



BURNING MAN

The American Frontier revisited in Acoustic Space

Ronny Diehl

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Acknowledgements

Ever since I saw the first documentary on Burning Man in 1998, I have been fascinated by this alien-type of absurdist event. Since then, I made it to the playa three times and always feel overwhelmed by the beauty of the desert and the beauty and humor of Black Rock citizens. With this work I hope that I can give something back that the Burning Man community has given me.

First of all, I want to acknowledge that I would have never made to the playa three times without the huge support of my parents: So I say VIELEN DANK! Secondly, I would like to thank Larry Harvey for offering me more than three hours of his time and listening to a German trying to talk like McLuhan. I also do thank John Law for being an inspiration to research through the rich countercultural scene of San Francisco. I want to thank Alex for initiating the idea for this project, and Brian for his advice and his patience to listen to my ramblings. I also would like to thank Keith, Micha, Martin, Alex and Bjorn for their support in the editing process.

1.1. Introduction

Burning Man is a counter cultural phenomenon that happens annually in the Black Rock Desert in Nevada. At the end of summer, during the week before Labor Day, thousands of people make their pilgrimage out to the desert to be part of a community its members recognize as a real city – they call it ‘Black Rock City’. Today, the festival has a history of almost 25 years and has become America’s most outstanding event for artistic expression and celebration of a new sense of community. With more than 50,000 participants, the event has grown out of a grass roots movement into an attraction to which people from across North America and all parts of the world travel.

Numerous articles, academic research papers and books have been published and dozens of documentaries have been filmed on Burning Man. Black Rock City’s distinctive culture, its celebration of radical self-expression, art and alternative community has attracted the attention of writers, scholars, journalists and filmmakers in the same way as the growing number of *Burners* – the term used for people who frequent the festival. The complexity of the festival allows an abundance of interpretation, for example, that it is not only an arts festival or a countercultural underground movement or just ‘the biggest party on earth’ but that it is indeed a veritable ‘city’ - with roads, street signs, radio stations, newspapers, a hospital, an airport, its own police force, etc. – and its own distinctive culture. The culture of Burning Man is a celebration of artistic expression with an emphasis on experience, ritual and participation.

Burning Man exemplifies two histories that will be the focus of the discussion – the history of the American Character and the history of Western Man.¹

First, Burning Man needs to be explained as a specific American cultural phenomenon that is a continuation of the most important theme/myth in American History: the *American Frontier*. This frontier was essential in the construction of the American Character and therefore, Frederick Jackson Turner’s thesis ‘The significance of the frontier in American History’ will be discussed. He was the first author to write on the American Frontier and

¹ Western man will be used as a generalized term that refers to all societies and cultures that are driven by Western thought since the Greeks invented the first complete phonetic alphabet as opposed to Oriental and primitive cultures. See: McLuhan, Marshall. *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. University Press of Toronto. 1962, p. 51 -71.

point to its significance in producing the American Character. This theory will provide the framework behind the history of Burning Man, which unfolded in the remotest corner of today's mainland America, the Black Rock Desert. Out there, in an environment isolated and hostile to any human settlement, a group of people found their 'promised land' where they could proceed with their annual ritual of burning a wooden effigy, which they called the 'Man', undisturbed by the authorities that forced them to abandon their ritual in San Francisco.

The desert provided the perfect setting to play with ideas of an alternative society for a community that had grown out of the strong heritage of counter cultural movements in the San Francisco Bay Area. They gathered under harsh and primitive circumstances at the final frontier and, eventually, the irony of a countercultural civic community that builds its own city became real. It is a story of people who tried to survive in one of the most hostile environments, a call for radical self-reliance and the sense of community that comes with survival; it is the story of unlimited freedom where almost any kind of behaviour was possible; it is the story of guns, outlaws and the abundance of free land; it is the story of streets and city borders and the establishment of law and order through rules and civic institutions and finally, it is the story of the quest for new identities - individually and communally. In short, it is the re-enactment of the American Frontier.

The history of Western Man, the second theoretical perspective on which this thesis is founded, is explained through McLuhan's theory on media. He offers an understanding of western civilization over the last 3000 years that explains the significant change that is currently unfolding through the electronic media environments. The disintegration of the Greeks tribal culture through the phonetic alphabet, the explosion of visual perception caused by the 'Gutenberg Galaxy' and the re-emergence of acoustic perception through all forms of electric media are important points in Herbert Marshall McLuhan's theory. Furthermore, the thesis will relate these concepts to Burning Man and explain how the festival embraced new modes of play, participation, organization, artistic expression and ritual. Embedded in this analytical framework, ancient symbols and pagan ideas (for example, the archaic burning of a wooden effigy and temple), the city structure, the no-commerce-philosophy and the on-going play with religious concepts will provide a broader and deeper understanding of Burning Man and the cultural consequences for the whole of western society. Burning Man, like no other event, exemplifies current changes in western society that require an explanation through the study of media. The term media will therefore be used in the broadest of senses to include

language and any man made tools. One of the most important authors in media studies, McLuhan, will be used in argument and provide the theoretical framework to approach Burning Man as an event of the 21st century, the century of the 'Global Village' or what he later preferred to call the 'Global Theater' with all its ramifications for the individual and society.

Although McLuhan did not provide a fully comprehensive structured philosophy, his legacy was a new understanding of history and culture. Therefore, this thesis will discuss and explain his field approach on media theory, which juxtaposes different styles and borrows from many different fields of studies, for example, anthropology, neuroscience, perception psychology, communications, information engineering and, most importantly, all forms of art.

In the first chapter, I will introduce the most important themes of McLuhan's theory. Secondly, I will explain the basic arguments of Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis on the American Frontier. These theories will serve side by side as tools for the analysis. In the second chapter, I approach Burning Man through a discussion of its historical precedents – that is, the countercultural movements of the San Francisco Bay area since the mid-1950's to the early 90's. In the third chapter, I will proceed by describing the beginnings of the festival, first at a beach in San Francisco, later in the Black Rock desert where its 20 year long history constitutes a re-enactment of the frontier myth. In parallel discourse, the countercultural movements of San Francisco and the Burning Man Festival will be discussed as symbolic manifestations of new modes of perception and awareness that are related to the technological changes of the 20th century. Therefore, in the fourth and final chapter I will specifically explain how the culture of Burning Man indicates how Western society in general is undergoing major changes that are caused by media of the electronic age.

In order to give full credit to the complexities and cultural ramifications of the event, this thesis approaches Burning Man in a variety of ways. First of all, I participated in the event in 2000, 2007 and 2009. Therefore, I was able to talk to many participants of the festival and could see the changes that had taken place throughout that period. Secondly, I personally interviewed Larry Harvey (quotes from the recorded interview will be included), the founder and current director of the festival, in October 2009 and talked with him about the themes and significances of Burning Man in historical and cultural contexts. Thirdly, I conducted a telephone interview with John Law who was also main organizer of the event until 1996 and who provides a critical perspective on the development of the festival into the large scale event

of today. Finally, I researched numerous articles, academic papers and books that have been written on Burning Man to attain a broad perspective on the festival. Anthropologist, ethnographers, art theorists and Cultural and Religious Studies scholars are at the forefront of publications on Burning Man and their conclusions reflect that the festival can be understood as a microcosm in relation to the macrocosm of Western society.

1.2. M. McLuhan's legacy – approaching mankind's history with the study of media and consciousness (figure/ground; acoustic/visual space)

[...] when dealing with the megatrends of history, and human behaviour in general, it is better to analyze the broad implications of movement patterns rather than a particular event. (McLuhan, 1989: 40)

Herbert Marshall McLuhan was an unorthodox scholar who approached mankind's history through the study of media. Although he is famous for his utterances on how media and communications influences man in general, his work essentially deals with the study of human consciousness and man's notions of space and time. "Spatial perceptions are not absolute but are culturally constructed." (McLuhan, 1989: 10) He developed concepts explaining the connection between media and consciousness and how media changes human perception and cognition. However critics suggest they lack an analytical, philosophical framework. One scholar even described McLuhan's legacy as "Unthinking Modernity."² However, McLuhan's work provides the basis for understanding humankind's history and the enormous shifts of today's world of technological innovation and cyberspace that force a new awareness on mankind. At the core of his theory were his investigations into different modes of human perception that correlate to the different processing modes of the two brain hemispheres. Therefore, I will introduce McLuhan's concepts of visual/acoustic and figure/ground through a short neurological inquiry into the human brain.

² Judith Stamps and Glenn Wilcott quoted in: Cavell, Richard. "McLuhan in Space". in At the speed of light there is only illumination : a reappraisal of Marshall McLuhan. Moss, John and M. Morra, Linda (eds.). Ottawa: Univ. of Ottawa press, 2004, p. 170.

1.2.1. Revealing the inner workings of the human brain – it is plastic

At no period in human culture have men understood the psychic mechanisms involved in invention and technology [...]. (McLuhan, 2001: 385)

Today, humankind has reached the point in history where for the first time it can fully become aware of the processes involved in our cognition and perception. It is increasingly becoming clear how our perception of reality is culturally biased and that these biases are not just habits that we internalize through acculturation. Our brain itself is modified and undergoes structural changes depending on the culture, or more specifically, the influences to which it is exposed to. To determine these influences and to bring them to our awareness will be one of the major tasks of current and future generations. At the same time, we need to become aware of how our consciousness and perception is influenced and framed based on the inner structure of our brain, as well as the interplay of our senses. McLuhan points out that “[h]umankind can no longer, through fear of the unknown, expend so much energy translating anything new into something old but must do what the artist does: develop the habit of approaching the present as a task, as an environment to be discussed, analyzed, coped with, so that the future may be seen more clearly.” (McLuhan, 1989: VIII)

Neuroscience has discovered that the brain is not at all a static structure which, once it has grown to its full size, will not change. In fact, the brain can change drastically and modify to new circumstances. This is called the *plasticity* of the brain and it becomes evident when a severe change in our ability to interact with the world has occurred, for example, the loss of one of the senses due to an accident.

When we lose a sense – hearing, for example – other senses become more active and more acute to make up for the loss. But they increase not only the *quantity* of their processing but also the *quality*, becoming more like the lost sense. ... deaf people intensify their peripheral vision to make up for the fact that they can't hear things coming from a distance. People who can hear use their parietal vision, whereas the deaf use their visual cortex, at the back of the brain. Change in one brain module – here a decrease in output – leads to structural and functional change in another brain module, so that the eyes of the deaf come to behave much more like ears, more able to sense the periphery. (Diodge: 295)

As revealed in the book *The brain that changes itself*, the human brain has an amazing capability to restructure - and this goes hand in hand with the interplay of the human senses, because the brain has a tendency to adjust to the new circumstances by balancing and finding an equilibrium in synesthesia. This will become important when we later discuss media –

understood as extensions of man – because all media not only extend capabilities beyond the normal ratio of human senses, but they also numb or hypnotize the extended sense.³

However, the brain also changes in its biological structure when, for example, reading is taught to children. (Diodge: 295) It alters and enlarges the visual modules of the brain. Experiments show that “each medium creates a different sensory and semantic experience – and, we might add, develops different circuits in the brain.” (Diodge: 308) Moreover, each medium stimulates different parts of the brain, depending on its own character and structure. For example, hearing induces stimulation on the right-hemisphere whereas reading on the left-hemisphere. Herein lies one of the most fundamental discoveries on which Marshall McLuhan’s work is largely based, namely that “[t]he entire world, past and present, now reveals itself to us like a growing plant in an enormously accelerated movie.” (McLuhan, 2001: 385) He was certain that through all our media, which are an extension of our central nervous system, man has reached a point in history where he becomes conscious of the inner workings of his consciousness itself. All of a sudden, he is able to see and understand the progress of his development, based on the assumption that the explanation of human progress lies in the very nature of consciousness balancing and restructuring itself due to cultural changes of sense ratio.

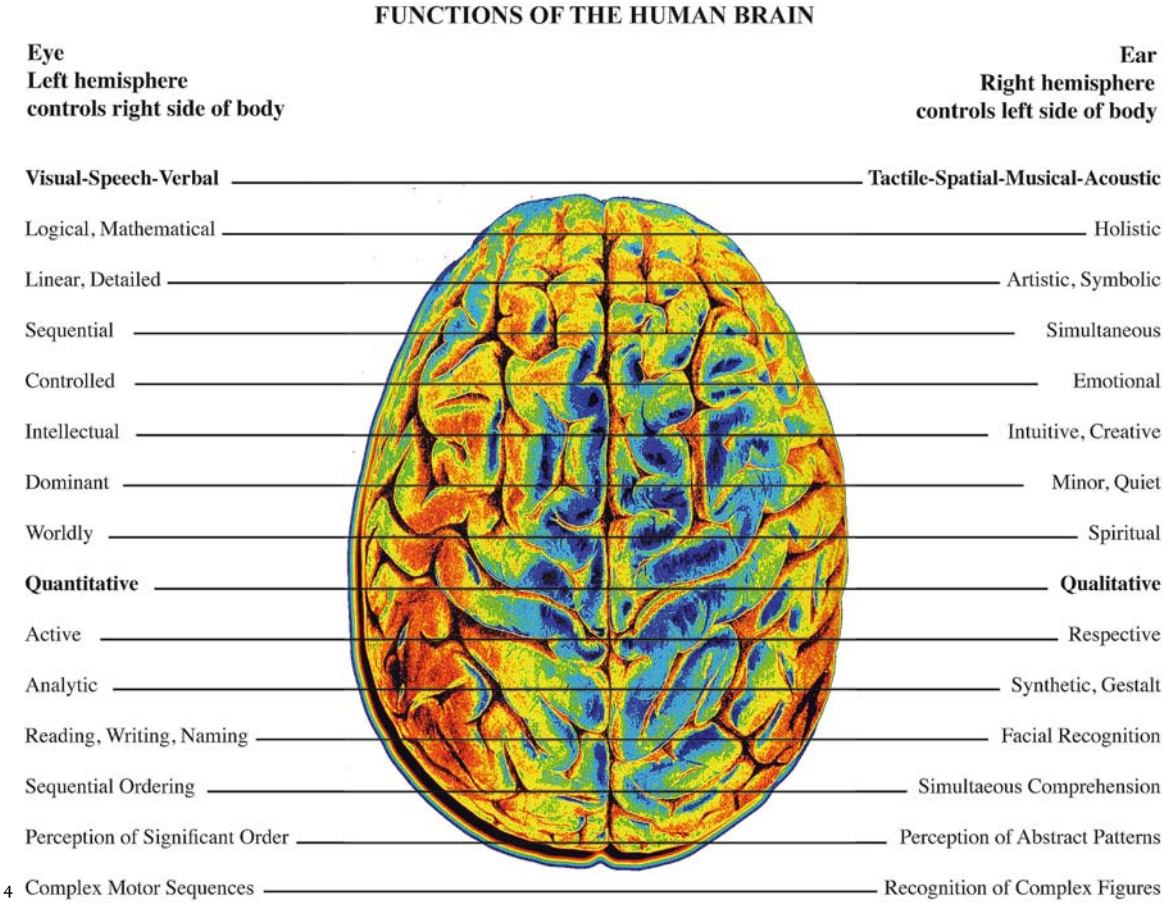
Media, by altering the environment, evoke in man unique ratios of sense percptions. The extension of any one sense alters the way we think and act – the way we perceive the world. When these ratios change, men change. (McLuhan, 1996: 41)

1.2.2. The Two Hemispheres

We must once again accept and harmonize the perceptual biases of both (the right and the left brain – added) and understand that for thousands of years the left hemisphere has suppressed the qualitative judgement of the right, and the human personality has suffered for it. (McLuhan, 1989: 4)

³ The term *media* is understood in the broadest sense. All man-made tools are media and extensions of man. The hammer is an extension of the fist, the knife of the nails and teeth, the wheel of the feet, writing is an extension of the eye, and language is an extension of man himself. “The first humanoid uttering his first intelligible grunt, or “word”, outered himself and set up a dynamic relationship with himself, other creatures, and the world outside his skin. Speech entails competition. It is also a tool to reconstitute nature into working synthetic models, to translate one form onto another.” (McLuhan, 1989: 93) In the evolution of man’s extensions, the computer marks a final stage where man has extended his consciousness. What is important to note here is the reciprocal relationship between man and media: “...technologies, like words, are metaphors. They similarly involve the transformation of the user insofar as they establish new relationships between him and his environments.” (McLuhan, 1989: 8).

The two hemispheres of the human brain have two distinctive and opposite ways of perception and cognition processing. The left-hemisphere modes of cognition and processing, which dominate in Western cultures, are responsible for logical and intellectual thinking. This sphere processes everything in visual terms and is therefore regarded as the sphere of the ‘eye’. All knowledge in science is based on the left-hemisphere’s analytical, mathematical, sequential processing which tends to be detail oriented. It perceives in quantitative measures and is responsible for reading, writing and naming. (McLuhan, 1989: 5)



In contrast, the right-hemisphere is the receptive sphere (the left is the active one), responsible for emotions, creativity and holistic processing. It is regarded as the spatial and tactile hemisphere, which has the ability to recognize patterns and complex figures and comprehend simultaneously. It perceives in qualitative measures and undertakes facial recognition. Finally, its musical and acoustic mode of perception makes it the sphere of the ‘ear.’ (McLuhan, 1989: 54)

⁴ Chart-diagram of brain functions, taken from: McLuhan, M. & Powers, B. The Global Village. Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 54.

Interestingly enough, the history of mankind has so far been a dualistic one. The Occident has perceived reality mainly in quantitative measures and visual terms whereas the Orient and other non-literate cultures perceive more qualitatively and holistically. Even today it becomes evident how perception differs depending on our cultural background.

These experiments and many others like them confirm that Easterners perceive holistically, viewing objects as they are related to each other or in context, whereas Westerners perceive them in isolation. (Diodge: 302)

The question remains why there is such a difference. Why is it that Western Man adopted this mode of left-hemisphere thinking whereas other cultures have a preference for right-hemisphere modes of perception and cognition?

1.2.3. The Phonetic Alphabet

Western history was shaped for some three thousand years by the introduction of the phonetic alphabet, a medium that depends solely on the eye for comprehension. The alphabet is a construct of fragmented bits and parts which have no semantic meaning in themselves, and which must be strung together in line, bead-like, and in a prescribed order. Its use fostered and encouraged the habit of perceiving all environment in visual and spatial terms – particularly in terms of a space and of a time that are uniform,

c,o,n,t,i,n,u,o,u,s,
and
c-o-n-n-e-c-t-e-d.

The line, the continuum

– this sentence is a prime example –

became the organizing principle of life. “As we begin, so shall we go.” “Rationality” and logic came to depend on the presentation of connected and sequential facts or concepts. (McLuhan, 1996: 44)

Like no other script, the Phonetic Alphabet is like a mathematical code of the spoken language. No other script achieved this level of abstraction. The Phoenicians’ alphabet was not yet a ‘complete phonetic’ alphabet when the Greeks adopted it. It consisted only of consonants – the vowels were left out and had to be filled in by the reader. In the process of adapting this technique of phonetic script into their own language, the Greeks (probably merchants who had contact with Phoenicians) used signs for weak Phoenician consonants that did not exist in Greek language, for their vowels. Due to the fact that Greek culture had an emphasis on poetry and music, they also used signs for the different pitches of vowel sounds – something no other culture had done before and thus all scripts were syllabic or ideographic which requires greater *participation* from the reader to complete its message. It is in the very

character of the phonetic script code where we can identify the cradle of Western culture. (McLuhan, 2008: 54-61)

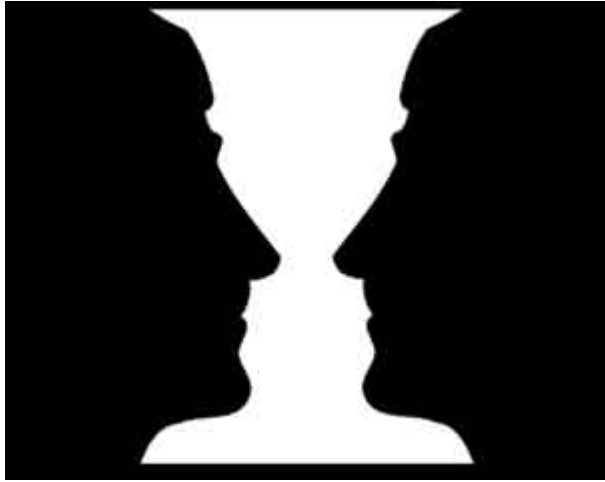
The phonetic alphabet enhances and stimulates left-hemisphere processing by its uniform, continuous and sequential character. However, to fully understand the workings of the phonetic alphabet, we have to understand how the alphabet achieves this level of abstraction in contrast to other scripts.

1.2.4. Figure and Ground

In order to grasp the difference between the distinctive forms of perception of the two hemispheres, we need to look at the difference between figure and ground. In general, as we have seen before, the left-hemisphere processes information by concentrating on detail. It perceives with the eye, which means that it has a tendency to only 'see' objects rather than background. This becomes obvious when we look at the paintings of ancient Japanese and Chinese artists and their love for the 'space within'. The space between objects for them has played a more important role than the objects themselves – what they tried to achieve is to let the beholder fill in the 'space within' and therefore behold the 'hidden' ground. In stark contrast to Western art, especially Renaissance and later periods where the objects or the people were 'objectively' represented leaving no space at all for the beholder to fill in, the suggestive art of Asia is the very opposite. (McLuhan, 1989: 72)

Edgar Rubin brought the difference between figure and ground to attention through his *Gestalt Psychology*. He was the first to demonstrate the difference between figure and ground by drawing pictures that could be seen or rather processed in two distinctive ways.⁵ The two faces facing each other and, thereby, forming a vase is probably the most famous one.

⁵ About the *Gestalt* principles. July the 14th 2010:
<<http://graphicdesign.spokanefalls.edu/tutorials/process/gestaltprinciples/gestaltprinc.htm>>.



In general, people who are left-hemisphere dominated tend to see the figures than the *background* – their perception is exclusive rather than inclusive. New scientific findings in Neuroscience conclude that even the most basic activity such as ‘seeing’ or looking at an object is culturally biased. “Easterners see through a wide-angle lens; Westerners use a narrow one with a sharper focus.” (Diodge 302) Hence, when Easterners look upon a picture with various objects on it, they see the relation of the objects in their position to each other – one could just say they observe the pattern – whereas Westerners will rather remember individual objects after having been exposed to such a picture for a specific amount of time.

Just taking a look into a Chinese ideogram and its inner workings, it becomes clear why we see so differently. “For the ideogram is an inclusive *gestalt*, not an analytic dissociation of senses and functions like the phonetic writing.” (McLuhan, 2001: 92) In the phonetic alphabet, the gap between figure and ground operates on a high level, because it makes a clear distinction between the sounds and written words – language being the ground and the written visual code the figure. Hence, the visual sense has been given the power to control the ear or as McLuhan has put it ‘an eye for an ear’.

Like no other script, or media, the phonetic alphabet implies that language is something superimposed on the world. In contrast, an ideographic script, for example, seems to de-emphasize such a duality between thought and words, between meaning and reality. Instead it encourages the view that thought is (part of) reality, because the ideographic character still retains components of the real world and, therefore, does not make this clear distinction between figure and ground – the ground remains part of the figure (script). What

⁶ Also taken from the website on *Gestalt* principles. July the 14th 2010:
<<http://graphicdesign.spokanefalls.edu/tutorials/process/gestaltprinciples/gestaltprinc.htm>>.

you have left in the phonetic alphabet are only figures without ground. Moreover, visual abstract figures highly stimulate the left-hemisphere mode of perception and cognition. Therefore, McLuhan concluded that a figure without ground is logic. Logic is nothing more than cutting the figures off the ground and stringing them together into a tight web. (Das Medium: 15, 21)

The left-hemisphere paradigm of quantitative measurement and precision recently re-explicated by some neurophysiologists, depends on a hidden ground which has never been thoroughly discussed by scientists in any field. That hidden ground is the acceptance of visual space as the norm of science and rational endeavour. (McLuhan, 1989: 21)

This new logic inherent in the phonetic alphabet gave the Greeks a powerful tool to detach themselves from nature and conceive the world in visual terms, which is what we call rational (McLuhan, 1989: 21, 59). Hence, Euclidean geometry, the cornerstone of Western mathematical and analytical thought was entirely based on the assumption that objects – now conceived as detached from their ground – were *rationally* detached from people, making man capable of becoming the ‘objective observer’. Comparing the four Euclidean axioms with philosophic syllogisms of the Eastern tradition, for example Buddhism, it becomes evident that although objects are also ‘objectively’ conceived by the observer, they still remain part of the observer, because how they are seen depends on the beholder’s state of mind. In Asian traditions, the paradox relationship between observer and the observed remains a dynamic one, because the relationship is understood as being in constant flux. This is in contrast to Western tradition where it is static due to left-hemisphere dominated perception. (McLuhan, 1989: 65, 66)

The impact of the phonetic culture has been elaborately explained by McLuhan in his most important books *The Gutenberg Galaxy* and *Understanding Media*. He writes that “...the separation of the individual from the group in space (privacy), and in thought (“point of view”), and in work (specialism), has had a cultural and technological support of literacy, and its attendant galaxy of fragmented industrial and political institutions.” (McLuhan, 2001: 116) Regarding literacy, he especially refers to alphabetic literacy. Although any form of writing enhances the ‘eye’ and therefore visual perception, “...phonetic writing, alone, has the power of separating and fragmenting the senses and of sloughing off the semantic complexities.” (McLuhan, 2001: 364)

When the Greeks adopted the technique of the phonetic alphabet, their tribal culture collapsed and a society which praised individuality, entrepreneurship and democracy emerged.

1.2.5. Man's perception of space

The alphabet separated and isolated visual space from the many other kinds of sensory space involved in the senses of smell, touch, kinaesthesia, and acoustics. Abstract visual space is lineal, homogenous, connected and static. (McLuhan, 1989: 59)

Western Man lives in the left-hemisphere bias of visual space, where everything has to have continuity and linearity. His notion of cause and effect, derived from the lineal and continuous form of visual space, made him become the objective scientific observer who cuts off all his other senses from his visual experience. When everything is perceived in continuous relation, the interval or the space 'in between' is filled by rational logic. The opposite can be said about Asian Man, for whom the space 'in between' is what constitutes reality. In the Asian tradition, art is about 'the principle of suggestion' where the viewer has to become part of the art piece himself. It is in the beholder's mind where the space 'in between' is filled and the art piece is completed. (McLuhan, 1989: 65, 66) That is what reflects the essence of Eastern philosophy and art, where the art of flower arrangements is about harmonizing the space in between them. Lao Tse said that the space between the axle and the wheel is what constitutes the wheel. (McLuhan, 1989: 63)

Therefore, non-literate or oral cultures live in *acoustic* space.⁷ Acoustic space is the space perceived by the right-hemisphere. Its characteristics are non-homogenous and discontinuous where the "resonant and interpenetrating processes are simultaneously related with centers everywhere and boundaries nowhere." (McLuhan, 1989: 45) For example,

American Indian traditions are spatially based rather than temporally based. Indian people lived their lives in accordance with the cycles of nature. While Western scientists see space and time as two distinct dimensions of reality, Indian cultures value their association with their homelands and other patterned

⁷ I would like to point out that McLuhan often uses the term 'non-literate' indiscriminately in reference to cultures who do not use the phonetic alphabet, even if a culture uses a script. Though writing in general enhances visual perception, for ex. the Chinese ideograph, it is only the phonetic alphabet that completely isolates visual from auditory cognition.

the organization of their villages and their ceremonies to the spatial movements of the sun and stars in the world above. (Kidwell: 13)

Therefore, creation is understood “in a constant creative flux that requires continual participation” that is guaranteed through prayers and rituals. (Kidwell: 36) Therefore, past and future is not perceived in terms of a historical past and a distant future of progress, but rather an all-at-once cyclical concept of destruction and renewal. (Kidwell: 154) This is most obvious when it comes to how language constructs these beliefs. Native American languages do not have the same features of time as linear construct. In the Hopi Indian language, for example, there are “no words, grammatical forms, constructions or expressions that refer directly to what we call “time.””⁸

It is still a controversial issue as to whether language is the basis for any concepts of time. Since Noam Chomsky established his theory of an immanent human language capability that structures time, colors and numbers, amongst other things, most scientist have rejected the notion that language forms the basis to understand reality. However there is new evidence that Chomsky’s theory is wrong, including most basic linguistic construction such as recursion. New published findings by Professor Everett from University of Manchester argue that there is evidence which will demand a new approach to understand the human capability of language. He bases his argument on his observation of an Amazonian tribe. The *Piraha* tribe which reportedly cannot conceive of number at all, also has no words for colours, nor for a past or future.⁹

In contrast, these findings would suggest that McLuhan is correct when he says that spatial perceptions including time are culturally constructed. (McLuhan, 1989: 10) Therefore, the notion of history conceived in a distant linear past and the notion of a future reflected in the concepts of progress, evolution and development are constructs born out of the Renaissance period and which are also apparent in the linguistic structures of European languages. “The English language, in fact most Western languages, suggest through their tense

⁸ Benjamin Lee Whorf quoted in Kidwell, Clara Sue; Homer Noley; George E. “Tink” Tinker. *A Native American Theology*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001, p. 94.

⁹ An article on Professor Everett’s research on the Piraha Tribe: Davies, Elizabeth. “Unlocking the secret sounds of language: Life without time or numbers.” *The Independent*. Science section. Saturday, 6 May 2006. Accessed on July the 17th 2010. <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/unlocking-the-secret-sounds-of-language-life-without-time-or-numbers-477061.html>>.

structures, that reality can only be contained in the concept of a past, a present and a future...”
(McLuhan, 1989: 40)

In contrast, the properties of visual space are “continuous which is to say infinite, divisible, extensible and featureless [...] connected (abstract figures with fixed boundaries, linked logically and sequentially but having no visible grounds), homogenous (uniform everywhere), and static (qualitatively unchangeable).”(McLuhan, 1989: 45) Time, especially with the invention of print, is conceived in a linear order with a *distant* past, present and future that gave man the idea of history and progress. Progress, however, is a concept of the “nineteenth-century mind. Progress literally stopped with electricity because you now have everything at once. You don’t move on from one thing at a time to the next thing. There is no more history; it’s all here. There isn’t any part of the past that isn’t with us, thanks to electricity. [...] Speed, huge speed-up, means there’s no more past. Now, there is no more history.”¹⁰

1.3. Frederick Jackson Turner and “the significance of the frontier in American History” – a short summary and analysis on the impact of his theory

American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character. The true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the Great West. (Turner: 32)

Ever since Frederick Jackson Turner first lectured and later published his text *The significance of the frontier in American History* in 1893, it has remained as one of the most important and influential works on the subject of the American Character. Turner pointed out that the frontier has not only been a myth in the American mind with all its associations of free land, wilderness (as an earthly paradise and as well as a place of darkness and savagery that had been celebrated by authors like James Fenimore Cooper and Mark Twain before Turner’s thesis) and land of opportunity, but that the frontier with its ongoing movement westward has been

¹⁰ McLuhan quoted in: Benedetti, Paul and Nancy DeHart (eds.) Forward Through The Rearview Mirror: Reflections On and By Marshall McLuhan. Ontario: Prentice-Hall Canada Inc, 1996, p. 184.

the very place of Americanization: “The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization.” (Turner: 33)

Turner argues that the essence of the American character will not be found in the colonies of the Atlantic coast line but in the Great West. The early colonies at the Atlantic coast line were still European in their character. Throughout the first colonization period, they developed from a primitive form of industrial society to a manufacturing civilization accompanied by the rise of civic institutions and representative government quite similar to, or one might even say offspring of, their European roots. The settlements of the Atlantic coast developed in a similar fashion to most other nations, because development was restricted to a certain era. (Turner: 32) However when pioneers moved away from the coast line to settle in the ‘hinterland’, thus moving to the first of several frontier lines, they began to move steadily away from their European heritage. The hinterland of the coastline settlements was the first of a series of frontiers that lay beyond the ‘fall line’¹¹ which was characteristic throughout the period of the western expansion and movement. (Turner: 36) In the 17th century the fall line was the hinterland of the coastline settlements, in the 18th century, the Appalachian Mountain Range, in the 1st quarter of 19th, the Mississippi, in the middle of the 19th, the Missouri (omitting California, Utah and Oregon) until the end of 19th, when the fall line was the Rocky Mountains and the line of the arid lands. (Turner: 36-37)

At these fall lines, the experience of the American Frontier would shape the American Character that distinguishes itself not only from its European heritage but also from the early beginnings of American settlement at the Atlantic Coast line. The further away from the Atlantic Coast line, the more American the participants of the frontier experience would become. (Turner: 34)

At “[...] the meeting point between savagery and civilization” (Turner: 31), European man had to adopt Indian ways to survive, because “at the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man. He must accept the conditions which it furnishes, or perish, and so he fits himself into the Indian clearings and follows the Indian trails.” (Turner: 33) Over 300 years of westward expansion, frontiersmen and women brought with them social, economic and political traditions and customs that were of no use at the frontier. The frontier required

¹¹ The term fall line (also called ‘fall zone’) refers to the geological fall line where an upland region and coastal plain meet. In the beginning of American settlement this geological fall line that can be observed almost throughout the Atlantic coast constituted the barrier between settled and unsettled area of the early colonies. Turner generalizes the term using it for all geographical borders that were natural barriers for American westward expansion, for example, mountain ranges or rivers are fall lines too.

simple survival skills, association of the settlers based on equality leaving behind all complex social activities. At the frontier, the struggle for survival in the wilderness, the adaptation of primitive forms of living and the eventual formation of new civic institutions grown out of that struggle meant a steady movement away from the European heritage for the individual and the community. “Thus the advance of the frontier has meant a steady movement away from the influence of Europe, a steady growth of independence on American lines.” (Turner: 34)

The first of such a distinctive area that became truly American was the ‘middle Region’, which people today refer to as the Midwest or the American heartland. “The middle Region was the first real America” because it lay west of the Appalachian mountain range - the first of a number of geographical boundaries in the westward expansion movement - and therefore its isolation furnished its specific American tendencies. (Turner: 51) In the beginning of the settlement of that region, pelt hunters and backwoodsmen like Daniel Boone were the first who crossed the Appalachian mountain range. What followed was an influx of pioneers who often had to fight the Natives using guerrilla war tactics they had learned from them earlier on as foes or allies in wars against other colonial powers. They cleared the land and raised settlements that later became villages and towns. (Billington and Ridge: 194)

Daniel Boone’s frontier of today’s Kentucky, that suddenly had become accessible because of the discovery of the Cumberland Gap, was not the first frontier experience of American settlement. However the discovery of the Cumberland Gap was significant in the way that it opened up a new frontier zone that lay beyond a fall line and therefore demanded new means of transportation and communication to connect with the East, thus accelerating American development.

The frontier as a zone of escape from the restrictions of civilization and society has been in the mind of the earliest English settlers. Outcasts, such as Anne Hutchinson and religious groups that did not conform to the Puritan ideals of the mid 17th century Massachusetts theocracy moved west to the frontier zone of what today is Rhode Island. (Miller: 13) Throughout the history of the US, the frontier as an area of freedom and liberty attracted rebels and outcasts. In fact, the Puritans were themselves such a group when they left England in order to establish the theocratic state they had envisioned. Many religious groups later followed, for example, the Quakers who established their own state in Pennsylvania. But also within the US, groups that did not comply with mainstream society moved to the frontier to settle with their communities in the isolation of the Great West and to be able to practice

their religious beliefs freely. The most famous example of such groups are the Mormons who, in 1847, moved far west into unsettled territory (at that time the frontier line was in the arid plains of Kansas and Nebraska) and planted their community in Salt Lake Valley.

After the closing of the frontier in the late 19th century there were voices that expressed concern about what might happen when the frontier had vanished. Turner argued that “[l]egislation is taking the place of the free lands as the means of preserving the ideal of democracy.” (Turner: 155) Others were more concerned and asked if “...the government, which (it was fondly believed) had been kept on an even keel by the escape of discontented elements through a frontier "safety valve," could prevent "radicals" from gaining control?” (Billington and Ridge: 692) These concerns were justified considering that the American character has an anarchistic tendency. The experience of the frontier made people cherish simplistic forms of life and be ‘self-reliant’ such that as a consequence “...individual liberty was sometimes confused with the absence of all effective government.” (Turner: 53) The frontier as a mythic place of absolute freedom, the connection to nature and simplistic forms of living has been in the minds of anarchist personalities and groups throughout American History.

Henry David Thoreau was very influential amongst the transcendentalist movement in the mid 19th century. He is well-remembered for writing about the *Resistance to Civil Government*. He encouraged civil disobedience in order to make political statements, but most importantly, his work calls for “the necessity for individual self-realization.” (Howe: 247) For the individual, it was absolutely necessary to be independent and self-reliant in order to find ones own full potential. Thoreau said that the chief hindrance to achieving this goal is society. For two years, he turned his philosophy into practice and moved to the woods, built himself a log cabin, planted a garden and lived mostly in solitude. Although he did not live at the frontier (he lived not far away from his town where he grew up and could visit and receive friends) he essentially lived the solitary life of a backwoodsman and created his own frontier experience.¹²

To create a frontier is not something exclusively American. Turner himself pointed out that it is not so much a geographical area than an idea. (Turner: 61) However, his argument was that the frontier and its expansion westward over a period of more than 300 years was the most decisive aspect in shaping the American Character. He pointed out that

12 Alger, Jamie. Thoreau's Frontier. 2007. Accessed on April the 30th, 2010.: <<http://mcc-enh241.pbworks.com/Thoreau%27s%20Frontier>>.

even though for most settlers the frontier experience did not last longer than a generation before moving to the next frontier in the Great West¹³, it did have a lasting impact.

The works of travellers along each frontier from the colonial days onward describe certain common traits, and these traits have, while softening down, still persisted as survivals in the place of their origin, even when a higher social organization succeeded. The result is that to the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics. (Turner: 59)

Although physically the frontier did vanish, it remains the most important myth in American culture, particularly, in popular culture that is reflected in the Western movie genre, Books, Music, etc. and is also widely used as a metaphor in American political rhetoric. American Presidents have often used the frontier in speeches and referred to new frontiers that they claimed needed to be conquered, for example, social and economic frontiers to ensure that the American Dream is kept alive or John F. Kennedy's announcement that outer space and the moon are the next frontier that required the whole nation's effort in order to be explored.

A hundred years after its first publication, "Turner's essay is the single most influential piece of writing in the history of American history" wrote John Mack Faragher in a newly published edition of Turner's essays. (Turner: 1) In his own days, Turner argued against the historical viewpoint in American Studies that saw the protestant Anglo-Saxon heritage and slavery as the primary themes that had influenced and shaped America and focused on the frontier as the primary perspective in which to understand his nation's history.

The frontier myth, however, was not something new to the American public. Since the first settlements at the Atlantic coast, the frontier myth was a metaphor for the ongoing struggle of survival and expansion that served as a nation's ideology since the early colonial days. (Slotkin: 15) By the mid 19th century, the American people had already embraced the frontier myth to the extent that the defeat of General Custer and his Army in the Battle of Little Big Horn, 'Custer's Last Stand', "...was for a generation a metaphor of disaster..." and a devastating blow for the American public. This exploded the frontier myth of the pre-

¹³ Turner specifically used the term 'Great West' to distinguish between all other terms that were used before that had signified various areas depending on each period of the Western expansion in which they had been used. For example, the Northwest was for a long period of time the area of today's Midwest. The term 'Far West' referred to areas in the Rocky Mountains and further to the Pacific.

industrial age in which civilization had always succeeded over savagery. (Slotkin: 13) Nevertheless, the frontier myth remained important and with the rise of mass media, its function as a metaphor for self identity and self assertion grew even further.

Over the years following Turner's publication and the widespread acceptance of his frontier theory, many Western historians (as they were called by then) followed Turner's footsteps and did not question its main paradigm. Herbert E. Bolton claimed that the west was everywhere and that Turner's west should have been called the north. He preferred the frontier of the Spaniards who had pushed it all over the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico into the inland. Another historian, Walter Prescott Webb, at first saw the West in the arid plains and the desert, and later in the all three continents of the new world.¹⁴

Ray Allen Billington who had embraced Turner's thesis published his first edition of a detailed analysis of the Westward Expansion in 1949. In the book, he described how the social mobility of the West, with people constantly moving westward, not only had the impact that they did not feel attached to their homestead as much as in other cultures and nations but also elaborated on how social mobility affected the American attitude towards hierarchy:

If the pioneering experience fostered political participation, it also accelerated the emergence of a social democracy that was even more typically American. This came naturally to a frontier people who lived amidst daily examples of the potential equality of all men. Class lines based on old wealth meant little in a land where the local ne'er-do-well might be transmuted into the town's richest citizen by a fortunate mining strike, the humble landowner transformed into a millionaire with a lucky real-estate speculation, or the local barmaid elevated to the peak of society's pyramid by marrying the village banker. (Billington and Ridge: 687)

He summed up that the frontiersmen and women not only steadily grew more independent with every new frontier they settled on, they also adopted character traits that were distinctively American: "the westerners were materialistic, mobile, versatile, innovative, wasteful, optimistic and nationalistic."(Billington and Ridge: 690)

Many of the later historians criticized Turner's approach depending on their historical perspective - often related to a political one - for instance, his theory's capitalist agenda, the lack of elaborating on the role of women at the frontier or its generalization of a geographical

¹⁴ Wilbur R. Jacobs, John W. Caughey, and Joe B. Frantz. Turner, Bolton and Webb : Three Historians of the American Frontier. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965.

area that rather calls for a regional approach. (Brinkley: 444) Today, we could also argue against the arrogant and rather imperial view of Turner and his contemporaries who perceived the Natives as savages living in an inferior stage of human evolution which morally justified conquering and taking their 'free land.' For example, Turner cites the Italian economist Loira (analyse della proprieta capitalista, ii, p.15) who says that a land with no history such as the US exemplifies the course of universal history, ignoring the fact that the American continent was inhabited by millions of people whom often had highly sophisticated cultures and histories. (Turner: 38)

Nonetheless, Turner was aware that history always changes with the changing historical perspective of the present and that his work was a first attempt to understand American History on the basis of the movement and expansion of the frontier. Critics of later periods unconsciously forgot that their rejection of Turner's theory was still a reaction to it that had more to do with social, economical, political attitudes or moral values than with an objective and justified judgment. In American history today, Turner is still omnipresent. (Turner: 229 -230)

In summary, Turner and his contemporaries saw American History mainly as a history of Western civilization that was dominated by ideas of progress. What Turner and others identified as the savagery of the Native Americans could also be interpreted as a lack of left-hemisphere-processing, an absence of rationalism, individualism and perception of history as a linear process. In the first chapter, I explained how *Naturvölker*¹⁵ such as Native Americans most commonly had very sophisticated philosophical systems in which they perceived history not in a linear but rather in a circular manner. Nevertheless, at the time Turner made his argument, it was generally assumed that Western man brought civilization to the Americas and that the Natives had neither culture nor a sense of history. They were *savages* and thus the land was free to be *civilized*.

It is also interesting to note that I see comparisons in both Turner and McLuhan, even though their theoretical perspectives differ – Turner wants to explain American History whilst McLuhan tries to come up with a comprehensive explanation of the last 4000 years. However,

¹⁵ I specifically use the German term here to emphasize that the English term 'primitive people' is not only derogative, but also leaves out the fact that such cultures do relate very differently to their environment. They generally have an acoustic awareness that enables them to perceive nature holistically. As M. McLuhan has pointed, Western man cannot perceive nature because his senses are imbalanced. (McLuhan, 1989: 132) His visual bias allowed him to see himself outside the framework of nature from his fixed point of view. Hence, the German term *Naturvölker* which translates into "people who live in nature."

both try to incorporate a variety of sources that broadens their perspective without reducing or challenging their major assumptions.

2.1. A short historical introduction into the ‘frontier’ counterculture of San Francisco – a prelude to the Burning Man Festival

San Francisco is “the focal point of the creative frontier mentality and the farthest you can get on the frontier.” (Law: 32:30)

In order to understand the history of the Burning Man Festival, it is necessary to give a short account of the history of San Francisco, because, as Larry Harvey, the initiator of the Burning Man ritual has said it is “ the only city out of which a Burning Man Festival could have emerged.” (Harvey: 1:47:00)

The physical frontier disappeared in the late 19th century. However, Turner pointed out that its myth would remain to play an important role in the American psyche. Outsiders, anarchists, rebels, people who questioned the morals of mainstream society and mistrusted authority, who in the days of the Westward Expansion movement would have sought refuge at the frontier, now had to find new means to live free of the constraints of society within society. Although the Gold Rush of the so called *1849ers* turned San Francisco from a small village to a city – the first urban center on the West Coast – and thus transformed it from a simplistic frontier community to a complex metropolis, the frontier mentality remained and became a striking feature. In terms of Turner’s frontier thesis, San Francisco grew quickly into an urban city and thus ceased to have the characteristics of a frontier town. However the physical frontier wilderness remained for another 40 years, and in the case of San Francisco, lay in the East. Therefore, the isolation of San Francisco as a city and the only metropolis west of the Mississippi certainly paved the way for the city’s non-conformist culture.

In the second half of the 20th century, this non-conformist culture of the San Francisco Bay Area¹⁶ would become apparent in countercultural movements as well as in innovative

¹⁶ Discussing the history of San Francisco and its cultural influences on counterculture in general and specifically on Burning Man can only be done in a broader context, for it is necessary to take the whole San Francisco Bay Area into our historical consideration. Indeed, it is not possible to do otherwise, because the region of the Bay is

ideas in technology and entrepreneurship that, eventually, would have a worldwide impact. After World War II, like so many others before in the history of the American West, non-conformists from the East sought adventure and refuge in the city.

[...] I wanted to get to San Francisco, everybody wants to get to San Francisco and what for? In God's name and under the stars what for? For joy, for kicks, for something burning in the night. (Kerouac, 2007: 281)

Jack Kerouac's book *On the Road* is the most iconic literary work of the Beat Generation. Before his book was published, Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and important figures of the Beat literary movement from New York had moved to San Francisco in the mid 1950's where they met with Gary Snyder, Gregory Corso and other writers and poets of the West Coast. In October 1955, the Six Gallery readings with the first public reading of Allen Ginsberg's poem *Howl* marked "[...] the night of the birth of the San Francisco Renaissance Movement" (Kerouac, 1976: 13) that established San Francisco as the countercultural hub of the 1950's. Kerouac's famous character Dean Moriarty in *On the Road* who also appeared in some of his other novels, was based on his friend Neal Cassady, a central figure in the Beatnik movement. Ginsberg's *Howl* was also inspired by and a tribute to Cassady with whom he had a love affair for many years – "N.C., secret hero of these poems, cocksman and Adonis of Denver." (Ginsberg: 128) Cassady was an inspiration for many writers and poets of the Beat Generation for his spontaneous, rebellious and passionate attitude to life that he lived restlessly and by all means 'non-conforming' to the moral standards of the 1950's (he openly had homosexual relationships, used drugs such as Marijuana, Benzedrine and sometimes opiates, had a long history of criminal offences and served some time in prison). Therefore, he lived all what the Beat Generation stood for and became its impersonating icon. Moreover, Cassady's legacy would reach into the countercultural movement of the late 1960's that explicitly started in San Francisco Bay.

intertwined and connected at all levels. Especially when it comes to countercultural movements of the 1960's, the universities of Berkeley and Stanford will play an important role. Of course, having spoken of the frontier mentality in technological innovation and entrepreneurship, Silicon Valley is its epicenter. As in the day-to-day language, there are three ways to refer to the area: San Francisco Bay, San Francisco Bay Area or just Bay Area. I will use San Francisco specifically when we talk about the city.

Ken Kesey, author and key figure in the *Psychedelic movement* that preceded the hippie era wrote *The day Superman died*, a short story and tribute to Cassady who had died in 1968.¹⁷ Kesey had met Cassady in the early 60's in San Francisco Bay when he organized his first LSD parties in Perry Lane.¹⁸ Kesey's parties will play an important role in the history of the counterculture movements of the 1960's, specifically the *Psychedelic movement*. They stand as a direct link between the Beatnik movement of the 50's and the hippie movement of 1960's that was an expression of the aspirations of Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, Neal Cassady and many others of the Beat Generation. They stood as examples to break with the moral restraints, the 'social frontier' of Post War America. Cassady and Ginsberg would become part of Kesey's psychedelic scene, Ginsberg would also play a part in the hippie and anti-war movement.

Secondly, Kesey who was introduced to LSD through a government program, believed that the drug opened the door for self-liberation and promoted the use of the drug. In 1964, Cassady joined Kesey and his followers, the *Merry Pranksters* on their 'epic' road trip to the East coast, documented by Tom Wolfe's book *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. Cassady drove the colorfully painted Bus *Furthur* most of its way to New York where Kesey met with Timothy Leary (who later also became a central figure of the psychedelic and hippie movement) to discuss the use of LSD as a means to change society. At that time, LSD was still legal and was the new frontier in the study of the subconscious in which Timothy Leary as a researcher and scholar was heavily involved in. The trip that has also been interpreted as a reverse of the westward movement in American history would have major ramifications for the hippie movement because it made the use of LSD widely popular – due to Tom Wolfe's popular book and, because, on their trip, the Merry Prankster would give the drug to anyone who was interested in it. (Cavallo: 110-11)

Interestingly, according to journalist and author Eric Davies, Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters were the most influential psychedelic ancestors to Burning Man.

¹⁷ Ken Kesey. *The Day Superman after died*. Northridge, California: Lord John Press. 1980.

¹⁸ Tom Wolfe, author and journalist wrote the novel *The Electric Kool Aid Acid Test* that would make 'Ken Kesey and the Merry Prankster' cultural icons. The book has also been called a *non-fiction novel* and is the first exponent of *New-Journalism*, „ a term that Wolfe himself [...] coined“ (Cateforis: 103) that became popular through his work and others like Hunter S. Thomson.

[T]he Pranksters' memorable Acid Tests were improvisatory fetes that deployed low-tech multimedia, a ragged carnival of thrift-store fashions, and fusions of performance, participation and prank. Kesey's famous bus Furthur is about as Burning Man as the '60's ever got [...]. (Davis: 24-25)

Finally, *the Electric Kool-Aid Acid test* happenings would draw a scene of artists, intellectuals and musicians who would become key figures in the following hippie movement. For instance, "Jerry Garcia [...] and the Grateful Dead were integral components of the acid tests [...]. Their live music performances were at the center of a barrage of light designs, film projections, electronic sound manipulations, and experimental drugs, all of which fused together to make the acid test a truly mixed media event." (Cateforis: 103) Others like Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder and bands like Jefferson Airplane who would also perform, were at the happenings that would eventually draw media attention.

In late 1966, LSD became an illegal drug in the state of California. By this time, the psychedelic movement and the Acid gatherings began to attract large crowds of people. On the day the California state legislature banned the drug, the *Love Pageant Rally* took place in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park next to the Haight-Ashbury neighbourhood which would become the epicenter of the hippie movement. Kesey and the Merry Pranksters as well as the Grateful Dead and Janis Joplin were among the hundreds of participants. (Tomlinson: 297) In January 1967, a much larger gathering, the *Human Be-In* with up to 30000 people took place in Golden Gate Park which drew nationwide media attention and was the starting point for the *summer of love* in San Francisco. (Tomlinson: 299) The free concert would showcase many of the bands that would become cultural icons of the hippie era and epitomize the new culture of 'love and peace', for the hippie movement would become famous. "Along with [the] local rock bands, Gary Snyder, Jerry Rubin (both local popular writers), Allen Ginsberg, and Timothy Leary attended the event, advertised as a "Gathering of the Tribes." (Grogan: 271) At the same time, protests groups against the war in Vietnam became part of the movement that was driven by students of Berkeley and Stanford (the two major universities of the Bay Area). (Stevens: 329)

To sum up, after World War, the San Francisco Bay Area slowly developed an alternative 'scene' that was driven by intellectuals, authors, musicians and students. Whilst initially still local, it would grow to become a massive national movement with San Francisco as its 'epicenter.'

2.2. Seeing the Beatniks and 1960's from *vanishing point*

Television completes the cycle of the human sensorium. With the omnipresent ear and the moving eye, we have abolished writing, the specialized acoustic-visual metaphor that established the dynamics of Western civilization. (McLuhan, 1996: 125)

The major cultural shifts that started in the 1950's and culminated in the hippie movement of the late 1960's are easily understood when we consider the impact of Television. TV was the medium that reversed the dominance of left-hemisphere perception in Western man's history: "In television, images are projected at you. You are the screen. The images wrap around you. You are the vanishing point. This creates a sort of inwardness, a sort of reverse perspective which has much in common with Oriental art." (McLuhan, 1996: 125) It is no coincidence that the Beatniks were fascinated with Eastern philosophy and art. The appreciation for Jazz and Bebop is correlated to the new writing techniques of the Beatniks, especially the favouring of improvisation and stream of consciousness.

Film and radio were media that already abolished old modes of linear narrative and their point of view. (The telegraph was actually the first of many such inventions which undermined the linear, sequential, mechanical, one-thing-at-a-time order. Moreover, all media based on electromagnetic waves or *light* waves give way to an instantaneous, all-at-once as in acoustic space perspective.) However it was TV that quickly became the most popular medium, accessible to every household that had a tremendous impact on the American psyche. It gave way to new forms of perception that collided with the rational environments of print culture – the bases of American democracy.

Television demands participation and involvement in depth of the whole being. It will not work as a background. It engages you. Perhaps this is why so many people feel that their identity has been threatened. This charge of light brigade has heightened our general awareness of the shape and meaning of lives and events to a level of extreme sensitivity. (McLuhan, 1996: 125)

As with all new media, most people are unaware of the impact of a new medium, especially those cultures and societies who are the first into which a new medium is introduced. McLuhan repeatedly said that one of the most striking features of human history is that we are generally unaware of the ramifications of a new media. We are numbed

by the experience of seeing ourselves extended. “It goes without saying that the universal ignoring of the psychic action of technology bespeaks some inherent function, some essential numbing of consciousness such as occurs under stress and shock conditions.”¹⁹ TV ‘inflicted’ a new sensitivity and awareness on the public and, specifically, the young generation. Therefore, the political unrest of the late 1960’s to the Vietnam War which was also significantly triggered by the uncensored media coverage of war that embedded journalists showed on American TV, is no coincidence.

The young today live mythically and in depth. [...] Many of our institutions suppress all the natural direct experience of youth, who respond with untaught delight to the poetry and the beauty of the new technological environment, the environment of popular culture. (McLuhan, 1996: 100)

Therefore, TV gave way to the clash of the generations in the 1960’s. The popular culture had dramatically shifted by the new electric environments that became part of everyday American life. The African American acoustic *musical* sensibility that was introduced through the new media of radio, the record and electrically amplified sounds – first Jazz and then later Rock n’ Roll – was the best example of a new sensibility and appreciation of art forms.

2.3. The Diggers: a countercultural group with a legacy that reaches Burning Man

One group that was also present and had a big influence in shaping the image of the Haight-Ashbury hippies were the *Diggers*. (Grogan: 271) The Diggers derived their name from a group of poor English farmers with the same name, which, in the turmoil of the English Revolution in 1649–50, had formed an anarchist type of community that rejected the notion of property. The Diggers in San Francisco also pursued ‘anarchist’ type of ideals of a society free of property, which they demonstrated by giving away Free Food and setting up Free Stores. They were opposed to the “premises of culture based on profit, private property, and power. Most importantly, “[t]he Diggers combined street theater, anarcho-direct action, and

¹⁹ McLuhan quoted in: Benedetti, Paul and Nancy DeHart (eds.). Forward Through The Rearview Mirror: Reflections On and By Marshall McLuhan. Ontario: Prentice-Hall Canada Inc, 1996, p. 119.

art happenings in their social agenda of creating a Free City.”²⁰ Their ideas were symbolic for the hippie era and would remain extremely influential for other groups that would later emerge after the hippie movement’s eventual decline in the late 1960’s and early 70’s. Their legacy of ideas will set the pretext of what would become a major theme of the Burning Man Festival.

Essential to their concept of guerilla street theater was inspiring people to think about social and political issues and giving a new perspective to issues of concern in a very direct and often satirical way. The Merry Pranksters had also used similar tactics to shed the constraints of social norms. They had given themselves new names and wore costumes in order to seek new identities, and they performed street theater acts that were in the category of *pranks* – most often during their acid test happenings. (Wolfe: 56) Some of the meaner pranks included giving out LSD without letting people know that they were taking it. (Wolfe: 241 - 53) The Diggers, however, took this attitude to a new level.

At the height of the summer of love, tens of thousands of young people from all over the country came to San Francisco in the hope of being part of the new Love and Peace movement and expanding their consciousness through the use of LSD. This was incubated by Psychedelics like Ken Kesey through his Acid test happenings and Timothy Leary who had formed a new LSD based religion called the Neo-American Church and assumed a major role as spokesperson of the LSD movement. (Stevens: 284) Additionally, the media coverage of the Human Be-In’s and flourishing *hip* counterculture of the Haight-Ashbury brought nationwide attention to the neighbourhood and, consequently, tourists would do tours in buses and cars through its streets to get a glimpse of the ‘strange’ new hippie culture.

The Diggers who “were the conscience of the Haight” reacted in creative fashion. (Stevens: 321) Not only did they establish a *Free City collective* that provided all kinds of free services to the influx of young people, they also staged pranks to subvert the attention of the tourist and police. The Diggers originated from a theater group that sought to engage the public through free theater in parks and streets. However, the Diggers had the ideal of “[...obliterating] the distinction between art and life, and between actor and audience.” (Doyle: 85) Therefore, they ‘staged’ a form of theater they called *life-acting* that was founded on the assumption that “part of all theater involved the wilful suspension of disbelief by those who participated in [.]” (Doyle: 85) and that promised theater would affect “[...] the

²⁰ The diggers archives. June the 5th, 2010. <<http://www.diggers.org/overview.html>>.

consciousness of participants in the same way as did LSD, dissolving one's prior cognitive map of reality in order to open up new possibilities.” (Hodgdon: 73) But in contrast to many of the psychedelic mystics of the time who had the idea that society would change from within through the use LSD – once everyone had an LSD experience – the Diggers attitudes “were more social oriented than revelatory.”²¹

In the early fall of 1966, they started distributing leaflets that critiqued all mobile bohemians of the time, such as famous local artists like Michael Bowen who organized the Human Be-In's, Jefferson Airplane, the local rock band soon to become a major success, as well as LSD 'guru' Timothy Leary. (Hodgden: 1-2) A public critique from within was something that the hippies of *Psychedelphia* (a term that some used for the Haight-Ashbury) were unaccustomed to. (Hodgden: 3) Their next move was to give out *Free Food* they had scavenged or stolen and then cooked. This act of redistributing the essential goods of survival – food – was an open attack on the hierarchies of capitalist and liberal society set by private property and money which they saw as the means that deprived humans of their liberty. (Hodgden: 37)

In December 1966, they set up their first permanent happening or 'non-stop' stage, they called the *Free Store*. The Free Store was open 24hs throughout the week where people could get free hot coffee, free food, free books and were free to use a washing machine and dryer. (Hodgden: 40) Later the store would also offer other goods like clothes. Essential to the message of the store was to encourage the potential 'customer' to join in shopping and “to invoke the cultural expectations of customers about commercial spaces and the attendant social relations [.]”(Hodgden: 45) Therefore, props and signs in the store would play with these expectations. In a published pamphlet [presumably March 1967] the Diggers offered an explanation to their intentions:

Diggers assume free stores to liberate human nature. First free the space, goods and services. Let theories of economics follow social facts. Once a free store is assumed, human wanting and giving, needing and taking, become wide open to improvisation.

A sign: If Someone Asks to See the Manager Tell Him He's the Manager.

²¹ Peter Berg, one of the important members of the Diggers in an interview in April 29, 1982, accessed through the diggers archive website on the 18th of June <http://www.diggers.org/oralhistory/pb_jg_0482.htm>

Someone asked how much a book cost. How much did he think it was worth? 75 cents. The money was taken and held out for anyone. "Who wants 75 cents?" A girl who had just walked in came over and took it.

A basket labeled (sic) Free Money.

No owner, no Manager, no employees and no cash-register. A salesman in a free store is a life-actor: Anyone who will assume an answer to a question or accept a problem as a turn-on.

Question (whispered): "Who pays the rent?"

Answer (loudly): "May I help you?" ²²

According to Peter Coyote, one of the leading members of the Diggers and later famous Hollywood actor, the store would sometimes achieve its intended purpose. Once, a middle-aged woman came into the store and Coyote observed how she clandestinely put clothes into her bag. When he approached her and said she does not need to steal anything because it is all for free, she, at first, rejected that she was. He then pointed to the sign about the manager and said "I know—but you *thought* you were stealing. You can't steal here because it's a Free Store. . . . You can have the whole fucking store if you feel like it. You can take over and tell me to get lost." Later he helped her in choosing a few more items and a week later, she showed up with baked goods and put them on the counter for free exchange. (Hodgden: 46)

In their later efforts, the Diggers social efforts would also include Free Legal Services, Free Concerts with local bands, a Free Medical Clinic that "was pioneering in treating drug abuse problems" and, in the wake of the summer of love, they tried to set up a Free Hotel but the project failed due to the city's bureaucrats. (Perry: 131) Besides the anarchistic motivated endeavours to provide free services to the community, they also staged sophisticated public theater acts that required sometimes hundreds to thousands of participants. One of them was the *Intersection Game* which was announced through the distribution of thousands of handbills that called out to meet at a specific time at a crossroad in the Haight-Ashbury.

The Intersection Game was set out to reclaim public spaces – the Intersection, the streets, the crossroad – that, in the eyes of the Diggers, had fallen victim to the predominance

²² [Peter Berg], "Trip Without a Ticket: Don't Pay for Your Copy", ca. March 1967, authorship and date assigned by Doyle, "Diggers," 473. Eric Noble, Digger Archives, assigns the date of 28 June 1967; Accessed through the Diggers Archives on the 15th of May. <<http://www.diggers.org/digpaps68/twatdp.html>>

of the car and traffic – which had more and more consisted of tourists that toured through the neighbourhood as a spectacle. On a late afternoon, they set up a 13 foot yellow ‘frame of reference’ on the southwest corner of the intersection of Haight and Ashbury. Two giant puppets that impersonated two famous local political figures (Robert Scheer and Jeffrey Coleman who had both run for the same seat in the recent congressional election and represented oppositional political viewpoints – Scheer was a left-wing journalist and had challenged the incumbent ‘status quo’ congressman Coleman²³) would constantly walk back and forth through the frame and argue about what is ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ and, at the same time, would encourage the many joining participants also to walk through the frame. Additionally, miniature versions of the frame with an attached string that people could wear as talismans were distributed. (Doyle: 83)

On the distributed Diggers’ leaflets it said that “the public is any fool on the street” which referred to one of Marshall McLuhan’s probes that stated: “An informed public is its worst enemy.” Further on the leaflet it said:

Public enemies watch reality — don't change that dial — an eventful new season of enemy spectacles
FREE FRAME OF REFERENCE to be worn around the neck, carried, displayed
Watch the D I G G E R news!²⁴

The whole act was meant to raise awareness that one’s ‘frame of reference’ or ‘consciousness’ can be changed and social hierarchies can be renegotiated. As hundreds of participants walked through the frame and across the intersection, the entire traffic would come to a halt. Soon, police officers showed up and did not know how to react other than to arrest the two puppet holders and a few other participants who did not obey the order to not block “a public thoroughfare”. On the contrary, they declared that they are “the public.” Eventually, the police left the scene with hundreds of people still walking, standing and later dancing on the street until late in the evening. (Doyle: 84-85)

The activities of the Diggers involved many of such public happenings that would draw attention to hierarchies and functions of institutions of society. Although the group would eventually split up and the Free Altamont Concert in December 1969 would mark the end of

²³ On Robert Scheer, accessed on June the 20th, 2010 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Scheer>

²⁴ The Diggers Archives. Accessed on June the 20th, 2010 <http://www.diggers.org/digger_sheets.htm>

the hippie era²⁵, their legacy of creatively challenging society's moral standards and hierarchies would prevail and be a major influence for other countercultural groups to come.

[...] The San Francisco Diggers' experiment [fashioned] a communitarian utopia by means of guerilla theater that performed a new set of social relations within distinct geographical boundaries. It was the New West's answer to the *City upon a Hill*. During their twenty-one-month tenure, the Diggers in effect improvised a play whose plot concerned how one community could be transformed root and branch into an alternative to the rest of American society. (Doyle: 91, italics added by the author)

Doyle is referring to another major American myth connected to *Puritan Errand*. The "City upon the hill" is also one of the most important historical themes that constitute the American Character and 'American Exceptionalism'. It goes back to the early Puritan sermons by John Winthrop, governor of the newly founded New England colony of Massachusetts during the 17th century, wherein it was declared that the Puritans had founded a commonwealth that would serve as a model for the corrupt world. (Brinkley: 38) Perry Miller pointed out in his famous essay 'Puritan Errand into the Wilderness,' that the covenant failed its initial purpose after the reinstatement of the English monarchy in the late 17th century because the monarchy was seen as a symbol of corruption. Therefore, the influence of the Puritans in the American Character also faded. However, Sacvan Bercovitch later pointed out that the rhetoric of the puritan sermons – the American Jeremiad – remained very influential in all social, religious and political thought and debate in America.²⁶

Meanwhile, one may also explain the Diggers' activities in terms of a frontier mentality that inspired them to reject the rules and values of capitalist society, transgress its social constraints by starting a communitarian utopia in the frontier zone of the formerly frontier city of San Francisco and declare the *Free City*. (Doyle: 81) Not only did 'free' for the Diggers stand for costing nothing as well as liberated from social conventions, it was intrinsically connected to the frontier myth. Peter Berg in an interview states:

²⁵ The chaos of the Altamont Speedway Free Festival where one of the members of the infamous Hell Angels motorcycle gang killed a man in the audience symbolically represents the demise and disillusionment of the Love and Peace values of the hippie era. Interestingly, the Diggers as well as Ken Kesey and the Merry Prankster were friends with the motorcycle gang and together collaborated in many activities. Michael Lydon gives a descriptive account on the day of the concert: Lydon, Michael. "The Rolling Stones" – At Play in the Apocalypse". in The Portable Sixties Reader. Charters, Ann (ed).New York: Penguin Books. 2003, p. 306 – 316

²⁶ The Puritan Errand and the prevailing myth of "the City upon a Hill," see: Miller, Perry. Errand into the Wilderness. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1956. Sacvan Bercovitch. The American Jeremiad. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press. 1978.

“Free meant *wilderness* to me. It was just like having *a forest in the City*, suddenly, if you said Free. If you said "you don't have to pay for something -- here's your food, and it's free -- here are your clothes, and they're free -- and here's you, and you're free, and what are you going to do next?"²⁷ (Italics added by the author)

I would like to draw attention to the point that anarchist Guerilla Theater today has become an important part of San Francisco's urban culture which remains an inspiration and example for other groups that we will discuss later in more detail. Already at the time of the Diggers' it encouraged chapters or similar groups in New York and other cities. (Doyle: 85-88) Today, the activities of such groups and individuals are often referred to as *pranks* – the term implies not only a comedic but also social aspect. In the introduction of the second published book on pranks by the San Francisco based countercultural magazine *Re/Search*, it is asked:

What are pranks? For us, pranks are any humorous deeds, propaganda, sound bites, visual bites, performances and creative projects which pierce the veil of illusion and tell 'the truth.' Pranks unseriously challenge accepted reality and rigid behavioral codes and speech.

Pranks deftly undermine phoniness and hypocrisy. Pranks lampoon sanctimoniousness, self-glorification, selfmythologizing and self-aggrandizement. Pranks force the laziest muscle in the body, the imagination, to be exercised, stretched, and thus transcend its former self. The imagination is what creates the future; that which will be. (Vale: 4)

Marshall McLuhan gives an interesting perspective on humor and its connection to the environments of new media.

Humor as a system of communications and as a probe of our environment – of what's really going on – affords us our most appealing anti-environmental tool. It does not deal in theory, but in immediate experience, and is often the best guide to changing perceptions. Older societies thrived on purely literary plots. They demanded story lines. Today's humor, on the contrary, has no story line – no sequence. It is usually a compressed overlay of stories. (McLuhan, 1996: 93)

Street theater or public staged pranks express this new form of humorist dealings with the problems of today. The older narrative forms that Aristotle described in the 'Poetik' were expressions of a culture which had undergone tremendous changes imposed by the phonetic alphabet. It demanded a storyline, the drama and cherished theater as a specialized means of

²⁷ Peter Berg interview, April 29, 1982, accessed through [The Diggers Archive](http://www.diggers.org/oralhistory/pb_jg_0482.htm) website on the 18th of June <http://www.diggers.org/oralhistory/pb_jg_0482.htm>

entertainment. In any other non-literate culture, theater remained part of ritualized expressions that engaged the audience as participants and not as spectators.

Ancient and nonliterate societies naturally regarded games as live dramatic models of the universe or of the outer cosmic drama. [...] The participation in rituals kept the cosmos on the right track, as well as providing a booster shot for the tribe. The tribe or the city was a dim replica of that cosmos, as much as were the games, the dances and the icons. How art became a sort of civilized substitute for magical games and rituals is the story of the detribalization which came with literacy. Art, like games, became a mimetic echo of, and relief from, the old magic of total involvement. As the audience for the magic games and plays became more individualistic, the role of art and ritual shifted from the cosmic to the humanly psychological, as in Greek drama. [...] The key to this understanding, however, is also available in our new electric technology that so swiftly and profoundly re-creating the conditions and attitudes of primitive tribal man in ourselves. (McLuhan, 2001: 237)

Interestingly, McLuhan points out that the *theater of the Absurd* that emerged in his time expressed fears of the “clash of cataclysmic proportions between two great technologies” (McLuhan, 1996: 95) – print and the electric media. It failed to do so because it tried “to do the job demanded by the new environment with the tools of the old.” (McLuhan, 1996: 96) However, Guerilla Street Theater and pranks are the meaningful tools of humor to deal with the new electric environment that requires a new approach, because they are multi-layered, they lack a linear narrative and have an emphasis on immediate experience and participation. One could say that the Diggers abandoned the Mime Troupe, the original theater group, because they intuitively realized that a theater of actors and audience are not the artistic means to challenge people’s expectations.

San Francisco was at the forefront of creating a culture of the immediate absurd and it will be an essential theme in the culture of Burning Man.

2.4. After the demise of the hippie movement – the countercultural scene of the late 1970’s and early 90’s – a prelude to the Burning Man Festival

San Francisco has been described as a city with a *collaborative openness*. It is easy to find help and support if one has a new and interesting idea. In the 1970's and 80's it was fairly cheap to live. With the disillusionment that followed the 1960's era, the city remained a magnet for creative individuals, although the city's appeal was different to that of other major American cities. "There was not a sense of professional rigor.[...] " and creative people who came to San Francisco were not so much career driven like in New York or Los Angeles. (Law: 36:05)

In San Francisco there is very little critical mind here. In a way its been intellectual in a regard, but that allows for people to do anything and collaborate with other people. If you come up with some goofy idea, you can 20 other people and they help you to do it, if it sounds like fun. And gives you a lot of power to do something. (Law: 37:00)

With very little critical mind San Francisco was a hub for creative people who experimented with new and alternative ideas that were out of the realm of mainstream American popular culture. (Law: 36:00 – 39:00)

One of the important groups that was heavily influenced by the Diggers was the Suicide Club founded Gary Warne in 1977. He has been described as a "comprehensive visionary" whose leitmotif was to "create alternate realities." (Law: 24:30) The Suicide Club was an important antecedent that influenced other groups which were crucial in what would later surface as the Burning Man Festival. (Law: 24:50) The Suicide Club was founded because its first members had a shared life-threatening experience and

[...] the four friends decided to start a club where they would encourage members to "live each day as though it were their last" by creating events and experiences that would challenge their deep personal fears, expand their knowledge and understanding of their world and those in it [and] be hella fun.²⁸

The name Suicide Club was derived from three of Robert Louis Stevenson's detective short stories about a secretive club of men in which one of its members was randomly chosen

²⁸ The Suicide Club website. May the 12th, 2010 <<http://www.suicideclub.com/memorial2/bio/default.html>>

to die each evening.²⁹ However, the origins of the suicide club go back to the late sixties, as John Law explains:

At that time, Gary was a chief administrator for the 'Communiversy,' which started in 1969 at San Francisco State College. It was part of a sixties hippie concept called the 'Free School Movement,' where people could actually exchange ideas and information without exchanging money. But around 1974, S.F. State started objecting to certain Communiversy classes having to do with jokes and pranks, like 'How To Do Clown Make-up.'³⁰



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Gary and a few other people decided to separate from S.F. State and run the Communiversy as a California state non-profit. However, Gary's interests became more arcane and bizarre. He was interested in hosting events based on fear, sex, lying, and other human interactions. He was interested in the way cults test people's freedom of will, especially in light of the cultural brainwashing that we get every day.³²

For its members, they wanted to recreate 'frontier' situations. Therefore, scaling Bay Area bridges (for example, they climbed Golden Gate bridge), rappelling down buildings,

²⁹ Robert Louis Stevenson. The Suicide Club. Toronto: General Publishing House. 2000 (1878)

³⁰ John Law in an interview, published in: Vale, V. Pranks 2. San Francisco: Re/Search Publications. 2006, p. 45

³¹ The diggers archive. July the 12th, 2010. <http://www.diggers.org/digger_sheets.htm>

³² John Law in an interview, published in: Vale, V. Pranks 2. San Francisco: Re/Search Publications. 2006, p. 45

walking through Oakland's sewers, infiltrating abandoned breweries, underground chambers, cemeteries or empty gunnery emplacement, riding in cable cars *naked* and holding a black-tie dinner on the walkway of the Golden Gate Bridge were activities of the groups in “the pursuit of experiences beyond the pale of mainstream society through subversion, pranks, art, fringe explorations and meaningless madness.”³³ (Italics added by the author)

Nudity as an expression of overcoming social norms and fears, of living at the frontier is a recurrent theme that became widely popular during the hippie movement and also can be observed on the Burning Man Festival. One major happening at the festival today is the critical tits bike ride in which thousands of women join a parade (in reminiscence of the critical mass bike parades through San Francisco) to ride around the city exposing their naked breasts, sometimes being completely naked. Since the beginning, nudity was an accepted theme of radical self-expression at Burning Man and a lot of artistic expression at the festival circles around nudity and relationship between the two sexes. Generally, a re-valuation of womanhood can be observed at Black Rock City. Women have not only become important artistic collaborators through now famous machine art groups like the ‘Flaming Lotus Girls’ at Burning Man, they also celebrate womanhood in ways that have been uncommon in Western society. Therefore, exposing their breasts is a sign of women’s emancipation – men have long been able to walk around breast naked. “Critical Tits is a feminist statement of solidarity and acceptance of one’s body and an opportunity for exhibitionism in the face of exploitation”³⁴ and today has become the largest communal performance at Burning Man. After the parade, the women gather at an excluded women only area where they ritually perform acts of female empowerment through dances and music.

However, Peter Berg, one of the most influential figures of the Diggers, had said that the act of taking off your clothes was considered as being social. “[...] walking around naked was good because it was expansive. It heightened individual experience. See, what’s social about it is that society, from our point of view, was essentially repressive.”³⁵ In terms of McLuhan, nudity as a “naughty excitement” could only occur within “a visual culture that had

³³ The Cacophony Society. May the 16th, 2010. <<http://www.cacophony.org/>>.

³⁴ Clupper, Wendy. “The Erotic Politics of Critical Tits: Exhibitionism or Feminist Statement?” *In Political Performances: Theory and Practice*. Susan C. Haedicke, E. J. Westlake, Deirdre Heddon, Avraham Oz (eds). NY, New York: Editions Rodopi. 2009, p. 251.

³⁵ Peter Berg interview, April 29, 1982, accessed through *The Diggers Archive* website on the 18th of June <http://www.diggers.org/oralhistory/pb_jg_0482.htm>.

divorced itself from the audile-tactile values of less-abstract societies.” For, cultures, “not yet abstracted by literacy and industrial order, nudity is merely pathetic” or they approach it with all their senses at once, like a painter or sculptor. “To a person using the whole sensorium nudity is the richest possible expression of structural form.”³⁶

Of course, one could argue against McLuhan because he assumes that attitudes to nudity are derived from the interplay or separation of senses and not from cultural paradigms that are most often constructed by religious dogma. This is the problem for any critical reading of McLuhan. His field approach – he called *mosaic* – to all media-related understanding remains controversial and problematic in terms of rational analysis. However,

t]he key to any analysis of the media, always for McLuhan connected to the spaces and temporalities of the life-world, is a mosaic field approach characterized by radical juxtaposition, a multiplicity of perspectives, and discontinuity. The mosaic is able to capture a world in action, to engage with living cultures without reducing them to one point of view or linearizing them into any one theoretical framework. This is why many are finding McLuhan’s work useful when it comes to making sense of non-linear digital cultures (Stevenson, Nick: 12)

He was interested in seeing similarities and juxtapositions in all human utterance and connecting them into patterns that revealed an *acoustic* understanding. Insofar, McLuhan followed his own revelations on the demise of visual culture with its fondness to rational and analytical thought and rather played with facts to produce ‘acoustic’ understanding. One could say his writing artistically combined form and content.

John Law was an early member of the Suicide Club who, along with Michael Michael in the 1986, founded the more well-known and larger Cacophony Society. He gives an account of “[a]ll these groups [who] were part of a cultural scene that was percolating in San Francisco from the late 70’s to the early 90’s” and were very influential in what later became Burning Man. (Law: 22:50; 17:00) He remembers of the early days of Suicide Club that “we infiltrated weird cults like the Moonies [³⁷] and pretended that we wanted to join them [as well as] the American Nazi Party [with whom we] went out and [...] camped with [...].”

³⁶ McLuhan quoted in: Benedetti, Paul and Nancy DeHart (eds.). Forward Through The Rearview Mirror: Reflections On and By Marshall McLuhan. Ontario: Prentice-Hall Canada Inc, 1996, p. 184.

³⁷ The ‘Moonies’ is generally regarded a derogative term for the *Unification church*. Wikipedia. Accessed on June the 8th, 2010. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moonie_%28Unification_Church%29>; <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unification_Church>

(Law: 10:40) The Suicide Club as well as the Cacophony Society not only was inclusive – one of their slogan’s was ‘You already might be a member’ (Doherty: 36) – but also democratic in their ideals that everyone in the group could create their own events.

[Members] could list and create events that interested, frightened or engaged them in some fashion and they would make an event out of it, including a lot of things that were illegal, primarily trespassing [...]. But we had a strong and very ethical sense about the world. We didn’t vandalize anything. [...] A big part of the philosophy was to *Leave No Trace* [...] (Law: 11:35, italics added by the author)

which today is one of the most popular slogans of Burning Man and that “came directly from the Suicide Club.” (Law: 11:40)

Another theme the two groups endorsed vehemently and which became one of the most important aspects of Burning Man, is the ‘*no spectators, only participants*’ slogan. Going back to the Diggers who already tried to make bystanders participate in their public staged acts and would rather send them away if they would just stop and watch, the Suicide Club and Cacophony Society also followed that principle. (Doyle: 83)

“We started the Cacophony Society in 1986. [...]” (Law: 15:48) “It was much bigger group because by that time there were more avenues to find out about it. But we were a nicer version [...] not as close and as secretive as the Suicide Club had been.” (Law: 14:00) In the early 90’s chapters of the Cacophony society started off in Los Angeles and leading members of the San Francisco group helped to kick off new local Cacophony Society groups in Portland, Seattle and New York.

In the tradition of the Diggers, both groups embodied anarchistic tendencies which staged artistically inspired public pranks, street theater, public acts of revolution, colorful costuming and absurdist theme parties. (Doherty: 39, 40) For example, one of their funny acts that is remembered involved members of the group all putting on a clown costume. Separately and at different bus stops, they waited and got on the same bus, acting as if they did not know each other. In another example, they turned a subway car into a lounge providing free dinner service for surprised passengers and pretended they were acting on behalf of the Municipal Railway. (Doherty: 39) Another act was staged in December 1994 when John Law

and Michael Michael organized their first *Santacon*³⁸ (also known as Santanarchy) where a 100 fully costumed Santas invaded a mall and stirred chaos through singing, chants and performances and repeatedly shouting ‘Charge it’ – a prank with a social irony that has been copied many times. Today, there is an international *santacon* movement.

John Law has been a member and organizer of a number of groups that are part of the countercultural scene in San Francisco. One of the things he started with the Suicide Club was the adventurous exploration of desolated often dangerous areas within the confines of the city. Nowadays, exploring the ‘frontier zones’ of cities is termed *urban exploration*. It has become a world wide movement that is interconnected through the internet.³⁹ There are groups of ‘urban explorers’ in cities such as Paris, Berlin⁴⁰, Glasgow, Moscow, New York, Edmonton⁴¹, Montreal⁴² and Sidney. It needs to be said that the idea of urban exploration was not something that exclusively surfaced in San Francisco. However, as with all the other countercultural groups mentioned here that came out of San Francisco, their influence grew especially through the use of internet, and the San Francisco Bay Area – with the thriving Silicon Valley as the hive of technological innovation – was on the forefront of using the new technology as a means of disseminating information.

A group that also emerged out of the San Francisco Suicide Club was the *Billboard Liberation Front*, which uses commercial advertising on billboards and applies creative changes to the ads. Combined with satire, those changes convey a political and social critique and often have a meaning contradictory to the original intention. Today, the group’s ideas and activities have earned them nationwide acclaim and their work has been exhibited by galleries and museums.⁴³

One group that did not come from the Suicide Club but founded at the same in the late 1970’s was the *Survival Research Laboratories*.⁴⁴ Founded by Mark Pauline in November 1978, SRL was the first machine-art-destruction-collective in the Bay Area and a precedent for many other similar groups that later followed. The machine art was constructed to invite bystanders to interact and control the large and seemingly dangerous machinery. (Doherty: 185) In the late 80’s and early 90’s, SRL activities would eventually lead them to built “giant

³⁸ Accessed on June the 8th, 2010. <<http://santacon.info/>>; <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SantaCon>>.

³⁹ Accessed on June the 8th, 2010. <<http://www.infiltration.org/history-timeline.html>>.

⁴⁰ Accessed on June the 8th, 2010. <<http://berliner-unterwelten.de/>>.

⁴¹ Accessed on June the 8th, 2010. <<http://uea.ca/>>.

⁴² Accessed on June the 8th, 2010. <<http://uem.minimanga.com/>>.

⁴³ The Billboard Liberation Front website. 22nd of June, 2010. <<http://www.billboardliberation.com/>>.

⁴⁴ The Survival Research Labs website, accessed on June the 20th, 2010: <<http://www.srl.org/>>.

monstrous machines that would attack one another” and consequently often destroy one another. (Law: 13:00) (Law was also a long-time member of SRL.) In the early 90’s, their shows would attract thousands of people. Although the group never had an actual presence at Burning Man, many of its members were present at Burning Man and their machine art would have a major influence on what later emerged as the ‘art culture’ of festival. (Doherty: 64)

*Food not Bombs*⁴⁵, founded in the early 1980’s, was a peace movement that followed the ideas of the Diggers in giving away food for free. *Critical Mass* was a cyclist movement with a social and political agenda that started out in the early 90’s and quickly became a mass movement not only in San Francisco but in other American cities.⁴⁶ Today it has affiliates throughout the world.⁴⁷

Processed World was an underground magazine that was founded in 1980 by disillusioned young office workers who worked in the financial district of San Francisco and felt that their work lives as ‘data-processors’, as they would satirically refer to themselves, lacked creativity. *Processed World* emerged out of an anarchistic and ironic world view that the life of an office worker is comparable to ‘slavery’ (the magazine’s main slogan was ‘Are you doing the processing.....or are you being processed?’) and, therefore, one should undermine a company’s effort to enslave their workers by using the company for one’s own interests. One of the magazine’s main purposes was to provide information for office workers on how to effectively use their work place for free time activities. Consequently, the first issues of the magazine were printed on paper, using a bank’s printer without its consent. Distributed by hand on lunch breaks the magazine had a fast growing following of volunteers with community-activities that eventually faded in the mid-80’s. However, the last issue of the magazine was printed in 2005.

Processed World originally emerged out of the *Union of Concerned Commies*, a group of young creative left-wing oriented people interested in art, music and street theater. They not only participated in the *White Night Riot* that followed the shooting of the prominent local gay politician Harvey Milk and mayor George Moscone (after they printed T-Shirts with burning police car on it that said ‘No Apologies’), they also did a street theater prank after the hostage crisis of the Iranian embassy and the invasion of Afghanistan had turned the general

⁴⁵ Accessed on June the 8th, 2010. <<http://www.foodnotbombs.net/>>.

⁴⁶Wikipedia on Critical Mass. Accessed on June the 8th, 2010. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Critical_Mass>.

⁴⁷ The German Critical Mass website: Accessed on June the 8th, 2010. <<http://www.critical-mass.de/>>.

public mood right-wing. They put on army uniforms and made real size tank dummies. On downtown Market Street, they declared War. The stunt

evolved into a full-fledged satirical revue, complete with reworded versions of the Marines' Hymn and "Over There," skits about the political-economic function of war and the militarization of daily life and lots of marching about and shouting ironic slogans like "One, two three, four! We can't wait to go to war!"⁴⁸

Thus the group was a typical exponent of what the Diggers had started as anarchist guerrilla street theater and what today is also phrased as *culture jamming*.⁴⁹

All these groups convey a critical and to some degree anarchistic world view towards hierarchies, morals and institutions of society that are dealt with a creative, satirical and sometimes indulgent absurd attitude. Moral points of view were challenged, because "[a] moral point of view too often serves as a substitute for understanding in technological matters."⁵⁰ One might argue to how what degree some of the groups activities were apolitical and rather served the purpose of social entertainment, unlike the Diggers whose activities were focused on bringing awareness and liberating the individual from the constraints of capitalism and liberalism – the criticism that will come into focus again when we discuss Burning Man. On the one hand, the comic playfulness in which social morals, hierarchies and 'truths' are made apparent and sometimes challenged could be explained through the 'naïve and primitive' nature of the American Character whose frontier experience lead it to refrain from historical and thus intellectual reflection. On the other hand, countercultural groups on the American East coast, for example, a Diggers chapter in New York (of which the original Diggers soon distanced themselves, although some of New York members originally were San Francisco Diggers) were more political and radical in their commitment.) (Doyle: 88) Lacking the naïve playfulness and collaborative openness of San Francisco, groups would often split up – something that would repeat itself with the New York chapters of the Cacophony Society two decades later.

⁴⁸ The official Processed World website on its history: Accessed on June the 8th, 2010.
<<http://www.processedworld.com/History/history.html>>.

⁴⁹ Culture jamming can be summoned as public acts of subversion, hence, it is another term for what we have discussed earlier as the prank culture. Accessed on June the 8th, 2010.
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture_jamming>.

⁵⁰ McLuhan quoted in: Benedetti, Paul and Nancy DeHart (eds.). Forward Through The Rearview Mirror: Reflections On and By Marshall McLuhan. Ontario: Prentice-Hall Canada Inc, 1996, p. 66.

From a broader perspective, the nature of the American Character with its anarchistic tendency based on its frontier experience is reflected in all of the San Francisco counterculture groups' activities. In the tradition of Henry David Thoreau, who did not move to the physical frontier but rather chose to live a self-sustained frontier life at *Walden Pond* and demonstrated his independence (and anarchy) through public acts of *civil disobedience* (one may also interpret his acts as pranks), the counterculture of San Francisco constantly challenges itself and society as if it was still living at the frontier. Moreover, in the early nineties, the frontier mentality of the San Francisco counterculture would physically recreate the frontier experience in a remote desert in Nevada. The diggers 'dream' of a *Free City* would eventually become reality.

3.1. 1986 – 1990 - The early Beginnings of Burning Man in San Francisco – a pagan ritual of the social frontier grows popular

Burning Man is the largest [...] exponent of the San Francisco scene in the last 20 years but it grew out of [...] many other things and I see Burning Man being part of that, than other things being part of Burning Man. (Law: 4:13)

For the first time, at the summer solstice of 1986, Larry Harvey and then collaborator Jerry James burned an 8 foot wooden effigy on Baker beach. Baker beach lies on the outer edge of the San Francisco Bay. Facing the Pacific, the beach not only geographically represents the 'last frontier line of Westward expansion', but it was also popular as a free frontier zone where the hippie culture of nudity, bonfires and art happenings still persisted. In 1986 only a small group of friends and around a dozen spontaneous participants attended.

For Larry Harvey, the first act had a simplistic and spiritual quality which led them to do it continuously over the next years. Building it, smuggling it through a wealthy neighbourhood (it was the only access to the beach), carrying it down the cliff and erecting it, you already felt a connection to this 'thing' on a transcendent scale. "It has an imminent meaning which doesn't require an explanation" (Harvey: 1:54) "No one was asking why in the beginning. Just doing it was sufficient." (Harvey: 1:50)

Mary Grauberger had organized art party happenings in the early 1980's at which she had burned her art pieces and held bonfires during summer solstice on Baker Beach. It is interesting to note here that celebrations of the summer solstice were an intrinsic part of the hippie calendar and the Diggers organized numerous events on that day. However, Mary

Grauberger certainly was an inspiration for other people like Larry Harvey and when she stopped doing it there was a gap to be filled. (Doherty: 26 - 28) What most inspired him to do it were his friends he today refers to as the 'Latte carpenters', a group of carpenters with a bohemian touch who would meet for book readings, discuss art, play music together or just enjoy each others company. (Doherty: 23) "This was a carpenter's idea and they didn't need to be told that this [wooden effigy] was them." (Harvey: 1:54) However, there are various different stories about where the idea originally came from. Some sources have pointed to the film *The Wicker Man* as an inspiration, but Harvey resolutely denies that he had seen the movie before the first burn and before he had already named the ritual *Burning Man*. Harvey himself had also spoken of personal reasons that lead him to do it. Apparently, the emotional turmoil that he suffered after the break up of a relationship also motivated him to do it⁵¹ - a story that other sources have mocked as a "creation myth". (Law: 52:30)

In the following years, the group of people who made their way down the cliff to the beach slowly grew bigger. In 1988, the Cacophony society embraced the absurdity of burning a wooden Giant on a beach - by which time the effigy had attained its final height of 40' feet.⁵² The following year, the burn was already mentioned in the Cacophony newsletter.

By 1990, the crowd on Baker Beach had grown into more than 600 people, some witness estimates are close to a thousand. A lot of people would not fit on the beach but stand and watch from the cliff. The 'Man' as they would later refer to the effigy had attracted a large crowd that Harvey later referred to as a 'mob', because people lacked a connection to appreciate the simplicity and spiritual quality of the ritual - they just came as spectators, not as participants.⁵³ The police who had taken notice of the bizarre ritual a year before and almost stopped them from burning it told them not to proceed this time. The police left and the mob requested them to burn the 'Man', but Harvey and his collaborators decided to keep their word. Despite the local media presence, they abandoned the ritual.

Coincidentally, for a year, the Cacophonies Kevin Evans and John Law had been planning a Cacophony field trip to a desert in Northern Nevada over 400 miles away from San Francisco. A year earlier, Evans had been part of an art excursion to the desert and instantly

⁵¹ The Burning Man website: the 5th of June 2010
<http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/1997/97_speech_1.html>.

⁵² The Burning Man website: May the 13th, 2010. <<http://afterburn.burningman.com/09/history.htm>>.

⁵³ The Burning Man website: June the 5th, 2010.
<http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/1997/97_speech_1.html>.

knew that it would make the perfect environment for one of the Society's adventurous trips that had been part of its activities.⁵⁴

Most of our Cacophony exploits did not take up an entire weekend, but just a few hours. We would do midnight walking tours of the Oakland storm drains, in full formal dress and hip waders, write a novel in the fashion of the Exquisite Corpse, play midnight urban golf, read from our favorite works of fiction by candlelight during a midnight stroll through the park, climb bridges or have cocktails in some urban wasteland. Most of the events were purely for amusement, but one of them, my own event, gathered a group of 40 people together to read Proust. John Law staged a counter-event to mine, the Charles Bukowski Support Group, that met at the racetrack, or in sleazy bars.⁵⁵

So when Cacophony organized a field trip for an entire Labor Day weekend of 1990 and asked if Burning Man wanted to join in, it was a 'coincidental' perfect match. To what degree members of both groups were already interrelated by that time could not be adequately confirmed; according to Larry Harvey, he was already a Cacophony member. (Harvey: 49:25) Nevertheless, the move would mark a turning point in the eventual development of the Burning Man ritual into a festival. In terms of the frontier analysis, the move symbolically stands for an idea and a group of people that required 'free land', that required a frontier zone where society could not enforce its restrictions, (could not reduce the idea to a spectacle) and where a new idea could develop to its full potential.

3.2.1. 1990 - An outcast idea moves to the Frontier and finds its Promised Land

The West, at bottom, is a form of society, rather than an area. It is the term applied to the region whose social conditions result from the application of older institutions and ideas to the transforming influences of free land. By this application, a new environment is suddenly entered, freedom of opportunity is opened, the cake of custom is broken, and new activities, new lines of growth, new institutions and new ideals, are brought into existence. The wilderness disappears, the "West" proper passes on to a new frontier, and in the former area, a new society has emerged from its contact with the backwoods. Gradually this society loses its primitive conditions, and assimilates itself the type of the older social conditions of the East; but it bears within it enduring and distinguishing survivals of its frontier experience. (Turner: 61)

⁵⁴ Kevin Evans on his first trip to the desert and the planning for the next year. Kevin Evans. "it's so empty it's full" [Laughing Squid Web Hosting](http://laughingsquid.com/its-so-empty-its-full/). Scott Beale (ed.). January 2007. June the 10th, 2010.

[<http://laughingsquid.com/its-so-empty-its-full/>](http://laughingsquid.com/its-so-empty-its-full/).

⁵⁵ P. Segal reports on the first event in the desert: P Segal. "Zone trip #4." [Laughing Squid Web Hosting](http://laughingsquid.com/p-segal-zone-trip-4/). Scott Beale (ed.). January 2007. June the 10th, 2010. [<http://laughingsquid.com/p-segal-zone-trip-4/>](http://laughingsquid.com/p-segal-zone-trip-4/).

As mentioned earlier, American history is full of examples of outcasts, anarchists and non-conformist groups that sought refuge at the frontier during the westward expansion period. And even though the physical frontier was officially declared to be closed for over a hundred years, the enormous areas of the desert still offer free zones for people to recreate frontier situations. So it is not farfetched to draw similarities between Burning Man and the puritans and many other religious groups in American history, who found their *promised land*. This time, however, the westward movement was reversed. From San Francisco they moved 400 miles east to the Black Rock Desert in Nevada, one of the most isolated and harshest environments on America's mainland.

The Black Rock Desert is located about 120 miles northeast of the city of Reno, Nevada. To reach the desert from Reno, one has to drive over 30 miles East on Interstate 70, and then over 100 miles north through a long stretch of unsettled mountainous desert grassland before reaching the settlements of Empire and Gerlach, two small town communities that lie 10 miles south of the Black Rock Desert entrance. Surrounded by scenic mountain ranges, the desert stretches out over 100 miles north and covers an area of over 400 square miles. Part of the heritage of frontier history, the Oregon trail of the 19th century passed right through the northern part of desert and the hot springs were used for water supply. Today, the remnant of a lake that dried out about 10000 years ago provides the perfect conditions for high speed racing. Indeed, the last high speed land record was made on the desert's *playa* as the flat surface is officially referred to. Nevertheless, the alkali sand of the *playa* offers nothing but the most hostile conditions for survival. Its grains are so small that people have to wear gas masks and goggles to protect themselves. After one of the occasional dust storms which in some years can happen every day, the dust essentially covers everything, even the interior of closed vehicles.

In spite of this, on Labor Day weekend in 1990, about 90 people made their way out into the desert to finally participate in the man's burn.⁵⁶ The power of the ritual was now enhanced by the experience of being out there in a desert. The mystic quality of the 'Burning Man' experience has remained one of the most important aspects regarding why people take up the burden of traveling often thousands of miles – we will discuss the aspect of the *pilgrimage* in a later chapter – to end up being burnt by the sun and having to endure powerful

⁵⁶ The Burning Man website. 13. Mai 2010. <<http://afterburn.burningman.com/09/history.htm>>

dust storms just to participate in the annual ritual. Larry Harvey has the following to say about the mystical quality of the desert:

It could induce mystical kinds of perception. One moment you feel, you are surrounded by infinite space, and you could be infinitesimal in it. And the next moment it seems as if the horizon is pressing up against you because it annihilates the middle distance and when you get to the point where you are experiencing both at the same time you get mysticism...because mysticism tends to annihilate everything in the middle or tends to take you from your innermost intimate sense of reality out to the cosmic and just leaves the rest out.” (Harvey: 56:10)

A rather small group of people that according to P. Segal added up to 89⁵⁷ – in comparison to the original crowd who had gathered on Baker Beach that year – arrived on the playa. When they got out of their cars a gesture was made by Michael Michael to illustrate that everyone was “in a different place now. Reality had mutated because they willed it thus. They had crossed into the Zone.” (Doherty: 49) Symbolically, the first gathering of Burning Man participants was already declared to be beyond the common rules of civilization. They had not only moved geographically to an environment that can be described by having the characteristics of a frontier – being beyond any human settlement, seemingly away from any outside authority and with an abundance of free land to use and play with – they also consciously declared that they were in a ‘frontier’ Zone where rules of society were suspended and human experience was open to new modes of perception and consciousness.

BURNING MAN '90

'The force that through the green fuse drives the flower drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees is my destroyer.'

After an aborted attempt on June 30, Burning Man is now scheduled to perish on September 2 in the Black Rock Desert near Gerlach, Nevada. Black Rock is a desert playa — waterless, frozen in time. Participants should bring everything needed for survival; food, water, and camping equipment. Carpools are now being organized.

Should you wish to attend please call (415) 621-3675. We ask for a \$15 contribution to defray the cost of transporting the Man, toilet facilities, and trash removal.

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⁵⁷ P. Segal reports on the first event in the desert: Laughing Squid Web Hosting. Scott Beale (ed.). January 2007. June the 10th, 2010. <<http://laughingsquid.com/p-segal-zone-trip-4/>>

⁵⁸ “Artifacts From Burning Man 1990.” Laughing Squid Web Hosting. Scott Beale (ed.). February 2010. June the 10th, 2010. <<http://laughingsquid.com/artifacts-from-burning-man-1990/>>

Of course, there were already a number of governmental authorities (federal, state and local law enforcement agencies) assigned to guard the Black Rock Desert, for example, the police officers from three counties whose borders fall within the Black Rock Desert and, overall, the Bureau of Public Land Management (BLM), which is the assigned federal owner and overseer of the Desert. (Doherty: 227) However, John Law who drove the rental truck that carried the ‘Man’ consciously chose the best spot after he had considered the political ramifications. I picked up the spot of the event along with Kevin Evans.

[...] I chose that place as far up in the Black Rock desert, as far of the road as we could get, specifically, [...] so the authorities wouldn’t know that we were there, didn’t care that we were there and would let us do whatever we wanted to do [...]. “ (Law: 49:30) “I chose a place that was geopolitically specific. I chose a place in Pershing County [...] which was outside of the jurisdiction of the closest law enforcement people of over 100 miles which made it very difficult for the law enforcement people to come there [...]. That created some difficulties because it was hard to find, maybe a little bit more dangerous because of the driving to get there, but when the event was nascent and just forming, when the influence of political groups like the county government and the sheriff’s department could have stopped the event, they didn’t bother because we weren’t on their radar. They knew we were there but we weren’t a problem for them. (Law: 50:30)

In the early years of the 90’s, the group’s gathering was only for the weekend. There was no art, no big camp structures, no city grid, no institutions or an organizing board - just a loosely connected group of people who would come out to the desert to “...re-create some of civilization’s earliest gestures of comity: wandering around the camp-site, offering small gifts to one another, and granting decadent hospitality to those that stopped by.” (Doherty: 53) The playa provided the perfect environment for the radical ideas of the Cacophonists

[t]o shed all the illusory rights & hesitations of history [that] demands the economy of some legendary Stone Age – shamans not priests, bards not lords, hunters not police, gatherers of paleolithic laziness, gentle as blood, going naked for a sign or painted as birds, poised on the wave of explicit presence, the clockless nowever.” (Bey: 4)

The quote from Hakim Bey’s book about *TAZ - temporary autonomous zones* foreshadows and describes what Burning Man was set out to do in the desert. This was not a coincidence, because

Burning Man until 1994 was a very free event. [...] And it was definitely heavily [...] influenced by Hakim Bey and the Temporary Autonomous Zone. [...] Because a lot of people involved in the Cacophony Society and early Burning Man read that book in the early 90's and [...] it had a huge influence in the direction of the event. [What was important about it was] coming together in a place where there is no control – the control factor. Not necessarily the government but just the organizational mind that wants to control everyone was unable to take control because we were so far away from general civilization [...]. (Law: 47:30)

Bey, an underground cultural theorist published his book in the mid 80's in which he propagated Ontological Anarchy, an anarchist form of society that rejected hierarchy and all forms of organized power structures and declared that mankind should abandon all modern forms of state and rather live in small communities that resemble ancient tribal forms of the Paleolithic age. (Bey: 43) Bey concluded that in today's world of total state control, the only thing a cultural rebel can do is to create *Temporary Autonomous Zones* – TAZ – where real freedom of oppression from rules and society can be created and achieved.

In the early years, first-timers came out to the desert and were often unprepared for survival in the Black Rock Desert environment. Therefore, the need to connect with others in order to survive was an important factor that had given people a feeling of deeper connection and created stronger bonds in the community. (Doherty: 53) Although there was never a time when everybody knew everyone, there was enormous trust among participants. (Harvey: 7:15) But what also made the early Burning Man so attractive was that no one really had a say on rules or limitations on how to behave on the playa. In fact, the prevailing rule was not to disturb anyone else's experience as long as they do not disturb someone else's. Hence, community and radical self-expression are the two core values that have been Burning Man's most important aspects up until today.

In the early 90's, there were hardly any authorities at all on the playa. John Law would obtain permission without any difficulties, without any of the prolonged bureaucratic procedures that Burning Man has to undergo today from the U. S. Bureau of Land Management for the event. When cops showed up, they would often leave after a short inspection of the encampment and the wooden effigy's stability. The whole desert was for everyone to freely use and everyone would drive around with their cars, drive to the hot springs that are positioned on the outer edges of the playa or even drive maniacally through

the night with no lights on, shoot with their guns and have sex at the same time – John Law’s peak American experience. (Doherty: 61) What will later emerge into an organized event is at its beginning an anarchistic gathering. The development into a whole scale festival, in fact, the emergence of a temporary city would mark the most controversial aspect of the festival’s history. It’s a complex history of passionate and creative people who, at the same time, cherish the idea of anarchy but also start to recreate society anew. The question of where to draw the line between anarchy and organized society will mark the crucial turning point between those who preferred to remain at the *frontier* and those who liked to see the growth of civic communities with all its ramifications for the individual.

However, these different forces among individuals in American history have always existed since the early days of the first colonization period. As Turner argues it always happened when “[c]omplex society is precipitated by the wilderness into a kind of primitive organization. [...] The tendency is anti-social. It produces antipathy to control, and particularly to any direct control.” (Turner: 53) The escape from mainstream society, so cherished by anarchists such as the Cacophonist in order to gain absolute control over destiny, be self-reliant and feel relieved from moral and social bondage has been a trademark of American history ever since.

[...]each frontier did indeed furnish a new field of opportunity, a gate of escape from the bondage of the past; and freshness, and confidence, and scorn of older society, impatience of its restraints and its ideas, and indifference to its lessons, have accompanied the frontier. (Turner: 59)

3.2.2. The city as jest – the development of civic institutions – the early 1990’s

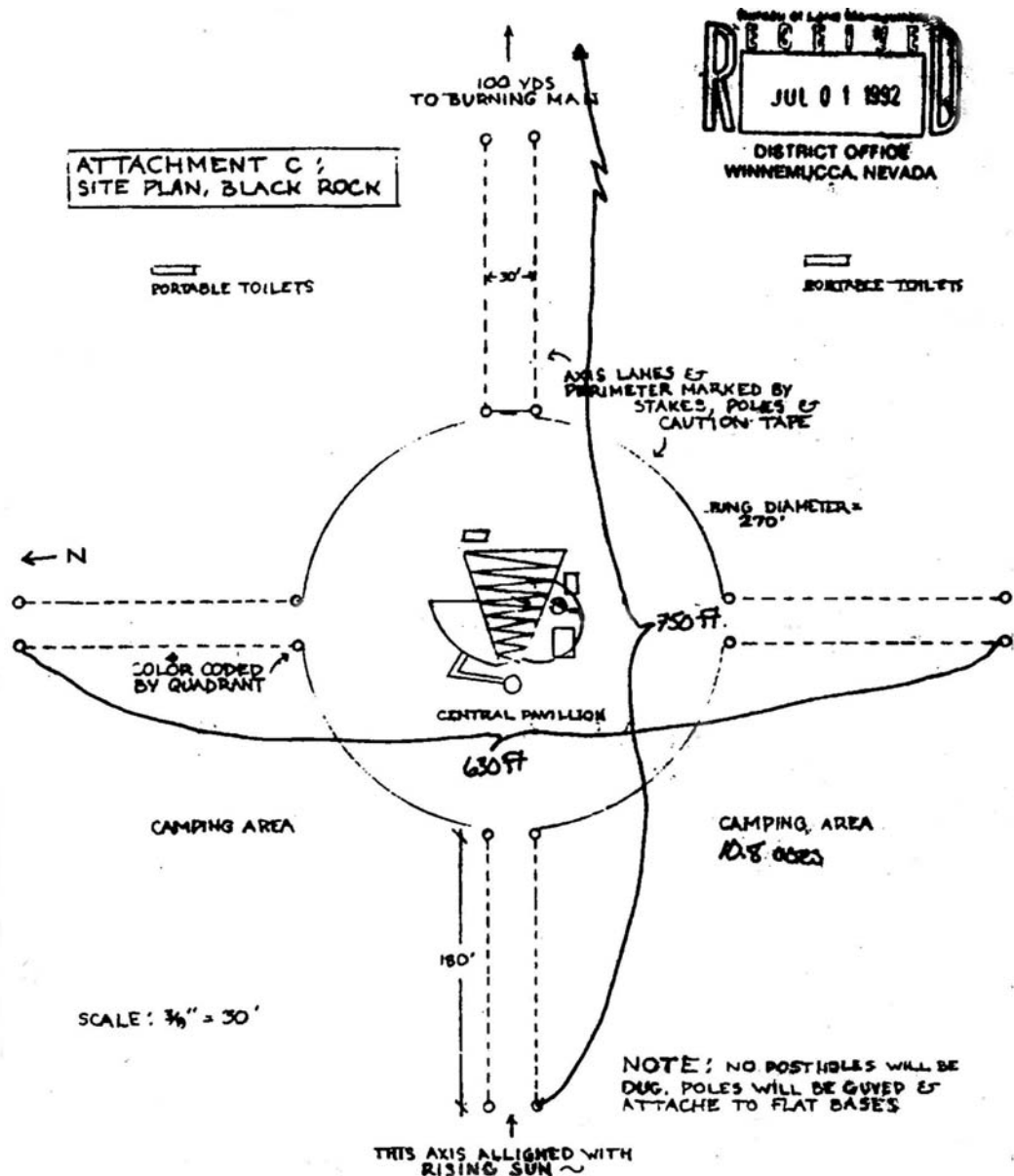
In this alien environment, you could almost imagine yourself born afresh into another planet, released from any old boundaries of behavior or thought. (Doherty: 62)

In the first four years the number of participants climbed from 90 to 250 in the following year to 600 in 1992.⁵⁹ By that time, first efforts had been made to create a civic environment, signs which suggested that they indeed were creating their own city. “We

⁵⁹ The Burning Man website. 13th of May, 2010. <<http://afterburn.burningman.com/09/history.htm>>.

already knew that if you just put surveyor flags in the ground then people would just camp along those lines [...]” (Harvey: 32:45)

With the growing number of people, *building their own city* fell into the category of pranks and meaningless madness Cacophonists would come up with and then rigorously pursue. Still, in the early years, the encampment would loosely stretch over the playa with some people camping along the surveyor flags, others preferring to camp away from the main encampments and the party noise produced by the sound systems that were powered by generators.



In 1993, with participation reaching a 1000 people, *Black Rock City*, as they would start to call it, already had its first radio station and first newspaper, *The Black Rock Gazette* (which would be edited and printed on the playa). (Doherty: 58) Larry Harvey with the help of Steve

Mobia also invented Burning Man's first civic functionaries: the lamplighter, the one who lit kerosene lamps that hung from posts on a path to the Man, a path that lead through the community that had started to camp in a circle. (Doherty: 57) The lamp posts, around 12 feet high, were designed by Harvey himself and build by other collaborators. (Harvey: 29:00) It was the first of a number of civic gestures that would eventually become a festival and a temporary city. The flat plain desert provides the perfect environment, where

the merest gesture could be world generating. By putting surveyor flags in the ground you can create an outline of an entire city and everybody would follow that rule. [...] There is a practical power that comes with it – it was intoxicating – that is why we could joke about [...] creating a city. (Harvey: 59:38)

Another of Black Rock City's now famous civic institutions was also created at that time. Michael Michael, a leading cacophonist member saw the "need for a specialized group of seasoned burners who could navigate the desert, locate lost campers and bring them safely back to the community encampment."⁶⁰⁶¹ First of all, back in the early days of Burning Man, the encampment was difficult to find due to its size and location. As mentioned earlier, the main encampment was set out far away from the road on the playa to prevent too much oversight from outside authorities. Furthermore, they wanted to specifically create a void and emptiness that made people feel detached from the outside world and more reliable upon each other which enhanced the community aspect. (Doherty: 56)

Secondly, with no boundaries restricting people from using the enormous space of the Black Rock desert, for example, going to the Hot springs, people easily got lost on the playa (although it is a flat desert, it is only a question of distance – a few miles and the camp structures blur within the line of the horizon) Michael Michael notes about the difficulty in finding your way on the playa: "The camp was small and always over the horizon. An error of 3 degrees for a new arrival or a group returning from a hot spring, could send a vehicle to the other end of the playa 20 or 30 miles away."⁶² Additionally, in this hazardous environment, cars easily break down. Interestingly, the frontier metaphor worked perfectly as a historical

⁶⁰ The Burning Man website. Michael Michael on the history of the Black Rock Rangers. May 17th, 2010. <<http://blog.burningman.com/metropol/the-black-rock-rangers-part-1-origins/>>.

⁶¹ The term *burner* would become popular among those who came to the event year after year.

⁶² The Burning Man website. Michael Michael on the history of the Black Rock Rangers. May 17th, 2010. <<http://blog.burningman.com/metropol/the-black-rock-rangers-part-1-origins/>>.

reference and provided meaning of what people experienced at Burning Man. Therefore Michael Michael came up with the idea to call his new guiding force the *Black Rock Rangers*.

We took the name “Rangers”, a term which predates American Revolutionary War when civilian volunteers “ranged” the frontier line of farms and homesteads primarily to protect settlers. The concept was firmly established on the western frontier when the Texas Rangers would operate beyond settlement boundaries, move with great speed through a wilderness, and settle trouble right on the spot.⁶³

The term Ranger has an interesting etymology that provides information on the impact of the frontier on the American psyche. Ranger derives from the term *range* which has a variety of different meanings that are all connected to the frontier experience. First and foremost, it is associated with physical space in general and is strongly connected with its demarcation, thus meaning *frontier* or border. It is also used for the description of the physical landscape such as mountain range, pasture, grasslands or grazing land. But it can also describe physical distances, for example the operating distance of gun or the cruising range of a car. In association with the use of guns it is also used to describe the area where people go to learn and train shooting with their guns – they do that at the shooting range. The ranger also has become a very popular term ever since its first usage during the Revolutionary period. A ranger can be hunter, a volunteer in a paramilitary unit, a forest officer and park ranger, or be part of a police force. The military today has named dozens of units with the term ranger, not only in the US but in Canada, Europe and even in Asia.⁶⁴ In popular culture the term ranger has become most often associated with a man who *ranges* through a vast area of open territory, an area affiliated with wilderness that is almost untouched by man. The TV series ‘Lone Ranger’ of the 1950’s is a good example.

The rangers have no authority to arrest people and during their training program, they specifically have to yell “We are no cops!” The rangers had authority on the playa and executed summary justice, e.g. draining the air pressure of tires, displacing the keys of insistent drivers, or leaving a drunk person outside the encampment on the playa with enough water and directions on where to go. “It was private, anarchistic justice. [...] In the nineties, Black Rock Rangers would perform the equivalent of arrests and property confiscation – and it was frontier justice...” (Doherty: 237- 239)

⁶³ Burning Man.com. May 17th, 2010. <<http://blog.burningman.com/metropol/the-black-rock-rangers-part-1-origins/>>.

⁶⁴ wikipedia on the term *Ranger*. May 20th, 2010. <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ranger>>.

Larry Harvey sees the Rangers humble beginnings in a broader social and historical framework:

When we went out there[...]. We invented the idea that it was Black Rock City more as ironic gesture, as a lark, as a jest. [...] The Rangers were first organized to go on search parties and find helpless strays. At first, it was meant just as a lark, as a jest, like building a city out there. We learned out of dire necessity [how to deal with the environment.] And when you learn that way it tends to be more of a philosophy because you have a deeper sense of why you have rules and not just copying a model that you were given by society. We invented society anew and ended up using many of the tools [and rules] which helped to form civilized life. (Harvey: 21:00 – 23: 28)

3.2.3. Black Rock City – utopia of the *rearview mirror*?

Here in the transversality of the desert and the irony of geology, the transpolitical finds its generic, mental space. The inhumanity of our ulterior, asocial, superficial world immediately finds its aesthetic form here, its ecstatic form. For the desert is simply that: an ecstatic critique of culture, an ecstatic form of disappearance. (Baudrillard: 6)

The history of Burning Man unfolds itself in a typical frontier fashion. First an idea about moving to a frontier zone and a small community struggles for survival. Slowly, the community learns to adapt to the new environment by supporting each other and by scaling back to simple modes of common sense – and rules. However, this history is not particularly American – it happened throughout the history of humankind. But it is of particular interest that the agents of their own Burning Man history heavily relied on the story line and myth of the American Frontier which helped them to see and understand their own situation.

Marshall McLuhan famously said that man generally walks *forward through the rearview mirror* by which he meant that he sees the present and projects the future through past perspectives and experiences. Humankind does not really look at the present because it feels safer and more comfortable living in the past. “What we ordinarily think of as present is really the past. Modern suburbia lives in *Bonanza* land. It looks back nostalgically and sentimentally to the frontier as a safe and, at the same time, admirable and desirable world.”⁶⁵ The American psyche is deeply embedded in the history of the frontier and its underlying myth. The Western movie is its most famous

⁶⁵ McLuhan quoted in: Benedetti, Paul and Nancy DeHart (eds.). Forward Through The Rearview Mirror: Reflections On and By Marshall McLuhan. Ontario: Prentice-Hall Canada Inc, 1996, p. 186.

icon. But McLuhan also argued that we have to overcome this “age-old human habit”⁶⁶ because so far the evolution of mankind must have taught mankind that it is necessary to understand the intrinsic nature of man’s consciousness and the connection to media (especially media of communication) which are extensions of his senses and rewire his consciousness. Man needs to become aware of the underlying nature of his technologies and overcome the numbing effect they automatically impose on him.

So far, “[a]nybody who looks at the present is a threat, a nuisance in the extremist degree. The present is an area that people have always avoided throughout human history – the utopias of mankind are all rear view mirror images of the preceding age.”⁶⁷ By ‘anybody’ McLuhan always meant the *artist* because he is the only person that looks at the present, “who lives right on the shooting line, right on the frontier of change.”⁶⁸ The electric age we live in not only rewires man’s consciousness to an acoustic sensibility it also renders specialism meaningless and opens new forms of synesthesia. (McLuhan, 1989: 129) Artistic expression is not something that is restricted to a specialized few anymore but becomes an intrinsic part of everyone’s occupation – just like in the Palaeolithic age or with ‘primitive’ cultures in general, where all members of a tribe make art.

Burning Man is the perfect metaphor for this cataclysmic change, because, as we will see, artistic expression has a very different emphasis and value than in the default society. On the one hand, Bonanza land and the frontier myth certainly played a role, especially in the beginning of the desert years, but it was something that people played creatively with, with an ironic *prank* attitude. On the other hand, Burning Man could be the ‘utopian image of the rearview mirror’. Outsiders and critics might interpret Burning Man as an arbitrary attempt by some people to create an utopia of the past, an utopian model for community that only exists because it is temporal (for one week) and set in a ‘mythic’ environment of a ‘frontier’ zone (which implicitly produces different perspectives and therefore cannot be emulated in the default world) and does not have any significant meaning for mainstream society.

Burning Man so far has played creatively with notions of utopia – and also dystopia. (Fortunati: 162) Utopia with its ambiguous meaning of a good place or no place, originates

⁶⁶ McLuhan quoted in: Benedetti, Paul and Nancy DeHart (eds.). Forward Through The Rearview Mirror: Reflections On and By Marshall McLuhan. Ontario: Prentice-Hall Canada Inc, 1996, p. 186.

⁶⁷ McLuhan quoted in: Benedetti, Paul and Nancy DeHart (eds.). Forward Through The Rearview Mirror: Reflections On and By Marshall McLuhan. Ontario: Prentice-Hall Canada Inc, 1996, p. 187.

⁶⁸ McLuhan quoted in: Benedetti, Paul and Nancy DeHart (eds.). Forward Through The Rearview Mirror: Reflections On and By Marshall McLuhan. Ontario: Prentice-Hall Canada Inc, 1996, p. 137.

in Plato's *Republic* which itself can be interpreted as a model or a satire for society. Since 1997, the festival's planning falls within a handful of people that some could and have argued are Plato's philosophers – the totalitarian ruler caste of the Republic with Larry Harvey as its leading tyrant and philosophical king of the regime. In fact, John Law who departed from Burning Man after 1996 argues that "Burning Man is a corporation, owned and controlled by small group of people. [...] They act as a corporation. [...] They want to control everything." (Law: 4:15) However, Burning Man, today, for the most part remains a community effort with over 8000 volunteers and tens of thousands of participants who dedicate their energy, time and money to make the festival happen. Larry Harvey has been the target of criticism that Burning Man is intentionally organized as an utopian vision – a justifiable criticism in regard to his belief that the festival signifies and embodies a movement which is beyond a typical countercultural scene.

[...] 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 countercultural 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 scale that not even the Paris commune did. [...] (Doherty: 266)

Yet, he does not claim the role of the utopian visionary:

No single person can invent a collective way of life for an entire people. That requires a collective process, that requires history and the sharing of experience and no mind can do that. [...] Human beings are imperfect – so how can they create a perfect world? [...] A perfect world is always going to be some form of totalitarianism. [...] We would not have been popular if we had tried to establish the perfect society that is for the hippies or a guy like Pol Pot – I was raised by people with a common sense. (Harvey: 24:45 – 26:15)

3.2.4. The growing culture of theme camps

By the mid-nineteen-nineties, the festival had established itself as a don't-miss event in the counter-cultural bohemia of the Bay Area. It started out as a weekend event but soon people would stay longer until eventually it would become a week-long gathering by the end of

the decade. First long term theme camps were organized by photographer William Binzen in collaboration with John Law and Michael Michael. From 1993 until 1995, they set up multi-week camps at one of the Hot Springs at the edge of the playa, install sculptures, perform rituals and essentially experiment with the idea of an intentional creative community that Burning Man eventually would become later. (Doherty: 70) However, the Burning Man crowd had grown from 2000 in 1994 (that number doubled the next year and doubled again the following) to 8000 in 1996.⁶⁹ In 1994, Burning Man already had its own website and would increasingly spread the word through email lists and thus be at the heart of the internet revolution that was driven by many media companies of the Bay Area.

The media also had increased its coverage. More and more national and international journalists and camera crews would cover the event. Since 1992 organizers called the event the Black Rock Art Festival and thus already pointed out that Burning Man was particularly about art and self expression. And in ever increasing numbers people came to the festival to do performance art, build art installations and theme camps. “The theme camp is devoted to creating [...] a sustained and planned environment to entertain, enchant, and interact with the other citizens of Black Rock City.” (Doherty: 60) In the book *Afterburn*, edited by Lee Gilmore and Mark Van Proyen, two long-time participants and scholars from the Bay Area, describe theme camps:

usually presented as whimsical places dedicated to a particular motif or affinity, each functioning as a hub for its own extended community. Numbering in the hundreds, these camps form themselves into a mythomaniacal arcade that semipublicly and semisatirically displays the human exemplifications of a staggering variety of subcultural lifestyles, each resplendent with appropriate code words, identifying artifacts, and fanciful totems. [...]“Oftentimes [theme camps] feature sardonic parodies of well-known popular figures or corporations, such as the *Spock Mountain Research Labs* or *Motel 666*. Always, these camps present themselves as an eccentric outpost for some form of cultural commentary, a place where identity is interactively negotiated as individuals exchange displays and postures before receding back into the anonymous and undulated crowd. (Van Proyen and Gilmore: 5)

It is unclear who and when the first theme camp was set up on the festival, but many of its features are reminiscent of the Diggers concepts of the Free Store that provided an

⁶⁹ The Burning Man website. 13. Mai 2010. <<http://afterburn.burningman.com/09/history.htm>>.

environment for participants to play and question social norms and creatively engage and relate with one another.



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At that time “there were already people trying to act out and present a unified, created experience, including the Bolt Action Rifle Club in 1990, pith-helmeted adventurers portraying the spirit of the soldiers of the Raj with tea and authentic weaponry.” (Doherty: 61) In 1993, the Christmas Camp with Christmas decoration, a pine tree placed in the middle of the camp, Christmas carol music, Christmas snags and drinks and a man in Santa outfit called Santa Doty who would pose with topless women for pictures has been recalled as one of the first ‘real’ theme camps. Critics could argue that this concept is merely reduced to silly and indulgent forms of involvement at Burning Man, and that theme camps generally lack the depth and radicalism to have any significance as a cultural and social commentary. As a response to these critics we could also argue that the playful and absurd engagement that has already been described when talking about the countercultural scene of San Francisco is a meaningful technique that challenges the individual’s consciousness and gives way to self discovery without reducing each act to a political or social critique of some sort. Ethnographer and long-time participant Jeremy Hockett concluded that

⁷⁰ “Danger Ranger’s Photos of Burning Man 1990.” Laughing Squid Web Hosting. Scott Beale (ed.). January 2008. June the 10th, 2010. <<http://laughingsquid.com/danger-ranger-photos-of-burning-man-1990/>>.

[t]he significance of Burning Man is the cultural and collective frame it manifests through which individuals can gain a sense of self *and* community. The collective ritual, festal and carnivalesque aspects of Burning Man foster self-discovery and provide a context in which to explore the possibility of an alternative ordered society. (Hockett: 80)

Overall, self-discovery and gaining of a new sense of self depends on the involvement of the participant. Therefore theme camp must be participatory to invite Black Rock citizens to engage in some form. Sometimes this means that people provide free services they find in the outside world which is often enough to create an environment for self-discovery – a concept the Diggers like Judy Berg already had experienced: “We put together a credo, which was, “Do your own thing”—no restraints, no rules—and “Everything is free.” That [credo] provided so much open space that anything could happen, and . . . did.” (Hodgdon: 1) In Black Rock City a theme camp can be a bar, a cafe lounge or a dance club, a yoga and massage center, a sauna (in fact, people have brought out and built a sauna – witnessed by the author) or a Bedouin Hotel with banquet dinners, a bar lounge and luxurious tents as guest rooms, a Free Cloth Store where participants chose their items and then walk out of the store on a fashion show platform with the cheering crowd waiting in line to get in. There are body painting camps, a soul mate swap camp – you bring a friend and swap him/her for a stranger – a ‘body wash camp’ in reference to a car wash – a camp in which people are provided with a full scale body wash by the hands of others, they can also join in and wash other participants. For many, the infamous *Thunder Dome* camp used to be one of Black Rock City’s main attractions. In a cone shaped dome two participants tied to bungee cords fight one another in reminiscence of the Hollywood blockbuster *Mad Max III*.

Theme camps as well as the growing art installations – growing in number and size – and art cars were becoming major features of Burning Man as an art festival. Art cars or *mutant vehicles*, as they are also called, were brought out to Burning Man for the first time in 1993. An art car’s size and features can vary tremendously. It could be lawnmower that has undergone a transformation to look like an animal that can only carry the driver of the vehicle; it could be a motorized moving platform with living room furniture and a bar which serves drinks or just the platform covered with a Persian rug (suggesting a flying carpet). It could also be a transformed city bus that looks like a giant – sometimes fire-spitting -- dragon, a Mississippi steam boat or an old sailing ship that can carry 50 or more people.



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⁷¹ La Contessa, by the La Contessa Crew. 2005

3.2.5. Playa names and new identities

In my nine years at Burning Man I've been a roulette dealer, a bass guitarist in a casino house band, star of a confessional TV show, sodlayer, ditchdigger, fireman, pyromaniac, gunman, reporter, furniture mover, painter, welder, driller, hole-digger, rigger. (Doherty: 12)

Another feature of Burning Man that suggests a *frontier* mentality is that people tend to give themselves *playa names*. Playa names are an indication that participants tend to see their experience at Burning Man as something quite different to their 'normal' lives in the confines of society. The event offers the opportunity for participants to reinvent themselves that yields to the festival's theme of radical self-expression. In Black Rock City everyone can work creatively as an artist, sculptor, fire-artist, they can work as bartender in the numerous bars of the city or in Center-camp, 'work' as a masseur or teach a yoga class in one of the many Yoga and massage camps, volunteer as a journalist for Media Mecca camp, volunteer as a Black Rock Ranger, etc. People have an abundance of options to explore new types of roles at Burning Man quite similar to frontier towns of the West where

[c]lass lines based on old wealth meant little in a land where the local ne'er-do-well might be transmuted into the town's richest citizen by a fortunate mining strike, the humble landowner transformed into a millionaire with a lucky real-estate speculation, or the local barmaid elevated to the peak of society's pyramid by marrying the village banker. (Billington: 687)

Social mobility at the frontier did not only mean that the individuals had opportunities to transgress social and economical hierarchies more easily than anywhere else in modern history. For frontiersmen it was also possible to work in different trades and start your own business if someone had an idea and was willing to risk the endeavour. The reinvention of the individual is one of the striking characteristics at the frontier. Larry Harvey draws similarities between the American Frontier myth and Black Rock City by comparing its history to that of San Francisco's during the Gold Rush of 1849 where the Gold Miners "all assumed nick names just like playa names." He further explains that

[San Francisco] just went from being a tent town to a city like that. It was like in the Gold Rush. [It happened within] just two years and [was] really just improvised. [The city was] full of restless spirits and everyone ready for something wonderful to happen. Back then, people could easily reinvent

themselves and overnight could become newspaper editors, just like Benjamin Franklin who was not only an inventor but who also reinvented himself. (Harvey: 17:00)

Reinvention of the self is not a particular frontier feature, although the frontier environment enabled individuals to pursue new identities more so than in a further structured and complex society. However, reinvention of the self is a feature of American mentality in general that goes back to the late medieval writings of Thomas Aquinas who not only declared the intellect to be independent over man's fall – a radical idea at that time – but also believed in the virtue of reason and its power to control one's passions. (Schaeffer: 11) He saw "the mind as a collection of separate modules or faculties assigned to various mental tasks."⁷² His views on *faculty psychology* were picked up by later 17th and 18th century Renaissance philosophers John Locke, David Hume and Francis Bacon who further emphasized the supremacy of reason over passion and mind over matter that manifests itself in a *balanced character*. (Howe: 151) Their conclusions based on scientific observation known today as *Empiricism* made faculty psychology extremely popular, especially in America.

Nowhere did the concept of the balanced character have more impact than in America where it was exemplified by famous political personalities such as Benjamin Franklin, Frederick Douglas and Abraham Lincoln. They were classic examples of individuals who had risen from obscurity and poverty to become monumental figures in American history and thus personified the American ideal of the self-made man.⁷³ In their life stories, they provided examples of the willingness to reinvent oneself as a way to overcome obstacles from within or without. Especially Benjamin Franklin's philosophy on self-improvement and self-invention that became widely popular through his autobiography - one of the best-selling and influential autobiographies of all time – illustrated how he not only sought new professions and challenges but also new identities for himself.⁷⁴ In America today, especially for immigrants, it is common to change his/her name and start a new life and seek a new identity. "It's pretty easy in California to reinvent yourself" says Harvey and points out "that [it] can liberating but also be fatuous. (Harvey: 18:04)

⁷² May 21st, 2010. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Faculty_psychology

⁷³ Daniel Walker Howe describes in his book ,*Making the American Self* how each of these famous political figures all had incorporated and personified the idea of faculty psychology and the balanced character.

⁷⁴ Benjamin Franklin. *The autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. Ware, Hertfordshire : Wordsworth, 1996.



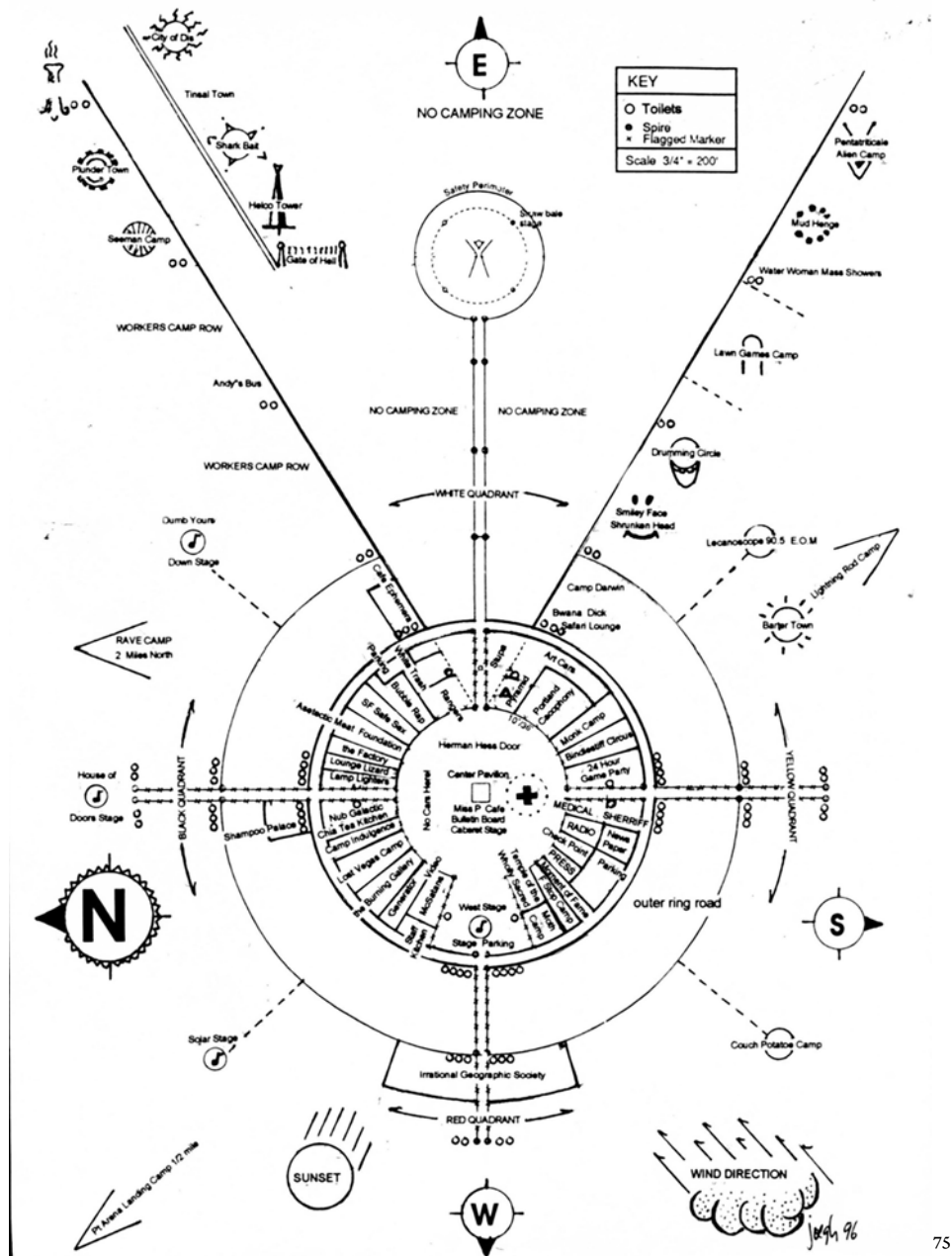
3.3.1. The year 1996 – the demise of the Wild West

Desert: luminous, fossilized network of an inhuman intelligence, of a radical indifference – the indifference not merely of the sky, but of the geological undulations, where the metaphysical passions of space and time alone crystallize. Here the terms of desire are turned upside down each day, and night annihilates them. But wait for the dawn to rise, with the awakening of the fossil sounds, the animal silence. (Baudrillard: 6)

The year 1996 became a major turning point in Burning Man's history. It marked changes in the way the festival would be organized and, most significantly, it marked major changes in rules. Additionally, changes in public reception of the festival lead to difficulties for the organizers to set up the event in the following years. Some of the leading figures would eventually part with Burning Man altogether. And for those who cherished the festival's anarchistic character most, 1996 was the climatic spectacle of 'total anarchy' that would not be repeated. Moreover, 1996 is a culmination of the Wild West atmosphere on the playa and ever since then the festival's development has become much more civic in character with increased regulation, increased supervision by outside authority and a constant increase of self-managed institutions. Therefore, 1996 marks the last year and the climax of cacophonist's TAZ anarchy. Initially responsible for taking the idea of Burning Man to the Black Rock Desert in the first place, they would no longer have much influence in organizing the event.

First of all, in 1996, there were a number of severe accidents before and during the festival that made questions of safety regulations apparent. A Burning Man staff member was killed in a motorcycle accident caused by his reckless driving just two days before the start of the festival. During the last night of the festival, a drug-influenced driver ran over a tent with two people sleeping in it and ended up crashing into another car, and injuring a third person. Two helicopters needed to be called in to bring the injured people to hospitals in Reno. Though all three victims eventually recovered, one of them suffered permanent physical damage. (Doherty: 84, 107)

Secondly, with participation reaching 8000 that year with almost limitless freedom for all, it became only a question of time until things would get out of control and something bad would happen. Some participants noted that they were amazed that no severe accidents had happened in the years preceding 1996. With no restrictions on driving, people could drive their cars over the vast space of the playa day and night. In 1996, Black Rock City's camp structure still resembled the lay out of the first year's with a circular main encampment and the rest of camps loosely set up along a few marked roads that lead to the village's center.



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Near campsites reckless driving was met with frontier justice by the Black Rock Rangers or other participants as mentioned earlier. There were also no restrictions on campfires and thus campfires were burning all over Black Rock City. Additionally, there were also no restrictions on pyrotechniques and fireworks. Fire as a ritualized symbol and agent of transformation played a major role in the Burning Man experience of the first years – it still does but it in a much more contained way. (Gilmore: 46) The problem was that fires would tend to grow out of control during the last nights of the event. Eventually anything that looked

⁷⁵ All following maps have been retrieved from the Burning Man website. Rod Garrett, the city main designer (in cooperation with Larry Harvey) discussed the development of Black Rock City. Accessed on July the 21st, 2010. See: <http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about_burningman/brc_growth.html>.

inflammable – on some occasions that meant cars and the art installations – ended up in the campfires or torched, sometimes without consent of the owners and artists. Hence, it became only a question of time and number of participants as to when things would spiral out of control. In 1996, such wanton burning of art and other objects definitely got out of control and such incidents would gradually decline in succeeding years. (Doherty: 206)

One of the most important symbols of the American Frontiers was also present in the early days of Burning Man -- guns. Guns were allowed because it is legal to carry guns in Nevada and, back then, the Burning Man community embraced the idea of guns in their encampment. The San Francisco bohemia made full use of it by setting up a drive-by-shooting range at the outskirts of the playa where anyone could set up and use as target practice any kind of object they brought with them. They also provided motorized vehicles that were modified to carry the gun lovers and drive them along the targets. (Doherty: 61 - 62)

Until 1996, the public had perceived Burning Man (the media was constantly covering the event) as a wild and bizarre happening in a remote desert where normal standards and rules of society were set aside. Overall the festival was regarded as safe and was acknowledged for its attention to environmental issues (e.g. the BLM praised the Burning Man organization for its efforts in cleaning up the playa after the event was over). The Cacophony ideal to ‘Leave no Trace’ had become a mantra out in the desert, says John Law who was also responsible for the clean-up in the early years. (Law: 13:00) However, the growing population of Black Rock City was also causing more and more problems to adhere to the ideal. “In fact, by 1995, I already felt uncomfortable about it because with 10,000 people you just couldn’t prevent damaging the environment.” (Law: 14:00) Overall, the perception changed dramatically after 1996 and it took the continuous effort of the new Burning Man organization (former PR manager of General Motors Marian Goodell played a key role) to convince the public and the numerous federal and state authorities that the new rules and framework of the event would prevent another disaster.

Since the mid 90’s, Burning Man had grown into an event which demanded a year-round work effort. By 1994, the three leading indisputable organizing figures of the festival had formed a company which overlooked organizing the event and functioned as a legal representative. Larry Harvey, initiator and main theoretician of Burning Man (one British

journalist described him as a ‘social engineer’)⁷⁶ was responsible for general planning and art management. John Law was responsible for BLM permission process (that became more complicated each year – today BM organizers start with the application process as soon as the last event ends) logistics, transportation and camp setup. Michael Michael (alias Danger Ranger) as founder of the Black Rock Rangers was responsible for safety and handled the books. (Doherty: 97) John Law and Michael Michael were also leaders in the Cacophony Society before Burning Man joined its Zone trip 4 into the Desert in 1990. In terms of management efficiency and liability – the event was insured through John Law’s and Michael Michael’s neon sign company – the division of work and responsibility upon the three head organizers seemed lucid and plausible. (Doherty: 96)

However, the management of the three only lasted for two years. One of the most significant problems was that John Law and Larry Harvey had diverging views on the further development of Burning Man that could not be reconciled. Up until today, the dispute between the two symbolizes the controversy of Burning Man parting with some of its core values of its early years. On one side, Larry Harvey had a vision of a new cultural utopia that he saw possible to create out in the desert – a utopia that eventually would also have an impact on mainstream society. And one could argue that any steps necessary to create and enlarge ‘his vision’ he was eager to take including the implementation of more and more rules and thus the restriction of freedom. On the other side, John Law as a committed cacophonist wanted to keep the anarchist spirit of early Burning Man alive – as did most of the people who participated in Burning Man those first years out in the desert.

“Most people involved in Burning Man then consciously operated on an underground impulse that opposed „successful“ mainstream culture; they were passionately devoted to loose coordination, no bureaucracy, the whole TAZ model. That all changed irreversibly with growing population and growing attention from the media, the police, and the BLM.” (Doherty: 102)

Before further discussing these two opposing central figures and their respective views that collided in 1996, the discussion, for the last time, turns to Frederick Jackson Turner’s already-offered insight in the underlying conflict.

⁷⁶ See the short documentary: The Burning Man USA. Journeymen Pictures, 1994. Accessed on July the 2nd, 2010. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7-Fn3LJ5MuM>>.

3.3.2. F.J. Turner on the different types of frontiersmen and the call for legislation as a means to preserve democracy

The conflict between the two can be interpreted in terms of the conflict that happened throughout the settlement of the frontier. First of all, Frederick Jackson Turner argued that there existed different types of frontiersmen depending on their occupations that advanced along the frontier in different stages. He differentiates between three main frontiers because their advancement differed in time and place.

The trader and the trapper were the first who explored the frontier. They were followed by the rancher and miner and, finally, the farmer settled the frontier which represented the last stage of settlement because what followed was the building of communities that marked the closing of the frontier. He observed that “[w]hen the trappers scaled the Rockies, the farmer was still near the mouth of the Missouri.” (Turner: 39)

Turner also cites Jason Mason Peck who described in his *New Guide to the West* in 1837 that there were three different classes of frontiersmen who advance along the frontier in different stages:

1. The true pioneer who clears the land, builds a log cabin, subsists mainly on hunting and a little bit of farming – he lives primarily in solitude and almost total independence until
2. The next group of pioneers move in constructing roads and bridges, live in houses with glass windows and build civic institutions, such as court houses, schools, mills and so forth.
3. Men of capital move in who buy off the land and enterprises of the early settlers who then move on further westward. The village then grows and develops to become a town or city with solid brick buildings, other edifices, churches and all the comforts and plentitudes of conventional civic life. (Turner: 44 – 46)

Hence, there is a clear distinction between the early frontiersman who cherishes the simplistic life at the frontier and the ones who follow and like to see the development of civic communities. The same development could be said about Burning Man. Different types of personalities were attracted to early Burning Man in contrast to what happens today. The Cacophonists are a good example for the type of early frontiersmen who cherished anarchy and total independence that receded due to the influx of more and more people, the growing attention from media and authorities and the implementation of rules.

Turner already argued that rules need to be implemented for lack of new land: “Legislation is taking the place of the free lands as the means of preserving the ideal of democracy. But at the same time it is endangering the other pioneer ideal of creative and competitive individualism.” (Turner: 155) An example that Turner provides to make his argument is *Populism* that he interprets as a call for political institutions in order to safeguard the ideal of democracy.

Populism emerged the late 1890's out of a large scale farmer's movement in the Midwest. By then, the popular myth of the independent farmer had been replaced by the commercial farmer whose livelihood very much depended on market prices and newly established communication and transportation systems of which he had no control. When the prices of farm goods dropped significantly and costs soared during the last decades of the 19th century (e.g. credit loans and railroad transportation expenses), the conflict between the agrarian society of the west, which until then had dominated the mindset of American society (Thomas Jefferson envisioned that America should remain an agrarian society to secure American democracy), and the emerging industrial society of the east resulted in the Populism movement. (Brinkley: 452-454, 523-527) Populism was an outcry for control of government of the American farmer. Turner argued that

he demanded [...] an extension of the powers of governments in the interest of his historic ideal of democratic society. ... [C]apital, labor and the Western pioneer, all deserted the ideal of competitive individualism in order to organize their interests in more effective combinations.

3.3.3. The opposing frontiersmen John Law and Larry Harvey and the development of the Black Rock City grid

Historically, in terms of the frontier analysis, the conflict between John Law and Larry Harvey could be interpreted as the conflict between anarchy and civilization, or between two types of frontiersmen. On the one hand there is John Law -- independent, adventurous, always questioning authority, just like the frontier farmer. He comforts himself in living the simplistic life in the backwoods. Therefore, his attitude towards growth of community cannot

be anything other than sceptical. In any case, he prefers an organic and sustainable growth of community and would rather abandon his settlement and move on to the next frontier than give up his independence for the sake of growth of community.

For two years prior to [1996] it started to become clear that the event was going to do one of two things. It was either going to completely implode and stop or going to become a gigantic commercial event. [...] In my mind, by late 1994, it was clear to me that it was going in one direction or the other. We couldn't sustain it at all or it would have to become a controlled event which was a very different thing from what I was interested in. (Law: 41:40)

John Law saw the growing numbers of people coming to Burning Man each year as an issue of great concern. He would have preferred to abandon Burning Man altogether when participation numbers reached a point beyond a sustainable level, i.e. beyond the original way they had celebrated their annual ritual. For him, the anarchistic character with almost no rules was an essential part of the Burning Man experience. (Doherty: 97, 117)

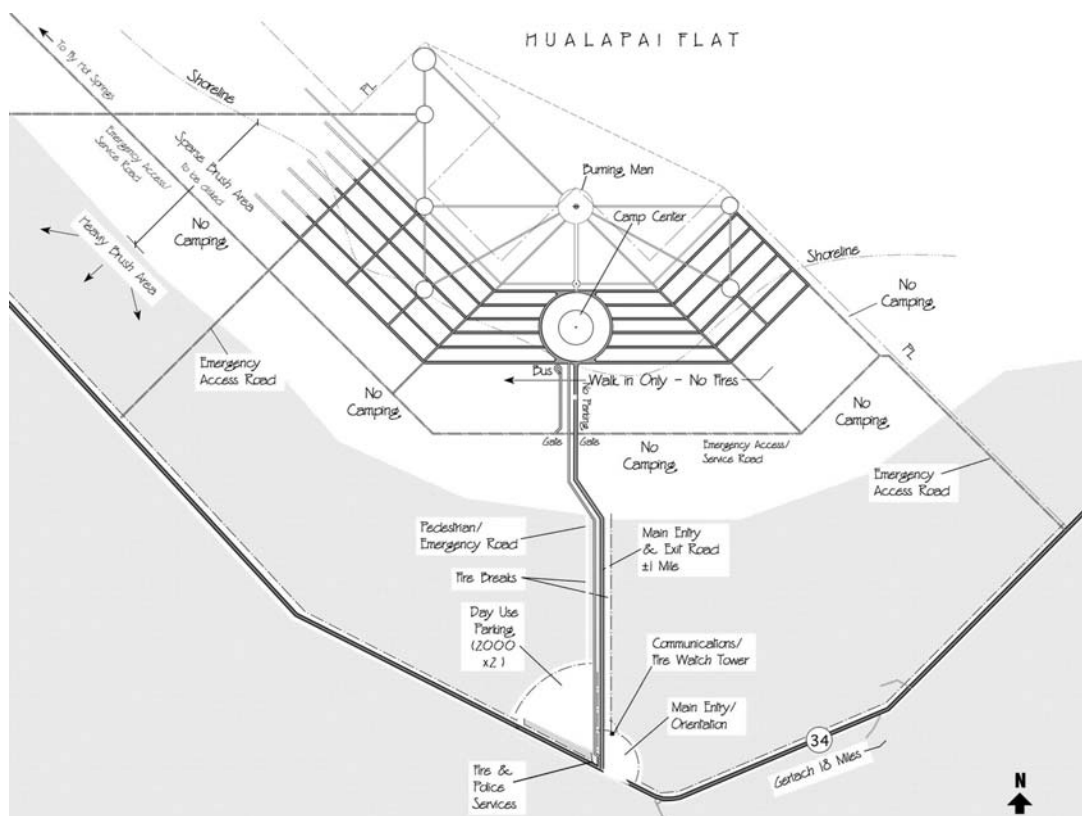
On the other hand, Larry Harvey personifies the *civic* frontiersman who sees satisfaction in the emergence of a civic community with centrally organized institutions in contrast to the frontier lawlessness of the early days of Burning Man.

I believe in civilization and I don't harbour much nostalgia for anarchy because I experienced it. I know how the rules got me. I know that in those wonderful days of freedom where you could shoot guns random someone I knew [...] came to me [...] [whose] camp was far out from the central settlement and described the angry buzz of a tumbling bullet that had gone right by his tent. (Harvey: 6:40 - 7:40)

Harvey wanted the festival to grow and become much larger in scale of participation. In fact, he had the dream that the whole world should see the man burn. Ever since he had been out there, he imagined and envisioned the building of a *real city*. Therefore, he knew that something needed to change.

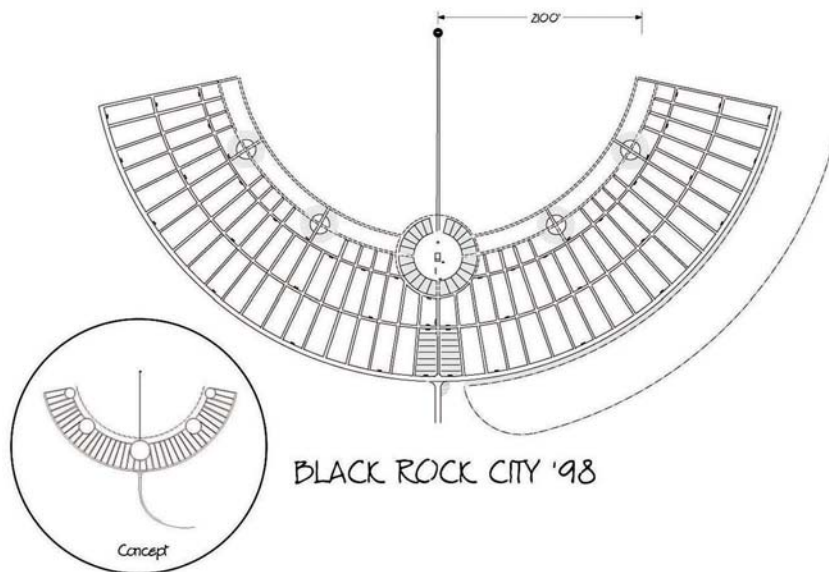
I could see the cars dashing through the night were a public menace...I felt what[...]we need is to delineate space that suggest to everyone present that there is some kind of higher order, there is something greater that they belong to and not just their circle.[...] I wanted to make it feel civic, because I knew that then people would behave more like citizens and be more responsible for one another. (Harvey: 31:20)

With the growing number of people, it was necessary to provide a city structure that not only suggested a more civic environment for the participants, but also ensured easy access for service vehicles, the Black Rock Rangers and outside authorities into the camps. Earlier he and Steve Mobia had founded the lamp lighters who enlightened the lamp post that marked the 'street' leading to the Man. At that time, the general encampment was marked by surveyor flags and campsites were loosely set up along those lines. This meant that specific camps were hard to find and sometimes impossible to access. But with the growing number of people this concept seemed unsustainable. As Harvey put it: "You can't just say, it's the yellow tent behind the red car behind the giant dog head."⁷⁷ Therefore in 1997, Burning Man had its first *city grid* with roads and road signs. Due to the catastrophic character and experiences of the 1996, the event was relocated to private property in the vicinity of the Black Rock playa. However in 1998, the festival moved back to its original location and has remained there until today.



⁷⁷ Article by Brian Doherty in *Reason* magazine. 15th of June 2010.
<http://reason.com/archives/2000/02/01/burning-man-grows-up/3>.

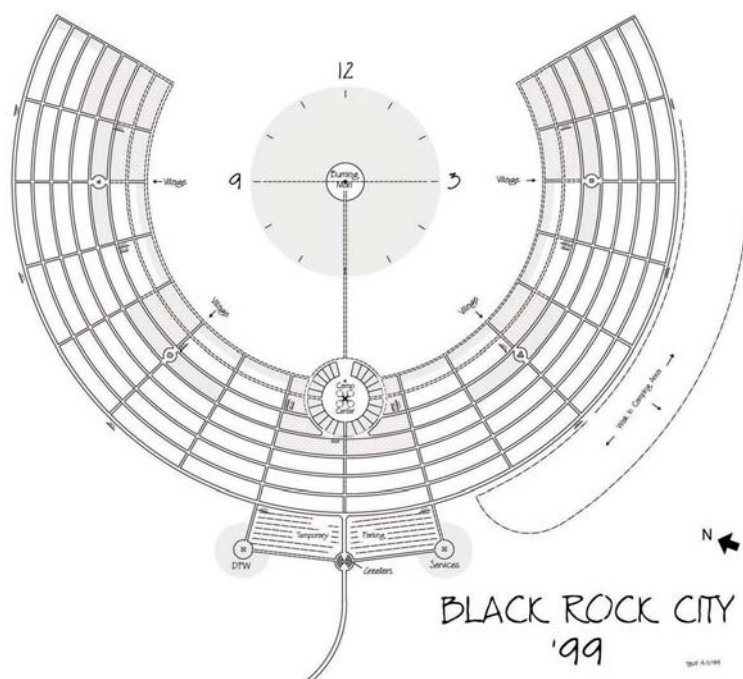
In the following years, Burning Man's city grid would evolve into a full scale circular city structure with the 'Man' as the central figure and geographical focal point from which all roads would lead.



The 'Man' as the central symbol that defined the event was enhanced because it began to serve as the main point of orientation. Since the beginning of the event in the desert, John Law resented the mythical and spiritual meanings that Larry Harvey placed upon the ritual of the Burn – although Harvey insists that the wooden effigy and the ritual of the 'Burn' has no other meaning than what people make out of it themselves. It was one of their main disagreements which couldn't be reconciled. Another was the development of the city structure.

I didn't know it was possible personally to continue on with a real free spirited format or not. It seemed it would be difficult if not impossible. [...] One of [the few ideas I had] which was rejected completely [...] by most of the people who were primary organizers [...] was to abandon the architecture of the camp in the direction we were moving to [...] The architecture which was begun the first year in the desert when I layed out the camp in a geometric fashion for simplicity reasons began to grow and grow and then Larry really jumped on that concept and became enamoured by the architecture of the camp [...] He understood the power of the architecture [...] and in mind emulated a [...] center that emanated the same kind of authority and control that the architecture of a place like Nuremberg would and for the same reason – for [an] ecstatic group, [an] ecstatic cultural exchange within a controlled architectural environment. (Law: 41:40 - 43:15)

Comparing Burning Man's city architecture with that of Nuremberg during the Nazi regime may, at first, sound far-fetched, but it is both interesting and edifying to note that architecture in general can offer unique insights into culture when understood in terms of space awareness.



3.3.4. From the circle to the square back to the circle

Men live in round houses until they become sedentary and specialized in their work organization. [...] A tent or a wigwam is not an enclosed or visual space. Neither is a cave nor a hole in the ground. These kinds of space – the tent, the wigwam, the igloo, the cave – are not enclosed in the visual sense because they follow dynamic lines of force, like a triangle. When enclosed, or translated into visual space, architecture tends to lose its tactile kinetic pressure. A square is the enclosure of a visual space; that is it consists of space properties abstracted from manifest tensions. A triangle follows lines of force, this being the most economical way of anchoring a vertical object. A square moves beyond such kinetic pressures to enclose visual space relations while depending upon diagonal anchors. This separation of the visual from direct tactile and kinetic pressure, and its translation into new dwelling spaces, occurs only when men have learned to practice specialization of their senses and fragmentation of their work skills. The square room or house speaks the language of the sedentary specialist, while the round hut or igloo, like the conical wigwam tells of the integral nomadic ways of food-gathering communities.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ McLuhan quoted in: Benedetti, Paul and Nancy DeHart (eds.). Forward Through The Rearview Mirror: Reflections On and By Marshall McLuhan. Ontario: Prentice-Hall Canada Inc, 1996.

McLuhan points out that architecture is intrinsically related to spatial organization and relations of man. Tribal nomadic cultures live in acoustic space because they do not specialize, thus emphasize, one sense over another; their sense ratio is in total equilibrium. And the circle is the most apparent symbol for this kind of awareness and is typical for *Naturvölker*. (Kidwell: 46)

Writing is *the* emphasis of visual stress and gave birth to civilization and the city. Nonetheless, it is important to note that McLuhan mainly used the word civilization in regard to Western culture because it is Western culture with its specific writing technique of the phonetic alphabet that stresses visual perception to the highest degree. Euclidean space is a direct result of the phonetic alphabet that the Greeks, a former tribal culture, fully invented and immersed themselves in. (McLuhan, 1989: 38, 39, 55) The impact was far-reaching and enormous. All western thought with its left-hemisphere bias is based on this script. Likewise, new space awareness emerged and resulted in new forms of city structure.

The Greeks were the first to fully apply a city grid with straight lines and right angles. Gregorian colonial towns, especially, were built in gridiron patterns since the 5th century B.C.⁷⁹ The Romans adopted the same technique and as well in building the *agora*.

It is the agora that makes the town a *polis*. As originated by the Greeks, the *polis* introduced an entirely new element into the civilization of the West and the Near East. This new element, represented by the agora [...] was based on the potentialities of a gradually growing democracy and may be *contrasted* with the principle of the axis. The latter, whether in Mesopotamia or in Egypt or during the last Roman centuries, always represents the architecturally crystallized form of a dictatorial concept of society.⁸⁰

The ancient Gregorian and Roman empires city structures and, particularly, Rome's linear road system leading to all corners of its empire, were physical effects of these new modes of space awareness.⁸¹ The organically grown cities of the Middle Ages, however, were a

79 Crawford, J.H. "A Brief History of Urban Form: Street Layout Through the Ages." 2005. Accessed on July the 14th, 2010. <<http://www.carfree.com/papers/huf.html>>.

⁸⁰ Zucker, Paul. *Town and Square: From the Agora to the Village Green*. New York: Columbia University Press. 1959, 31.

⁸¹ The method on how script was recorded, the medium so to say – stone, papyrus or paper – played a significant role in the organizational structure of any given society. Harold Innis, an inspirational figure and huge influence for Marshall McLuhan, was the first historian who explained that the empires of history were determined by media of communication. Their expansion and longevity depended upon the means of how space and time was dealt with. Generally, cultures that used stone as a writing material generally were governed by a priest caste and endured over centuries but expansion was restricted. Cultures that used papyrus or paper were governed by a

testimony of a culture that had absorbed the technique of the phonetic alphabet but still retained an acoustic sensibility. The cities of the Middle Ages in Western Europe hardly had any straight roads and right angles. McLuhan bluntly said the “[t]he history of Europe between A.D. 300 and A.D. 950 was a story of the task of missionizing the barbarians.” (McLuhan, 1989: 137)

This all changed dramatically with the advent of print technology. With print technology, left-hemisphere perception was increased to the degree that the fixed geometrical figures (two dimensional) of Euclid were substituted by points that were connected through infinite lines in the coordinate system (three dimensional space) of Rene Descartes. “Print gave men the concept of indefinite repetition so necessary to the mathematical concept of infinity. [...] This concept of infinity is not imposed upon us by logic.” (McLuhan, 2001: 126) Thus dividing a circular line into quantitative bits, small enough to be measurable is the character of the Gutenberg technology. That was something the Greeks could not have conceived; for them, a line was always graphical and, therefore, measurable. Hence, squaring the circle was the classical problem for ancient man. (Spengler: 87) The mindset in the Renaissance period is marked by the affinity for the infinity. The man of the Renaissance overcame the fixation on his physical outer eye that was substituted by the awakening of the inner eye. (Spengler: 101). The awakening of the inner eye accompanies a transcendental yearning for the infinite space which is reflected not only in the very different mathematical system, but also in pictorial art (the perspective)⁸², classical music, architecture and a new historical awareness.

In the same way, the squared grid of American cities, counties and states is the result of perceiving in a mechanical, linear and uniform mode. (The medium: 52, 53) American democracy in general is based on rationalism and individualism which are all values that are derived from typography. (McLuhan, 2008: 161 – 166)⁸³

military bureaucracies that could expand military dominance over vast empires. However, they were mostly short-lived.

See: Harold Innis. The Bias of Communication. University of Toronto Press, 1951.

⁸² The perspective in paintings obviously anticipates the three-dimensional coordinate system of Descartes – Caravaggio was the first to translate this new perception into artistic form.

⁸³ The author likes to point out that he has written an essay on the “Influence of the phonetic script and typography on the American democracy” where it is discussed how Puritanism and Liberalism is a direct result of typography and how most of American ideals can be derived from this technology. Published on the website: <<http://rondeejolamedia.yolasite.com/papers.php>>. Accessed July the 24th 2010.

Aside from this important exception, most city design since the Renaissance adopted the grid. This reached a height during the US westward expansion, when hundreds of gridded towns were platted along the railroads. (In many cases, the exact same plan was repetitively stamped onto the land.) This was a matter of expedience, but these towns almost all still have their original street network--once established, streets are not often changed.⁸⁴

Furthermore, the long straight roads and avenues that were realized in 19th century Paris and today can stretch over 30 miles in Los Angeles, are another testimony to typographic man's attachment to visual space. (Giedion: 770)

Today, we live in the electric age and perception and space awareness has changed once again. The telegraph was the first physical invention based on electromagnetic technology that put an end to the one-at-a-time sequential perception of space and time. (McLuhan, 1989: 14) The mechanical age that started with Gutenberg's new technology and found its mathematical masters in Descartes and Newton started to erode. Einstein and quantum mechanics eventually opened the path in science to acknowledge the new form of space and time awareness that the electric technology had introduced. The one-thing-at-a-time perception found its 'climactic ending' with the invention of the computer, although it is precisely the very result of perceiving in rational or causal terms (either 1 or 0). "[T]he computer reverses into simultaneous pattern recognition (acoustic space), eroding or bypassing mechanical processes in all sequential operations." (McLuhan, 1989: 103) At the same time, science recognized that nature does not operate in causality as Werner Heisenberg published his now famous *Uncertainty Principle*.

Its key element was that in the quantum world, measuring the position or velocity [of] an object affect the object being measured. The more accurately we know the position of an electron, the less we know about its momentum. Heisenberg also showed that the same applies to energy and time, a similarly linked pair of quantities. Observables, in effect, are produced by the measuring process. There was also another far-reaching implication of the principle, that "in a certain sense the law of causality becomes invalid," as Heisenberg noted in 'Über die Grundprinzipien der 'Quantenmechanik' (1927), his first nontechnical article for nonphysicists. Philosophically this meant that causality was an a posteriori concept, not one of the a priori categories of the understanding as Kant had argued. [...]"Natural science does not simply describe and explain nature," said Heisenberg in *Physics and Philosophy*

⁸⁴ Crawford, J.H. A Brief History of Urban Form: Street Layout Through the Ages. 2005. Accessed on July the 14th, 2010. <<http://www.carfree.com/papers/huf.html>>

(1958), “it is a part of the interplay between nature and ourselves; it describes nature as exposed to our method of questioning.”⁸⁵

Further, the theoretical and practical questions of today’s quantum mechanics that deal with the question of quantum entanglement, reflect a new awareness of perceiving simultaneously and in patterns – of seeing the figures and the ground and the in between..

The computer essentially is the extension of man’s consciousness and the internet or *Cyberspace* is acoustic space in (non-) physical form. Participants of the Burning Man Festival have compared the physicality of the playa with cyberspace because its immensity gives the impression of having no fixed boundaries. One can amble about and find oneself immersed in all varieties of experiences that are far away from, if not alien to, one’s normal day-to-day experiences in the default world.

However, having understood the connection between media and social organization we could argue that Black Rock City’s grid architecture is still a reminiscence of typography in combination with the retrieved acoustic awareness – the circular structure and spatial organization certainly is a reminder of an awareness that could be linked to Europe’s pagan heritage or that of Native Americans. Natives are rooted in a world view shaped by reciprocity and spatiality that means that the native notion of time is deeply connected with spatial relationships. (Kidwell: 46) The annual periodic cycles of the sun and the moon and the earth are ceremonial determinatives for the spatial relationship between the community and the sun at solstice – thus Burning Man’s roots in summer solstice celebrations and setting up the grid structure that was determined by the sun, is evidence of the community’s ‘new’ spatial awareness. In the half-circle shape that took its final form in 1999, due to the ‘Wheel of Time’ theme of that year – since 1995, Larry Harvey announces an annual theme for the festival that is of cultural, social, spiritual or political significance and to which participants and artists should relate their effort for that particular year – streets were named in order of the clock, while avenues – streets that follow the circle – were given the names of planets in our solar system. This system has for the most part stuck, though avenues are now renamed in keeping with the year’s theme, but always adhere to an alphabetical order. Nonetheless, Burning Man

⁸⁵ A short biography of Werner Heisenberg. *Pegasus*. 24th of July 2010. <<http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/heisenb.htm>>.

evolved more and more into an event that had fixed boundaries⁸⁶ and the 'Man' as its central symbol serves as a point of orientation. "[I]t makes it easier in lot of ways to create spectacle and in some ways it makes it easier to create a comprehensive centrally emanating force that everyone can feel that they are part of it." (Law: 43:10)

John Law's comparison of its architecture to that of Nuremberg is an interesting note in terms of tribal awareness that played a role in Nazi Germany. For McLuhan, it was the new electric (acoustic) media that worked on the unconscious level of the German populace and gave way to the rise of German nationalists like Goebbels and Hitler. (McLuhan, 2001: 115) In contrast to France or, especially, England, the German populace (along with the Japanese), retained a *tribalism* in their culture upon which the new acoustic media, particularly radio, had an overwhelming subconscious effect: it reminded them of their tribal traditions and acted against the new forms of individualism, so feared by many. (McLuhan, 2001: 49) Therefore, Albert Speer's architecture of Nuremberg and Berlin served the purpose of creating spectacle in a neo-pagan yet nationalist way.

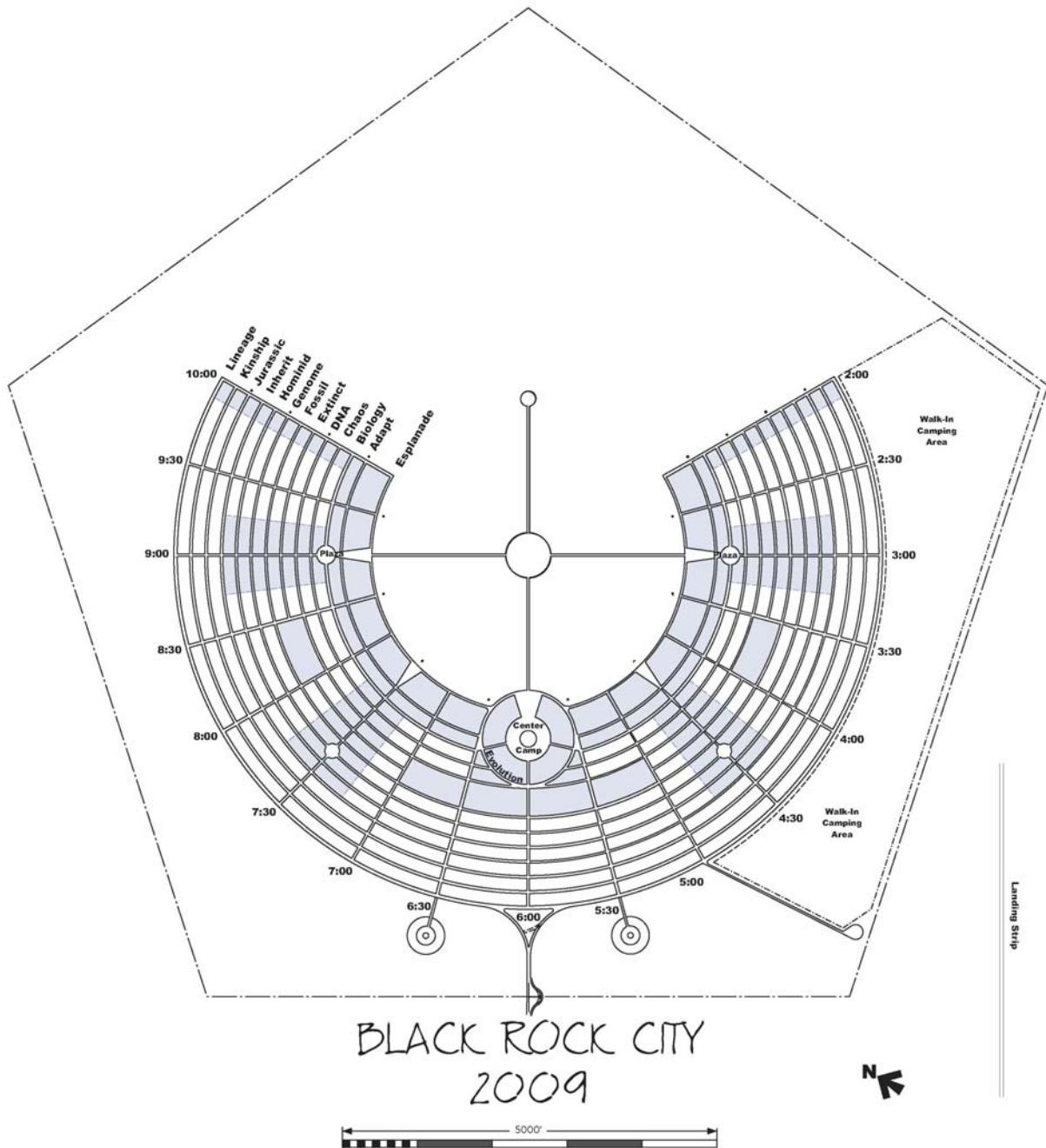
The author would like to point out that Burning Man and fascism have absolutely nothing to in common in terms of the ideological framework. Nevertheless, the comparison serves the purpose of our analysis in terms of how man's consciousness and cultural awareness is determined by media. McLuhan states that

Literate man naturally dreams of visual solutions to the problems of human differences.[...] It is more difficult to provide uniqueness and diversity than it is to impose the uniform patterns of mass education; but it is such uniqueness and diversity that can be fostered under electric conditions as never before." (McLuhan, 2001: 345)

This thesis argues that the Burning Man festival and its celebrated culture in many of its aspects is a testimony for a new cultural awareness that can be directly linked to the technology of the electric age. Still, some aspects of Burning Man are reminders of left-

⁸⁶ A border fence today stretches over seven miles around BRC.

hemisphere awareness, especially its centralizing architecture.



Black Rock City's city grid today can hardly be interpreted as a reminiscence of acoustic 'cyber'space.

The left hemisphere places information structurally in visual space, where things are connected sequentially – having separate centers with fixed boundaries. On the other hand, acoustic space structure, the function of the right brain in which processes are related simultaneously, has centers everywhere with boundaries nowhere. (McLuhan, 1989: 8)

If acoustic space had been fully translated onto the playa the physical outcome would have been a different one, probably more an organically grown chaos like the annual *Rainbow Gathering* which, interestingly, is also a child of the 60's hippie movement. Every year, with no official head organization, the participants communally chose the spot for the festival in one of the many American National Forests. Travelling from all parts of the country, they gather without having any hierarchical structure and, consequently, encampments grow organically.⁸⁷ John Law had a similar idea in mind before he left Burning Man after 1996.

[...] it is much more difficult and much more rewarding in my mind to have a very free form, not formatted, not structured communal situation that what I was trying to promote the last year I was there. [...] which was to make the camp not centrally controlled [and] allow the different groups – by then there were [...] big groups coming in with their own ideas of what they wanted to do – and allowing them to set up their camp pretty much where they wanted and format the architecture of the camp after a completely organic growth driven by the individual proponents and the individual groups. Allowing them to set up and use whatever space they needed and having the later groups to grow up around them. It would be difficult to navigate this, particularly with 50000 people. [...] It probably wouldn't work. I really admit that. But as a concept I found that really compelling and would have loved to have tried it. [...] Now because of the nature of the event and the creative people and the types of art that still is promoted and allowed to happen at Burning Man, of course is it good to have a map and see all this cool stuff, there is nothing bad about that. It is just a different concept. And the early Burning Man of what I was talking about from what the event grew into. (Law: 43:45 - 44:45)

Nonetheless, all things considered, Black Rock City's architecture reflects an interesting mix of pre-historic, ancient and post modern influences. On one side, the axis mundi that is created by the temple, the 'Man' and the Center Camp Café – the three most important symbols of today's festival – and falls through the 6 to 12 o'clock line of circular city structure is a reminder of pre-historic or ancient city structure that has been associated with non-democratic societies. However, Burning Man also has a huge public open space – the playa – which is electronic man's *agora*. It establishes an almost complete circle, but yet is left open for exploration of the boundless and directionless space that is reminiscent of acoustic space.

⁸⁷ The author has visited the Rainbow Gathering in 2008 in Wyoming. The two festivals which can be both traced back to its origins in the 60's movements have particular similarities in terms of a communal weeklong gathering in the summer with an emphasis on non-commercialism and community. Comparing the two festivals in terms of its origins in the Digger's Free Collective and the Prankster mentality as well as the psychedelic movement would constitute another interesting thesis.

3.4.1. After 1996 – the closing of the Frontier – rules, borders and community

[...] there are people who are sayin it's not the little town that it once was. No it's not, it always was intended to be a city. (Harvey: 47:44)

After the disaster of 1996, the head organizers knew that the festival needed a change in direction in order to survive. A new emphasis was placed on building a community. (Doherty: 121) On one hand, the implementation of rules was inevitable, on the other hand, Black Rock City eventually turned into a real city with various institutions that provided basic community services.

First of all, a ban on guns was inevitable considering the number of people that were coming to the desert. At the beginning, it was mostly friends having fun together in a remote desert. In 1996, with the 8000 people on the playa it was a different thing.⁸⁸ “I began to say that having no guns would not really deprive us from any kind of real liberty. There was so much freedom at hand in any other aspect [...]” (Harvey: 10:00) But, according to John Law, by 1996, the drive-by-shooting range did not exist anymore.

It had become clear to me (and the people actually involved in them like JD Boggmann, Kimmerick Smythe and others) by 1995 that the gun events were not supportable as "sanctioned" BM events. The Drive-By Shooting Range in 1995 was the last gun event that was open to anyone. From 96 on – after 96, I depend upon information from friends since I wasn't there – any gun related events took place far from the BM camp and were private and by invitation only. There were many such private events during but apart from BM taking place by my last year 1996. There were propane canister shootings and moving target events - all away from main camp, most in the hills somewhere where shooting would be safer.⁸⁹

Secondly, a ban on driving was implemented which proved to have enormous repercussions on how people moved around the city and certainly had an impact on the development of Black Rock City's structure. From this moment on, only service vehicles and mutant cars were allowed to drive around the encampment with a strict speed limit of 5mph imposed by the Rangers. (Doherty: 140) Ultimately, bicycles became important part of Burning Man and, today, almost everyone brings a bicycle to the festival in order to be able to move around – the city's size makes it necessary! *Pedal camp* emerged and became a popular

⁸⁸ The Burning Man website. May 13th, 2010. <<http://afterburn.burningman.com/09/history.htm>>

⁸⁹ Received email from John Law: (john@laughingsquid.com), Sent: June the 9th, 2010.

camp in the years before the millennium that recycled old bicycles and offered help in case someone's bike needed a fix. Connected to the ban on driving were the growing numbers of art or mutant vehicles. Therefore, the *Department of Mutant Vehicles* was established in order to restrict and impose safety standards on all mutant vehicles.

One of the most famous communal institutions is the *Center Camp Café*. Since, 1995, when it was decided to let P. Segal run a central café, it has served as the *de facto* community center of Black Rock City. (Doherty: 71) Through the years, it not only became the largest shade providing structure and the only location at the festival where you could buy coffee and tea – any other commerce is generally prohibited at Burning Man – but the Center Camp Café also evolved quite naturally into the main meeting point for all Black Rock citizens.

Another important institution that is responsible for building Black Rock City anew each year is the Department of Public Works (DPW). Most of the DPW workers are volunteers who often reside in or near Black Rock City for several weeks before and after the event.

The DPW is headquartered on an 80-acre ranch near our city. Here are housed workshops, cherry pickers, cranes, water trucks, storage containers and an ever-growing fleet of trucks and trailers. Work at the ranch commences weeks before Burning Man begins. Indeed, without the DPW there could be no Black Rock City. These workers are responsible for surveying our city, installing its roads and street signs, and erecting the built environment — the buildings, trailers, trenched power lines, and communication towers that form the working infrastructure of our home in the desert.⁹⁰

Artica is the camp where people can buy ice for cooling. Today, there are at least three *Artica* camps in the city. The *Emergency Service Department* serves as the hospital of Black Rock City. The City also has its own *Airport* that is run like a separate, independent constituent. *Playa Info* provides general information, volunteer work opportunities, and a sort of facebook-like database to locate and connect with friends and other members of the community. There is no cell phone reception and, up until recently, no internet access on the playa. *The Greeters* are set at the gate of Burning Man and provide a form of ritualized 'welcome' to incoming participants that is reminiscent of Michael Michael's gesture when the cacophonists arrived on the playa for the first time and declared that they had entered the *Zone*.

⁹⁰ The Burning Man website. April 22nd, 2010:
<http://burningwindow.org/index.php?option=com_wrapper&view=wrapper&Itemid=127>

The *Earth Guardians* work with the Bureau of Land Management to protect the historical, cultural and environmental resources of the desert. For example, volunteers are taken to the three hot springs that are located on the margins of the playa and serve as guards of the hot springs because Burners today should not use them during the time of the event. These local hot springs were originally part of all Burning Man experiences but later needed to be monitored and protected from the exponentially growing number of participants.

Media Mecca provides support to the increasing number of journalists, filmmakers and scholars who cover and do research on the event. However it is not affiliated with the dozens of the radio stations that pop up especially for the event, nor with the *Black Rock Beacon*, Black Rock City's very own newspaper.⁹¹ The *Artery*, the *Black Rock Arts Foundation* and the *Art Department of the LLC* are all institutions that serve, support and sometimes fund the numerous art works that today can be seen at Burning Man. Each year, hundreds of art projects can be seen on the playa, some of the installations and art pieces have grown into enormous size and scale – some that could even reach the height of a ten-storey building! This development is also resented by some participants says Harvey: “In the old days you just needed to put a flamingo in front of your tent and you be cool and now they give all this money to big artists and big groups and that makes me feel futile. But that's pathetic. As if society is not about striving for ideals.” (Harvey: 45:00)⁹²

Finally, coming back to the aspect of rules, campfires were banned. Campfires were important in the early days of Burning Man because they provided natural centers and meeting points for the community, but with upward numbers of 50,000 people and climbing, such primal luxuries were no longer prudent on an individual basis. Tiki torches were also banned because one of the Burning Man staffers accidentally burned his camp down before the gates opened in 1998. Burning your own art, another feature of the early event that turned into seemingly uncontrollable chaos in 1996, was also banned. It now must be done on an approved burn platform.⁹³ In the early days, fire play was often a spontaneous expression

⁹¹ In 2002, Black Rock City already had about 45 pirate radio stations. Fortunati, Allegra. “Utopia, Social Sculpture, and Burning Man.” in *AfterBurn: Reflections on Burning Man*. Mark Van Proyen and Lee Gilmore (eds.). New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 2006, p. 153.

⁹² Information on communal camps was mostly accessed through the Burning Man website.

⁹³ Brian Doherty. “Burning Man Grows Up : Can the nation's premier underground event survive its success?” *Reason magazine*. February 2000. 15th of June 2010. <<http://reason.com/archives/2000/02/01/burning-man-grows-up/3>>.

before “[...] scheduling, planning, and preapproval of dangerous fire art were required.” (Doherty: 188)

Another aspect that also changed was the handling of public acts of sex. In the early years, it was generally accepted to engage in sex publicly. There were camps who explicitly offered an environment that encouraged sexual engagement between participants. But Larry Harvey disapproves of this kind of behaviour and has no problem with people getting arrested if caught engaging in public sex. (Doherty: 230) This philosophy goes hand-in-hand with Burning Man becoming a more family-friendly event. For example, in the first years, there were no families with children coming to the event. Today, many families reside in *Kids Village*, one of the largest theme camps specifically set up for kids with services like kindergarten, child care and creativity workshops.

The ever-increasing number of participants is also accompanied by an increased number of outside authority personnel that come to the event to enforce the law. Since 2000, cops not only patrol the event (passively) as they had mostly done before, but have actively started to make arrests and hand out citations. They also use night vision cameras and infiltrate the Burning Man community undercover. (Doherty: 227, 228) Now, arrests, citations and warnings from the various agencies – Highway Patrol, County Sheriffs, BLM Rangers – add up into hundreds. Black Rock City became “a real city with normal problems, including crime.” (Doherty: 231) All things considered, the begging question is this: has the original TAZ model of a *free zone* that originated in the Diggers ideal of a Free City been replaced by Jeremy Bentham’s *panopticon*?

The frontier closed. Civilization replaced anarchy. Turner said that the rise of civilization is accompanied by an increase in legislation as well as the ascension of complex structures of human organization, thus institutions. He also observed out that this goes hand-in-hand with a decrease of individual creativity and spontaneity. Therefore, the people who originally brought the idea out to the desert and were crucial in the development of the early communal experiment, today, mostly, stay away from the festival.

With all its ever-increasing rules, Burning Man is not the cacophonous event of years gone by, though representatives of the Portland, Oregon, and Los Angeles branches of the Cacophony Society attended in 1999. The L.A. group returned after a two-year absence, bristling at new rules restricting the unsupervised use of pyrotechnics in art projects. The Portland group's anarchic, snarky energy is less

suiting to the festival than it once was. The real cops quickly put the kibosh on their routine of wandering around in postal uniforms with unloaded, but real, guns as the "Disgruntled Postal Workers."⁹⁴

Jerry James, Harvey's collaborator in building the 'Man' in the early years on Baker Beach said in 2000: "It's more like a typical urban experience. It's not the social experiment it used to be. Larry talks about building community – what I see them building is just like the community we live with every day, all these cops and rangers and rules and roads."⁹⁵ Harvey admits that the evolution of Burning Man into a full scale city with 50,000 people demanded changes that not everyone agrees with.

The cacophonists out in the desert – they liked to twist reality – stumbling onto that stage [the desert], that explains the early growth of it. The later growth of it can be explained by the attraction of what we created there – which is different. And I can understand someone saying those Gold Rush days are gone. And some of what happened back then had a profound aspect. (Harvey: 1:00)

Although, he gives credit to the anarchist ideals of the Cacophonists, he argues that "freedom is more something about a moral freedom to express your self and I didn't identify it with something of a counter-cultural bad boyism." (Harvey: 12:30)

The people who styled themselves anarchists had no wit of a philosophy. They knew nothing about philosophical anarchy. They didn't have the dignity of a philosophy. It was a countercultural attitude that signified anything; it signified arrested development. They were behaving like fourteen year olds." (Harvey: 36:00)

He concluded that "[s]ome of the cacophonists still come out to the desert but many stay behind because Burning Man's larger scale which undermines their sense of self election – typical for underground movements." (Harvey: 49:00)

One of the cacophonist's last pranks that displays the issue between them and Harvey speaks for itself:

⁹⁴ Brian Doherty. "Burning Man Grows Up : Can the nation's premier underground event survive its success?" *Reason magazine*, February 2000. 15th of June 2010. <<http://reason.com/archives/2000/02/01/burning-man-grows-up/2>>.

⁹⁵ Brian Doherty. "Burning Man Grows Up : Can the nation's premier underground event survive its success?" *Reason magazine*, February 2000. 15th of June 2010. <<http://reason.com/archives/2000/02/01/burning-man-grows-up/2>>.

After that cease-and-desist order, the Portland contingent turned its energy to pranking the festival itself, staging a bogus "Larry Harvey" book signing in center camp. One of their number donned a fedora and stuck a cigarette in his mouth--Harvey's signature accessories--and sat on a couch on the mobile living room art car. Supplicants were forced to kneel at gunpoint before "Larry" as he signed cheap, thrift-store paperbacks with xeroxed cover stickers identifying the book as *Mein Camp*, by Larry Harvey. "Do not touch Mr. Harvey, do not speak to Mr. Harvey, do not look at Mr. Harvey," a gunman shouted through a megaphone. "Move along."

3.4.2. Black Rock City – Decentralized Cohesion and the city as a cultural ghost

All things considered, we have to point out and emphasize that Black Rock City is one of the most inventive community experiments and one of the most creative art festivals in the world today. The growth of the community shows how the festival represents an alternative realm for people to experiment in *community, artwork, absurdity, decommmodification* and *revelry*. And interestingly, artists like Jim Mason who was involved with and created many sophisticated art projects at Burning Man and is well known within the community, uses the frontier metaphor to explain the experience.

It's a frontier situation – you get into the middle of a desert, and you start to believe bullshit that you shouldn't believe. It's very important that the event is held out in Black Rock. The isolation is important. So people go out there and lose track, both wilfully and unconsciously, of other responsibilities, and they are willing to have a great time of excessive play and excessive work. (Doherty: 262-263)

Still, the development of Burning Man into a centrally controlled event that seemed necessary and was required by 'outside' authorities to provide safety for the increasing number of participants can be seen as *rear view image* of our concept of city and community. "To be "uncivilized" is to be uncentralized." (McLuhan, 1989: 136) Many elements of the festival as I will discuss in the last chapter bring forth a new awareness of space and time that can be linked to cultural changes enforced by electric media. For example, we may argue that the festival offers the interpretation of a new sensibility of communal organization that Harvey identified as *Decentralized Cohesion*. Marshall McLuhan pointed out that electric media enforce upon man the mythic consciousness of acoustic space that is closely related to forms

of tribalism as in the Palaeolithic Age where “the tribal person cannot think of himself in any other way but as a member of the group.” (McLuhan, 1989: 137) Therefore it is no coincidence that new/old modes of human cooperation and culture surface, e.g. the re-emergence of the term ‘tribe’ from the hippie movement that was accompanied by a new emphasis on ritual and participation are features that have become celebrated values and virtues in Black Rock City.

However, theoretically speaking, if one would follow the paradigm shift of today’s electric environments “[t]he city no longer exists, except as cultural ghost [...]”, because “[t]he INSTANTANEOUS global coverage of radio-tv makes the city form meaningless, functionless.”⁹⁶ This may have sounded far-fetched more than 50 years ago, when it was written by McLuhan, but with the internet today, “the tyranny of geography is no longer the primary factor in the formation of social space: theoretically one can live and work anywhere.” (Fortunati: 160) Now it seems possible to restructure human organization and abandon the *metropolis*.

A goose’s quill put an end to talk, abolished mystery, gave architecture and towns, brought roads and armies, bureaucracies. It was the basic metaphor with which the cycle of CIVILIZATION began, the step from the dark into the light of the mind. The hand that filled a paper built a city.⁹⁷

The age of *Writing* as the basis for civilization has come to an end, because “[i]n the electric age [...] we encounter new shapes and structures [...] which are “oral” in form even when the components of the situation may be non-verbal.” (McLuhan, 2008: 3) And within the electric environment “the global melting pot of peoples and cultures [...] can only end by making of the world a single city” – thus the Global Village.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ M. McLuhan quoted in: Theall, Donald F. The virtual Marshall McLuhan. Ontario: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001, p. 11.

⁹⁷ M. McLuhan quoted in: Theall, Donald F. The virtual Marshall McLuhan. Ontario: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001, p. 11.

⁹⁸ McLuhan, M. quoted in: Cavell, Richard. McLuhan in Space. in At the speed of light there is only illumination : a reappraisal of Marshall McLuhan. Moss, John and M. Morra, Linda (ed.). Ottawa: Univ. of Ottawa press. 2004. p. 175.

Preliminary Conclusion

To sum up, the Burning Man festival emerged from a strong tradition of countercultural movements of the San Francisco Bay Area after World War II. A distrust of hierarchical structures within their groups as well as in society as a whole was symptomatic, something that is not unusual for alternative sub-cultures. However, the method in which these groups applied techniques of radical inclusion, juxtaposition and the absurd to induce and disseminate non-hierarchical modes of consciousness that emphasized process and pattern recognition leads to the conclusion that San Francisco was at the forefront of a paradigmatic shift in social awareness; the scale of the groups' influence on a national and international level cannot be underestimated. The new social awareness that, I assert, is a result of the new environments of electronic media was transplanted into the void, the *tabula rasa*, if you will, of the Black Rock Desert and thus given the perfect setting from where it could manifest itself in *civic* form.

Nevertheless, there is a strong disagreement among participants, specifically long-time participants who had experienced the early years of Burning Man, on where to draw the line between creative chaos and total anarchy, between civilization and lawlessness. In 2007, long-time participant Paul Addis, a known figure in the counterculture scene of San Francisco, torched the 'Man' on Tuesday morning, four days before the scheduled Burn. Brian Doherty reported on the incident in *Wired* magazine that "[t]orching the Man early is a running gag among the more anarchic of Burning Man attendees, but this is the first year it actually happened."⁹⁹ Obviously, he wanted to make a statement and show his disagreement on how the event had evolved. The 'Golden Days' of total anarchy had passed a decade earlier and the 'Man' had become the towering icon, elevated to a height of more than 65 feet.¹⁰⁰ A number of people agreed with his act, though many did not.¹⁰¹

For most people, however, growth of community is synonymous with a certain unavoidable loss of individual freedom that they are willing to cede in order to share the deep

⁹⁹ Doherty, Brian. „The Burn Will Go On (Again); Disgruntled Burner in Custody.” *Wired Magazine*, August 28, 2007. Accessed July the 24th, 2010. <<http://www.wired.com/underwire/2007/08/the-burn-will-g/>>.

¹⁰⁰ Wikipedia. July the 24th. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burning_Man>.

¹⁰¹ The author was present at the incident and witnessed the arrest of Paul Addis who was later given a jail sentence and a fine. The author spoke with a number of people about the incident and came to the conclusion that it were particularly long-time participants who had a positive opinions to the act. The discussion on the internet can still be found on a number of websites. Here someone tries to sell in typical absurd fashion T-Shirts of the arsonist. July the 24th, 2010. <http://www.cafepress.com/arse_o_nist>.

communal experience that the festival offers. But it does remain to be seen how much additional growth Burning Man can take. On the other hand, the Burning Man organization is a good example for promoting cooperation in horizontally organized structures that today numbers more than 8000 volunteers. After the cathartic year of 1996, they realized that they had overestimated the non-hierarchical strategy of cooperation where everything was decided by consensus. They had reached a point where specific hierarchies needed in order to keep up with the growing number of staff and volunteers that were needed. Therefore, “Burning Man organizers corrected for underorganizing by shifting from ad hoc to formal organizing.” (Chen: 154) Their new approach has become known among staff and volunteers as ‘Do-ocracy’.” (Chen: 43 – 63) Katherine K. Chen wrote about how the Burning Man organization has been trying to find a balance between under- and overorganizing and concluded that Burning Man is a good example that “organizations can serve rather than rule us.” (Chen: 163)

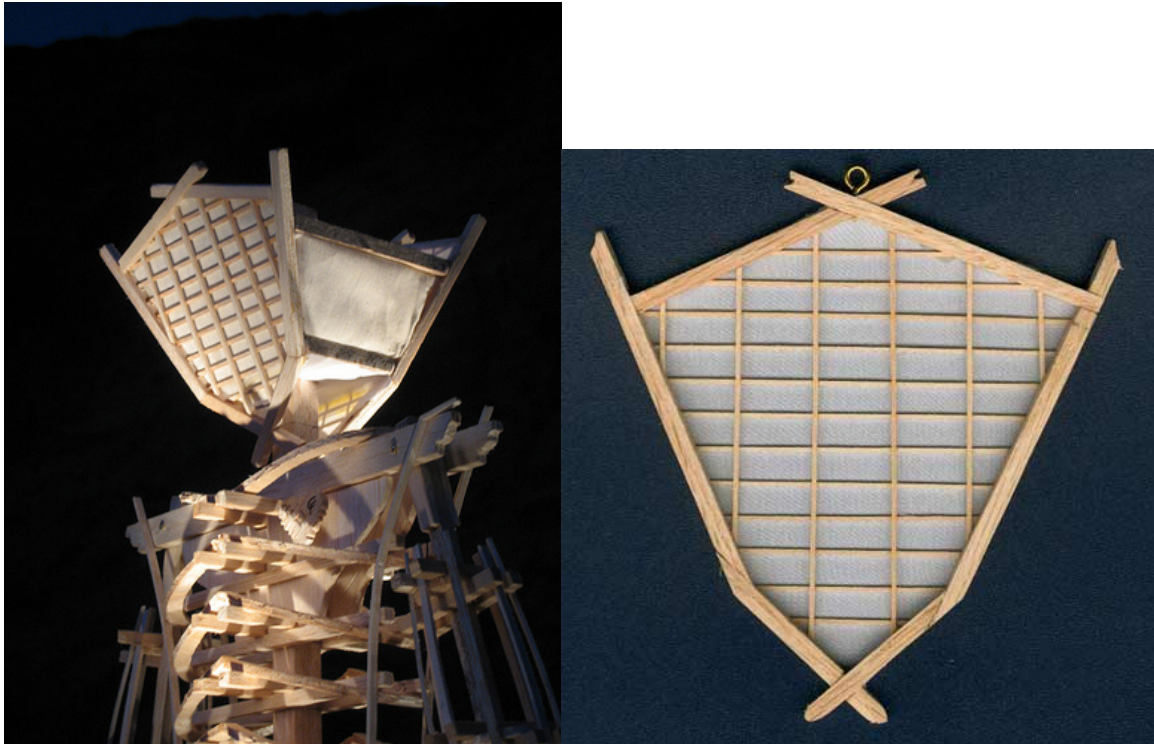
Finally, in my opinion, the chaos of 1996 seems to point out that, at a certain point in number, man needs to delineate physical space into visual categories in order prevent total chaos. Law’s ideas on the total free city architecture are certainly compelling, but he admits himself that the *reality* of implementing such a model is a different matter; it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to ensure the safety of the citizens of Black Rock City

4.1. Art within the paradigm shift of the electric age

Art is not just play but an extension of human awareness in contrived and conventional patterns. (McLuhan, 2001: 241)

Art or artistic expression is the cornerstone of Burning Man culture. Art wasn’t always considered to be at the core of the happening. Especially, in the early years, the survival at the desert ‘frontier’ seemed to be more important than making any kind of artistic statement. However, the ‘Man’ is an artistic expression in its own right – a sculpture with multilayered meanings combining art and ritual. It is a descendant of Mary Graubeger’s idea of burning art on Baker Beach on the summer solstice that Larry Harvey and Jerry James carried on, and it is

also an offspring of Kevin Evans' idea who wanted to burn art in the Black Rock Desert.¹⁰² Together with John Law, the Cacophony Society and Harvey, they have brought the 'wooden effigy' to the desert where, today, it draws a crowd of a mid-sized city. Interestingly, Larry Harvey designed the 'Man's' head in a fashion that is clearly reminiscent to Japanese art. Of course, the American West Coast has long been a melting pot of Western and Asian cultures and the fact that Harvey's design replicates Asian features should not be overestimated. Nonetheless, it is an interesting note for our discussion of art.



The head of the 'Man' evokes Japanese furniture art.

As pointed out in the beginning of our analysis, traditional Oriental art was very different to Western art as the emphasis is on the space within, the pattern of things or the ground, unlike Western art which put an emphasis on objects, thus perceiving figures – a difference that we have explained by analysing the different writing system. (McLuhan, 1989: 71 -73) The ideographic symbol is an inclusive 'gestalt' and still retains the semantic complexities for an acoustic sensibility, the phonetic script is exclusive because it is a visual code and thus stimulates only left-hemisphere processing - the eye becomes the dominator of all other senses. The concept of objectivity and the distant observer can be directly linked to

¹⁰² Kevin Evans on his first experience in the Black Rock Desert in 1989. July the 19th 2010. <<http://laughingsquid.com/its-so-empty-its-full/>>.

the phonetic alphabet and it even becomes more apparent with print technology – the introduction of the vanishing point in Renaissance paintings is the best example for the increase in visual space perception and correlates to the Western belief in the individual's *point of view*. *Cubism* paintings, influenced by 'primitive' art forms, abandoned the point of view concept and showed objects from various angles in one frame of reference. Therefore, cubism foreshadowed a new space awareness that, at the time, was also proclaimed by new findings in physics and mathematics in the early 20th century, specifically the work of Albert Einstein, Max Planck, and Werner Heisenberg among others that lead to Quantum mechanics. (McLuhan, 1989: 64) The new electromagnetic technology and the inventions of the telegraph, the telephone and radio are artifacts of this dramatic paradigm shift. "Electric circuitry is recreating in us the multidimensional space orientation of the "primitive"." (McLuhan, 1996: 56) In the boundless, instantaneous space of the electric age, the fourth dimension of time is reduced to the constant and instantaneous flux of one's point of view -- indeed, fixed point of views have become obsolete.

In my opinion, there are two major consequences that result from this dramatic shift in art. Artistic expression becomes an accepted feature of any social interaction and art becomes interactive and participatory. Both changes have become main characteristics of Burning Man culture. First of all, the term culture itself has often been discussed in association with qualitative judgement, in terms of high vs. low culture. In a fragmented society, dominated by the left-hemisphere, the artist assumes a specialized role and stands outside of his audience. The audience is reduced to the role of the passive observer. In such a society, art is uplifted to a higher realm as if artistic expression were some kind of magic. This differentiation, however, is rendered meaningless in the *global theater* of the electric age where everyone, as in tribal societies, is involved in artwork. (McLuhan, 1989: 15, McLuhan, 2001: 240) The British cultural theorist Stuart Hall acknowledges this shift by saying that it is not the cultural artifacts such as paintings, films and TV that make a culture but the *practices* and *processes* of the individuals and groups of a society that give meaning to art. "It is the participants in a culture who give meaning to people, objects, and events [...] It is by our use of things, and what we say, think and feel about them – how we represent them – that we give them a meaning." (Hall: 3) His acknowledgement seems to reconcile the old conflict within cultural theory that ensued ever since the concept of 'culture' was developed in the 19th century. Jean-Jacques

Rousseau emphasized the simplicity and purity of folk culture as well as the authenticity of the noble savage. Matthew Arnold understood the term culture in reference to the elite goods and activities.¹⁰³ Again, what we observe here is a shift from visual to acoustic, from seeing *figures* to the *background*.

This also corresponds to the shift in communication theory of the recent century. The Shannon-Weaver model of communication still understood communication in visual terms as it saw the message being sent from the sender to the receiver. Coming from a technical engineering background, Shannon and Weaver assumed that the most important thing in communication is to eliminate all noise that prevents the message's content from being clearly received.¹⁰⁴ The same model of communication was translated by Roman Jakobson into Linguistics where communication was conceived of as a process that included the elements: transmitter, message, receiver, context, code and channel.¹⁰⁵ Half a century later, Mitchell and Crowley, two communication theorists declared this model obsolete. Communication is not a one-way thing and cannot be understood in the sender/receiver, encoding/decoding, production/consumption dualism, because... "[w]e are all senders and receivers, encoders and decoders, producers and consumers now."¹⁰⁶ Our recent left-hemisphere models of understanding have been replaced by the observation of patterns or *context* rather than *content*. Marshall McLuhan simply said that communication is not about *matching* the content of a message as in the Shannon-Weaver model, because "[i]n actual fact, communication is *making*. The person who sees or heeds or hears is engaged in making a response to a situation which is mostly of his own fictional invention."¹⁰⁷ Therefore, the receiver is as much actively involved in communication as the sender. In terms of the figure/ground, left and right-hemisphere relationship McLuhan explained the problem of communication theory as follows:

¹⁰³ July the 24th 2010. <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture>>.

¹⁰⁴ Cavell, Richard. "McLuhan in Space". in *At the speed of light there is only illumination : a reappraisal of Marshall McLuhan*. Moss, John and M. Morra, Linda (ed.). Ottawa: Univ. of Ottawa press. 2004. p. 168.

¹⁰⁵ Monica Colombo writes in her paper "Theoretical Perspectives in Media-Communication Research: From Linear to Discursive Models" that there is "a major shift from the conventional view of language as a tool of description [...] to a view of language as social practice." Published on the Forum: Qualitative Social Research – Sozialforschung. Volume 5, No. 2, Art. 26, May 2004. Accessed on July the 22nd, 2010. <<http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/viewArticle/592/1285>>.

¹⁰⁶ David Mitchell and David Crowley quoted in: Cavell, Richard. "McLuhan in Space". in *At the speed of light there is only illumination : a reappraisal of Marshall McLuhan*. Moss, John and M. Morra, Linda (ed.). Ottawa: Univ. of Ottawa press. 2004, p. 168.

¹⁰⁷ Marshall McLuhan quoted in: Cavell, Richard. "McLuhan in Space". in *At the speed of light there is only illumination : a reappraisal of Marshall McLuhan*. Moss, John and M. Morra, Linda (ed.). Ottawa: Univ. of Ottawa press. 2004, p. 167.

For use in the electronic age, a right-hemisphere model of communication is necessary, both because our culture has nearly completed the process of shifting its cognitive modes from the left to the right hemisphere, and because the electronic media themselves are right-hemisphere in their patterns and operation. The problem is to discover such a model that yet is congenial to our culture and its residua of left-hemisphere orientation. Such a model would have to take into account the apposition of both figure and ground (left and right hemispheres working together and independently when necessary) instead of an abstract sequence or movement isolated from the ground. (McLuhan, 1989: 80)

In the electronic age, the internet, although providing for everyone easy, ready access to knowledge, seems to be a threat to knowledge itself. Andrew Keen stated in his book *the cult of the amateur: how today's internet is killing our culture* that we have plunged into a world where experts and amateurs become indistinguishable - anyone can claim to be an expert. He observes that specialism was at the core of capitalism and, interestingly, turns to Karl Marx who said that in a post-capitalist world anyone can basically do anything he wants: “[H]unt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner [...]”. And then Keen asks: “But if we can all simultaneously be hunters, fishers, cattle herders, and critics, can any of us actually excel at anything, whether hunting, fishing, herding or criticising? In a world in which we are all amateurs, there are no experts.” (Keen: 38, 39) He makes critical observations on the current shift in political rhetoric and media coverage caused by web 2.0 technology that seem to threaten American democracy. However, for the analysis, his observations are more intriguing if they are seen in a broader context.

Western (visual and sequential) man now discovers himself habitually relating to information structures which are simultaneous, discontinuous, and dynamic. He has been plunged into a new form of knowing, far from his customary experience tied to the printed page. In the same way that the sense of hearing apprehends details from all directions at once, within a 360-degree sphere, as it were, in a manner similar to a magnetic or electrical field; so knowing itself is being recast and retrieved in acoustic form. (McLuhan, 1989: 14)

Within civilization, knowing has so far always been dominated by geographic and cultural centers where the experts of knowing would reside and assert their position by affirming ‘the truth.’. With no centers of knowing, the trust in the source becomes an important aspect. (Keen: 64) Keen’s concern about the amateur who can write and post

articles on wikipedia and falsely assume the role of an expert may have its justification if wikipedia is understood as a mere remodelling of an Encyclopaedia. (Keen: 40) In fact, the concept of wikipedia is quite different in terms of access and opportunity for any user to edit and add articles.¹⁰⁸ However, as discussed above, knowing in acoustic space is not reduced to one source, the source of the expert; knowing is recast to see in patterns and contexts wherein the user plays an active role in the *making* process. Moreover, the amateur is an interesting word that provides explanation to the cultural changes that are currently happening. ‘Amateur’ (originally from the Latin word *amatorem* or *amator*)¹⁰⁹ implies someone does something because they love doing it. In the electric age, as at Burning Man, we all become amateurs and artists.

Walter Benjamin already observed in his famous essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” a dramatic shift in art forms caused by the new emerging media (film, radio, gramophone and photography). He pointed out that through the process of reproduction, art loses its “original significance as objects and their function (religious or otherwise); we might almost call them not ‘works’ but ‘moments’ of art [...]”¹¹⁰ Further “the medium of contemporary perception can be comprehended as decay of the aura [...]”¹¹¹ – the aura of art works. The speed-up of electric media that could capture and imitate reality and art works diminished the significance of objects in their relation to time and location (space). When confronted with changes, Benjamin, as many others, saw the new media as a threat to the tradition of ‘high’ culture and he did not share the positive attitude towards film with his contemporary, the Italian Futurist Marinetti.¹¹² Benjamin referred to this new form of art as ‘Babylonian style’. Mark Van Proyen, associate professor of art history, states that

[...] the term “Babylonian style” is a good way to describe many of the works of art exhibited at Black Rock City. Many of them sport obsessively applied additive assemblage techniques that teem with

¹⁰⁸ Read on wikipedia’s policies. July the 20th, 2010. <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:About>>.

¹⁰⁹ Wikipedia. July the 22nd 2010. <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amateur>>.

¹¹⁰ Walter Benjamin quoted in Van Proyen, Mark. “A Tale of Two Surrealities.” in *AfterBurn : Reflections on Burning Man*. Mark Van Proyen and Lee Gilmore (eds.). New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 2006, p. 180.

¹¹¹ Walter Benjamin. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. (1936). A copy was obtained in pdf. format. July the 15th, 2010. <<http://www.dzignism.com/articles/benjamin.pdf>>.

¹¹² Marinetti proclaimed that cinema would “sharpen and develop man’s sensibility, will quicken the creative imagination, will give the intelligence a prodigious sense of simultaneity and omnipresence.” In the essay ‘The Futurist Cinema’ by F.T. Marinetti, Bruno Corra, Emilio Settemelli, Arnaldo Ginna, Giacomo Balla, Remo Chiti.(1916). July the 21st, 2010. <http://soma.sbccc.edu/users/DaVega/FILMST_113/Filmst113_ExFilm_Movements/Futurism/FuturCinema.pdf>.

detailed ornament and arcane complexity. Quite a few are robust and even cheeky in their aggressive extroversion of *aesthetics of the marvellous* in a way that vividly contrasts with the earlier Surrealists' inclination toward poetic introversion; and almost all of them guilelessly bespeak and codify the localized values of many different microcommunities of desire. Or, failing that, they function as gregarious send-ups of conventional modernist-derived ideas of public sculpture, seeming in some ways to be theater props that function as pidgin misrepresentations of obscure or outlandish art. Or perhaps they are outlandish artworks that are witty dissemblances of such imaginary theater props, each an aggressive misconstrual of commonplace absurdities-heaped-upon-absurdity. Either way, a do-it-yourself aesthetic is featured, and materials tend to be selected in large part upon the basis of availability and affordability. (Van Proyen: 181)

Van Proyen descriptions of Burning Man art mainly fall within the category of art as being recast to simplistic or primitive forms wherein everyone becomes an (amateur) artist (This type of 'new' art has also been called 'outsider art' or 'folk art'). In the present age, visual assumptions of art as objects of significance based on time and space have become obsolete. However, as we have said before, the paradigm shift of the electric age also emphasizes process-oriented awareness. Now, art as well as knowing is about *making* and inviting the former passive observer to *participate*. The Black Rock Arts Foundation, an offspring of Burning Man's effort to support its artists, is actively involved in public art projects in the Bay Area and other US metropolitan areas and its "mission [...] is to support and promote community, interactive art and civic participation."¹¹³ Further, the interactivity of art has been described as follows:

art that blurs the line between artists and audience, with collaboration in the creation of the experience of the piece. Art that requires the action of a participant to complete the piece. It represents an opportunity for the people to come together and incites them to interact with one another, whether directly because they are needed to make something happen or just something so exciting it makes people gather, brings them together. (Doherty: 274)

A typical example of Burning Man's more elaborate art installations was witnessed by the author in 2007: 'The flying monkey' was a structure that consisted of a carousel approximately twenty feet high to which about 20 man-sized puppet figures were attached on its circular top. Each of the puppet figures depicted the same monkey clinging with his arms to

¹¹³ The Black Rock Arts Foundation. July the 21st, 2010. <<http://www.blackrockarts.org/>>.

the carousel and each of the puppet figures positioned the monkey in a different stage of movement clinging and moving with his arms from one point to the next (as if from branch to branch). Ten (or so) stationary bikes were also fixed in a circle around the carousel at its base. Each needed to be pedalled by the individuals in order for the carousel to go around – these people were the generators of energy for the installation. Additionally, around half a dozen conga drums were seated in the center circle of the carousel that invited to be played on. At night, in the dark, the volunteer cyclists were could see a continuously-flashing strob light that indicated whether the carousel was revolving at the right speed. at optimum rate, the carousel of monkey figures became one perfect ballet of movement, grasping from one point to the next like in a film sequence. The final clue of the ‘message’ was that a snake would come down from the very top of the structure and crawl into the monkey’s mouth.



What is described here is in many aspects a new form of art that today is referred to as *systems art* (also known as installation or conceptual art). Jack Burnham was among the most influential theorists and artists who described the new emerging art form in 1968. He stated in his essay ‘Systems Esthetics’ that a new mode of art is emerging that involves an open process that is participatory, non-static, non-linear and multi-sensory. “We are now in transition M from an *object-oriented* to a *systems-oriented* culture.” And he further claimed that “a systems esthetic will become the dominant approach to a maze of socio-technical conditions rooted

only in the present.”¹¹⁴ Burnham envisioned that art would use computers and sensors to create systems wherein the observer becomes part of the creative art work and the message of it would reveal itself through her/his participation in process. To explain this concept Burnham refers to Hans Haacke, a contemporary artist of his time, whom he quotes on how sculpture art changes from objects to systems.

A "sculpture" that physically reacts to its environment is no longer to be regarded as an object. The range of outside factors affecting it, as well as its own radius of action, reach beyond the space it materially occupies. It thus merges with the environment in a relationship that is better understood as a "system" of interdependent processes. These processes evolve without the viewer's empathy. He becomes a witness. A system is not imagined, it is real.¹¹⁵

The sculptural art of Burning Man often follows this new paradigm. Especially artists and collaborate art groups who have been participating for a number of years, build sophisticated art works that emphasize interactivity. Here are a few further examples taken from the Burning Man website:

A monumental ice ball entitled Temporal Decomposition was fashioned at Burning Man 1997 by artist Jim Mason. This solid sphere, measuring 11 feet in diameter, represented a complex meditation on the processes of time. Embedded with an array of clocks and watches, it functioned, in concert with four frozen obelisks, as an enormous sundial. Gradually melting over a span of five days, this frozen mass embodied geologic process, evoking Time's passage as a medium of transformation. Sited at a public crossroads, it invited parched participants to rub against it and consume its substance in the form of flavored snow cones. This same year saw the installation of Das Ammoniten Projekt, a metal and canvas structure by German artist Hendrik Hackl. Measuring 10-feet-high and 70 feet in diameter, this sculpture was fashioned in the semblance of a giant ammonite. Participants were allowed to enter this coiled construction, creeping forward by degrees until they slithered out a narrow aperture located at its center.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Jack Burnham. *Systems Esthetics*. First published on Artforum September, 1968. Accessed through the website of the University of California in Santa Barbara on July the 21st 2010.
<http://www.arts.ucsb.edu/faculty/jevbratt/readings/burnham_se.html>

¹¹⁵ Hans Haacke, quoted in Jack Burnham. *Systems Esthetics*. First published on Artforum. September, 1968. Accessed through the website of the University of California in Santa Barbara on July the 21st 2010.
<http://www.arts.ucsb.edu/faculty/jevbratt/readings/burnham_se.html>.

¹¹⁶ Darryl Van Rhey in "The Art of Burning Man - an Illustrated Essay." 1999. July the 22nd 2010.
<http://www.burningman.com/art_of_burningman/art_of_bm.html> In the same article, Darryl Van Rhey, a pseudonym of Larry Harvey in the mid-1990's, also states that "[a]rt at Burning Man does not merely attempt to break down barriers between audience and art form, and between creator and participant — a long-standing aim

Similarly, the concept of theme camps that are connected to art happenings and absurd street theater (already discussed in the countercultural movements of the 1960's) also fall within the category of active involvement in artistic processes. Theme camps and street theater pranks are elaborate multilayered systems that invite the participant in some form of process wherein the message is conceived.

All things considered, Burning Man exemplifies a cultural shift that can be explicitly observed in connection to artistic expression. It is related to a new awareness that Marshall McLuhan called acoustic. Herein, old visual categories of space and time that put the individual into the position of a passive observer and art outside the cultural framework of the audience are abandoned. Western society goes back to process-oriented space awareness where man perceives himself connected to the environment and not as the 'point of view' observer of three dimensional space. Likewise, artistic expression becomes a chance or even the necessity to seek life in artistic way constantly re-establishing new meanings, because "[a]s the age of information demands the simultaneous use of all our faculties, we discover that we are most at leisure when we are most intensely involved, very much like the artists in all ages." (McLuhan, 2001: 379) The seemingly boundless space of the Burning Man playa is a metaphor for the cyberspace of the internet (acoustic space). (Fortunati: 163, Doherty: 99) The creativity one can witness on the playa also appears to provide a justification for McLuhan's claim that "[t]he imagination is most creative in acoustic space. Acoustic space has the basic character of a sphere whose focus or "center" is simultaneously everywhere and whose margin is nowhere. A proper place for the birth of metamorphosis." (McLuhan, 1989: 134)

A metamorphosis of what kind? The one Pierre Teilhard De Chardin dreamed of? A mankind united by the *noosphere* in an ever increased complexity which results in an increased consciousness?¹¹⁷ McLuhan was highly influenced by that priestly philosopher, but later did not share the man's enthusiasm for electric technology anymore. In fact, he saw them as the peak of human endeavour to escape from awareness. So he said: "What may emerge as the

of avant-garde movements in our century. It seeks to become the central principle that generates both social interaction and the ordering architecture of civic space."

¹¹⁷ Teilhard De Chardin, Pierre. Pierre Teilhard De Chardin: Writings Selected with an introduction by Ursula King. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books. 1999, p. 55.

most important insight of the twenty-first century is that man was not designed to live at the speed of light.” (McLuhan, 1989: 97)

Nevertheless, the art culture of Burning Man transgresses the meaning of art in the default society. At first, Burning Man was just an act and excuse to gather, says co-founder Michael Michael. But then he observed that art developed into a whole new category of meaning.

Why art at Burning Man? What is this art thing? There’s something much larger here. Art is a vehicle, a symptom of something bigger occurring. It’s spreading beyond the desert, beyond the playa. It’s a way of being, of thinking, to change a person: That’s the real story, the real thing that’s happening. (Doherty: 282)

4.2. Burning Man – mass-consumerism in post-TV culture where everyone becomes the producer

Everything that happened is a radical continuity of the first acts. [...] No money, we were all participating, we were all giving. The man was the first shining gift. (Harvey: 2:17:30)

Self-Reliance, as observed earlier, is one of the most important features of the American Character which is directly linked to the frontier experience. In Black Rock City, everyone should be prepared to survive one week in the harsh desert environment which means all participants bring their own shelter, sufficient water supply and food. In the early years of Burning Man, there were a number of attempts by participants to sell commodities like fireworks, drinks and food to others. However, most of these attempts failed badly as Harvey reports: “There were people setting up a bar and trying to sell drinks, because that is what they knew. [...] They tried to replicate that part of their world. Except, of course, they took a bath, because this was a self-reliant culture and everyone came and provided to get drunk on their own.” (Harvey: 2:05:30) There wasn’t officially any rule that banned this kind of behaviour; until 1997, when “[...] we said no commerce. What have been implicit became explicit and it was probably the single most significant thing we did.” (Harvey: 2:08:30)

The non-consumer attitude was part of Burning Man early on, although in the first years out in the desert it was more a barter economy where participants exchanged gifts and

services.¹¹⁸ Undoubtedly, most early participants rejected the idea of money transactions – it would not have suited to the idea of a ‘Temporary Autonomous Zone’ they were trying to create. Consequently, any effort that provided some kind of ‘service’ to the community became a gift. Over the years, a culture in Black Rock City emerged that was based on a gift economy that can at “best [be] expressed not in the proffering of gewgaws but in an expression, a word, a built object, a performance.” (Doherty: 5) Since the year 2000, potlatch – borrowed directly from the Native American tradition – or gift economy, is officially encouraged. In the same way, transactions of money between participants are prohibited. (Kozinets and Sherry, 2005: 91) While it is true that there is no commerce in Black Rock City, there are places and services within the city where money is used. This includes coffee and tea in the Center Camp Café, ice at Artica camps, tickets for the shuttle bus, fresh and waste water services for RV’s and a fee to use the Airport. Finally, since 1995, there is an admission fee for all participants that last year started at \$210¹¹⁹ and increased up to \$360.¹²⁰

To repeat, Burning Man has developed into a mainly non-commercial event or one might say, non-commercial social experiment. Participants have to be fully prepared to live off their own supplies for an entire week and thus spend extra money before coming to the event (the amount can vary from a few hundred to thousands of dollars depending on how much they spend on art and theme camp projects). (Kozinets and Sherry, 2005: 99) The non-consumerism and the festival’s emphasis on active engagement, immediate experience and community can be interpreted as a “breakdown of capitalist culture”. (Fortunati: 158) Larry Harvey who has often been cited as a critic on contemporary consumer culture claims that Burning Man gives an alternative example to mainstream society wherein individuals are given

¹¹⁸ The author remembers that in 2000, it was still common to bring some kind of small gifts to the night clubs and bars in order to exchange them for drinks. Today, gifts are generally given without any expectations.

¹¹⁹ July the 22nd, 2010. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burning_Man>.

¹²⁰ Price of the ticket depends on the date when the ticket was bought – early buyers pay at the lowest price. I will not discuss the economic side of Burning Man in detail. However, it needs to be said that the high entrance fees are a result of the increasing organizational effort behind the event and are not a result of profits gained by the organizers. (The funding of many art projects at Burning Man that, today, has expended to art projects in the Bay Area and other metropolitan areas in the US explains in part where profits are spent.) The six LLC members, Burning Man’s organizational board whose director is Larry Harvey all signed an agreement that annihilated equity. At the moment, Burning Man is a ‘not-profit’ organization. (Doherty: 265) In last year’s Black Rock Beacon, Burning Man’s Newspaper, it was announced that the LLC (Limited Liability Cooperation) was trying to become a non-profit organization, although the issue remains problematic because the head organizers are concerned with conceding control to a separate board in case they would turn non-profit.

Black Rock Beacon, issued on September the 5th 2010. Accessed on July the 17th, 2010.

<http://www.blackrockbeacon.org/2009pdfs/e_saturday_09_brb.pdf>.

For more detail on this issue and the structure behind the Burning Man organization, see: Chen, Katherine K.. Enabling Creative Chaos: The Organization Behind the Burning Man Event. Universtiy of Chicago Press. 2009, p. 37 – 63.

the opportunity to actively and creatively engage with one another – a basis for a new form of community. In his interviews, lectures and speeches that Harvey has given over the years has been an outspoken critic of mass consumerism, commodification and the mass media which established a system in which the individual has been further isolated from the community and turned him into mere consumer of products.¹²¹ Harvey points the finger particularly at television which “was capable of inducing among millions of people a kind of hypnotical trance which left the viewer uniquely receptive to the power of suggestion.”¹²² His observations are very similar to McLuhan’s who explicitly pointed out that TV produces a kind of hypnosis wherein the “left brain slides into a non-dominant, neutral state [...] [and] the right brain remains alert, stimulated by bright, sensuous images, music and random movement.” (McLuhan, 1989: 87) On the one hand, electronic media bring forth right-hemisphere awareness – something that Western man has neglected due to left-hemisphere culture. McLuhan is adamant in pointing out that this shift brings forth many positive changes, eg. he claimed that acoustic awareness would reintegrate western culture as opposed to the fragmented process it had undergone. (McLuhan, 1989: 14) On the other hand, he persistently spoke of the dangers that electronic media would inflict upon society. In electronic media, man becomes the discarnate or disembodied user that loses his identity because perceptions are not connected to place anymore. (McLuhan, 1989: 97)

The loss of individual and personal meaning via the electronic media ensures a corresponding and reciprocal violence from those so deprived of their identities; for violence, whether spiritual or physical, is a quest for identity and the meaningful. The less identity, the more violence.¹²³

The fantasy violence on TV is a reminder that the violence of the real world is much motivated by people questing for identity. Rollo May and others have pointed out that violence in the real world is the mark of those questing for identity. On the frontier, everybody is a nobody, and therefore, the frontier manifests the patterns of toughness and vigorous action on the part of those trying to find out who they are.¹²⁴

¹²¹ Burning Man Archive on Harvey’s lectures and speeches can be found on the Burning Man website. Accessed July the 23rd 2010. <http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/people/1_harvey_bio.html>.

¹²² LA VIE BOHÉME — A History of Burning Man, a lecture by Larry Harvey at The Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, February 24, 2000. Accessed through the Burning Man website. July the 23rd, 2010. <http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/lectures/la_vie.html>.

¹²³ McLuhan quoted in: Benedetti, Paul and Nancy DeHart (eds.). Forward Through The Rearview Mirror: Reflections On and By Marshall McLuhan. Ontario: Prentice-Hall Canada Inc, 1996, p. 82.

¹²⁴ McLuhan quoted in: Benedetti, Paul and Nancy DeHart (eds.). Forward Through The Rearview Mirror: Reflections On and By Marshall McLuhan. Ontario: Prentice-Hall Canada Inc, 1996, p. 97.

Harvey also states that “we ourselves are now TV’s and broadcast images” and adds that “the lust for sex, money and power are just diversions for the basic need to be ‘real’.”¹²⁵ Certainly, the technical non-responsive or non-participatory character of the TV medium had the effect of introducing and, at the same time, numbing the mass audience that sought further meaning in mass consumerism. However, TV could be interpreted as a by-product of the eventual electronic (r)evolution that would mark the change from left-hemisphere to right-hemisphere consciousness that seeks meaning in process- and pattern- oriented modes of consciousness.

McLuhan’s ‘nobody at the frontier’ is a good metaphor for the analysis, because once again, electronic man is seeking meaning to be real at the frontier. Burning Man served as a kind of ‘refuge from the violence of nobodies’ for the countercultural groups of the Bay Area who were also at the forefront of the internet revolution. The desert frontier was the perfect setting for a ‘primitive’ community that grew into a complex society whose culture was quite different from that of mainstream America. In there, the shift from object-oriented (seeing only figures) mode of thinking has been replaced by process-oriented (ground) awareness, from quantity to quality. Objects (art) serve the purpose to actively engage with the community and in that process meaning is achieved. Yet, unlike in the fragmented mainstream society, everyone is involved in doing art.

Meaning is something that needs to be achieved and is not something that can be instilled in things. A consumer thinks that meaning can be instilled in things and purchased. That is what all the ads tell you. [...] But we were not consumers, we were producers. The consumption aspect, well we dedicated that out to the fire. That is a force much greater than ourselves. (Harvey: 2:01)

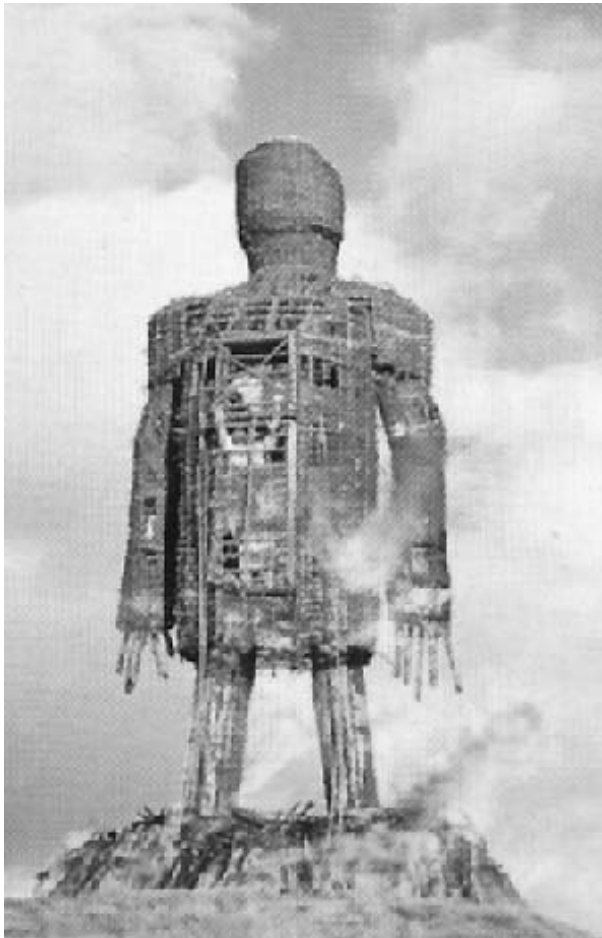
Even though McLuhan did not live to see the Internet¹²⁶, he made many clear predictions and assumptions that turned into reality. He already foretold that computer technology would eventually develop into a form of connectedness “where computer programmers will become the new Pythagoreans, espousing pattern as the golden mean [...]” – undoubtedly a prediction to Google founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin. (McLuhan, 1989: 99) He predicted that the

¹²⁵ Larry Harvey, quoted in: Fortunati, Allegra. “Utopia, Social Sculpture, and Burning Man.” in AfterBurn: Reflections on Burning Man. Mark Van Proyen and Lee Gilmore (ed.s.). New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press. 2006, p. 153.

¹²⁶ To some extent computer networks already existed in the 1970’s, but data-transfer was problematic because the Internet Protocol was not invented until 1982. Accessed July the 25th 2010.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Internet.>

vertical organizing structure of economy and the hierarchies in society would lessen due to simultaneous and non-hierarchical pattern recognition. (McLuhan, 1989: 103) This new mode of awareness would automatically stimulate people's artistic passions and sensibilities.



4.3. Ritual and Religion – the transcendence behind juxtaposition and the absurd

[W]e are no longer limited to a perspective of past societies. We recreate them. (McLuhan, 2008: 60)

Harvey hadn't seen the film 'Wicker Man' when he came up with the idea to burn the first Man in 1986. However, the idea to call the ritual Burning Man was in part inspired by Wicker Man, says Harvey. Listening to recorded soundtrack of the 1988 burn, he heard someone calling it 'Wicker Man'. Feeling that this not appropriate name for the ritual he called it Burning Man. Nonetheless, 'Wicker Man' can be understood as an ancestor or as evidence for acts of synchronicity to Burning Man.

The British film, released in 1973, is considered today as one of the classic films in Horror genre. The basic plot is about a police detective who comes to an island where its inhabitants believe and practice a pagan-like religion. They have tricked him to come to the

¹²⁷ The wooden effigy in the movie *Wicker Man*.

island in order to sacrifice him in a ritual. He is put into a giant human-looking wooden effigy along with chicken and pigs where he is burned alive. During the ritual the congregation assembles in a half circle around the Wicker Man.¹²⁸ The film's symbolisms of pagan beliefs (tribal) with a sacrificial fire in order to improve the year's harvest certainly have similarities with Burning Man. The wooden effigies both serve the purpose of a sculpture that incorporates ritualized meanings of renewal and recreation and the human resemblance enhances the participatory aspect through identification. Similar rituals may have existed throughout human history – the burning of 'witches' and heretics in the medieval period falls into the category. One of the greatest public cults of the Greeks, for example, the 'Eleusinian Mysteries,' bear similarities in terms of a ritualized fire in harvest season and the psychoactive drugs to enhance the experience. (Davis: 16) Not all participants use psychoactive drugs at Burning Man, but it is much more common than under normal circumstances to use them in the desert environment. (Davis: 26) However, the environment of the desert and the playa is intoxicating in itself. It can induce mystical experiences. (Davis: 27)

Fire, as a symbol for sacrifice and renewal could be understood as one of Carl Gustav Jung's archetypes that has remained part of the human unconsciousness.¹²⁹ The interesting fact is the archetype's reappearance that has been given new meaning at Burning Man. In the event, the Man and his Burn on Saturday night after the weeklong festival already passed undoubtedly serves the purpose of a communal symbol for identity. For the whole week, it was the central point of orientation – as we have discussed earlier, the entire city architecture is built around it. (It needs to be said that, until 2000, the Man was raised by communal effort which intensified the connection to the community.) The ritual burn can be interpreted as a destruction of the 'self' – "it may be a prophetic harbinger of an end to the emphasis on the self and a stronger shift to community." (Fortunati: 168) For others, the Man and his "eternally recurring death" serves mainly as an excuse to come out and gather in the desert year after year. (Doherty: 274) Still, many participants have sacred, spiritual and religious associations, not necessarily with the Burn but Burning Man itself. (Davis: 15) A number of academics and scholars have written on Burning Man and concluded that the festival bears witness to some form of religion or spirituality.¹³⁰ For instance, the "regular use of religious frameworks and

¹²⁸ July the 23rd 2010. < http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Wicker_Man_%281973_film%29>

¹²⁹ Jung, Carl Gustav. *Complex/ Archetype/ Symbol in the Psychology of C.G. Jung*. London: Routledge. 1999 (1925), p. 31.

¹³⁰ Sarah M. Pike, John F. Sherry Jr/ Robert V. Kozinets, Bertine Bönner, John W. Morehead have all written on the religious and spiritual aspects of the festival. Bertine Bönner's paper explicitly concluded that Burning Man's

sacred symbols” by participants is evidence that Burning Man offers a stage wherein the need for religious or spiritual experience and meaning can be sought. (Davis: 16) “[P]articipants regularly cannibalize Christianity, Satanism, Buddhism, shamanism, Western occultism, Tantra, Judaism, and other theme parks of the spirit for their costumes, camps, sculptures, and performances.” (Davis: 16) “Black Rock City can be imagined as a New Age/Neopagan mirror image of the spiritual supermarket its residents have encountered in the “world”. The city is a bazaar of beliefs, a hive of heterodoxy, a convocation of callings.” (Kozinets and Sherry, 2007: 126)

Larry Harvey, although he is adamant in pointing out that the ‘Man’ is an open symbol, he associates spiritual connotations with the Burn in a pragmatic way. At first, he cites William James, the founder of pragmatism: “[T]he practical needs and experiences of religion seem to me sufficiently met by the belief that beyond each man and in a fashion continuous with him, there exists a larger power which is friendly to him and to his ideals.”¹³¹ Then he states:

I agree with that. The ‘man’ is standing for that – very useful. We can identify with it. It’s bigger than you. It looks like it’s up on the par with the sky and the vast horizon. Everyone gathers around it. It’s the unconscious focus of all experience because in order to find out where you are, everyone uses it as their primary navigational tool. All the roads converge on it and, at the end, for the first and only time the community confronts itself, witnesses itself as they witness it. And then it is transformed by forces beyond your control and by that point it is like the man on the beach. It is you or you can feel that way. I’m not saying everyone has to. [...] I do not have to be necessarily moved by it but generally I can put myself in this kind of state. And that’s all that is practically necessary. You don’t have to believe in the supernatural.” (Harvey: 3:01)

Others like long-time participant and artist Jim Mason do not like the spiritual attachment to any of Burning Man’s symbolisms. He has been cited in *This is Burning Man* saying:

One thing that’s annoyed me about Burning Man lately is the earnestness that has come into the core, an attempt to forcibly increase its impact and meaning. But the reason Burning Man had meaning to begin

spiritual practises and beliefs of participants can be described as a form of religion. For references please see bibliography.

¹³¹ James, Dr. William. *The Varieties of Religious Experiences*. in Writings 1902 -1910. New York, NY: Penguin Books. 1987, p. 1 - 479, p. 468.

with was that it was always deeply comedic – it has always been a spin through jesting and farce and absurdism. I try to imagine my projects as spiritual farces. (Doherty: 165)

While it is true that participants have developed rituals that have spiritual or sacred connotations – e.g. since 2000, a temple or mausoleum is generally used for mourning purposes in which the participants write messages to relatives and friends who have died on the temple's walls and on Sunday the temple is ceremonially burned as well (Pike: 198) – Burning Man remains a theater of the absurd.¹³² Moreover, Burning Man's juxtaposing gestures of spirituality and religion give way to the human craving for spiritual meaning, but yet confront with mockery the juxtaposing nature of spirituality which has the tendency to be turned into hierarchical systems of religion. (Davis: 32) "Juxtaposing is also the chief strategy employed by many art installations, costumes, art cars and theme camps." (Davis: 31) Sherry, Jr and V. Kozinets observe that "[r]eversals, parodies and lampoons of many of the institutions of the "world" are enacted in Black Rock City. Trickster must be among the *genius loci* of this desert." (Kozinets and Sherry, 2007: 127) The reference to the Trickster, the sacred spirit of American Native Theology that embodies the good and bad, the duality of human existence, is an interesting insight to the paradoxical nature of Burning Man.

Trickster is a breaker of barriers, and an eraser of boundaries. He moves between heaven and earth, between deity and mortals, between the living and the dead. He is also the ultimate symbol of the ambiguity of good and evil and the essential statement of the human condition. Human beings may aspire to ultimate goodness, but they are subject to basic impulses and desires. (Kidwell: 115)

Yet, the Trickster is not an exclusive Native American symbol for the paradoxical reality of human existence. In West Africa it is the spider Anansi, the Greeks and Romans called him Mercury or Hermes, native Hawaiians called him Maui and for Native Americans it was the Coyote (but also known as Raven, Wolverine, Rabbit, Iktomi). In Asian tradition, the Yin and

¹³² Since 2000, a temple or Mausoleum entirely made of wood is built on the playa on the 12 o'clock point of the city's circle. It has become the focus for mourning rites in Black Rock City. Although, the temple has been given different names and meanings over the years from the organizers, it has remained to be used for mourning rituals. Some people not only write on the temple's walls but also attach photos or personal items connected to their dead loved ones. On Sunday night, the temple is set ablaze in another ceremonial gathering of the community, although thousands of Burners already have left during the day. It marks the end of the festivities of the festival. Sarah M. Pike points out that "[d]eath rites at the Mausoleum transformed private grief and loss into public expression in ways that are generally unavailable to most contemporary Americans." Sarah M. Pike. "No Novenas for the Dead : Ritual Action and Communal Memory at the Temple of Tears." in AfterBurn : Reflections on Burning Man. Mark Van Proyen and Lee Gilmore (eds.). New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 2006, p. 198.

Yang symbol of Chinese Taoism stands for the same kind awareness as well as dualistic character of religious symbols in Hinduism, for ex., Shiva or Vishnu. In contrast, Western religious symbols, especially Christianity, do not have dualistic categories. There are either good or evil.

Marshall McLuhan pointed out that perceiving reality/nature in dualisms, as in tribal societies or in the Asian tradition, employs an acoustic awareness that conceives in simultaneous patterns. (McLuhan, 1989: 65) Western man, with the introduction of Gregorian philosophy started to perceive in visual sequential categories, the one-thing-at-a time.

5. Conclusion

Burning Man places us firmly in an artificial world of perfect abundance. The reason we don't need commerce out there is that we are supposed to have already brought (and bought) with us everything we need to survive and thrive. With all those material needs taken care of, Burning Man makes us learn how to live, love, create, and relate in a space where we have nothing but leisure on our hands. This could be of great relevance in preparing for that very possible future – a world beyond scarcity, beyond labor for anything other than creativity and joy. (Doherty: 242)

The original starting point of this thesis was that Burning Man could provide important insights for a historical and cultural analysis. On the one hand, Burning Man was to be presented as a framework to explain the concept of the American Character, and on the other hand, Burning Man was supposed to offer relevant understandings in the development of Western culture. To explain the concept of the American Character through Burning Man, I discussed the most influential and famous theory: Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis on *the significance of the American Frontier on the American Character*. Herbert Marshall McLuhan's theories on media theory were used to elaborate on the current paradigmatic shifts in Western society connected to the use of electronic technologies.

Three distinctive results can be drawn from the analysis.

First, Turner's thesis applies to the essential aspects of Burning Man's historical development. Burning Man's early beginnings in the Black Rock Desert was marked by the experience of isolation and wilderness in a geographical 'frontier zone' where the community was forced to adapt to and cooperate in the new and hostile environment. Thus the frontier

experience had a significant impact on how the community grew into Black Rock City. Also, Turner's observations in the development of small 'primitive' frontier town communities to more complex towns and cities can also be applied to Burning Man. The pioneers of first generation have transcended all hierarchical boundaries; no rules and regulations existed and all decisions were made on a communal basis. With the growing number volume of participation the "creative chaos" needed rules, regulations and eventually, a city structure. (Chen: 154) Additionally, Burning Man became increasingly vertically organized, although the organization also adapted techniques of deregulation and decentralization such as a "mixing of bureaucratic and collectivist practises." (Chen: 155)

Secondly, the history of the countercultural movements in the San Francisco Bay Area from the 60's to today's annual Burning Man Festival confirms McLuhan's assumptions on the electric age and its subsequent transformation of Western culture. In this regard, Ken Kesey's Merry Prankster, the Diggers, the Psychedelic and Hippie movement, the Suicide Club and the Cacophony Society are symbolic representations of a new awareness that was induced by the new environments of electric media. The impact of television on American society, on one side stimulated right-hemisphere perception and cognition, and on the other side produced mass audiences and mass consumerism. It also fostered insecurity, cynicism and growing distrust in consumer culture. Burning Man epitomizes the current shifts in Western culture not only in relation to a renunciation of consumerism, but, overall, in a culture that values and emphasizes participation and immediate experience. This is best reflected in Burning Man's art culture, which promotes process-oriented perception and cognition, thus representing the transition from left-hemisphere to right-hemisphere modes of awareness. Additionally, the playa as a symbolic representation of the internet (cyberspace) as well as Black Rock City's architecture, which represents a mix of visual and acoustic structures, were discussed.

Thirdly, I want to point out that the parallel discourse of Burning Man as a representation of the American Character and also Electronic man was most useful to explain McLuhan's perspective on Western culture. It is explicitly in the frontier myth where the Gutenberg Galaxy becomes most apparent because here, order, rationalism and absolute individualism were most highly valued. After all, America represents the show-piece of historical democratization and the western notion of self-fulfillment.

However, this thesis does not claim that Burning Man was a complete re-enactment of the American Frontier. It provided a good theoretical framework through which the festival's history could be explained. The discussion has shown that the myth of the frontier was significant for the festival's organizers and well as participants. The translation of frontier symbols into new meanings speaks for itself -- for example, Larry Harvey's signature Stetson whenever he appeared on the playa. The frontier provided a cultural and historical reference that enabled them to understand their own actions and served as an example from where they could continue to act and create Black Rock city's unique culture. Moreover, it needs to be said that Burning Man is a temporary community and temporary social experiment and thus comparisons to 'real' frontier situations remain theoretical constructs. For example, the Burning Man community did not have to fight for their land. While it is true that guns were part of early Burning Man, it was for pure enjoyment and play. They did not engage in any real conflict situations whether with Native Americans other groups of settlers. Though this has not always been an essential property of the frontier situation -- isolation in the wilderness certainly is the most important one -- it is at least important to note when we draw comparisons to much of the history of the American West.

In the same way, *Burners* have very different reasons why they seek to re-enact the frontier in contrast to the American settlers. Isolation and adventure were certainly two things they had in common, but the means by which they invested themselves in the land could not have been more disparate.

Many men went to the frontier in the last century to prove themselves. In the border town of the American West, everybody was a nobody until he wrested an identity through taking a risk and pure grit. The frontier was a hardware society which allowed men and women to define themselves by transforming the land.

The electronic society does not do so; it does not have solid goals, objectives, or private identity. In it, man does not so much transform the land as he metamorphosizes himself into abstract information for the convenience of others. Without restraint, he can become boundless, directionless, falling easily into the dark of the mind and the world of primordial intuition. Loss of individualism invites once again the comfort of tribal loyalties. (McLuhan, 1989: 98)

The American sought meaning and wealth by investing himself in the land and its resources. His main objective was object-oriented. The Burner who is 'Electronic man' *par excellenc*, given the fact that so many of the participants work in Silicon Valley or in other

internet and/or software enterprises throughout the Bay Area, does not have any objectives other than to immerse himself in the process of participation and immediate experience. (Doherty: 167) Although one might argue that many have artistic objectives, e.g. building sculptural art or giving a performance, it is still the process of engagement with other participants and with oneself that Black Rock citizens achieve meaning.

McLuhan was not an optimistic foreboder of the electronic age. The internet appears to put the disincarnate and disembodied user further in a situation of ‘TV violence and the quest for identity.’ I do not share his pessimism. It is exactly the empty void of the desert that is a large part of the Burning Man experience and why people journey out there year after year. They want to “become directionless, boundless” and some may have ‘mystical’ experiences in “the world of primordial intuition.” For participants of Burning Man the “loss of individualism” or *private identity* that McLuhan defined as the “uttering of the self as fragmented and abstracted from the group” is also intentionally pursued. (McLuhan, 1989: 73) Electronic man accepts the price of having to give up a certain amount of individual freedom in order to immerse himself in a primal, communal bath -- which is largely unavailable in regular mainstream society. Of course, in my argumentation, I have to take into account that Burning Man is a temporal situation and people may not want to live permanently in a more ‘tribal’ form of society. However, many do seem to have the aspiration for a more communal-based life as evidenced by the growing number of regional Burning Man groups that are popping up spreading around the globe.¹³³

Though often negative about the outcome of the electronic age, because “at the speed of light everybody tends to become a nobody,”¹³⁴ McLuhan nevertheless captured the imagination of many of his contemporaries. His influence waned in the late 1970’s and 80’s but resurged when the internet became widely accessible and people realized that many of his predictions turned out to be exactly on the point, if only because his method of investigation reflected the new modes of consciousness that the new media environments produced. He was positive that electronic media would induce new modes of perception and cognition upon man – specifically Western man – and consequently bring relief to the biases of Western man’s left-hemisphere awareness.

¹³³ See for more information on the Burning Man website. Accessed, July the 25th, 2010.

<<http://regionals.burningman.com/>>.

¹³⁴ McLuhan quoted in: Benedetti, Paul and Nancy DeHart (eds.). Forward Through The Rearview Mirror: Reflections On and By Marshall McLuhan. Ontario: Prentice-Hall Canada Inc, 1996, p. 101.

I see Burning Man as a metaphor for Western man's struggle with the new electronic environments. The event is a comprehensive attempt to renegotiate old (visual) and new (acoustic) modes of consciousness that is reflected in Burning Man's culture. The detached observer – the individual who values his private identity – has been replaced by the integrated participant. Participation is a process that provides a platform for constant engagement of the individual's faculties and instant communal feedback.

McLuhan's morphological approach to history made him an eager observer of the relationships between art, science, music, architecture and literature. In his work, he showed that all intrinsically related each other by employing his theory on how space and time are culturally constructed by media. His observations on the theater of the absurd and its appliance on the countercultural movements were already mentioned. Paul Thiessen, following McLuhan's argument, also arrived at a striking conclusion regarding the same topic.

We must remember of course that global man is tribal man times technological man. We have become tribal without ceasing to be technological. That is why there is no joy in the magical ease with which the modern theatre manipulates space. [...] If we insist as we have a right to do, that the theatre of the absurd is over, we must be clear that what we mean is that we have turned away from a theatre which was chiefly anti-environment, without being able to formulate a theatre which could deal with conviction with the multi-consciousness of global man. The shift, then, has been from a theatre of reaction to an experimental theatre. The former was clear and distinct in its performance. The latter is understandably obscure and uncertain, and in order to keep our bearing we have to take what aid we can get from architecture, painting and sculpture. (Thiessen: 103-104)

Thiessen's exclamation asserts, once again, that Burning Man is a metaphor for "technological man times tribal man". In the 'Global Theater' of the 21st century, everyone operates as a participatory actor of the absurd to achieve meaning and borrows from an abundance of cultural and artistic sources to employ in his act. Global man has abandoned the hierarchical division of space as in theater and reverses time through his active engagement; thus, *immediate experience*. Time, therefore, has become a different entity than in the linear sequential order of Modernity. Time and history has been recast into an omnipresent Present.

However, some people may not agree that Burning Man has any cultural significance. Television documentaries often portray the event as a mindless show of eccentrics and hipsters. Incidentally, John Law is also ambiguous in his evaluation of Burning Man.

I look at Burning Man now very much like I look at Disneyland. I love Disneyland. Disneyland is great. You pay your 50 bucks and there is amazing things to do. People have a blast. Obviously there are big differences. There is the do-it-yourself culture and people are less controlled. But there are definitively similarities like the architecture. Disneyland is laid out for people to move from point A to point B spending money. Burning Man's architecture is laid out for the people to behave in a certain way. Burning Man is controlled from a central architectural point that encourages people to focus their energy on an empty central symbol. And be with a power that is ceremonial and spiritual [...] I find that really bizarre and antithetical to what I'm interested in. But it works and people love it. [...] You definitively getting your money's worth. (Law: 45:30 - 46:49)

In contrast, Larry Harvey hopes that Burning Man will have an impact on mainstream society. Like the Puritans who wanted to provide an example for the whole of England in the 17th century, Burning Man is, in Harvey's opinion, 'the city upon the hill' overlooking mainstream America and the whole world.

"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 that world." (Doherty: 268)

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¹³⁵ Big Rig Jig by Mike Ross and crew, The Green Man Theme 2007.