

Chapter 8

The Enchantments of Consumer Capitalism: Beyond Belief at the Burning Man Festival

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For Raymond Lemieux¹

Every year², tens of thousands³ make the long journey out to the harsh environment of Nevada's Black Rock Desert at the end of the summer for a week of 'radical self-expression', 'radical self-reliance' and effervescent community at what is one of the most vibrant subcultural phenomena today; the Burning Man Festival. After months of preparation, 'burners', be they first time 'virgins' or long-standing 'veterans', arrive on the flat and lifeless desert playa to participate in this 'no spectator' event that calls on the creativity of everyone so that the utopian 'ephemeropolis'⁴ of Black Rock City can materialise as a three-mile-wide open circle at the centre of which stands a forty-foot-tall wood, metal and neon figure called 'the Man'. Dominating the city from atop its three-storey-high pedestal, the 'Man' is the symbolic and physical icon of the festival (its 'axis mundi' as

¹ My debt to Raymond Lemieux in problematising religious reconfigurations of religion with respect to the cultural and social influence of the market is enormous. His insightful and avant-garde work as well as his teachings have been an illumination and an inspiration.

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³ Participation has risen, initially exponentially, thereafter constantly from 1990 onwards. For example, there were 30,000 participants in 2003 and 55,000 in 2011.

⁴ D.S. Black, 'Burning Man as Ephemeropolis and the Refusal of Meaning', paper presented at the North American Interdisciplinary Conference on Environment and Community, University of Nevada, Reno (1998). For a history and general information on the event, see Brian Doherty, *This Is Burning Man* (New York, 2004).

the city plan indicates),⁵ yet is devoid of any affixed or explicit meaning, thereby offering itself to a wide array of variously enunciated interpretations, associations and appropriations. Designed as a space of discovery and experimentation of otherness and for emancipation from the constraints of the 'default world', Burning Man's community builds up to a crescendo until Saturday evening when the Man is set alight in a feverish frenzy of music, drum pounding, fire swirling, shouts, dances, pyrotechnics and delirium before toppling over and continuing to consume itself well into the cold desert night. The 'sacrifice' by fire of many of the year's gigantic sculptural artworks follow that of the Man until the following evening when the 'Temple', Black Rock City's second symbolic centre, set at the frontier with the '(W)hol(l)y Other' (city plan) of the open 'Playa', is also consumed – this time in a surprisingly hushed and contemplative ambience.

Burning Man's most striking and certainly most structurally significant characteristic is its ban on vending, advertisement, and any form of commercial activity in favour of a thriving gift economy in tune with the festival's ethos of do-it-yourself creative entrepreneurship, participation, and involvement in the fostering of community.⁶ This radicalises a defining trait of subcultural phenomena in that it claims to be a haven of authenticity set against the conformist and alienating superficiality of media-saturated and consumerism-fuelled, corporate capitalist mainstream culture.⁷ In addition, and while Burning Man avoids most attempts at defining its ultimate meaning and does not present itself as an overtly religious event, it is underwritten by a profuse cosmology and self-consciously offers innumerable ritual settings and opportunities for one-time or spontaneous religious and spiritual investments. For many participants, the experience of Burning Man has strong religious dimensions.⁸ As a consequence, this utopian

⁵ See <http://www.burningman.com>. The organisation's website is a gold mine of information on the event.

⁶ The entrance fee for participating in this gift economy presently ranges between \$250 and \$450 per ticket (which covers the organiser's costs in addition to contributing to the Black Rock Arts Foundation which provides funding for some of the authorised installations and art work), and at least another \$1,500 in getting there and purchasing all that might be needed over the time of the festival (and much more depending on what one intends to give to the community).

⁷ See Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (Middletown, CT, 1996).

⁸ Most prefer the term spiritual. It is interesting to note that claiming spiritual or religious dimensions has little connection with the actual content of the interviews. The testimonies of those who shun such qualifiers still hold very rich material from a religious socio-anthropological perspective. The Burning Man experience widely functions as a rite of passage founding identity and belonging, is central to life narratives, is transformative, links with the cosmos, provides 'peak experiences' and experiences of *communitas* (Victor Turner), etc. See namely François Gauthier, 'Le Temple de l'Honneur. Rituels et deuils dans le désert au Festival Burning Man', *Frontières*, 17/1 (2004): 87–90; Lee Gilmore and Mark Van Proyen (eds), *Afterburn: Reflections on Burning Man* (Albuquerque, NM, 2005); Lee

experiment is readily interpreted as a vivid example of postmodern re-enchantment in an otherwise commoditised and disenchanted world.

It has become common within the social sciences to understand contemporary religiosities as examples of re-enchantment, be they novel and Dionysian forms (such as those found in subcultures) or more traditional ones. In this chapter, Burning Man provides a case study to contest the interpretation according to which its religiosity is the expression of re-enchantment effected by the transgression of a disenchanted, commoditised world. It rather develops the argument that such an interpretation rests on an erroneous comprehension of consumer societies and their constitutive enchantments. This in turn opens onto a more paradoxical and complex analysis of the rapports between consumerism and religion.

Burning Man as a Subcultural Phenomenon

Subcultures are cultural ensembles composed of a matrix of styles, codes, meanings, values, aesthetics, music, modes, and networks of communication and so on, constructed around claims of authenticity in opposition to mainstream values of conformity (and thus *in*-authenticity).⁹ Born out of the consumer society of the 1950s and 1960s, subcultures construct specific identities expressed as a lifestyle with their own overarching mythology and rituals such as gatherings, festivals, and shows. Born in *the* subcultural capital of the US, San Francisco in the late 1980s prior to moving to the desert in 1990, the Burning Man Festival is not so much a subculture in itself as an annual meeting place for subcultures and marginal (and not-so-marginal) identities; a ‘meeting of the (neo)tribes’.¹⁰ As such, Burning Man has grown to become a year-long cultural and social phenomenon which includes regional associations in most Western countries and a growing number of smaller annual regional burns occurring everywhere from the US to Australia, South Africa, and Spain.

Gilmore, *Theater in a Crowded Fire. Ritual and Spirituality at Burning Man* (Berkeley, 2010); François Gauthier, ‘Les HeeBeeGeeBee Healers au Festival Burning Man. Trois récits de guérison’, *Ethnologies*, 33/1 (2011): 191–215.

⁹ On authenticity as the crux of subcultural phenomena, see Graham St John, ‘Going Feral: *Authentica* on the Edge of Australian Culture’, *Australian Journal of Anthropology*, 8/2 (1997): 167–89.

¹⁰ Burning Man as a meeting of the tribes is an idea borrowed from Graham St John, who, while at Burning Man 2003, formulated it during a discussion held in the midst of a severe dust storm. See Steven T. Jones, *The Tribes of Burning Man* (San Francisco, 2011). While subcultures are often born as youth phenomena and coalesce within similar age groups thereafter, Burning Man has a varied population age-wise, ranging from newborns (with their parents) to 70 year-olds. ‘Subculture’ and ‘tribe’ are each contested concepts, and do not overlap as I seem to be suggesting here, but this is not a very important debate in my view with respect to the aims of the present discussion.

The population growth of the 1990s sparked the institutionalisation of its present form and the adoption of a small set of rules.¹¹ Voices were quick to arise, warning against what subcultures fear most: institutionalisation, recuperation and commoditisation. Two sets of narratives have since competed within the Burning Man community. On the one hand, it is said that the event allows for emancipation from the market. As one participant confided: 'So much of what you are is made by media: which products you buy, which groups you associate with. Burning Man crosses out all that.' On the other, some regret the good old days when there were no rules at Burning Man and fewer people, and lament the fact that 'Burning Man is now packaging meaning and selling community'; in other words that it has 'sold out' to media attention and mainstream consumer culture. Hence the question: does Burning Man's authenticity and religiosity stem from its opposition to a disenchanted consumer society?

Re-enchantment and the Myth of Rationality

The re-enchantment narrative emanated from postmodernists like Michel Maffesoli before spreading through the social sciences. It appeared to be particularly relevant from the 1990s onwards as the notion of the decline of religion, which had been announced by the most popular brands of secularisation theory, was increasingly recognised as being of limited help in understanding the complexities of religious realities and emerging phenomena such as subcultures. Re-enchantment seemed an adequate term, especially on account of the emergence of phenomena exhibiting explicit or implicit religious dimensions in politics, culture, arts, and sports. Yet re-enchantment presupposes a prior disenchantment, and thus carries forward what it initially aims to critique. Re-enchantment occurs at the margins of an otherwise disenchanted whole, like resilient weeds growing in the cracks of modern rationalisation.

This narrative equates the modernisation process (and modernity itself) with rationalisation, as in Weber's evolutionist account of the progressive unbridling of instrumental, formal rationality. This process, the story goes, marginalises the (supposedly) irrational basis of magic and religion (disenchantment is *Entzauberung*, 'demagification'), thus allowing modern capitalist societies to function without metaphysical foundations, and without a 'sacred canopy'. From this perspective, the capitalist market economy and consumerism are heralded as being governed by the laws of formal rationality and self-interest, and are held to be inherently secularising (in the sense of shaking religion from the 'symbolic economies' of modern societies). Yet, as some observers have noted, the capitalist

¹¹ The 'Ten Principles' are Radical Inclusion, Gifting, Decommodification, Radical Self-reliance, Radical Self-expression, Communal Effort, Civic Responsibility, Leave No Trace, Participation, and Immediacy. See the 'Survival Guide' at <http://www.burningman.com>.

economy is not a sphere of reason but a ‘theatre of emotions’,¹² starting with the irrational desire to accumulate power in the form of wealth. As such, this perspective fails to understand the specific ‘enchantments of capitalism’.¹³

One widespread mistake is to understand modernity as essentially characterised by rationality, and thus equating ‘postmodernity’ with the rise of emotionality. Against this belief Charles Taylor has forcefully argued¹⁴ that both reason and emotion (or passion, or irrationality) are constitutive of modernity, that they are two sides of the same coin – that they are, to use Foucault’s terminology, modernity’s *épistémè*.¹⁵ In sum, modernity is defined by a tension between Reason and Emotion, incarnated in the opposition between techno-science and Romanticism, or the works of Descartes and Rousseau, and so on. Thus objectified, Reason and the wild fluxes of Interiority complement and presuppose each other. The disenchantment and rationalisation narratives are, incidentally, but truncated and partial graspings of modern (and late modern) culture.

Authenticity as Romantic Truth for the Late Modern Self

As cultural theorist and economist Don Slater has argued, Romanticism and the idea of culture that it ‘produced were in many respects reactions against industrial, commercial, consumer society from Rousseau in the 1750s through revolutionary and nationalist romanticism up to the mid-nineteenth century. It has therefore provided probably the most enduring source of critiques of consumer culture, which it sees as part of a materialistic modernity that lacks authentic collective values and truths.’¹⁶ Yet at the same time, ‘paradoxically Romanticism also bequeathed to consumer culture many of the themes that we consider most modern or even postmodern’, promoting ideas of ‘personal authenticity ... derived from what was “natural”, emotional, irrational, sensual and imaginative in the self’.¹⁷

The modern period hosted a shift away from a Christian, other-determined morality towards individualism and the autonomous ethics of authenticity. Authenticity can be aptly defined with Taylor as

¹² André Orléan, *L’empire de la valeur. Refonder l’économie* (Paris, 2011).

¹³ Peter van der Veer, ‘Market and Money: A Critique of Rational Choice Theory’, *Social Compass*, 59/2 (2011): 183–92.

¹⁴ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, 1989).

¹⁵ An *épistémè* (literally ‘I believe’) refers to the conditions of discourse, the belief structure underlying the very processes of thought (and thus analysis) in a particular society at a given time, its grammar one might say. See Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses* (Paris, 1966).

¹⁶ Don Slater, *Consumer Culture and Modernity* (Cambridge, 1997), 15.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

the understanding of life that emerged with the Romantic expressivism of the late eighteenth century, that each of us has his or her own way of realizing one's own humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one's own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority.¹⁸

For Taylor, the extension of post-war consumerism in the second half of the twentieth century and the development of mass media have been a powerful force in the massification, dissemination and radicalisation of a modern culture of authenticity and expressivism, which until then was mostly the affair of the bourgeoisie and the élite. To push things slightly further, it is in a way *because* consumerism became a vehicle for the expression of individual authenticity that it was able to penetrate and shape culture to the extent that it has. In other words, the rise of consumption as a desirable social ethos has less to do with the spread of instrumental rationality than we commonly think, and a lot to do with the fact that it provided a powerful vehicle for the modern ideology of authentic and autonomous individualism.

Taylor's perspective is reinforced if we consider the history of marketing and consumerism in the last century. In the 1950s, marketing pioneers in the US initiated a trend which propagated throughout the West, in which products became conceived of as vehicles for individual self-expression in accordance with a new standard of self-realisation.¹⁹ Consumption is driven by the socially constructed imperative to create oneself in order to be recognised, and the act of consuming aims not so much at the satisfaction of needs as the construction of an authentic self, much like that promoted by Romanticism:

[t]he very idea that acts of consuming are seriously consequential for the authenticity of the self (as opposed to mere physical survival or social climbing) is an unintentional consequence of these early [Romantic] developments, as are many of the 'authentic values' in which modern consumer goods come wrapped: naturalness, emotional gratification, ethnic and national cultural values²⁰

One of the consequences of such a consumption-driven culture of authenticity is the need to express the symbols of this authenticity for it to be recognised – and therefore socially grounded and legitimised. Hence the development and popularity of increasingly sophisticated and personalised electronic media interfaces such as the internet, email and more recently social networks and their public *mise en scène* of private life. While the rationalistic pull of the modern project strove to

¹⁸ Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* (Boston, MA, 2002), 83.

¹⁹ See the introduction to this volume.

²⁰ Slater, *Consumer Culture*, 16.

separate the individual sphere from the public and the influence of the state,²¹ Romanticism symmetrically encouraged the outward expression of interiority and the merging of public and private.²² Through late twentieth-century consumerism, such Romantic values were given a powerful voice to the extent that the public and private divide, which had been foundational of our modern political systems (in both republican and liberal models), has become seriously challenged by what some have called the 'de-privatisation of religion'.²³

This discussion highlights the ways in which consumer culture is founded on the perpetuation of cycles of enchantment linked to the Romantic ethos. Contemporary consumer societies are not disenchanted and rationalised barren lands in the cracks of which resilient phenomena such as the Burning Man Festival constitute isolated and pure arenas of resistance and re-enchantment. The reality is more complex, as are the rapports between religion and consumerism.

The religious landscape has been profoundly modified as a result of the cultural changes brought on by the multifarious and variegated processes of modernisation leading to today's globalising consumerism. Yet very few scholars to date have acknowledged the importance of consumerism and economic ideologies (such as neoliberalism) with respect to these changes. While many have written about the incidences and dynamics of the individualisation of religion, the idea that this individualisation might be intimately tied to the consumer nature of our societies is an idea that has passed well under the radar. Similarly, noting the erosion of traditional, institutional regulations is commonplace, yet almost inevitably leads scholars to conclude that religion today is fragmented and diffused, since 'deregulated'. In concordance with the perspective sketched out in this volume's introduction, I would like to argue the contrary: that the contemporary religious landscape reveals not so much a state of un-regulation as a coherent system in which the values, ethics, worldviews, and eschatologies of consumerism are structural.²⁴ If religion has shifted away from a traditional type of culture, it is because it has become re-embedded (to use Karl Polanyi's expression)²⁵ in a globalising consumer culture. In other words, consumerism defines (in part at least) the backdrop for the re-configurations of religion, and the thorough understanding of its nature and dynamics can help us seize the *grammar* of a significant portion

²¹ See Jeff Weintraub, 'The Theory and Politics of the Public/Private Distinction', in Jeff Weintraub and Krishan Kumar (eds), *Public and Private in Thought and Practice* (Chicago, IL, 1997), 1–41.

²² Slater, *Consumer Culture*, 95.

²³ Philippe Portier, 'Les mutations du religieux dans la France contemporaine', *Social Compass*, 59/3 (2012): 193–207.

²⁴ See also François Gauthier, 'Primat de l'authenticité et besoin de reconnaissance. La société de consommation et la nouvelle régulation du religieux', *Studies in Religion/Sciences religieuses*, 41/1 (2012): 93–111.

²⁵ Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston, MA, 2001).

of religious reconfigurations today. The remainder of this chapter discusses the different levels linking religion and consumerism at Burning Man.

Rituals without Dogma @ Burning Man™

The 2003 Burning Man theme ‘Beyond Belief’ was meant to bring the religious aspects of the event to the fore.²⁶ In an interview, the founder of Burning Man, Larry Harvey, explained that he had wanted to propose this theme for years but had waited to feel that the community was ready for it. Harvey is a reader of anthropology and the philosophy of religion, and it is quite knowingly that the layout and geography of Burning Man makes such an abundant and purposeful use of religious functionalities and symbolisms: ‘The city planning has always been a form of sacred geometry.’ For example, the Man’s situation at the centre of an open circle is directly inspired by his readings of Mircea Eliade on the construction of sacred time and space, and the Man’s 2003 pedestal was inspired by Meso-American pyramids. His youthful reading of William James’ *Varieties of Religious Experience* and the idea that beliefs were secondary to experience especially moved Harvey. ‘Belief is thought at rest’ was indeed the first quote that one could read on the signs aligned along the dusty desert path leading to the Black Rock City gates that year. Accordingly for Harvey, only the resort to experience can help avoid a situation where objects of beliefs, which is to say, particular metaphysical assertions, become ‘idols one could kill for’.²⁷

In such an environment, says Harvey, ‘Spontaneously, rituals sprout’. From the Temple to the sacrifice of the Man, from the lamplighters’ ritual at dusk to the meditation classes and sweat lodges, Black Rock City’s offers, scattered across its ‘sacred geometry’, act as an invitation for all burners to participate in and create rituals. Burning Man’s ‘ritual without dogma’²⁸ type of religiosity radicalises the trend towards experiential and emotional religion in consumer societies. For Harvey, the religious investment of Burning Man is a direct product of the gift economy created by the vending and advertising ban. He sees culture as a naturally occurring phenomenon which is inhibited by consumerism. It is because Burning Man thwarts the reifying logics of consumer capitalism that rituals happen all over Black Rock City. For example, the San Francisco artist David Best has overseen the construction of the Temple for over a decade, and it has become indispensable

²⁶ Themes have been part of Burning Man since 1996. The themes are invitations to reflect on certain dimensions of the Burning Man experience and experiment with certain meanings and symbols. Each year a certain fraction of activities, theme camps, and artwork resonates with the theme, often in an ironic and playful fashion.

²⁷ This interview was realised two years after 9/11.

²⁸ See Lee Gilmore, ‘Fires of the Heart: Ritual, Pilgrimage, and Transformation at Burning Man’, in Lee Gilmore and Mark Van Proyen (eds), *Afterburn: Reflections on Burning Man* (Albuquerque, NM, 2005), 43–64.

to the Burning Man experience. Innumerable rituals occur within and around its lavish and intricate structure, made of recycled materials: from marriages to funerals, in addition to a host of personalised rituals of mourning, loss, joy, forgiveness, longing, hope, wish, and love. According to Harvey, these are the types of rituals one will not see happening in a consumer society. Rather, culture is

actively exploited and extirpated and strip lined and destroyed before it can elaborate itself into anything beyond primitive forms. ... The culture scouts seek authenticity, the most valuable commodity of them all, remove it as a bearer of identity, and then sell it as a lifestyle. We live in a situation where the economic forces are generally hostile to the generation of culture ... that is one reason we are in the desert and why we need to be very vigilant. ... Late twentieth-century capitalism concentrated on the marketing end, the manufacture of desire, the creation of spectacle, leaves the consumer isolated from inner resources, to others and to a greater world.

Larry Harvey's perspective is interesting because it is both right and wrong. It is right because consumerism indeed seeks to harness authenticity, yet it is wrong if it implies that consumerism is not itself involved in the production of culture. Returning to the mechanisms of consumer culture, Roberta Sassatelli argues that it relies on the two fundamental processes of commoditisation and de-commoditisation. Consumer culture does indeed seek to harness authenticity and meaning in order to derive a profit. Yet it relies at the same time on the circulation of brands within social relations. Consumer culture does not so much isolate individuals as it encourages them to express their identities with its products: 'All in all, modern consumers are asked to actively participate in the process of de-commoditization, producing themselves as the source of value.'²⁹ Goods are not so much material objects as symbols that must be appropriated by individuals and used to produce subjectivity:

Consumption is a sphere of social action regulated according to the *cultural principle of individual expression*. This is not to say that the subject is absolutely free; on the contrary, the subjectivity required by consumption is a binding individuality. To consume in appropriate ways people must be masters of their will and signal their difference from commodities.³⁰

Consumer culture is not a vampire that thrives by sucking the meaning out of otherwise spontaneous productions of culture. *It is the means of production of culture in a globalising world*. Hence one never escapes consumer culture, even when side-stepping profit-making. As was discussed in the introduction to this

²⁹ Roberta Sassatelli, *Consumer Culture: History, Theory and Politics* (London, 2007), 149. Emphasis in text.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 161.

volume, brands were the result of the self-realisation turn in marketing. They were conceived to fill 'the great gaps of meaning that exist in people's lives' and propose 'ideas that people can live by',³¹ in the words of UK marketer John Grant. While goods can fill a variety of functions, 'brands are primarily to be understood as resources for the construction of the self and its social moorings'.³² 'For consumers, brands are means of production. They function as a pre-established context of consumption that anticipates a certain style, mood or experience'.³³ Brands are promises that are intended as media for the 'construction of a common social world'.³⁴ As one loyal 'supporter' of a soft drink (!) confides: 'Because things are so crazy out there, people like to find out if they see the world the same way as other people. People will believe in anything – from a chocolate bar to a political view – if it makes them feel that they belong to something bigger than themselves'.³⁵ For the marketing guru Douglas Atkin, a brand is a meaning system, 'a unifying structure for the community' which separates those who identify with this meaning system from others. Brands allow for identification and differentiation. Brands are symbols, and the economy of consumerism is a 'spiritual' and 'symbolic economy'. As a consequence, the ideal of branding is the making (and sustaining) of a 'cult brand'.³⁶ Atkin even argues that 'the same dynamics are at play behind the attraction to brands and cults. They may vary in degree of strength (although not always), but not in type'.³⁷ Quoting Eileen Barker's empirical work in addition to his own interviews with Harley riders, Marines, Mormons, and Krishna followers among others, Atkin writes that cults and brands answer similar 'urges' for meaning, identity, community, belonging, security, and intelligibility. In other words, the branding ideal is to create a nexus of religiosity.

As a consequence, one can no longer oppose Burning Man's religiosity and authenticity to the reified disenchantment of consumer culture. From this perspective, Burning Man is a (successful) brand in its own right. The Burning Man logo, which depicts the figure of the Man in a minimalist design with arms raised and ready to burn (see Figure 8.1), has been appropriated by thousands

³¹ Quoted in Celia Lury, *Brands: The Logos of the Global Economy* (New York and London, 2004), 38.

³² Adam Arvidsson, *Brands: Meaning and Value in Media Culture* (London and New York, 2006), 81.

³³ Ibid., 93.

³⁴ Ibid., 3.

³⁵ Douglas Atkin, *The Culting of Brands: When Customers Become True Believers* (New York, 2004), 95.

³⁶ Atkin defines a cult brand as: 'a brand for which a group of customers exhibit a great devotion or dedication. Its ideology is distinctive and it has a well-defined and committed community. It enjoys exclusive devotion ... and its members often become voluntary advocates' (Atkin, *Culting of Brands*, xix).

³⁷ Ibid., xiii.

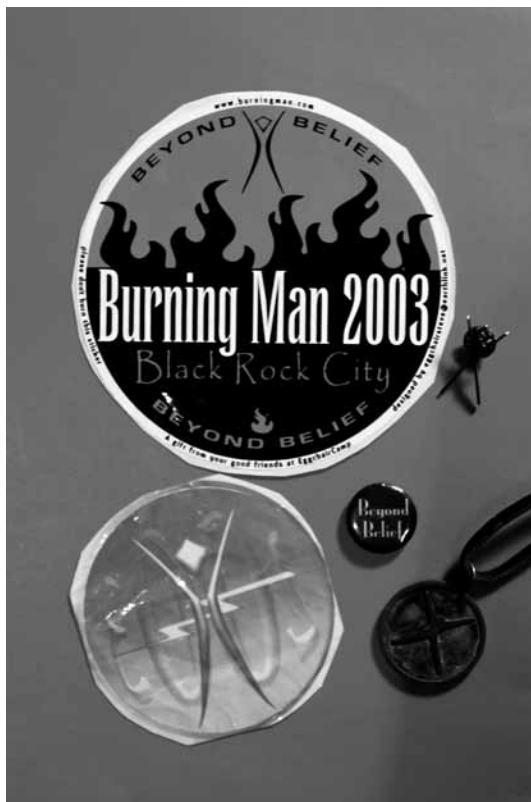


Figure 8.1 Examples of the Burning Man as re-appropriated by participants

of burners and appears on self-made T-shirts, bumper stickers, jewellery, even tattoos – just like other successful logos. It is an immediately recognisable symbol for those in the know and it sparks enthusiastic conversations with like-minded spirits across the globe. It is the marker of a tribe, the expression of a certain set of values, meanings, and commitment that readily confers identity. It is also, within its own territory, exclusive, as all other logos from the outside world are banned within Black Rock City.

From such an anthropological perspective, concerned with the symbolic (and religious) aspects of branding, one can indeed say that Burning Man is selling community and meaningful experiences. Yet selling access to community and possibilities of self-exploration and self-expression does not taint the authenticity of Burning Man. In the dynamic process of commoditisation/de-commoditisation, Burning Man generates authenticity for as long as it is considered to do so by participants, that is, as long as it maintains a delicate balance between financial, legal and political sustainability on the one hand and a sense of resistance to the pressures of outside sponsorship and commercialism on the other. It is

interesting to note that the Burning Man organisation is constituted as a limited liability corporation, which is to say that it has a for-profit structure that allows the organisation to have full decision-making power over the event. Yet, the very existence of Burning Man depends upon the volunteer work of several hundreds of people over the course of a year, and upon the participation and gifts of all burners during the event. This is how the sale of tickets at a moderate price still makes the event possible, while allowing for significant amounts of money to be redirected to the Black Rock Arts foundation which subsidises projects on (and off) Playa.³⁸ Gift and market economies are not opposed, but complementary and necessary to each other, certainly at Burning Man, but also elsewhere in consumer culture. The difference lies perhaps in the finalities: Burning Man does not sell community in order to make a profit (which is what a stock exchange inscribed company like Nike does), but for the sake of a certain ideal of community, to support the creation of culture for its own sake and, as is evident in Larry Harvey's discourse, to change the world by promoting and producing non-materialistic experiences.

Burning Man and the Rituals of Consumer Capitalism

Burning Man certainly attracts a good deal of people who are disenchanted, wary or simply critical of the consumer capitalist culture in which they live. Such testimonies as that quoted earlier in this chapter are easy to come by. Yet the important thing to note is that they do not differ in nature from what one would hear associated with other brands that successfully generate authenticity. This perspective allows us to make sense of a series of facts that are otherwise problematic from the idealist perspective according to which Burning Man's authenticity and religiosity depend on its opposition to and subtraction from consumerism. This is summed up by one participant who happens to be happily involved in the capitalist economy *and* a prominent member of one of Burning Man's longest standing theme camps: 'I love capitalism, just not at Burning Man.'

Burning Man rose to subcultural fame during the 1990s at the same time that the expansion of the internet and electronic communications were developed. It is well known that, alongside more bohemian, hippie, artsy, spiritualist and marginal burners, a significant fraction of burners are also professionally involved in the Silicon Valley. A 1996 article in *Wired* – the 'geek' magazine *par excellence* – heralded Burning Man as the 'New American Holiday',³⁹ publicising the event within tech-savvy networks. The network sociality of Burning Man was seen by many as the materialisation of the horizontally networked, radically inclusive utopia of the internet, as developed in open sourcing and common-based peer

³⁸ See <http://blackrockarts.org>.

³⁹ Bruce Sterling, 'Greetings from Burning Man!', *Wired*, 4/11 (1997), [Online], available at: <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/4.11/burningman.html> [accessed: 20 July 2011].

production (such as Wikis). The very idea for Google was allegedly born at Burning Man (the name itself is supposed by some to be derived from ‘goggles’, a piece of equipment made indispensable by the frequent desert windstorms that sweep the Playa), and this company, along with many others involved in the dot-com sector, design conception, programming, and marketing, has been encouraging cultural creatives to go to Burning Man for inspiration and team-building.⁴⁰ Burning Man experiences such as organising theme camps and putting up some of the giant interactive art projects also appear on CVs. Yet if Black Rock City is a place where new relationships are intensively created, talking about one’s professional activities in the ‘default world’, making business propositions and acting in an interested manner are taboo there. Participants widely take on pseudonyms, called Playa names (often given by others rather than self-appointed), and it is not uncommon that one will have no idea of a person’s true identity or professional activity, even after spending a lot of time together over the course of the festival. The gift economy of Burning Man ensures that social relations are not the product of pure self-interest and thus guarantees authenticity.

As such, it is undeniable that Burning Man serves a social function with respect to wider society. Fred Turner has documented how Burning Man’s bohemian ethos supports new forms of production which are emerging in Silicon Valley by showing ‘how elements of the Burning Man world – including the building of a socio-technical commons, participation in project-based artistic labour, and the fusion of social and professional interaction – help shape and legitimize the collaborative manufacturing processes driving the growth of Google and other firms’, and thereby act as a ‘key cultural infrastructure’⁴¹ for new media industries and consumer capitalism at large.

A similar case could be made for participants linked to sectors such as education, social work, bars, restaurants, and entertainment arts (such as music and circus). The whole array of alternative and Eastern spiritualities and holistic therapeutics can also be found at Black Rock City. While the ‘alternative’ offered by these spiritualities often involves a critique of capitalism, their primary actors (yoga teachers, *reiki* practitioners, meditation coaches, and so on), contrary to traditional church structures, completely rely on practices that are wholly integrated in a personal-care market for their income and livelihood.⁴²

⁴⁰ Clément Baudet, ‘Les chaleurs du festival Burning Man’, *OWNI* (6 September 2011), [Online], available at: owni.fr/2011/09/06/dans-la-chaaleur-du-festival-burning-man [accessed: 20 July 2012].

⁴¹ Fred Turner, ‘Burning Man at Google: A Cultural Infrastructure for New Media Production’, *New Media and Society*, 11/1–2 (2009): 73–94. Quotations are drawn from the abstract.

⁴² See Marion Bowman’s contribution to this volume.

Catering for the Lifestyles of the Culture of Authenticity

One of the main tropes of the personal narratives collected on Playa is personal transformation.⁴³ One could even say that self-transformation is Burning Man's *raison d'être*. The typical (and idealised) first experience is recalled in terms of being 'blown away', shocked, humbled, and so on, often with profound and lasting consequences. Participants discover another way of being, interacting, and belonging. They are revealed to themselves. Not only are participants transformed at Burning Man, but they also use its context for rituals that involve transformation.

As a theatre for radical self-expression, immediate experience, radical self-reliance, participation, and individual responsibility, Burning Man is a remarkable and radical example of the culture of authenticity that has emerged out of the modern subjective turn and which has been diffused throughout society with consumerism. Burning Man's religiosity is therefore entirely on the side of what Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas have called subjective spirituality, in opposition to 'life as' forms of religion that depend on tradition and an outside authority.⁴⁴ Accordingly, the socio-demographics of Burning Man, in spite of its call for radical inclusion, are massively middle class, white, and highly educated – in other words, the social strata most affected by the subjective turn.

The introduction to this volume stresses how the ethos of consumerism is inseparable from the dissemination of the culture of authenticity and how this has favoured the crystallisation of identities around recognisable lifestyles. The underlying issues are that of identity (who I am in my own life?) and ethics (how to live this unique life?). This cultural shift has affected religion, whose lived forms can often be assimilated to lifestyles.⁴⁵ My own research on subcultures has tended to show how for many people, subcultures and 'religions' coexist on the same 'level' in consumer societies – which is one way of understanding why these phenomena make such an explicit use of ritual structures and why they are infused with so many religious symbols.

While outside observers have tried to define the meaning of the festival, the organisation has successfully evaded any limiting definition (for example, as a 'Woodstock remake', or as a resurgence of *Wicker Man*). Rather, Burning Man attracts *because* of the indeterminacy of its ultimate meaning, which allows for personal investment and appropriation.⁴⁶ It is because the Man has no defined

⁴³ See Lee Gilmore, 'Fires of the Heart: Ritual, Pilgrimage, and Transformation at Burning Man', in Lee Gilmore and Mark Van Proyen (eds), *Afterburn: Reflections on Burning Man* (Albuquerque, NM, 2005), 43–62; Gauthier, 'HeeBeeGeeBee Healers'.

⁴⁴ Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford, 2005).

⁴⁵ See François Gauthier and Jean-Philippe Perreault (eds), *Jeunes et religion au Québec* (Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2008).

⁴⁶ For holistic spiritualities, the indeterminacy of meaning is the very condition for religious meaning and communalisation.

meaning that it can coalesce a community made of autonomy- and authenticity-seeking individuals. One often hears that the Man has as many meanings as there are burners. Yet this is only correct to the extent that everyone's experience is irreducible by definition. In reality, interviews and informal conversations on this matter tend to revolve around a limited set of themes. The following statement collected from a burner onsite reflects the opinion of a quite significant majority: 'For me, the Man is the symbol of my experience here. I think it's also the symbol of the community', before hurrying to add: 'But that's just me, I'm sure everybody else has a different answer.' The paradox that lies in the massive dissemination of this opinion coalesces the two sides of the 'religion of the individual' (Durkheim) in the era of authenticity: personal experience, and interactive, voluntary-based (versus organic) community. Here is a vivid illustration of how a radically unregulated space in the guise of the indeterminate meaning of the Man leads to homogeneous appropriations. While the meaning of the Man is not defined by any cultural, political or religious exteriority, the predictable and highly homogeneous meanings uncovered by empirical research serve the socially constructed imperatives of self-realisation and authenticity.⁴⁷

Conclusion

This chapter has shown some of the complex and somewhat paradoxical ways in which the religiosity of Burning Man is intimately tied to consumerism and the dynamics of consumer culture. If the interdiction on vending and advertising allows for a thriving and extravagant gift economy (in which the community, symbolised by the Man, is implicitly the intended receiver) that catalyses its religiosity and is foundational of its authenticity and community, these dynamics do not break with those of consumerism, understood as a symbolic economy aiming at providing (more or less profitable) building blocks for self-realisation, identity, and belonging. Furthermore, this late modern potlatch supposes an abundance only made possible by consumer society. Consumers do not escape the market when they participate in Burning Man, but find a refreshing and catalysing frame outside the overt finality of utilitarian profit.⁴⁸ While participants speak abundantly of personal transformation, and while many lives are rerouted in the wake of this experience into less standardised, materially-oriented and corporate lifestyles, Burning Man is not confrontational with respect to consumer capitalism. Rather, for the economies linked to new media and the holistic spiritualities milieu for example, the ephemeral incandescence of Burning Man's religiosity can even be said to be foundational.

⁴⁷ Gauthier, 'Primat de l'authenticité'.

⁴⁸ See Robert V. Kozinets, 'Can Consumers Escape the Market? Emancipatory Illuminations from Burning Man', *Journal of Consumer Research*, 29/1 (2002): 20–38.

The Burning Man Festival, as many subcultural gatherings, can perhaps best be defined as an ‘alternative cultural heterotopia’.⁴⁹ Heterotopias are places of otherness, as the Latin signifies. Yet heterotopias, unlike utopias (u-topia: non-place), are not idealised and suspended time-places but rather embodied, socially embedded and heterogeneous liminal social worlds with paradoxical, ambivalent, ambiguous and contested meanings. As an alternative cultural heterotopia, Burning Man actualises, legitimises, and defers the dynamics of consumer culture at the same time as it contests certain of its contradictions (such as the *telos* of profit versus the imperatives of individual authenticity outside any pre-determined frame) by proposing cultural ‘alternatives’ and new possibilities. This chapter has argued that a subcultural phenomenon such as Burning Man is not a haven of religiosity because it manages to escape consumer culture, but rather because it is a radical example of its most profound symbolic dynamics. As an alternative cultural heterotopia, Burning Man is not so much an array of enchantments and resistances in rupture with the disenchantments of consumer capitalism as it is a blazing and colourful example of its enchantments.

⁴⁹ See Graham St John, ‘Alternative Cultural Heterotopia and the Liminoid Body:

Beyond Turner at Confest’, *Australian Journal of Anthropology*, 12/1 (2001): 47–66.

Gauthier, F. (2013). Religion in consumer society : Brands, consumers and markets. Retrieved from <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com>
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