a unique counter-development to America's capitalist-consumer culture.

### **Consumerism and Burning Man**

Identity of place – including all of those institutions mentioned at the beginning of this chapter – is controlled by those who control it. However, no one controls Burning Man – there is no one setting a standard that must be accepted for healthy integration into its culture. The

entirety of the place, down to its construction, its location, and its art, all act as empty signifiers. They receive meaning from and respond to the constant influx of people and perspectives. The people change it, but in being a liminal space, it changes people in return, who then act out and reflect this change in themselves, which reflexively returns to affect and change and bend the meaning of the place some more (Jenkins). At Burning Man, the issue of cultural control of meaning and manipulation is a non-issue. Burning Man offers itself, then, in stride with the creation of new meaning of cultural and Self, of the “new man”, the new member of the grander (American) culture; it's not merely a matter of escaping from a culture too heavy on the control of value and meaning, “it is a question of implementing the indispensable means for “successfully bringing about the masterpiece of society”, the formation of the “new man” (Maximilien Robospierre, cited in Baczko 196).

“Why should more dignity attach to being complete and mediocre than in leading...one more intense, particularly if we can recapture in this way what we have lost, through our association with who possess what we lack and make us complete?” (Durkheim 261).

At Burning Man, the individual is thrust into a new setting, where he is free to, divorced from consumer culture, socialize and identify, judge and be judged as he pleases, with the values and measures inherent to man's social nature, at once reaffirming his place in community, his self-identity, his place in the environment and, most important, confirm his distinct humanness, different and dissimilar to that of the object.

*At Burning Man, people are free to be and create an identity of their choosing*, not one which was assigned to them by their pay check, their name, their job, or their possessions. Burning Man prohibits all forms of brands and branding, and encourages radical inclusion,

participation, and creativity. The idea is to build your own identity, not buy it (Jenkins). In it, the “participants are momentarily freed from the abstractions and ideological proscriptions that predominate in 20<sup>th</sup> century thought in order to forge a new meaning in their world” (Hockett 80). One experiences a freedom to *be*, in a way which may not be typically possible and is most likely discouraged or even prohibited at home in the default world.

*At Burning Man, people are given the chance to reestablish community and repossess the 'lost intimacy'.* Burning Man eliminates the rules and understood execution of life within society; it is, to use Mircea Eliade's phrasing, a *tabula rasa* of meaning (Levi-Strauss 128). “It attempts to remedy the alienation and interpersonal distance created by capitalist exchange”, and “the connections with others that are forged and deepened during the festival often have real and lasting impacts that transform participants daily lives well beyond the event itself” (Kang; Gilmore). Michael Mikel, long-time Burner veteran, says “it fulfills a need, need to connect” (Bonin); “an immediatist group, devoted to the overcoming of separation” (Bey 1994, 6). A symbolic display and practice of this, unique in society (outside of holidays) to the festival, is 'gifting'.

'Gifting' was inspired by Lewis Hyde's work, the *Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (Fortunati). In it, he says:

“a true gift never really belongs to the person who gives it. Think about a perfect gift and you've given. When you thought of giving it to someone, didn't you first feel that's her or that's him? Didn't it feel as if it was already part of the person you were giving it to, that it was just passing through you? Likewise, think about your own gifts, your talents. Any creative person knows that they don't really own their gifts. We say that these kinds of gifts are God-given, inherent in what we are. We really didn't do anything to deserve them. There isn't any deal involved. The true value of gifts is unconditional. They just flow out of us” (Fortunati 159).

The effect of this simple gesture is confounding; the gift, for all its simplicity, represents the triumph over the values of a culture based, in its most concentrated and severe form, on exploitation, extortion, and gain. “Values arise from this turbulence [difference between life and Burning Man], values which are based on abundance rather than scarcity, the gift rather than the commodity, and on the synergistic and mutual enhancement of individual and group;- values which are in every way the opposite of the morality and ethics of Civilization-” (Bey 1994, 3). Gifting is present in older cultures; “in ancient systems of morality of the most epicurean kind it is the good and pleasurable that is sought after, and not material utility” (Mauss 76). Burning Man utilizes gifting not only because it is the *absence* of consumerism/capitalism, but because it symbolizes a *defiance* and *refusal* to participate in such debasement. Through gifting, sincere interaction and sentiment is bestowed; “a tie occurring through things, is one between souls, because the thing itself possesses a soul; is of the soul. Hence it follows that to make a gift of something to someone is to make a present to some part of oneself” (Mauss, 12).

At Burning Man, technology does not separate, it binds. Erik Davis attests that “Burning Man's greatest aesthetic triumph...” is the “...the creation of an immersive and chaotically collaborative space of expanded cinema that marries a wide range of visual media, both fancy and crude, with the most powerfully archaic flicker tech of all- fire!” (29). At Burning Man, science finally brings knowledge and activity together, illuminating the world and the autonomy of things. “This implies...SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS”, says Bataille, “ the taking up of science and directing it towards intimacy” (97). This is the Cult of Flicker at the festival, and it is, as Hockett says, “cybergeneration's answer to Woodstock” (Davis 28; 65). Far from being a deterrent to the tech geeks and freaks, inspired by and thriving in a culture tight-rope walking the

precipice of technological over-saturation, the festival make itself the happy home of 'zippies', "the 90's version of hippies", a combination of "flower children plus computer geeks"(Huffstutter). The most notorious group of today's tech-savvy that can be spotted at the festival are the Google, Inc. workers, who head out in droves every year and are, in fact, encouraged by their workspace to attend. This is one example of Burning Man's effect on social environments, and therefore lives, in the 'default world' (although I have it on good authority that Microsoft is establishing itself as a Burner-friendly company).

Where capitalism destroys culture, Burning Man rebuilds. "Default, after all, refers to something that occurred through lack of action, and in many ways Burning Man is against exactly that: the passive acceptance of culture" (Kang). Burning Man "defies the beliefs that the social structure imposed by consumer culture are a necessary given and that these structures are absolute and unchanging" (Kang).

Burning Man provides a new slate, a *tabula rasa* for culture. However, as Hakim Bey astutely observes, "to shed all illusory rights and hesitations of history demands the economy of some legendary Stone Age- shamans, hunters, gatherers, going naked for a sign of painted as birds and poised in a wave of explicit presence, the clockness however" (1985, 4). And that is what Burning Man does. Its entire construction, physically and ideologically "makes a case for the critique of the isolating factors of consumptive culture" (Kang). By ridding the environment of those isolating factors (capitalism, media, technologies (for the most part), advertising, and consumerism, It reestablishes immediacy instead of time, identity instead of passive consumption, community instead of isolation, and humanity over singularity. Burning Man is a capitalist apocalypse, at once completely desolate of the teachings of that culture and an



awakening; “apocalyptic cracks the pavement of the status quo. It irritates and disrupts the feverishly defended norms of whatever culture it engages” (Dark 12). This is a new state of society, “the state of morals, the alternative society...” and this society is necessarily and intentionally “a social state without laws” (Baczko 89). As one former Burner is quoted as saying:

“[Burning Man was] an experience that utterly transformed my perception of the world and of what is possible when minds and resources are collectively directed toward the creation of culture. Everything at Burning Man seemed motivated by a deep desire to express ideas and meanings, and most importantly, to let others generate meaning for themselves in the process. The act of cultural creation became nothing more than an act of making sense of the world, and at Burning Man all was open to one's interpretation” (Gilmore 66).

Ultimately, this is Burning Man's full potential and counter-capitalist act; not to not participate in consumer society, or even to protest it, but to restore what it devotes much of its energy to divide: the relationship between man and the world. This, Baczko says, is “the key to the metaphysical and moral enigma”; “Nostalgia as secondary phenomenon is only a reaction to the real evils of the state of laws from which men suffer” (88). We long for a time before the laws, the mandates of all the various institutions culture has set into place. Boundaries abound, and at every turn our natural potentials and abilities are clipped, and instead replaced with an meaningless, lifeless *object*, that has been given some meaning that we accept which mollifies us, or some newfangled piece of technology that's been created to do for us something that *we can do better and more satisfactorily on our own*, and yet we're left waiting for the New Version, it's successor in the Throne of Diversion to appear...

“Publicly we'll continue our work in publishing, radio, printing, music, etc, but privately we will create *something else*, something to be shared freely but never consumed passively, something which can be discussed openly but never understood by the agents of alienation, something with no commercial potential yet valuable beyond price,

something occult yet woven completely into the fabric of our everyday lives!” (Bey 1985, 10).

This is Hakim Bey's plan, and occasionally we can achieve this. Occasionally, it can be done, in the immediate presence of oneself and others. Unfortunately, most of the time it can't be gotten away with; it won't be tolerated in the American culture. It's immediately perceived as 'radical', a riot, 'rebellious', 'anarchist', or some other term of immediate dismissal and misunderstanding. If we want to have it, we have to realize that we must leave the place of exploiters and critics. Hakim Bey understands this, when he says “the will to power is disappearance” (Bey 1994, 6). We've already made excellent progress; “if the will to power is disappearance”, then, as Bey says, “-meeting face to face is already the revolution”(1994, 21).

III  
Utopia, Festival,  
and the  
New Modern Mythos

# Review and Introduction

## Section II: Review

If *Section I* discussed the festival's sociocultural 'institutional' elements and how they affect/were affect by the group, *Section II* discussed how the festival effects and what the festival provides for the individual. It reviews how individual identity is formed, in relation to both society and maturation during childhood, and ultimately how these formations are influenced and affected by the current American culture we live in. As a brief but more detailed review to refresh the readers mind before delving into the next section, I'll mention each chapter individually and gloss over it's points of highlight.

In Chapter 8, 'Identity', I explained how an individual's identity forms. The term 'identity', like religious or spiritual, is also curiously vague and misleading. An individual is in truth comprised of many 'identities': inherent 'fixed' identities (from birth), social identities (from the mirroring and influence of culture), Self (the 'intimate' Self, which is reflexive of the other identities), and personality (the situation-appropriate manifestation of aspects of ones identities). The most important thing to take away from this chapter is that the individuals' identity (singular) is in fact an agglomerate of identities, many of which are largely dependent on culture. Each person is unique, but the social self cannot be disentangled from the intimate self, as their foundation is one in the same. Burning Man is a remarkable environment because it allows people to 'reset' their identities, by adapting to a new environment which is predicated on 'radical' individual expression and inclusion (which conversely, at Burning Man, results in acceptance), allowing the individual to be largely in control of their identity. This is aided through the use of

costumes and anonymity-granting playa-names.

In Chapter 9, I discuss the meaning of childhood, and why it is so greatly coveted in American society. I discuss it, similarly, as greatly influential on identity, including what aspects of it are influential to a person during this stage, such as Play and immediatism, and how they affect the person's eventual maturation. Rites of Passage, in conjunction with the concept of liminality, are introduced and explained as semi-official inductions into a culture and transitions from childhood to adulthood, how this is performed through a 'Journey-like' ritual structure, and what it means if a culture does not provide these crucial distinctions. Burning Man is relevant because it artificially induces a 'second childhood', a free space predicated on many of the same principles, like Play, immediatism, and the Journey, and how that provides people with a second chance to make this distinctive transition. The juxtaposition of the Burning Man experience to that of the 'default world', identifies and focuses a person's core values and provides a way of putting life in outside of the festival into new perspective. Therefore, leaving Burning Man can symbolically represent 'leaving childhood', and officiates the relationship between a mature adult with an understanding of the world and solidification of one's role (or lack thereof) in the greater American culture.

In Chapter 10, we discuss how the American culture not only affects individual identity, but also its comprehensive identity as a culture. I summarize the rise of capitalism, aided by and contributing to improvements in industry and technology, and how these developments slowly erode at and create a schism between the individual and the communal aspect of culture, eventually resulting in widespread feelings of isolation and discontinuity where there should be security and oneness. This is further exacerbated by the strategies of marketing and advertising and the eventual creation of a thoroughly 'consumer culture'. In light of this condition, and in

reaction to it, Burning Man enforces a strict practice of 'Decommodification', which allows culture to flourish. Community is rebuilt, encouraged and reinforced by the practice of 'Participation' and 'Radical Inclusion', and reflexively communal and personal identity is revived. The absence of consumerism and advertising also allows the individual to choose and structure their own lifestyles without the pressure or pre-established meanings of products. Because they are no longer 'competing' with or being judged in conjunction to 'things', the individual is 'decommodified' and is reintroduced to his inherent humanity and 'humanness'.

*Section I* clarifies what the festival is and why it is influential, *Section II* describes the condition of the individual and community in American culture, and in *Section III*, finally, I will attempt to combine these elements to answer the question asked initially at the start of my thesis. I mean to deduce ultimately, what *need* – that is missing in the mainstream culture of America – the festival was created to fulfill. I believe the answer is in the festival's structure as a *Festival/Celebration*, its function as a *Utopia*, and finally, its embodiment and creation of the emergence of a new and unique American cultural *Mythos*.

# Utopia

“Reality had mutated because they willed it thus.”  
(Doherty 49)

## **Introduction**

Burning Man, to the eyes of many an onlooker, and to the ears of many who've known people who have gone, can seem at first like a Utopia. In fact, as a “promiscuous carnival of souls, a metaphysical flea market, a demolition derby of reality constructs colliding in a parched void” (Davis 17), it hardly seems real at all, but the testimonies that one is regaled with hardly make it seem less than a mythical kingdom, a lawless flawless social utopia. Burning Man is a liminal space. This, and cogent efforts by its creators and the people responsible for its smooth execution, turn it into “a pocket universe where radically different rules temporarily apply”, a seamless transition, from real world to highway, from highway to desert, from desert to the New City (Davis 17). Does this fact alone make Burning Man a Utopia? What utopic elements are involved, and what does this mean for the American people? In short, the question that's on everyone's mind: Is Burning Man Utopia? This is a question of much imperative because, as Bronislaw Baczko says, “the value and importance of a utopia in the present would depend on its 'truth"- that is, ability to predict the future” (3).

## **Utopia**

To start the discussion on Utopia, let's take a look at its beginnings. Utopias were a 'hot' social topic in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and utopic discourse came into the rhetoric during the era of

revolutionary urban communes began in Europe (Bey 1985, 124). This was a time of much civil uprising and upset in Europe, and so the thoughts of political and social leaders of the time were busy with the construction of an ideal society and policy, the New City. It was thought that society would transgress a certain progression through basic stages of social evolution, which was thought at the time to be thus:

savage state → state of disunity → state of extreme disunity → state of unity without disunity  
(Baczko 20).

The “savage state” was society without Order, the “state of disunity” was the unsatisfactory rule, the “state of extreme disunity” was the intolerable rule, and the “state of unity without disunity” was the renewed or newly created Order. This seems to infer that European thinkers at the time thought the unstated element that moved the 'state of extreme disunity' into the new 'state of unity without disunity' would be a revolt, a rebellion, a revolution of some kind. Clearly, Utopia was not achieved by either the French *or* the American peoples after they staged their revolutions, but they had managed to create a successful theoretical social discourse. Utopia gave shape to society's dreams and came to be associated with the “Land of Perfection”. Utopia was the “aim at a new life in the name of value that transcend existing reality and that alone are judged capable of regenerating individual and collective life” (Baczko 15).

Unfortunately, this meant that society has to be in a rather unsatisfactory state beforehand (or “state of disunity”), as utopic discourse, while outlining the ideal society, “tend[ed] toward radical criticism of existing society” and the belief that “laws and government, education and religion, are all agents to perpetuate prohibitions and constraints on natural needs and aspirations,



property and prohibition”(Baczko 15). Utopias, therefore, are a kind of social daydream, a communal coping mechanism; “Utopias are responses given to the anxieties, to the unsatisfied hopes and dreams of the century” (Baczko 20). Like a dream, utopias are not always entirely out of the realm of possibilities, and like a dream, as Alphonse de Lamartine says, “utopias are often only premature truths”(Baczko 3). First and foremost for any utopian-musings to occur,

“[a state of mind must be] incongruous with the state of reality within which it occurs...Only those orientations transcending reality will be referred to...as utopian which, when they pass over their conduct, tend to shatter, either partially or wholly, the order of things prevailing at the time... [and] have a transforming effect upon the existing historical social order”(Fortunati 152).

The first step to realizing utopia in a physical sense is, since it is simply an idea, create circulation; utopia is a *collective* idea, and “participation is a central principle” (Kang):

“Utopia is not only imagined and thought; it is made intelligible and communicable in a discourse by which the merging of the idea-images and their integration into a language is accomplished” (Baczko 17).

However, when the Utopia does take shape, it may or may not be feasible. No Utopias have ever yet existed in a semi-permanent manner, and maybe there is good reason to this. Sir Thomas More says:

“the utopian places himself in the dimension of the impossible, that the utopian process doesn't resign itself to looking at the present social reality and its projection on the future as the only ones possible; the utopian shifts the very limits of what is acceptable as possible or even as imaginable” (Baczko 152).

Whether or not Utopias are possible has to do with the particular set of characteristics they're endowed with. For instance, “most utopian environment involve crescent or radial community and geographic isolation” (Fortunati 159). This seems difficult, and yet a fairly simple characteristic to attain. Much of the landscape and shaping of the environment is

symbolic, consequently, to keep the meaning of the place visible and intact. The utopia, this New City, must then establish a modicum of comfort and happiness for its citizens; “it is up to a Utopian city to take hold of the idea of collective happiness and to give an image to public felicity” (Baczko 15). To do so, the utopia must devise some sort of new system of laws and judgments which are complementary with its imagined state of life, or if it cannot devise one that is suitable or is disparate enough from the one being avoided in the first place, it must give them up altogether. Utopias are more often associated with the latter, which is the state of morals (Baczko 89).

The Utopia is completely extracted from the supra-society, politically and geographically removed. This removal allows it to function better as “a setting and specific mode of the exercise of the social imagination”; it has therefore become a liminal space, outside of the ordinary where experimentation and exploration can, morally, be condoned. Even as a thought experiment, this establishment of utopia as an experimental space is paramount, because utopia is also a space where such unchecked imagination “leads to the exploration of social otherness” (Baczko 314). In fact, Baczko says, “there is no utopia without a synthetic and disruptive representation of social otherness” (14). A chief reason for this, argues Levi-Strauss, is that even in the imagination “a society's iconography must be comprehended in terms of the symbolic and the social modes of neighboring human cultures” (which correlates back to reflexive social identity discussed in Ch 7) (Turner 83). . To summarize it is utopia's structure as a liminal space that allows it to generate new meanings, and the foundation for a New City.

### **Types of Utopia**

I've mentioned at least one type of Utopia already, explained previously for its functions

as a liminal space. Since a utopia also functions on the principles of liminal space, these locations can, at times, coincide, or be one in the same. Hakim Bey's T.A.Z is one of these 'places' (Gilmore). The T.A.Z., a lawless, liminal place, is unique in its particularly radical practices, including: chaos, poetic terrorism, amour fou, wild children, paganism, pyrotechnics, and art sabotage, to name a few...(Bey 1985, 1994) Michel Foucault's also coins the term 'heterotopia', which he uses to describe places of liminality and consisting of 'otherness' (Kazinets). The T.A.Z could conceivably be seen as a heterotopia of sorts.

Different types of utopias, or utopic discourse, also became associated with their names of parentage. Karl Mannheim became associated with utopic society, or the ideology of utopia; Thomas Moore was the originator in the discourse, creating the utopic space; and Joseph Beuys elaborated on the aspects of the utopian individual. Each of their thoughts lent themselves to the overall view and understanding of utopias in society. Initially, there were two basic views of the utopic society. The first was the imaginary voyage, in which, as if in a novel, a new land is discovered, idyllic and isolated, with new morals, culture, religion, etc., or similarly, of "a group transplanted to an isolated island, led by a quasi-legislation, sets up a new life, in total rupture with what it had known" (Baczko 90). "It is an appeal to set a up a social experiment that would prove- even to the most incredulous- the advantages of the state of morals"(Baczko 89). The second is the proposal for ideal legislation, in which the government cooperates by creating new policies that satisfy the wants and ameliorate the woes of everyday life. In both of these, the clear mission of the utopia is to "regenerate social life"(Baczko 17).

However, the discourse eventually became progressively more and more elaborate. Soon there were 4 new types of utopia, these based on social class. The first was the "orgiastic

chiliasm<sup>31</sup> of the anabaptists<sup>32</sup>. This utopic state of social class was based upon “absolute presentness”, intense emotionality, and sensual experience (sensuality) (Fortunati 152). The second state was the “liberal humanitarian ideal”, in which a “positive acceptance of culture and the giving of an ethical tone to human affairs” was encouraged, guided by ideas and ideals, with the focus on the future, on 'becoming' and gradual improvement (155). The third was based upon conservative ideas, lacking all/any “reflections”, illuminating “the historical process which come from a progressive impulse” (157). The fourth was a socialist communist utopia, based on the belief that freedom and equality can appear only in the remote future, with the inevitable breakdown of capitalist culture.

There came still, later, another idea of utopia, mentioned briefly before, Michel Foucault's “heterotopia”, introduced by his work entitled '*Of Other Space*'. He defined this space in not the most easily comprehended way, as “a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and invested”, and “...a willful jumbling of our ordered and fragmented world” (Fortunati 159). A more simple definition defined them as “a strategy of struggle”, appearing as “points of insubordination”, who confront the powers that be and “escape”. They “open a void, a moment of silence, a question without an answer, provoke a breach without reconciliation where the world is forced to question itself”. He concludes that such a place would become a space divided over the contestation of “concrete freedom” and the likelihood of “ possible transformation” (Pencak 147).

Utopia accrued a great many manifestations, but they all boiled down to the same thing:

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<sup>31</sup> “The doctrine of Christ's expected return to reign on earth for 1000years; millennialism. (Dictionary.com, “Chiliasm”).

<sup>32</sup> A Protestant sect that baptized believers only and “advocated social and economic reforms as well as the complete separation of church and state” (Dictionary.com, “Anabaptist”).

“[these] ...accumulated descriptions of the everyday only become functional insofar as they put into more concrete form the imagined overall society, particularly the principles that command it. At most, each detail is only a symbol, while all the details are only signs that signify a sole idea, the representation of the New City” (Baczko 16).

Baczko says:

“However it may be carried out, the “happy revolution” must completely annihilate anything the state of laws produced throughout human history. The rupture can only be total and at all levels: knowledge and morality, language and property, and the relationships between the sexes and between men and nature” (90).

Utopia is based on 'true system' (the system of morals), not the 'savage state' (social state), it is the “realization of the perfect equality and liberty of which men up to that point had not even had an idea”; “all goods will be held in common and this collectivism will be, so to speak, naturalistic”; “it is his fundamental unity or things that man finds again and realizes though the state of morals” (Baczko 99).

To look again at the TAZ, this time with a more informed idea of utopia, TAZ may certainly be a heterotopia, but it is not a true utopia. Hakim Bey says:

“[the book is] not touting the TAZ as an exclusive end in itself, replacing all other forms of organization tactics, and goals. We recommend it because it can provide the quality of enhancement associated with the uprising without necessarily leading to violence and martyrdom. The TAZ is like an uprising which does not engage directly with the State, a guerrilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere/elsewhen, before the State can crush it” (1985, 101).

and

“The TAZ is somewhere. It lies at the intersection of many forces, like some pagan power-spot at the junction of mysterious ley-lines, visible to the adept in seemingly unrelated bits of terrain, landscape, flows of air, water, animals” (1985, 111).

Because the TAZ does not take itself out of the culture which it denies, and does not even

necessarily have one location, but exists as satellites, the TAZ cannot qualify as a bona-fide typical utopia according to the discourse. *However*, the TAZ still shapes up well along the lines of a heterotopia: “[the]TAZ involves a kind of offerality, a growth from tameness to wilderness, a “return” which is also a step forward” (1985, 134).

Ultimately, Utopias present themselves as “the key to the metaphysical and moral enigma”, curing man of his nostalgia for nature, which is only “a secondary phenomenon is only a reaction to the real evils of the state of laws from which men suffer”. There exists within much of mankind the belief that “man is good by nature and only depraved by his social state” (Baczko 88). Our solution, then if the social state cannot be fixed, is to simply create a new one in which to exist:

“If our society does not provide them for us, why cannot we provide them for ourselves. For there is clearly a profound therapeutic value in the recognition and ritualization of recurrent problems involved in the maintenance and repair of human relationships and in assigning meaning to what subjectively may seem to be merely pain and loss” (Turner, 26).

Symbolism becomes a central part of the New City, engendering increased collectivity and community, collective effervescence, and complete and total cooperation and participation by the group.

### **Black Rock City the New City?**

To return to our initial question: Is Burning Man a Utopia? It seems to draw up some, or maybe more than some, very convincing parallels, and by Lee Harvey's own testimony, it seems in fact hard to ignore:

“dedicated to discovering those optimal forms of community which will produce human culture in the conditions of our post-modern mass society within a desert wilderness we

build a city, a model world composed of people who attend our event from all over the globe...living as we do, without sustaining traditions in time and ungrounded in a shared experience of place, it is yet possible to transcend these deficiencies” (Kazinets 89).

Firstly, it was begun by a few influential leaders, who were by their own accounts, “inspired by late 60's- eccentric, gold rush towns of San Francisco” and the idea of “people com[ing] to be what the imagined they could be” (Bonin). There's the similarity of location and form: Burning Man is isolated 11 miles out into the Black Rock Desert, with a semi-circular radial layout, and let's not forget the overlap between the New *City* and Black Rock *City*. Burning Man is set up as a liminal space with no rules or laws, based only on inherent social 'moral' law, as a social experiment to explore the Other, just as in a utopia. Among its key principles, integral also to utopic structure and maintenance, is total participation. The evidence is piled high in favor of Burning Man as the New City, but before any decisions are made, let us see the defense.

Dom Deschamps proposed the idea of a 'reality utopia'. The Reality Utopia had the following qualities:

- cities disappear** to rural village communities
- live communally **under “long roofs”**
- family divisions
- live in most favorable climactic conditions**
- everything held in common, responsibilities, resources, and possessions
- minimum elements of exchange
- non monogamous relationships
- children raise themselves, social education

**-the arts and sciences will become useless (because they are the search for 'truth',  
which will have already been already attained)**

**-no more individuality**

(Baczko 93)

Dom Deschamps, describing the Utopic Motif of the 'Imaginary Voyage', described it as one in which “a man, imbued with the true principles recruits 10,000 men and women to cross the seas and come with him to found a new colony in an uninhabited land...” (Baczko 90) Indeed, Larry Harvey and Jerry James, imbued with true aspirations for an “ a utopian project that seeks to rebuild community” (Kazinets 89), recruited 50,000 men and women to cross the desert and come with them to found Black Rock City in an uninhabited portion of the Black Rock desert, and lo, was this society hailed from a father-society, based on “experiences beyond the pale of mainstream society through subversion, pranks, art, fringe explorations and meaningless madness”, but Burning Man was still not a utopia (Gilmore 6). It got close- as in many of the elements and institutions and mechanisms of culture we have discussed up to this point, it made a great many *borrowings*, had a great many similar *aspects*, but ultimately it cannot be labeled as one.

Burning Man very well may have been a Utopia, were it not for a few imperative factors, first of which include the glaring opposition of nearly half of the criteria of Deschamps' 'Reality Utopia'. Secondly, its existence even as a heterotopia implies too much permanence- the festival is simply too fleeting. Finally, Lee Harvey makes a critical distinction, and the deal-breaker argument:

“But now the idea is that we want people inspired by what happens at Burning Man to go home, not to create a refuge from the world... see, we make a model of the world, a model of civilization, temporary but striking. We want them to go home and reform their towns and cities and apply any lessons they learned to where they really live instead of seeing it as a chance to escape the world” (Larry Harvey, cited in Doherty 268).



Burning Man was never meant as a utopia, because – although it did become the alternate 'home' for many of its participants, and it does qualify as a heterotopia – people were always meant to return. In existence by itself, in permanence, the festival means *nothing*. For it to ultimately have value, the experience *must* be juxtaposed with the imminent reentry in the real world outside itself.

# Festival and Celebration

“We're transported into a carnival realm, an outlandish exaggeration of our own world, not unlike a fairy tale but far too familiar and reminiscent of our everyday life to be dismissed as complete fantasy.”  
(Dark 45)

## **Introduction**

“Just as the capacity to dream and fantasize, though not immoderately, is considered by psychologists indispensable for mental health, so likewise exposure to those objectified dreams and fantasies which are thrown up by celebratory enthusiasm, may be necessary for social health” (Turner 1989, 14).

Victor Turner, in this passage, suggests that imagination and creativity are necessary not only to healthy psychological standing, but also to a healthy social self. In America, the infectious omnipresence of media and advertising and its subsequent effect on the American culture sets a standard of individuality being only as diverse as the product is, mass-produced and manufactured. The ability to buy all our needs in a multiverse of infinite choice and preference strip of us our creativity and present to us a false sense of confidence and individuality. By presenting us with the ability to choose 'what best suits us' from options A-Z, we forget that we may be best suited by an option *outside the alphabet* (to continue the metaphor). Not only do we become distracted from ourselves then, but we don't even consider that what we're looking for may be found through other people. If this is the case, that we require “the capacity to dream and fantasize”, and the “objectified dreams and fantasies which are thrown up by celebratory enthusiasm”, then the thing to satisfy this dream within capitalism are the happy, productive friends and cultures in commercials. And if this is the case, than people must take, find, or in this

case create, another route. In the case of Burning Man, people have chosen celebration.

“When a social group, whether it be a family, clan, village, nation, congregation, or church, celebrates a particular event or occasion... it also “celebrates itself”. In other words, it attempts to manifest, in symbolic form, what it conceives to be its essential life, at once the distillation and typification of its corporate experience” (Turner 1989, 16).

By choosing to collect in the desert in celebrate, Americans have chosen one of the oldest forms of positive identity reinforcement. Americans are reclaiming their right to be individual and think and create outside the frames of capitalism. The life in the desert is not an ascetic trial, but a “happy revolution”, a reclamation of identity through revelry with abandon. “The festival,” Georges Bataille says, “is the fusion of human life- it is the crucible where distinctions melt in the intense heat of intimate life” (54). Lee Harvey and Jerry James, 21 years ago on a beach, did not burn a wooden man intending for it to become a festival, to become the primary focus and major holiday of a thriving subculture, just as the people who came back year after year could not have understood the meaning of the momentum they were creating, but rest assured: even if it was a subconscious decision, Burning Man's solidification as a *festival* and as a *celebration* was not coincidental. It may seem that way, since it started out as a small get-together, a miniature celebration on a beach, but that fact is crucial- if their needs would have been otherwise, so likely would have been the activity. The development of a festival, the act of celebration in this case, gives us our first clue into the direct insight of a cultural need.

### **The Meaning of Festival/Celebration**

Celebration in communities is the uplifting of the communal spirit in a gathering based on the collective uprise of energy, positive emotions, and feelings of communal identification.

Amitai Entzioni says, “community festivals are brief but recurring intense moments in the life of

a town or city when citizens come together to celebrate some facet of their community” (132).

The same can be said for culture, that cultural festivals are brief but recurring intense moments in the life of a town or city when citizens come together to celebrate some facet of their culture.

There are many types of festivals, and each one provides a different social purpose and are created and called into existence in time of need. Most often, the purpose for a festival, of whatever kind, is to revivify the community spirits or reinforce a communal moral column.

Festivals, in short and similar to rituals, are called upon when there is a problem or insufficiency of one or another social necessity. Festivals and celebrations help inspire community camaraderie and mutual reinforcement. As such, it is usually a prime location, along with ritual, for collective effervescence. Ritual and festivals, in fact, have a lot in common, but there are important distinctions to note. Festivals and rituals both have their roots in religion, but where ritual is the conducted gathering and liminal space of *invocation* by the *social* community of a culture, the *festival* is the conducted gathering and liminal space of *Celebration* for the *civic* community; “through civic festivals communities celebrate, sanctify and promote important local sociopolitical structures” (Enztoni 132). Both utilize symbols and symbolically charged gestures and objects, but while ritual creates community through the sustaining of a common belief, as Baczkó says, “the festival is a rite of unanimity and fraternity which results in souls merging together in a common enthusiasm” (186).

The festival, as a common cultural device, is another manifestation of the liminal space. We've seen the liminal space in various forms so far, each of which has been primarily to aid in the transformation or transition of an individual, even if it was ultimately for the sake or benefit of the community. The festival, however, “is considered only the expression of the peoples will to have what is and what ought to be coincide, the real and the possible, the individual and the

social” (Baczko 190). The festival becomes a place of liminality and change not just for the individual, but *for the community as a whole*”. The entire community is involved in its undertaking, and in the transition, for the purpose of instilling and inspiring a cohesive and collective community-wide change. “It requires, as well, the participants assent to its message and spectacle”, which is to say, the community must have the cooperation and support of each of the individuals that make it (Baczko 199).

Part of this “message and spectacle”, and what removes 'festival' from the realm of the real world and into the liminal space, is its immediacy. Lucy Kang explored this subject in depth in her own thesis on the Burning Man festival in 2008 and laid much of the groundwork for this argument. The festival, speaking specifically of Burning Man, involves three realms of time: “festive/individually experience time, historical time, and natural/cosmic time.” In my own research I've found this to be true, not only of Burning Man but of festivals in general. The festival's presence in liminality, and in immediacy, also gives it an 'inside' perspective, from which the participants can view the world in its normal state. Within the liminal space, normal rules don't apply, and this is true of time as well; festival time creates illusions with time, simultaneously drawing it out and shortening it. Festival time is drawn out because one is used to individual function, and has drawn one's own activities and daily patterns as informal measure of time. At the festival, the constant interaction and presence with others confuse this measure, which can make it seem drastically longer or shorter. The festival also influences historical time. A good example of this is festivals of remembrance, in which moments of the cultures history are revered or recanted, recited or reenacted, bringing to present mind and life the actions of the past; it “links us to both past and present...helps us affirm dimensions of time we might ordinarily fear, ignore, or deny”. Finally, the festival presents and exists in a natural/cosmic time. This realm

involves the natural world, the literal environment of the festival, and man's place in it. The festival can either embrace an environment or completely disguise it, in decorations or symbolic objects. The interaction the festival takes with its environment is very reflective of the culture and the culture in time, as these practices tend to change over time.

A festival is also similar to rituals, like Rites of Passage, in that it involves a particular mood, and element of play and immediacy, where the “gap between the real and imaginary is reduced” (Baczko 314). The carnival, and the *carnavalesque*, elaborated by Bakhtin, is a type of festival that is especially representative of these two facets. The carnival is a festival that combines the celebratory, free-and-easy atmosphere of the festival with the ethereal, 'Other'-worldly mood of the carnivalesque (Kang). The carnival in particular is resemblant of a Rite of Passage, and childhood, because it combines the elements of play and immediacy to become something more like a performance; a hybrid of ritual and celebration, performance and festival. “Performance” infers the depiction of something, already a mimicry of its real life counterpart, and this depiction is given accordingly with the critiques and opinions of the depicter. Thus, a festival in this guise as a performance, and with the help of the liminal space, can be the vision of an ideal culture, as per the telling of its participants, or it can be the mockery and derision of the parts of the culture/community that it wants changes. When a festival acts in this way, involving performances and “rituals of inversion”, it functions as a safety valve for discontent. Both depictions of festivals and the performances of the participants within, whether utopic or inverted serve as a “fundamental challenge to the status quo” (Ehrenreich 102).

However, the festival must take place in a communal space, and can never get far from home. “Thus”, Edward Hoffman says, “the letting loose of the festival is finally, if not fettered, then at least confined to the limits of a reality of which it is the negation” (54). Festivals still find

themselves chained to that which they are ultimately trying to escape, trying to change. Although the effects of festivals may be permanent, and the changes/moods exhibited have lasting effect, the festival itself, housed in the 'default world', must be only fleeting. Turner himself admits, that even “the thrills of *communitas* had to be “liminal”, or marginal; otherwise social breakdown might ensue, “speedily followed by despotism” (Ehrenreich 11).

### **Festival Timespan- Changes from the Ancient to the Present**

The act of Celebrating and the development of Festivals are two elements of culture that stretch back nearly as far as we can trace into recorded history, and may even span into unrecorded time<sup>33</sup>. As far as we know, festivals and celebrations developed hand-in-hand with the development of humans into banded, social groups. Festivals and celebrations are as coterminous with culture as language and religions, and just as characteristic. Cultures developed specific ways of celebrating, and these were each indicative of the internal sociocultural orientation, and were indicative of the mood and, reflexively, the social purpose of the festival. There were two particular festive archetypes in particular, each devised to meet and address a certain necessity at the time. They were festivals of hope, and festival of remembrance. Festivals of hope were held to encourage hard work and a better tomorrow or successful completion of something. Festivals of remembrance were held in appreciation of the current situation, and to think of and be grateful to community elders. Festivals of remembrance reinforce investment to and bonds with the community, by bringing to the forefront of the common mind a shared sense of history and acknowledgment of the members that came before you, and whose lineage you were a part of. Festivals of remembrance and festivals of hope both serve to reinvest and reinvigorate

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<sup>33</sup> The time before writing was developed.

community members, inspiring them to take greater part in or care of the community around them.

Festivals span far, far back into the history of human time, and were established with the development of societies, and especially religion. Many of the earliest festivals are centered on worship. Some of the best and most well-known examples are the Greek festivals. Held in the honor of one or another of the Gods in the pantheon, the Greek people would host humongous, city-wide celebrations. These too, had assigned days and months, and took many weeks of preparation. However, these were festivals of high energy, euphoria, and revelry. Greek archaeological remains, such as amphorae and tomb-engravings, suggest that contests, dancing, and singing, performance, drinking, and possibly even psychoactive drugs were taken. Similar festivals were held by the Mesoamerican cultures as well, involving a near identical structure and schedule of events. Both types of celebrations and festivals provided either reinforcement of cultural attitudes, beliefs, and energies, or possible solutions to problems. Festivals of similar manner happened in parallel all over the world, and they all had one very common, very grave potential: these festivals provided “direct insights into matters of life and death” (Davis 16). This pattern was not distinct only to pan- or polytheism, but applied also to, and was apparent, in monotheistic religious festivals as well. Festivals, although matters of gaiety and celebration, had grave and portentous potential, and carried hefty cultural significance.

However, festivals are no longer what they were then, and in America there is a noticeable dirge of festivals, compared to what is present in the history books. Something happened, and feelings toward the festival, religious or not, began to change. As Barbara Ehrenreich says, for the opposition “it can be argued- as the enemies of festivity have done for centuries- that festivities and ecstatic rituals are incompatible with civilization, at least in its modern form”



(249). Suppression of traditional festivals began in Europe, occurring largely in the 16th-19<sup>th</sup> centuries (97). This started with the transition to monotheism. The gaiety and revelry that was apparent in the old festivals became associated with pagan inclinations. Historian Jean Delumeau asserts that “people danced in both churches and cemeteries in the Middle Ages, especially on holidays such as the Feast of Fools, Day of the Innocents, and so on... until the Council of Basel...ruled against this practice” (Ehrenreich 79). They began disassembling the festival, element by element, eliminating singing, dancing, and any form of pleasure. Pleasure inspired desire, and desire inspired greed, lust, pride, and all manner of sinful, lascivious and licentious behavior. Pleasure became the devil's game, and was strictly forbidden from any festivities, especially those having to do with the church. Wave after wave of regression took place, or, as the instigators saw it, “reform” (Ehrenreich98). Soon, Eventually, Ehrenreich says,

“The only thing Christian encounter resembling festivity, “Vanity Fair”, turns out to be a death trap for the virtuous, the place where Christian's high-minded companion, Faithful, is seized, tortured, and finally burned to death by the wanton fairgoers. Carnival, in other words, is the portal to hell, just as pleasure in any form – sexual, gustatory, convivial – is the devil's snare” (145).

Festival culture in religion, had been entirely stripped of its exuberance. It still served as a mechanism for communal bonding, but it's structure and top-down over-seeing by the Church and the State (who were still in cahoots), nullified the necessary excitements necessary for positive reinforcement of culture. This also made the festivals devoid, in turn, of any properties of mockery, criticism, inversions, or release of tensions, good or bad. As Ehrenreich says,

“Once, people could rely on official church services as occasions for dancing and perhaps drinking and other forms of carrying on. As the services became more disciplined and orderly, people had to create their own festive occasions outside of church property and official times of worship”(65).

However, with the industrialization, the predicament of festivals in the Western world only got worse. “Traditional religious festivals are criticized. They are so numerous, they only incite the populace idleness; so full of prejudice, they impress the crowds with their pomp and obscure symbolism” (Baczko 183). In a society-confounding move to produce a more productive workforce, any celebration or festival events were confined to being held on Sundays. Then, in an equally baffling mandate, celebrations and festivals were *banned* from Sundays, to preserve and honor the Sabbath. Suddenly, there were no festivals (except for holidays) for the working man to divert his tensions and attentions to. As Ehrenreich says, “Peasants created festivities as an escape from work; the Puritan embraced work as an escape from terror<sup>34</sup>” (145). Max Weber, E.P. Thompson, Christopher Hill also contribute their thoughts on the matter, saying:

“The repression of festivities was, in a sense, a by-product of the emergence of capitalism” “The middle classes had to learn to calculate, save, and ‘defer gratification’; the lower classes had to be transformed into a disciplined, factory-ready working class—meaning far fewer holidays and the new necessity of showing up for work sober and on-time, six days a week. The new industrialism required ceaseless labor, all year round” (Ehrenreich 100).

The newly-instituted pace of the industrial revolution produced higher levels of productivity, it's true, and with no celebration or festivals to distract the working man from his taste, progress was made by leaps and bounds. However, the increase in economic and technological 'progress' was accompanied by equal increase in the *anomie* and isolation of the common man (Durkheim, cited in Ehrenreich 140). “At the level of “deep, underlying psychological change”, both depression and the destruction of festivities could be described as seemingly inevitable consequences of the broad process known as modernization” (Ehrenreich 147). The industrial revolution, in fact, paved the way for the only remaining festivity: Festivals

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<sup>34</sup> The “terror” for the Puritans were the 'demonic' elements, such as drinking and singing, and especially dancing.

of the Revolution, and festivals of Inversion.

### **Revolutionary Festivals of France and Early America**

French and America are both famous for their revolutions, but a little known fact is that these revolutions were not just spontaneously waged by a disgruntled people: they had, each of them, in fact been being rehearsed for several years prior to the actual event. Riots and protests are minor manifestations of such rehearsals, but even more important were festivals of inversion, and eventually festivals of the revolution. Le Roy Ladurie says, “popular revolts frequently took on the air of “great social saturnalia”, whose dominant theme was social otherness imagined as an inversion of the social world, as a permutation, among rich and poor, of ranks, statuses, spouses” (Baczko 178). The Feast of Fools is most common among these, and will serve us as a prototype. The Feast of Fools was a festival of derision and mockery of the court and the clergy. Members from the crowd were chosen as mock-archbishop, bishop, and lord among them, the Lord of Misrule. Who would then go on to treat the crowd in a pompous on unjust manner, and the crowd, unlike normal, was allowed to regale him with insults, sticks, rotten vegetables as was characteristic of the Medieval period, and so on...(Ehrenreich 78). Nearer the revolution in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, French rural uprisings were often accompanied by costumes and festive behavior. It was established, by this time and beyond a doubt, that mockery and inversion now signified serious political intent (Ehrenreich 110). In the autumn of 1789, France began to experience a budding of “the spontaneous generation of festivals” until July 17, 1789 , the Fete de la Federation, France's first true revolutionary festival took place (Baczko). Through festival union, the people came together in the name of their community, and as a mass, they could be quite powerful.

The Festival of the Revolution, as a concept and a practice, was the embodiment of the ideal image of the New City. Says Baczkó, “the festival is at once reality and anticipation- what has been momentarily lived in it is the harbinger of a trans-temporal state, of a revolution that will definitely take place in heads and hearts, as it has taken phase in conditions and in the government” (190). After all, the Revolution is a communal experience to begin with. The Revolution involves high passions and energies, devotions and sentiments, just as the festival does. The Revolution in itself is somewhat analogous of a Festival. Baczkó says, about the revolution:

“[It is an...] experience that is necessarily collective- one does not enter into the revolution all alone: one live it with some and against others, in the human warmth of a crowd in the process of discovering itself as a collective reality, in an experience rich in intense emotion, which generates dreams and hopes that marks the scope of collective expectations” (190).

The Revolution, in terms of the collective viral spread of passions, a euphoric wave of release inspired by the mentality of the crowd, can even be viewed as a type of “collective effervescence”. Hakim Bey says, “risk itself makes up part of the direct experience of pleasure, a fact noted in all insurrectionary moments – all moments of waking up- intense adventurous enjoyments...[it is] the festal aspect of the Uprising, the insurrectionary nature of the Festival” (1994, 5).

America's own festival traditions, in fact, begin their roots here, in the Revolutionary Festival. There were all sorts of demonstrations and celebrations, meant to urge and encourage Americans to pursue their own political autonomy and cultural identity. These early American festivals were “entered into freely and with vigor, these activities tested the limits of civic authority, even when sponsored by the government or by local elites” (Roger D Abrahams, cited

in Pencak 21). These festivals often resulted in minor amounts of chaos, as parades of people would roam from house to house of unsatisfactory public officials; at times they would hurl stones at the house, sometimes they would hang, tar and feather, or burn an effigy outside, or sometimes they would break in and wreak general havoc on the houses innards. Costumes were a large part of the display, partially to mock and partially to disguise. One of the most famous examples of American revolutionary celebration/festivity was the Boston Tea Party, in which the protestors, dressed as Indians, in the height of crowd-induced vigor, overturned 342 crates of tea into the Boston Harbor. Remnants of inversive celebration can still be seen in California's Doo-Dah parades, which began as the inversion of the more formal civic pageants (Pencak 28).

The presence of celebrations and festivals of revolution help support the assertion that festivals and celebrations of all types, while often exuberant, unruly, and intoxicated, are mechanisms of inspiring and producing widespread cultural change and reinforcing community and collective identity.

### **Folk Festivals/Festivals to Revivify Traditions**

Folk festivals are currently one of the most common types of festival in America today. Many folk festivals began with the influx of immigrants to the United States in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Largely, the smaller, more regional or community based festivals were “meant to acquaint new Americans together, and to their new nation” (Cohen 15). They were also based on group and individual identification and similarity though- many new immigrants weren't necessarily to throw their old culture out of the window. Folk festivals were created, according to Indiana University folklorist Stith Thompson, to “serve the function of continually bringing the revival back into 1<sup>st</sup> hand contact with the genuine surviving tradition” (Cohen 32). Many of

these early festivals revolved around music, incorporating the local or regional foods of the native culture; “ethnic music festivals were probably popular throughout the country, as immigrant communities attempted to preserve a particular culture that was threatened by outside forces” (Cohen 1). Folk festivals are still quite common, although not as common as before.

### **Festival of Utopia**

There currently are few festivals in the world today that are similar to Burning Man, in either atmosphere or scale. Carnival is one of these. As Goethe said, “carnival” is a festival that really is not given to the people, but one the people give themselves” (Ehrenreich 95). This reformative, self-reflexive element of the carnival, as discussed before, gives it a similarity of liminality to Rites of Passage. Inside the United States, there are certainly not a lot to compare it to. There are some of similar lengths, but none even compare to having a similar internal structure (or lack thereof), and there does not exist, in any other festival, the spontaneous ingress of the population of a small city. Within America, the view is widely held that “[those regarding] festive tradition have tended to see it as an archaic remnant, unsuited to survive...as society becomes more complex and differentiated within classes and professions” (Alfred Metraux, cited in Ehrenreich 249). Maybe what America is looking for is a redefinition of the festival, a festival of *utopia*.

Utopia is associated with festivals in a way that's similar to collective effervescence—sometimes it *can* be present, when the participants find the experience of the festivals to be *utopic* of ideal in some way. This is utopia of the festival. However, there is another development regarding festivals and utopia: the festivals of Utopia. These two parts are part of a theoretical framework by Bronislaw Baczko. The festival of Utopia is a hybrid between the festival and the

utopia. The Festival of utopia seeks to create a new city and legislation. Baczko himself says:

“In the same fashion as utopia, the festival is a quasi-island, with its own space and time that take it beyond the daily. A universal social event with many levels and dimensions, among which the degree of coherence are variable, the festival groups participants in a quasi-autonomous totality. The play of its languages and rites results in the association of the social values and models present in the festival with the individual and collective behaviors, with the arrangement of the participants in time and space and to the allocation of their respective roles. In relation to the 'everyday', a heterotopia” (184).

Festival of Utopia and heterotopia are one and the same; they are both places that lay outside the norm of society and everyday life; terming it Festival of Utopia simply adds specificity to this discussion. There are several types of heterotopias. For example, the TAZ is a heterotopia as well, and both it and Festival of Utopia are an actualized location of a liminal space (Bey 1985, 7). However, the TAZ is not a Festival of Utopia. Baczko continues, “it's time and space exist in conjunction with the imaginary – in the festival they are not lived in their positivity, but with all the partialities of the imagination”(184). The 18<sup>th</sup> century was a time where utopia and festivals were often intertwined; the festival acted as a “magic mirror” of what the world, or at least the society, could be. However, it was often beyond the capabilities of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to achieve these dreams, and festivals remained festivals with utopic *elements*, and not fully realized festivals of utopia.

The festival of the Utopia is based on many of the principle we have described so far in conjunction with Burning Man. For example, “the utopia of the festival rests on spontaneity on the free transformation of the spectators into actors who are their own spectacle” (Baczko 199). Freedom to be, to form oneself and be able to transform what is around one, primarily through free interaction, creation or expression. The festival of Utopia is now possible as it never was before. We have finally reached a point in society where the utopia we imagine is possible: it is

possible because we have achieved such great accomplishments in technology that our dreams have mellowed and become realistic and attainable and because we have reached a point in development where we can rule ourselves – civilly and even productively – without an overseer. Utopia has finally found the potential for realization in the physical world, exiting out of the realm of 'hypothetical' and 'theoretical' and 'philosophical' and into the realm of true attainable experiential phenomena.

### **Burning Man: The 'New City' as the 'New Festival'**

Celebrations and festivals are an important part of any culture. They are society's method of self-diagnosis, of uniting the community to pool its energies and create solutions to problems or give new life to flagging values. Burning Man is no different. As a “promiscuous carnival of souls”, Burning Man *is* the “cybergeneration's answer to Woodstock” (Davis 17; Hockett 65). Instead of the rockers and the hippies, it is a place for the tech geek, the consumer freak, the over-educated entry-level employee to find solace from an American culture that is reaching whose 'grind', whose unflagging pace of life is coming to a deafening roar. The Development of Burning Man as the first true Festival of Utopia is a momentous occasion for American culture. It signals a new stage, never before achieved in its short history. It has completed the novel creation, from the bottom up, of a new subculture of people and of thought.

America has been host to many inspiring, revolutionary, and world changing movements in its still-young lifetime. Rock and roll helped break the mold; it introduced pleasure and ecstasy back into a Puritan way of life. Woodstock was its festival, predicated on peace, love and the pursuit of grooves, and it changed the world and the counter-cultural landscape of America as we know it (Ehrenreich 210). There are music festivals, and there are devotees, but Rock and



Roll has no Burning Man. The Rainbow Gathering is also similar. In fact, it too is a “nomadic, utopian community” “committed to principles of nonviolence and non-hierarchical egalitarianism”. The Rainbow Gathering even has a set of similar tenets – Love, Peace, Non-violence, Environmentalism, Non-consumer/Non-commercialism, Volunteerism, Respect, Consensus, and Diversity – and even predates Burning Man, beginning in 1972, but still, it *is not* Burning Man. In 38 years of existence, the Rainbow festival has never peaked at more than 30,000 people (Circle of ...). If the Rainbow festival is so similar, why wasn't it adopted as the 'chosen' Festival of Utopia?

The answer is because the Rainbow festival, while it may be utopic in some sense, in no longer a modern utopic ideal. It's outdated, based on the social aspirations and ideals of the hippy culture, which now inhabit their own niche in American subcultural history. In the midst of a war era, the hippie's idealism involved peace and non-violence, a world where everyone loved all day and no one ever was angry, but that isn't a reality. The Rainbow Festival takes place in the woods, so it too connects one with nature, but there is no aspect of 'radical self-reliance' at the Rainbow Festival. At the Rainbow festival, you don't have to survive any harder than you do in your home, just differently; a sleeping bag instead of a bed, a tent instead of a house, *but you are still provided for* (David Skinner, cited in Hocket 69).

Only by looking at a 'utopic festival' like the Rainbow Gathering can we gather and understand what Burning Man truly is. Burning Man is the Festival of Utopia because it is the new utopic ideal, appropriate to its situation in the present time and culture, created by the people to fulfill a need. The new utopic ideal is not flying cars or robots- we have those things (at least in their experimental stages). The new utopic ideal is not peace, love, and eternal smiles because that's all we see on the television, and on billboards and advertisements and bus stops and

posters, and we know enough to know that it's not *real*; it's just a baited trap. The American ideal is no longer 'the ideal'; it's for simple reality.

The *carnavalesque*, the laughing derision, the element of mockery and inversion is an important part of the establishment of Burning Man as a Festival of Utopia. Burning Man becomes a festival of “play in conjunction with carnivalesque laughter” (Kang). Carnival is already embodied in a grinning trickster, a joker's sneer; “carnival is the laughing double of everyday life, when distinctions between social classes break down and even the most sacred institutions are mocked, if only for a brief interim.” Carnival is the spirit of juxtaposition, of the Feast of Fools and the Lord of Misrule, and the “meaningless chaos” of the Cacophony society. “Carnival,” Bakhtin explains, “is infused with the spirit of universal laughter; it is “the people's second life, organized on the basis of laughter” (Kang). Laughter is, in the same vain and literature, characterized by “it's universality, its freedom and it's relation to the truth”. “Laughter is visceral, immediate and bodily. It resists control by its very nature: one cannot force another to laugh; rather it must be offered up, like a gift” (Kang). One cannot fake laughter, or least it is very difficult, usually unconvincing, and is a questionable endeavor in the first place. As Ehrenreich said, “mystical ecstasy and laughter are the two great delights of living, and saints and clowns their purveyors, the only two categories of human being who can be relied upon to tell the truth” (Fraser Muggeridge, cited in Dark 47). Burning Man can laugh at itself, and laugh at the world. At times, Brian Doherty says, “Burning Man can feel decidedly New Age-y or pagan; there's lots of rituals...but then you can find lots of mockery and parody of all those things at Burning Man too” (11). Burning Man's not so serious; it “does not fall into the futile trap of fighting against its own end, but celebrates it because the death of the old, in carnivalesque terms, means the birth of the new” (Kang). This is why, the realistic, peeled-back view-askew look at

reality, “is the culture-preserving, sanity-saving, carnival spirit” (Dark 50). We sacrifice the man at the festival to regain our humanity, to gain back our the intimacy we lost to the world of things, to the world of commercial glitter, but what we also sacrifice at Burning Man is ourselves. Thrown to the wind of abandon and experiment, we decide to try something new, and if we fall down or hurt ourselves, especially our pride, we laugh because we did it. We laugh because we can. We laugh because it's real, and because it feels good to laugh.

Burning Man is a “carnavalesque festival that is built on the act of playful artistic expression” (Kang). The environment, the people, the art, and the rules, all of it is meant to be played with. At Burning Man, “the Universe wants to play” (Bey 1985, 22). But play is the entry to the liminal; in the arena of play, one can collide the yin and yang together, one can push the Big Red Button on the bomb, and merely be sent back to the beginning of the game, hopefully having learned our lessons. Burning Man may not be realistic in this way, but it does not sugar-coat the world for us. In the liminal space of no rules, one is set free to play with social interaction, play with one's limits, play with drugs and physical exhaustion and experience life to the extent that we as a culture have made possible, to play with the technologies and social structures we have developed in a way that they're not meant to be used, and while we do it, we'll celebrate. This expression of a need, the need to be really free, and really intimate, will be through the creation of this one festival, Burning Man, where “the architecture of suffocation and paralysis will be blown up only by our total celebration of everything- even darkness” (Bey 1985, 43). Burning Man is not afraid to confront the taboo, the uncomfortable, and the dark. It's not a nice experience. The rain and the dust, the cold at night and the sun at day, the terror of being along in a crowd of 10 thousand people, or alone in the desert in a dust storm. The chance to test your limits and have them severely tested back. Not just the realization that you belong in

humanity but the realization, facing the desert and the mountains and the larger than life expanse that you don't stand before, but that stands before *you*, that you are nothing, and whatever you do with your life won't matter and the only people you'll affect will not matter either and in the blink of an eye, to this place, you'll be several generations dead. It is the pain and disorientation of dehydration and heat sickness, it is the horror of seeing someone lose their mind on a drug, it is the imminent possibility that at any given moment the entire place could go into a frenzy, destroying itself and everyone with it. And no one would ever know. It is that, that remnant of *reality* that qualifies Burning Man as a true Festival of Utopia; "for only vengeance that is commended by passion and a taste for untrammelled violence is divine. The restoration of the lawful order is essentially subordinate to profane reality" (Bataille, 82). That glimpse – the constant reminder of the world outside – is present, side-by-side with the simultaneous living out of dreams. We are fully conscious of the entire experience; we are fully present, fully immediate, and fully alive.

There is an element of freedom, of intimacy and reality that is missing in American culture. Political correctness and miniscule laws surround nearly everything in sight- on the street, on the bus, on the TV, on people's clothes and in magazines. Burning Man is a festival, representing a utopic condition, of elements in life that keep getting prohibited, outlawed, or strongly suggested against. The same thing happened with Carnival. French historian Aron Gurevich says, "in the early central and middle ages, carnival had not yet crystallized in time and space; its elements were diffused everywhere, and hence there was no carnival as such" (Ehrenreich 78). Today in American culture, "currently, collective ecstasy is most likely to be found at a sporting event (255). This started in the 1950's, the same time as Rock and Roll. I'm sure there is no difference. But Burning Man is different than Rock and Roll and sports fanatics.

Lee Harvey once stated during an interview,

“I know every raver you ever met said they were going to change the world. The hippies said they were going to change the world. But we're a little different. One novelty I will claim is that we are the first bohemian-based counterculture movement that ever came along that transcended the limits of a 'scene' we went civic. We went above ground. We engaged the world on a level that not even the Paris Commune did” (Doherty 267).

Burning Man has successfully realized Utopia. Unfortunately, it is not yet sustainable, and it probably never will be; society will continue to change, as will ideas of Utopia. Utopia is ephemeral by nature; it must bend and flex to the needs of society, and when they no longer need it, it must be able to disappear and *leave no trace*. The Festival of Utopia is the only way to maintain that balance. Even though Black Rock City may not be a permanent structure, elements that Burning Man has created are permanent, such as the culture. And whatever of Burning Man gets taken down at the end of the week, lives on in its life in culture and in narrative, as mythology....

“At the height of the festivity, we step out of our assigned roles and statuses- gender, ethnicity, tribe, and rank- and into a brief utopia defined by egalitarianism, creativity, and mutual love. This is how danced rituals and festivities served to bind prehistoric human groups, and this is what still beckons us today” (Ehrenreich 253).

# Mythology

“Where and when is the world of unmediated creativity? If it can exist, it does exist- but perhaps only as a sort of alternative reality which we so far have not learned to perceive.”  
(Bey 1985, 1)

## **Introduction**

From the beginning, as something only available for description through *narrative* structure, *simile*, and *metaphor*, Burning Man has offered itself up , not as a festival or a utopia or even a new age religion or ritual, but as a *myth*. As Lee Gilmore made note of:

“[there is a]...stark visual contrast between a potent imagery of mystery geographical emptiness and imaginative abundance. The desert also evokes a potent imagery of mystery abstraction, and limitlessness, as well as time-honored connotations of hardship, sacrifice, and solitude, creating the context for an esoteric experience in a quasimythical setting” (59).

Already on an abundantly potential environment for myth, Burning Man creates a perfect setting and scenario of events, from the 'leaving of the 'default world', the initiation, the 'zone trip', the 'natural elements and elementals (dust storms), coalescing at the Burning of the Man, and finally, the return trip to home and the reentry of normal life. It's like an adventure story, *and that's not mentioning all the crazy characters and adventures that await inside the festival!*. As a subculture, what Burning Man lacks for in permanence of place is more than made up for in ideology and mythology.

Durkheim argues that societies typically respond and evolve as side effects to changes and/or evolutions in their societal structure, and that this subsequent change is not deliberately enforced. However, “modern societies, though, are to some extent engineered and are subject to

public policies that attempt to change the relations among ethnic, racial, and economic groups.”

John R. Gillis argues that “American holidays, rituals, and myths are lagging behind reality- that they represent a distorted view of a society that is long gone, especially the notion that there was and ought to be one “traditional” kind of family. He argues for “profound recasting of our core myth (and hence our holidays and rituals), toward a formulation that provides a higher level of reality-testing and a more genuine expression of our true feelings and psychic needs” (Enztioni 32).

Bronislaw Baczko says, “Every epoch has its modes of imagining, reproducing, and renewing the imagination, as it has its own ways of believing, feeling, and knowing” (314).

Burning Man is the creation of a new myth, engineered both consciously and subconsciously, to fulfill the cultures needs left wanting by the great modern American supra-culture.

### **Mythology's Role in Society**

Myth, like the other cultural institutions mentioned through the entirety of this thesis, fulfill a specific, fundamental and quintessential role in the healthy establishment and function of a culture. To be missing any of these elements is to ensure cultural decay or collapse. Myth is no different: “its job is to reflect, in a deeply liberating fashion, the tensions and paradoxes that constitute our understanding of reality” (Dark 11). Myths provide a sense of shared history and cultural connection to the members of a community, culture, or collectivity, an experience or illusion of a shared past. Jerome Bruner says that myths and narrative provide conventions expressed as rules, and structure our ordinary life, actions, and attitude (Harre, 27). Additionally, as cited several times before,

“Just as the capacity to dream and fantasize, though not immoderately, is considered by

psychologists indispensable for mental health, so likewise exposure to those objectified dreams and fantasies which are thrown up by celebratory enthusiasm ,may be necessary for social health” (Turner 1989, 14).

Myths represent those “objectified dreams and fantasies which are thrown up by celebratory enthusiasm”, thereby contributing in this way to social health, of the group and of the individual. This is in fact one of myth's most important tasks; to reinforce the bond of cultural affinity through the sharing of and uniting around a core corpus of myths. These myths are not just stories, their structures, characters, and symbols carry with them a heavy burden of meaning and value, close to and inspired from the heart of the culture itself (Turner 1989). In this way, myths are a necessary cement for the cohesion of the group, and for the maintenance of values, symbols, and practices, but myth are also supportive and reassuring to the individual. Victor Turner says,

“Perhaps, paradoxically, we confront our own personality, singular depths more fully in these collective forms than we do through introspection, for they arise from a heightened sense of our shared humanity, even if they do themselves in the guise of a thousand different cultures” (1989, 14).

Through identification with or feeling inspired by mythological characters, an individual feels more connected, and more personally invested in the story and therefore, in the culture. The myth is a mechanism that provides and revives cultural intimacy amongst both the individual members and the culture as a collective. “Play, imagination, and paradox, with all its possibilities come to the fore, and along with them, an attitude of mind that is interpretive, self-reflexive, and self-conscious” (Levi-Strauss 117).

Additionally, magic was discussed, in the end of Ch 3, as *mana*, the unidentified element of significance, the mysterious provider of meaning. In reality, *mana* loses credibility and its



functions, both in the real world and as an explanation for actions, is doubted or received with disregard. However, *mana* is a very powerful story element, akin with magic; both have marked significance in the story realm. “Ultimately, magic is transformative by associating things through similarity and in spite of official boundaries between them.” Lisa Salamon agrees that “growth is stimulated by the transformation of taxonomies, dichotomies, and categories, and by merging apparent contradictions” (Kang).

Magic's (and *mana*'s) role in the story is to transfer some unspoken, unknowable quality, *qualia*, to an object- it imparts special significance. However, neither myth tropes transfer over very well when subject to the laws of science and rationality that most people and cultures require. This is because:

“...magic [and *mana*] attempts to represent the unrepresentable by manipulating perception. The underlying reality is so unknowable that its representation is all that is accessible, and what is between is that same space of ambiguity previously encountered. The heart of the matter lies in the “secret contained in the trick that is both art and technique, and thus real and really made up” (Kang).

### **The Present State of Myth in Modern America**

As John R. Gillis was quoted in the introduction, “American holidays, rituals, and myths are lagging behind reality- that they represent a distorted view of a society that is long gone, especially the notion that there was and ought to be one “traditional” kind of family. He argues for “profound recasting of our core myth (and hence our holidays and rituals), toward a formulation that provides a higher level of reality-testing and a more genuine expression of our true feelings and psychic needs” (Entzoni 32).

The entirety of this paper has focused on the importance of cultural adaptation; whether it be through the creation of a festival, religions, rituals, or utopias, cultures *must adapt to their*

*present social conditions*. To do otherwise is to risk dying out, effacement, or replacement.

“[Having] knowledge about society is thus a realization in the double sense of the word, in the sense of apprehending the objectified social reality, and in the sense of ongoingly producing this reality’ (Berger and Luckmann, cited in Enztoni 135). This suggests that understanding a culture and ‘having realization” is an ongoing, continuous process; as a culture changes, your knowledge and thus realization of this fact change along with it. For one’s understanding to survive, one must be changing it along with the changes as they occur. The process, like cultural assimilation, will be long and incremental, but if the adaptations are correctly made and taken up into practice, the society, and the individuals, will continue to thrive.

However, American culture has not kept up. Maybe the pace of the changes and the increasingly hectic pace of life have taken the pressure off the need for a common mythos, since myth is a part of communal identity, which people hardly have time for nowadays. On the other hand, the development of a modern mythology is most critical at this time, when individual and social identities are both so weakly founded and un-reinforced. Anthony Giddens argument rings particularly clear, when he says that “self-identity is a distinctly modern project within which individuals can reflectively construct a personal narrative for themselves which allows them to understand themselves as in control of their lives and futures (Jenkins 12). “For many of us, however, the pursuit of new or alternative identities never gets beyond our daydreams” (9). How is this possible? If we’re responsible for making ourselves form the bottom up, how is it that so many people can lack a strong sense of identity or individuality?

Again, this stems from a non-presence of characteristically American cultural mythology. The latest modern myths are stories from the revolutionary era, of Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Bull, and George Washington cutting down the cherry tree. Our National Heroes are over a

hundred years old, and the culture has shifted so drastically since then that we can no longer access those characters as figures to find solace in and identify with. Even the American Dream, which can be espoused to be our strongest mythos, has since grown outdated. Predicated as a 'the land of golden opportunity', where every young fella went to 'make a name for himself', America was a land based on 'making it big' and 'making a fortune', or even just 'making enough money to send back home'. However, these were all myths of America made from an *outsiders* view; when the immigrants settled in, and backbreaking life in the factory or the fields followed, the land of 'golden opportunity' was beginning to lose its sheen. Even religion has been losing steam, itself (as I said, regardless of truth or not) being a narrative. *America's myths are losing ground, and we're not creating anything to replace them.*

Of course, Burning Man represents this one hope, and in multitude of ways. To begin with, Burning Man is *adaptive*; it's both the reason for its existence, 21-year survival, and its effectiveness. Burning Man borrows the elements it needs from cultural mechanisms (such as ritual and religion) without explicitly subscribing to any one or the other of the pre-existent systems, and uses them to create a *highly-modernized hybrid*, engineered *meaningfully yet subconsciously* to fulfill the need of the moment. And the need in American culture is for a new myth, for new heroes, and maybe a new happy ending (Entzioni).

When we enter Burning Man, "we're transported into a carnival realm, an outlandish exaggeration of our own world, not unlike a fairy tale but far too familiar and reminiscent of our everyday life to be dismissed as complete fantasy" (Dark 45). This similarity creates confusion and blur; the "gap between imaginary and real is reduced" (Baczko 314). In this moment, someone shouts "WELCOME HOME!", and you're dragged out of the car, hugged, kissed, and rolled in the playa dust, where already in the next moment the social drugs are reeling – a rush of

Burning Man to the brain – which finds and takes over the old elements of culture – it takes the adventure and desert from the frontier and the cowboys, it takes the symbolism of fire, it takes term of derision ('The Man') from bureaucracy, it takes play and rites of passage from childhood, and it takes 'the Journey' from myths of yore – and creates one long, week-long interactive choose-your-own-adventure myth. And the hero? The center of the story, the narrator, the one who struggles and faces challenges and is reborn and saves the world? That person is you- you are your own creation myth, and you are the one who will, ultimately, bear the burden of saving the world.

Says Larry Harvey,

“But now the idea is that we want people inspired by what happens at Burning Man to go home, not to create a refuge from the world... see, we make a model of the world, a model of civilization, temporary but striking. We want them to go home and reform their towns and cities and apply any lessons they learned to where they really live instead of seeing it as a chance to escape the world” (Doherty 268).

### **Type of Story**

What type of story is it? Burning Man could be understood as a Creation Myth, the story of a New Self, a New Perspective. Burning Man is the creation myth of the soon-to-be new culture. Burning Man could be viewed as a myth of Origin: at Burning Man, people are awakened for the first time. It is the fabled city of a new race, the new lore, and the new hero(s) who will usher in the New Beginning. But above all of these, it interprets Burning Man as a myth of Rebirth, because Burning Man is the coming of the apocalypse. In mythology, the destruction of the world is always followed by its re-emergence, and the fire is a symbolic vehicle for its spiritual, moral, and emotional cleansing. In some myth, such as in the Christian stories, God destroying the world only truly refers to the destruction of civilization. The end of the world, the

apocalypse, is said to be close at hand – there is a popular belief that 2012 will bring the apocalypse, as predicted by the Mayans and the seemingly portentous end of their calendar. However, having spoken to people of the Mayan culture, this end does not signify the end of the world and mankind as we know it, but a spiritual awakening. Having spoken with a young Mayan man at length about this, the Mayans today believe that this end of time, which actually represent the end of an era<sup>35</sup>, will be the end of this age of the spirit of man and an entry into a new age of spirituality. When the 13<sup>th</sup> Baktun ends, time will stop for each person – his life and decisions will be realized simultaneously, and he will at that moment have to choose, whether to stay as he was, or decide to change, renounce his evil tendencies, and be resolved. If the person chooses the path of 'good' (let's call it righteousness), then he will experience the bliss of human unity and the world will be as paradise. If he chooses to stay as he was and continue to live a morally depraved and selfish life, he will continue to live as he was – he will have no recollection of the moment of choice, and he will not be able to recognize the splendor of the New World around him. What we perceive as 'apocalyptic' – destructive and final – they perceive as 'apocalyptic' in the sense of rebirth and renewal.

Maybe the Mayans readopted their myth, over the centuries, to reflect their beliefs; maybe that was it's meaning all along. Maybe the schism between the Mayan interpretations is not access to different facts, but different cultural interpretations. Not every culture will have the same myths, and if they do, not every culture will tell it the same way. As with ritual, myths are culturally specific. They are created and told, by the members of a culture, to make sense of the

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<sup>35</sup> The end of the Mayan calendar is the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> Baktun. Baktuns are measures of time, approximated to about 394 years. The beginning of a new Baktun represents the beginning of a new era, and the number 13 was a sacred number. The significance of their calendar, which they had forecast with some amount of predictability, accuracy, and forecast, to end on the 13<sup>th</sup> Baktun, their holiest of numbers, seems to leave the a gap open to free suggestion and association, although we cannot know precisely why the calendar was ended to abruptly on this date. (McKillop, 2004).

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world. Its frame is bounded by the culture's place in time and space; the myth must account for events that have happened, and the nature of the world around them. Burning Man is similarly a myth of modern apocalypse, where the old structure of a culture that fails to meet our sociocultural needs must be torn down and rebuilt in a way in which the world makes sense. It *must* crumble, it *must* burn, not to defile or bestow and ill-will upon it, but in a simple practical strategy to make room for the new. It is an apocalyptic awakening, in the Dark<sup>36</sup> sense, a revelation.

Burning Man is a New City, for a new culture. The culture is small, and only-yet exists as a minor culture within the supra-culture; its devotees and loyalists – the participants, the volunteers, the *Burners* – make the pilgrimage, a yearly *Journey*, back to the sacred center, sacred to them because it is the Liminal Space, the place of transformation and limitless possibility. The 'magic' of the place, its mysterious amalgamous *mana*, exist, as far as anyone can tell you – but they can't. The true understanding, this *qualia*, the French term best as 'a certain *je ne sais quoi*', only makes sense and finds reasonable explanation within the myth structure.

“Greater apocalypses have ways of developing within the old, domesticated ones. When this happens, it literally makes history” (Dark 12).

### **The Story: The New Mythology as Burning Man creating the New Life Narrative**

From the clips and phrases of attempts to describe the festival, and from segments of applicable myths, structures, and stories, we can sew together the piecemeal remnants to recreate the experience, but newly narrate, the Myth of the Burning Man Festival.

“A man, imbued with the true principles recruits 10,000 men and women to crossed the

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<sup>36</sup> The idea of 'apocalypse as awakening' is borrowed from David Dark in *Everyday Apocalypse* (2002).

seas and come with him to found a new colony in an uninhabited land...”led by a quasi-legislation, sets up a new life, in total rupture with what it had known” (Dom Deschamps, cited in Baczko 90). Here, they create a “Disneyland in reverse”, where “reality had mutated because they willed it thus” (Kazinets 89; Doherty 49). A “promiscuous carnival of souls, a metaphysical flea market, a demolition derby of reality constructs colliding in a parched void”, it was “a place where you could and nothing or lose everything and no one would ever know”...“with no discernible relation to anything, yes” (Davis 17; Doherty 48; Jim Mason, cited in Doherty 168).

In this place, “the playa provides” for “...heroes who carried on the struggle against bad consciousness but still knew how to party”(Doherty; Bey 1985, 137). It it a place of “amusingly absurd intellectualized nonsense” and “psychic nomadism, ...[the] imaginative deployment of advanced information technologies, irony-laced encouragement of fluid, [and] boundary-effacing identities” (Gilmore 10). It a place where you can go to “ huff art and bear-bong culture...you crash land in the center camp, with 15,000 naked computer programmers dancing around your flaming wreckage, greeting you, neon and benevolence, watching you. You're here to build a community based on Lord of the Flies. They need you; you wave toothpaste...you've built an egg for shelter, a suit made of human skin, a car that looks like shit. You've covered yourself in dirt, you're sporting a mullet, and food stamps, or maybe a shirt for the first time. You're broadcasting desperate rays to thousands”(Seth Malice, cited in Doherty 225). It was a place where “the kind of ideas that slightly skewed creative people brainstorm about in late nights at cafes and around the hardwood living room floor after the fourth glass of wine or third bowl of pot, but actually executed” *were* actually executed, and were toiled and strove over by “great minds, not just for the Truth, but for the Truth of pleasure. Serious but not sober...” (Jim Mason, cited in Doherty 168; Bey 1985, 137). They realized the “vision of a good life, which is both noble and possible,



rooted in a sense of the magnificent overabundance of reality” (Bey 1985, 137). These ideas were allowed to blossom and bear fruit, because “Chaos is not entropy, Chaos is not death, Chaos is not a commodity. Chaos is continual creation. Chaos never died” (Bey 1985, 60).

It is a place, where “this unity makes possible the equality of esteem, but the fact that esteem is in principle equal in this system is essential to this unity of purpose itself. Under the aegis of the general will, all virtuous citizens are to be equally honored. The age of dignity is born” (Taylor 44).

The Danger Ranger<sup>37</sup> says in an interview “I’ve seen things you wouldn’t believe, and I believe in things you can’t see” (Doherty 41).

## Conclusion

Myths today are viewed as archaic and primitive, but they still function in the present and are as important as ever. Myths are all around us in our daily lives; we’re just not used to associating them with what we recognize to be myth. We think a myth has to be of fictional Gods and Goddesses, swallowing the world or beheading hydras or performing some other unrealistic and inhuman labors, but the classic myth structures can be found all around us, in movies and books, comics and Broadway plays. In these, we can recognize the need for stories, the need for fiction. Victor Turner says,

“Perhaps, paradoxically, we confront our own personality, singular depths more fully in these collective forms than we do through introspection, for they arise from a heightened sense of our shared humanity, even if they do themselves in the guise of a thousand different cultures” (1989, 14).

However, books and movies are myth-like, but they are *not* our New American Myth.

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<sup>37</sup> Veteran Burner, but in this case, also a character trope.

There is no Middle Earth or Mordor<sup>38</sup> in America; the Dark Avenger's Gotham City<sup>39</sup> does not exist. We need something that directly translates, that incorporates the utopic daydreams of the everyday American, toiling away at work behind a counter or a desk, inside an office or a classroom. We do not believe in Myth, the roots of science and rationality have gone too deep. Maybe we just need something more accessible – a myth we can believe in, but also live to experience....

“Doing is believing – one may become what one performs” (Mircea Eliade, cited in Levi-Strauss, 128).

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<sup>38</sup> From J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* series

<sup>39</sup> A pseudonym for and patron city of Batman

## Conclusion: The End of a Story

“It happened because people wanted it to happen, people made it happen, and no one stopped. It was a spontaneous flowering of a felt need of a free people.”  
(Doherty 3)

“The form of things is passing away, the old world is coming undone, and a new one (then and now) is underway;”  
(Dark 24)

“the Black Rock playa is either killing us by swift degrees or turning us into some kind of indestructible Next Man, and we'll only know which by the way we feel inside.”  
(Doherty 215)

“Utopias are often only premature truths.”  
(Alphonse de Lamartine, cited in Baczko 3)

## The Revelation

What does it mean, that Burning Man exists? What does it mean, that Burning Man is a festival instead of a commune, or an actual city? What does it mean, that a *festival* has survived and grown, for 21 years, attracting 50,000 to one of the most desolate and uninviting environments on the planet, nevertheless the United States? What does it mean, that it looks like religion, like ritual and anarchy and a cult? What does it mean that the only way to describe it is to use metaphors and fantasy terms? What do its ideologies and principles, its lawlessness and commerce-less-ness mean? And ultimately, what does it mean that Burning Man was created in America, in this here and now?

Burning man is not a religion; Burning Man is not a cult, or a ritual ceremony, but it *can* be likened to one. The confusion around Burning Man, in understanding it at a glance and misinterpreting its cultural elements, stems from Burning Man as a culturally adaptive

mechanism. Burning Man was created to adapt to a need not being met in the greater collectivity of American culture. Burning Man was semi-consciously created; the ten principles were created knowingly, but what they in turn *provided* was a subconscious; in reality, their conscious creation was a secondary subconscious reaction to need-fulfillment. Burning Man cuts and sews what it needs from the cultural institutions; it takes Collective Effervescence and Apocalypse from Religion, Liminality from Ritual, Transformation from Rites of Passage and the mythological Journey, Play from Childhood, Disorder and Chaos from Order and Rules, and uses these to create and revivify Individuals and Community, Freedom and Intimacy. But these pieces it has chosen as its ideal ingredients, are the basic necessities for Culture, and so a culture was created, a sub-culture manifested in this Festival of ephemerally-realized Utopia. The festival ends, but the culture remains. Still fresh in the minds and bodies of the participants, the story is told, shared as a Legend of Lived-Experience. That is how Burning Man becomes a Myth of Modern America.

I believe the presence of Burning Man allows us to make a diagnosis of American culture in its current condition, and I believe that Burning Man and similar developments, many years from now, will have led directly up to the future state of society, outlining a path by which adaptations and incremental changes were made. I believe that Burning Man and similar developments are a preview, a small glimpse into states and attributes that the future of American culture may place more emphasis on. I think we can perceive Burning Man and its specific architecture as step forward and to-the-side, which will have a final say, no matter how small, in the continued evolution of American culture.

Victor Turner describes liminality as occurring during transitional periods of history,

“when the past had lost its grip and the future has not yet taken definite shape” (Levi-Strauss, 117).

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Figure 1. ("Rough Draft").

# ROUGH DRAFT

ISSUE #48  
SEPTEMBER 1990

The Official Organ of the  
SF Cacophony Society

The Cacophony Society is a randomly gathered network of free spirits united in the pursuit of experiences beyond the pale of mainstream society.

We are the Merry Pranksters of the 90's, traveling through the social landscape, dispensing a variety of mind challenging activities to everyone.

You may already be a member!

**Bed Day At Black Rock (Zone Trip #4)**  
When: Labor day weekend, September 1-3.  
Where: Black Rock Desert, Nevada.  
RSVP: 415/942-2257

As established Cacophony tradition, the Zone Trip is an extended event that takes us outside of our local area of time and place. On this particular expedition, we shall travel to a vast, desolate, white expanse stretching toward the horizon in all directions. A place where you could gain nothing or lose everything and no one would ever know. A place well beyond that which you think you understand. We will be accompanied by the Burning Man, a 40 foot tall wooden totem which will travel with us into the Zone and there meet with deity. This excursion is an opportunity to leave your old self and be reborn through the cleansing fires of the jackal, pure desert.

**Activities include:**  
•The wholesale annihilation of the caravan crossing into the Zone boundary. Bring with you something of strong symbolic value.  
•Campsite reaction in the tradition of modern datsic nomadic Gypsies.  
•The construction of a brick oven for the baking of bread.  
•A group must require your participation to make and illuminate the Burning Man.  
•Nighttime viewing of relevant desert video on a big screen.  
•Some formal evening cocktail party with music. Bring your favorite CDs.  
•Visit to a natural local hot springs.  
•Other activities as we make them up.

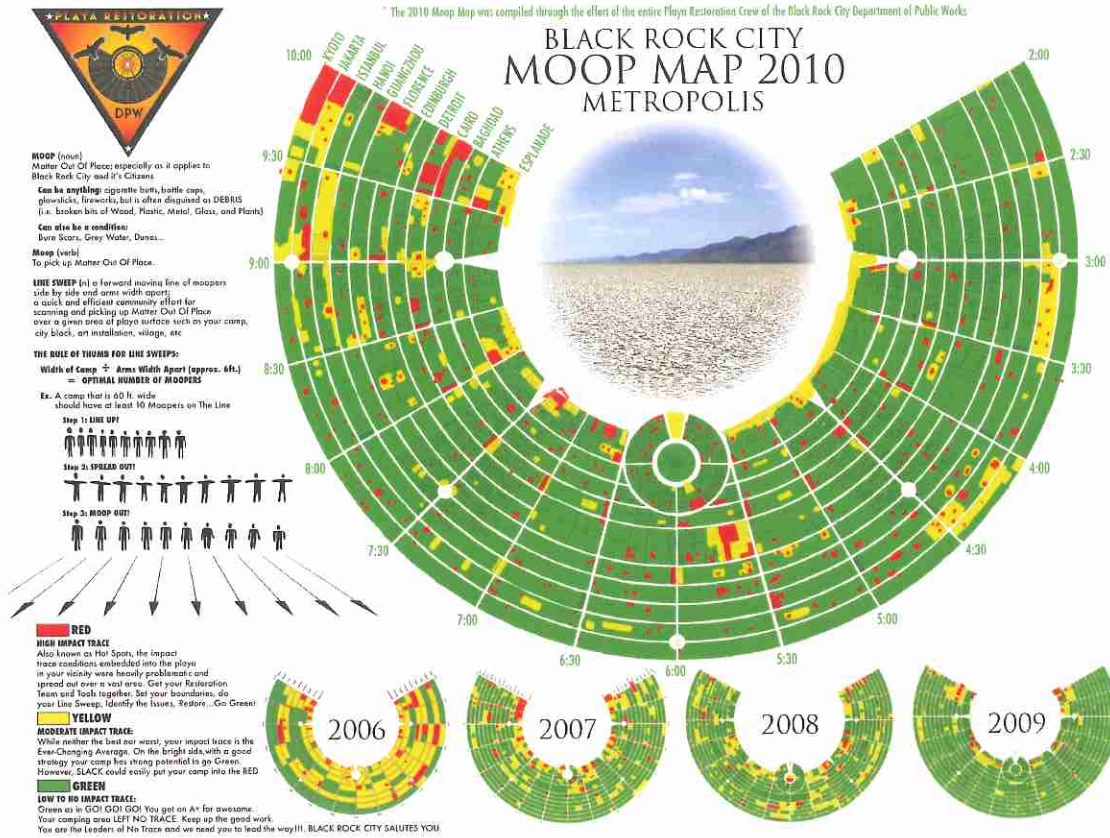
This event is co-hosted by the Cacophony Society, Burning Man Committee, and the Black Rock Desert Rangers.  
Special Thanks to DogeDoo Productions.

**Objet Trouve-Heute Trash Fashion Show**  
When: Friday & Saturday, September 14 & 15.  
Where: Nevada Theater, Nevada City, CA  
Another long distance event in September? YES!

The event has been going on for 7 years up in Nevada City and is a fashion show in which all the modeled clothing has been constructed from materials scavenged from the local dumpsters, and designed and assembled by people with names such as: Pina Debris, Chocastelle, House of Original Sin, Rayona Visqueen, Polly Ethylene, Recyclanilla and Jennie de Molar. This may be the last year this show is held so we think it is important to make this important cultural journey. If you intend to go, it is important to get your tickets in advance, because they always sell out. You can purchase your tickets from Sincerely II, 5100 Spring Street, Nevada City, CA, 95959, phone 530/226-2615. Tickets are \$8 per one night or \$15 for a 2-night pass.

**Cacophony-like Minds**  
When: Monday, September 17th, 7:30 pm.  
Where: Sacred Grounds Coliseum, 2050 Hayes at Colla St.  
Everyone is welcome at the monthly "meeting" of the Cacophony Society, when we sit around remembering past events and thinking of new hypotrain schemes for the future.

Figure 2. ("Black Rock City 2010").



**Figure 3.** (Logan).



**Figure 4.** (“Satellite View of Burning Man 2010”).



**Figure 5.** (Hude, “On the Edge”)



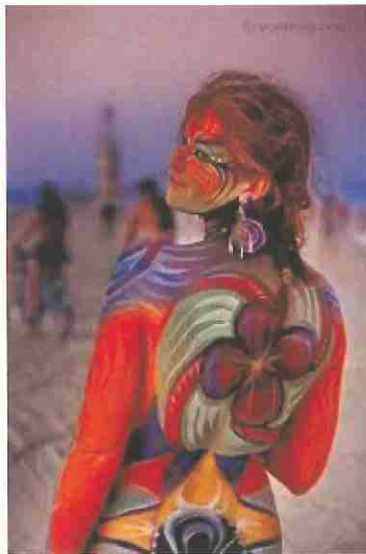
**Figure 6.** (Hude, “Tutu Tuesday”)



**Figure 7.** (Ladies in Gaiety)

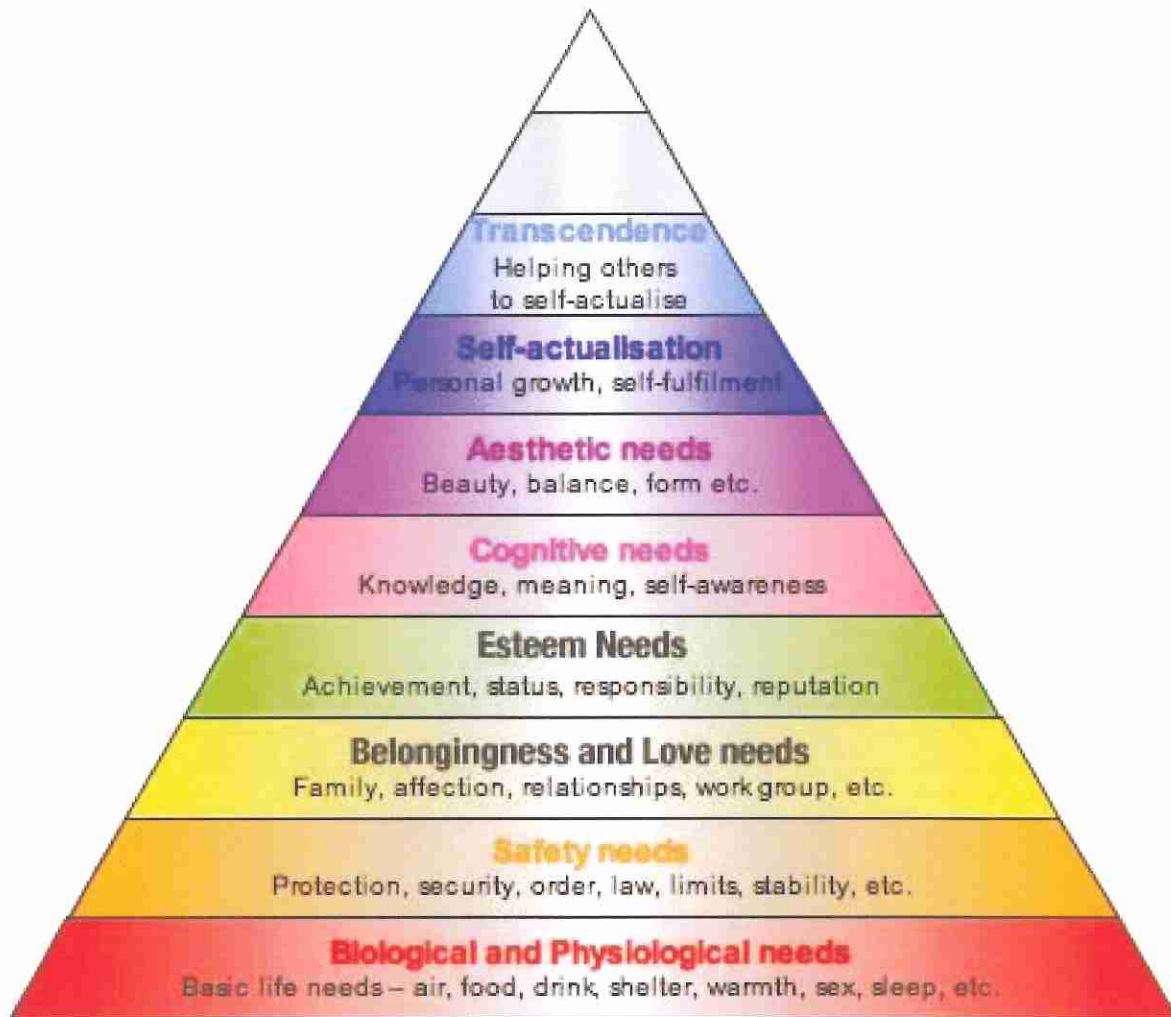


**Figure 8:** (“Livingbrush Woman”).





**Figure 9.** (“Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs”).



## **Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs**

**Figure 10.** (Langley).

**Erikson's stages of personality development**

Freud's stages of personality development	Stage	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Oral		Basic trust vs. mistrust							
Anal			Autonomy vs. shame, doubt						
Phallic				Initiative vs. guilt					
Latency					Industry vs. inferiority				
Genital						Identity vs. role confusion			
Young adulthood							Intimacy vs. isolation		
Adulthood								Generativity vs. stagnation	
Maturity									Ego integrity vs. despair