

17 The Autothemataludicization Challenge

Spiritualizing Consumer Culture Through Playful Communal Co-Creation

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In the past quarter century of consumer research, a recurrent theme has been the persistent interrelation of religious culture and contemporary American consumer culture. Religious practices, rituals, and meanings—and those looser beliefs termed “spiritual,” “magical,” and “sacred”—have been located in fan communities (Kozinets, 2001; O’Guinn, 1991), in historical re-enactments (Belk and Costa, 1998), among touristic gatherings (Arnould, Price, and Otnes, 1999; Hetherington, 2000), in technology groups (Belk and Tumbat, 2002; Muñiz and Schau, 2005), in online and offline groups devoted to food (Kozinets, 2002a; Thompson and Troester, 2002), in consumer activism (Kozinets and Handelman, 2004), at raves and doofs (St. John, 2001), at shopping malls and themed retail locations (Kozinets et al., 2004; Ritzer, 1999), as well as in collections, at swap meets, and in American society generally (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry, 1989; Sherry, 1990).

Although the presence of sacred forms of consumption is oft-noted by scholars in mainstream consumer practice, explicitly sacred forms of consumption are rarely theorized beyond this point. We know that contemporary consumption has blurred the boundaries between sacred and profane (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry, 1989), and that some contemporary variants of traditional religious belief have been deeply transformed by their situation within acquisitive, materialist, and consumer-centered society (O’Guinn and Belk, 1989). However, as studies in the social sciences attest, alternative forms of religion and spirituality have flourished (e.g., Mazur and McCarthy, 2001; Pike, 2004; York, 1995), yet their mutual imbrication with consumer culture has yet to be fully examined. In this chapter, we seek to contribute to this growing and important stream of thinking, one to which this volume makes an important contribution. We focus our efforts on a particular phenomenon of interest in this “self-help” and “consumer-generated” age of consumerized spirituality. We seek to offer up a meaningful initial theory that examines the experience, the substance, and the ideologies of so-called alternate religious and spiritual practices and relate them to studies of consumer culture by looking at the do-it-yourself elements of a popular contemporary spiritual

festival. Through that enterprise, we try to develop novel insights into the nature of the consumption of contemporary spirituality and the spirituality of contemporary consumers. We begin by describing contemporary alternative spiritual movements and practices and then relating them to consumer culture. We then detail some of the spiritual consumption practices occurring in our field site, the Burning Man project. In our concluding section, we speculate freely about this new area of spirituality and consumption and its investigation and representation in contemporary consumption and cultural studies.

CONSUMPTION AND SPIRITUALITY

Consumer Society and Transcendence

Many scholars, including many in this very volume, have noted that the consumption of religion, especially in contemporary North American contexts, can be categorized as a “spiritual marketplace,” a veritable smorgasbord of alternate beliefs that can be mixed and matched like courses at a broad buffet (e.g., Csordas, 1997). Many have also found that religious sentiments and meanings have moved from more formal, organized locations such as churches and temples to events and gatherings such as festival, concerns, workshops, and fairs (Taylor, 2002; York, 1995). Chief among the new or disestablishment religious forms we wish to explore are genres broadly labeled “New Age,” which includes a vast variety of religious forms, including those influenced by Native American and Eastern religions; some reforming Wiccan, shamanic, and Pagan beliefs and rites; and others focusing on extraterrestrial intelligences, channeling, mysticism, and UFOs (Ferguson, 1980; Pike, 2004; York, 1995). New Age is, in short, an eclectic mélange of syncretic expressions that converge on the goals of personal experience and insight, and for whom ritual is the touchstone of identity and community (Pike, 2004; York, 1995).

It would, however, be a mistake to conflate the fluidity and heterodoxy of New Age spirituality with postmodernity and to consign institutional or organized religions—with their tendency towards rote and dogma—to affiliations of modernity. Better perhaps would be to think of the institutions of religion as premodern or traditional and to note the pervasiveness of modern impulses in religious and spiritual forms. It has been widely argued in sociology and anthropology that consumer culture is bound up with the whole of modernity (e.g., Campbell, 1989; Miller, 1987; Ritzer, 1999; Slater, 1997). This view contrasts concepts of modern and premodern society, or traditional and post-traditional society, defining consumption in relation to the major themes and features of modernity.

But in order to elaborate the influence of modern consumer culture on spiritual experience, and without claiming to be exhaustive or authoritative on the matter, we cleave these guiding modernistic themes into three supporting cultural themes or pillars, which we then locate in contemporary American spirituality. The first pillar of modern consumer culture is the premise and promise of *freedom of choice*: a conflation of democracy, autonomy, ostensibly rational self-interest, and individualism. The second pillar is that of the *mutable self*: a conflation of constant desire blended with identity creation and re-creation, competition, and uncertainty. The third pillar is *popular spectacle*: the deep interrelation of the meanings and values of daily life with the mass mediated (and increasingly global) creations of news, sports, entertainment, and other identity brands. Each of these elements is implicated in consumers' religiosity or quest for transcendence, yet these important links have thus far remained, for the most part, indistinct. In total, they constitute the three fundamental underlying principles of a type of religious practice called *autothemataludicization*, which we define, theorize, and develop later in this chapter. As preliminary theoretical groundwork for that exposition, we explain each of them in turn here before proceeding to theorize their more intimate linkage.

Freedom of Choice. Over the course of modernity, a vision of market society arose that focused on liberalism and neo-liberalism, emphasizing choice, autonomy, and individualism and valorizing the consumer as a hero of modern freedom and progress. Supplanting old notions of fealty, responsibility, and communal obligation, the individual has but to freely choose based on selfish desire, and the morality of the innate marketplace will raise his or her action to a level of valor (Campbell, 1989).

Yet central social tensions have arisen in relation to this portrayal, namely, how individuals relate with one another and with the wider world of meaning in the atomistic, hedonistic, individualist, and self-serving consumer society (see, e.g., Cushman, 1995). We see this tension among individuals, society, and the communal search for transcendence meaning in consumer society as a central and commanding theme present in a number of past investigations (e.g., Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry, 1989; Kozinets, 2001, 2002a, 2002b; Kozinets et al., 2002; Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001). The present study recasts the dichotomies and uneasy mergers between brands and communities, between markets and communities, and between profane and sacred in modern consumer culture as arising from these central social issues about authoritarian narratives governing collective social logics. Our study suggests how *autothemataludicization* allows a rapid and communal construction and communication of varieties of religious experience that can be and are used to rapidly transcend, and in some sense transform, systems of consumer culture.

Mutable Self and the Quest for Transcendence. The second pillar of contemporary consumer culture is the *mutable self*: a conflation of constant desire blended with identity creation, a romantic ethos, and a quest

for the transcendence of the old through embracing the new. A founding pillar of modernism was the idea that the person could learn, grow, and transcend their past or their inherited condition. After millennia of serfdoms, thralldoms, caste cultures, and bluebloods, individual selves were finally viewed as capable, through their own acts of will, of pulling themselves up and bettering their conditions. By the modern era, this capability had turned into an imperative.

According to Cushman (1995), Americans suffer from an uncertain, reflexive, and doubting self due not only to the loss of religious certainty and community, but because of the destabilizing influence of markets and popular consumer culture, which demand constant newness, constant change (Brand, 1999), and a constant reach towards the future (Brooks, 2004). Just as Christianity first nurtured the sense of human sin and depravity, offering consolation through confession and the church's acceptance, so capitalism flourished on the broken terrain of the isolated and empty self facing a frighteningly uncertain tomorrow, which it promised to make whole in the future, through the transformative power of fantasy (Cushman, 1995; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Martin, 2004).

As other contemporary anthropologists have done (see, e.g., Hetherington, 2000; York, 1995), our study relates the constantly striving and searching self of contemporary consumer culture to the quest for religious experience and the spiritual seeking of contemporary New Age movements. Like Pine and Gilmore (1999), we see an important and noteworthy tendency in the shift from the search for things to the seeking of meaningful experiences, but we cast the quest for new experience as spiritually charged. Through the notion of *autothemataludicization*, we redeploy notions of the empty, fragmented, and mutable self to answer questions about how contemporary consumers can slake their thirst for authenticity, take control of the role of time in their experience, and make spiritual shifts fit into the busy schedules of a well-adjusted consumer operating in a therapeutic consumer society.

Popular Spectacle and the Quest for Transcendence. The third pillar of consumer culture is the deployment of public popular images in personal ways. Postmodern, cultural studies, subcultural, and media studies literature fields have long debated whether consumer culture manipulates and inoculates consumers with its values, or whether it provides them with resources for creativity and resistance. Research indicates that it does provide them with images powerful enough to act as spiritual and religious analogs (see, e.g., Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry, 1989; Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry, 2003; Porter and MacLaren, 1999; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). This appropriation and repurposing of popular culture images creates tensions between control and autonomy, self-expression and self-control, and it requires individuals and communities to form expressive rituals around meanings that belong to them in spirit, but that are actually owned and controlled by others. *Autothemataludicization* and its projects

allow them to collectively meet these sometimes conflicting challenges in elegant and meaningful ways.

Sites of Spiritual Consumption Investigation

Our investigation explores these central themes of choice, self, and spectacle in the context of sites designated as spiritual social spaces. We ethnographically and netnographically engaged a variety of alternative religious events—including several psychic fairs, strip mall channelers and roadside Tarot readers, and an alternative church—in search of spiritual consumption enlightenment. The investigations of these sites informed our central inquiry but will be analyzed and reported in detail elsewhere. Due to the richness of the data it provided, we elected to put our study's primary focuses on Burning Man, an event that is a hotbed of spiritual experimentation and individualization.

For one week each year, a vast tract of the lifeless Black Rock desert near Gerlach, Nevada, is transformed into Black Rock City, the fourth largest city in the state of Nevada, site of Burning Man. In the 2011 event, which ended just as we were finalizing this chapter, the event attracted 50,000 participants and was limited to this number by legal constraints. Many of the event participants describe themselves as spiritual seekers and their Burning Man experience as containing the most profound and sacred moments of their lives. The event has been chronicled in many other places (e.g., Brill and Lady Bee, 2003; Doherty, 2004; Kozinets and Sherry, 2004; Kreuter, 2002; <http://burningman.com/>; Sherry and Kozinets, 2004, 2007).

This chapter is based within a larger ethnographic and netnographic project of inquiry into Burning Man, conducted with participants and organizers drawn from all quarters of the event. We attended Burning Man in 1999, 2000, 2001, 2003, and 2005. We also attended the event virtually in a myriad of different ways in all of the other years since the inception of our research in 1999. Hundreds of hours of physical and virtual immersion in the sites were capped with participant-observation in Black Rock City in the desert near Gerlach, Nevada, and in-person, on-site interviews of hundreds of Burning Man participants. We recorded data manually in fieldnotes, electronically in photographs and in both audio- and videotape formats. We also drafted research participants (some of whom were fellow academics and other professors) to assist us in member checks. Because this work is part of a long-term and ongoing project, we also have many other related findings reported in a variety of other outlets (see, in particular, Kozinets and Sherry, 2004; Sherry and Kozinets, 2004, 2007, which deal with some related spiritual consumption themes). In keeping with the enacted, embodied, ritual nature of the event and the New Age movement as a whole (Pike, 2004; York, 1995), we opt in this chapter to provide a richly observational account that privileges longer fieldnote excerpts over longer interview verbatims (although both are included).

AUTOTHEMATALUDICIZATION

Considering Consumption, Shopping, and Spirituality

Resisting Imposed Meaning and Individualized Choice. Because the ritual of the burning of Burning Man is both physically and metaphysically central to the event, located in the center of the semicircle that forms Black Rock's city, we begin with an exploration of the event as reconstructed through our combined fieldnotes.

The burning of the Man occurred last night, Saturday night. The effigy had been assembled on Monday, trimmed with neon lighting and installed on its stage. It acted as a devotional shrine for the pilgrims who traverse its structure often in the balance of the week. As the week wore on, participants' talk turned inevitably to the coming burn. The Burn itself turns out to be a major spectacle of the grandest, and most Hollywood and Disneyesque proportions. Yet it's a creation and eternal return of an ancient (or it somehow *feels* like it is ancient) ritual that brims with authenticity, although it is deliberately staged. Tonight, in the gathering darkness, pilgrims stream down the dusty avenues, across the Esplanade where they promenade. They fan out over the playa, staking out their places around the neon-lighted Man. Dressed in full regalia, armed with glow sticks and el-wire, bearing musical instruments and cameras, they banter with each other and the rehearsing performers. The surrounding throng is boisterous and rowdy as the momentum of the previous week achieves its peak. The "Ranger" police force urges the crowd to sit, to ensure maximum visibility for the greatest number. Several hundred fire dancers on foot, on stilts, in costumes, and in wheelchairs parade around the Man, inciting the crowd with the promise of imminent conflagration.

An extremely powerful and engaging ritual, the Burning of the Man is also remarkable because of its lack of imposed meaning. The Burn has no meaning, or, more accurately, it has only the meanings imposed on by the individual participants. Perfectly, almost hermetically in keeping with the New Age, Situationist, and artistic ethos that the ritual or act has no meaning beyond itself, the organizers of Burning Man are extremely careful to leave the significance of the burn polysemic, ambiguous, open, and flexible. As participant-author Black (1998) relates it:

Burning Man is a veritable tar-baby of interpretation. The organizers and many of the participants refuse to assign or acknowledge any specific meaning to what happens at this festival. The event's founder and chief spokesperson Larry Harvey once told a journalist: 'Representing nothing, the Man becomes tabula rasa: any meaning may be projected

onto him.' This viewpoint is one of the few doctrines that Burning Man attendees can agree on. And so it becomes the sum of everyone's individual experience. Tar baby or teflon? Does a phoenix of understanding rise from the ashes, or is that a black hole bending the light, denying certitude and insight into what, if anything, it all means?

This resistance to imposed meaning runs directly counter to traditional organized religion whose denominational foundations are formed on the collectively shared interpretation of the meaning of particular symbol systems. In this sense, Burning Man defies definition as a culture, subculture, or belief, but a congerie of questers who are rooted strongly to no particular belief but openness to many beliefs. The openness invites personalization, which invites relevance. As Mazur and McCarthy (2001, p. 4) put it when explaining the religious significance of popular culture, "Church is church, but rock concerts, for instance, seem to be nearly whatever their followers want them to be, often including experiences of intense spiritual transformation."

"Trying to explain what Burning Man is to someone who has never been to the event is a bit like trying to explain what a particular color looks like to someone who is blind," states the Burning Man website, by way of an introduction and explanation of the event (<http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/>). Another posting by a participant states, "At the end, though your journey to and from Burning Man are finished, you embark on a different journey—forever." As with the spiritualized participants in post-raves (Tramacchi, 2000), in neo-pagan rituals (Pike, 2001), at New Age fairs like Confest (St. John, 2001), and in gatherings like the annual Rainbow Family gatherings (Niman, 1997), the ritual events themselves have a profound significance that many people find ineffable and mysterious.

Shopping for Experiences in the Spiritual Marketplace. On the morning after the Burning of the Man, we witnessed pilgrims rubbing themselves with the ashes of the burnt Man, a ritual reminiscent of both Hinduism and crematory funerary rites (see Figure 17.1). To us, it suggested that participants seek ever deeper, more physical, more profound, and more personal contact with the ritual moment that so moved them the evening before. In keeping with the flavor of the entire event, this sacred polysemy manifests itself through a marketplace phenomenon that we also encountered in psychic and New Age fairs, and that St. John (2001) describes in detail at the Australian ConFest festival (see also Niman, 1997; Pike, 2001, 2004).

This is the sacred theming, the encampment on particular ground and the making it specifically sacred that Burning Na's guiding organization has institutionalized in its provision of "theme camps." Participants at Burning Man both create and simultaneously choose from a vast variety of constructed experiences, many or most of which have the express purpose of providing spiritual insights or transcendent experiences. Black Rock City can be conceptualized as a New Age/neo-pagan mirror image of the spiritual supermarket its residents have encountered in the world. The New

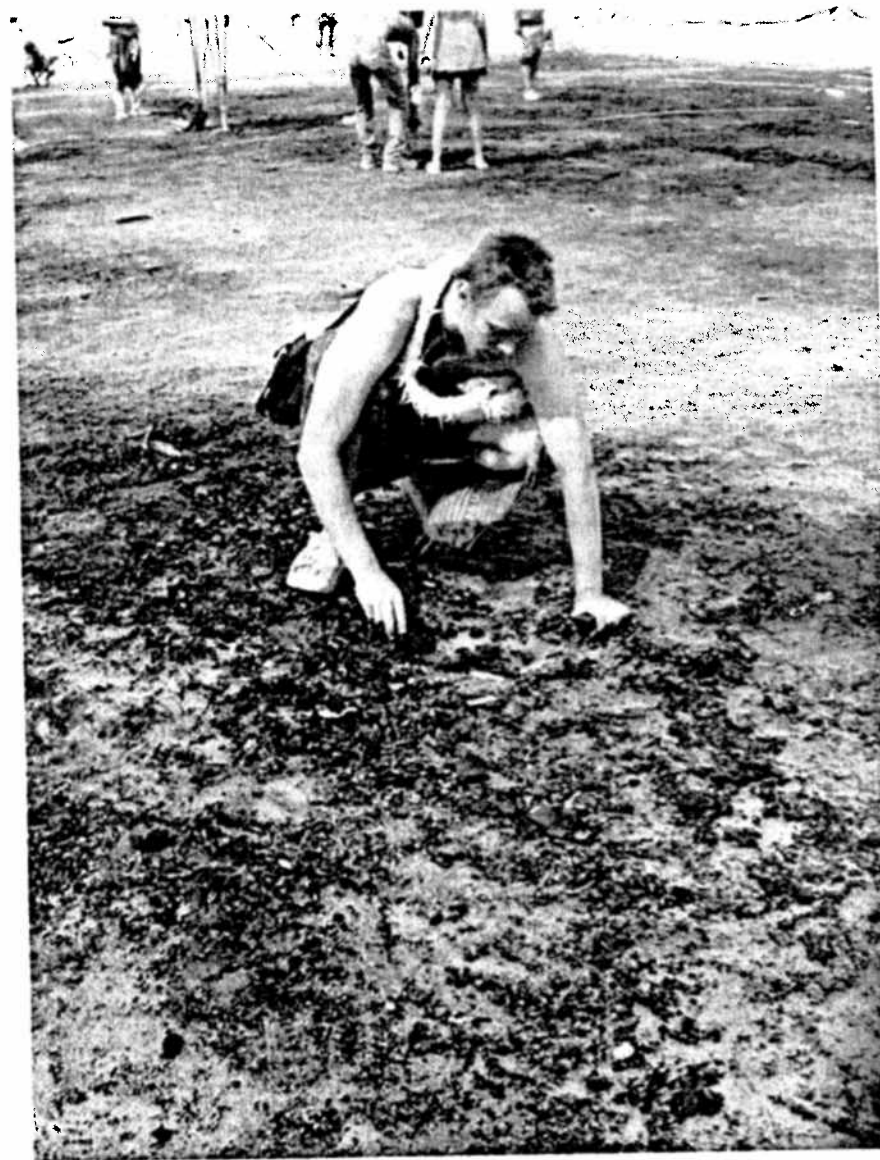


Figure 17.1 Gleaners the morning after the burn.

Age emphasis on Eastern mysticism revealed itself in widespread yoga and meditation sessions offered in Burning Man theme camps. Typically New Age, various forms of massage are also widely offered for free throughout the encampment. Many of the massage camps drew on the human potential movement of the 1960s and 1970s to encourage safe exploration of one's own and others' bodies.

New types of beliefs were also represented. The Burning Man encampment of the Church of Mez became a place to pragmatically discuss not only the benefits of living intentionally, and of following belief systems that are frivolous and playful, but the pragmatics of life extension. As the Church of Mez's website states, "The Church of Mez is a Transhumanist religion. Transhumanism is the belief that through technology it is possible for us to fundamentally change the so-called human condition, and in so doing to transcend the limitations that we take for granted, and transform ourselves into whatever beings we wish to become. . . . Unlike some religions, we believe that life is to be enjoyed. That enjoyment comes from play, from pleasure, and from sharing that play and pleasure with others" (<http://www.meziah.org/church>).

Massages, yoga, and meditation are almost always offered in a playful, pleasurable, yet serious (i.e., non-parodic) fashion. However, a variety of interestingly skewed variations on familiar occult and Christian rites such as exorcism, confession, and baptisms are regularly offered. For example, the "Sacred Temple of the Enigmata" offered its own dogma and confession booth, and it featured a new Christian religious text that expounded a story of Jesus stepping in canine excrement. At Burning Man 2002, one theme camp presented a book that detailed, in words and vivid paintings, child abuse at the hands of Catholic clergy from a first-person perspective. As they are at other spiritual gatherings like psychic fairs and New Age festival, Tarot readers, fortunetellers, and other personality readers and prognosticators are abundant. At Burning Man 2003, we interviewed the founders of the "Temple of Boobfoot," who had developed a method of interpreting personality traits from readings of female (and male) breasts. A cursory check of the theme camp manifest suggests no metaphysical ailment or curiosity need go untreated during the pilgrim's sojourn through Burning Man.

Markets and Spiritual Marketplaces. Both Pike (2001) and St. John (2001) describe spiritual marketplaces that were positioned largely in the commercial realm and were contested. For Pike (2001, pp. 74–75), vendors were located in "Merchant's Row" assigned to special places in the neo-pagan camp and were "approached more ambivalently by festival goers." At ConFest, St. John (2001, p. 53) describes how commercial offerings created tensions between festival participants, as some chose to contest "the apolitical frivolity of on-site consumerism."

Burning Man is noteworthy because of the individualization of participation. With very little central organization, participations themselves create a vast spiritual marketplace of offerings and then share these offerings with one another at their own cost (similar to the Rainbow Family gatherings; see Niman, 1997). Like ConFest, neo-pagan and Rainbow Family gatherings, this is not an event of pure harmony, but one where profound differences breed fundamental schisms, where harmony may be one goal among many. Burning Man is a good example of an "alternative cultural

heterotopia," as St. John (2001, p. 48) described ConFest, "a matrix of performance zones occupied by variously complementary and competing neo-tribes and identity discourses," a realm of competing discourses that somehow cohere together around a single event.

The reason for this unanticipated coherence, we propound here, is that they are enmeshed in, and to some extent formed by, a consumer culture that celebrates choice as diversity, and that fosters the growth of heterotopic society as a byproduct of a segmentation-driven marketing culture. The resulting events exemplify economies of experience and customization that provide participants with an access to and variety of choices that they use, as our next section details, to experiment with the transformation of self.

Transforming Self and Others

New Therapies, Confessions, Wedding, and Funeral Rituals. Transformative experiences form the core of many of the syncopated rituals that in total create Burning Man alternative cultural heterotopia. At Burning Man, the pursuit of the sacred self is cast in parodic terms as often as it is cast in a therapeutic form that blends healing and play with spirituality. Indeed, we would argue that much of the therapeutic quality of the Burning Man experience lies in its combination of openness and playfulness.

We witnessed several weddings that took place during Burning Man. For some, the bride and groom were nude for the ceremony. At others, they were dressed in wildly expressive garb that riffs on traditional wedding wear. Each of the weddings was marked by a high degree of individual expression and expressive outpourings of emotion. In an interesting turn of events, funerary and memorial rituals have become institutionalized as part of the Burning Man experience through David Best's series of great Temples that he has built since 2000. But those Temples, including 2011's Temple of Transition, always act as an alternative memorial ritual, a way of remembering the dead in a way that is deeply personal, and yet co-constructed by the community. It is both auto (or personalized) and collective, and therein lies much of its semiotic strength. The structure of the building invites deep inscription and evokes empathic, cathartic, therapeutic response in its dwellers. As they contemplate the meaning of others' deaths, many participants find themselves ruminating about the meaning of their own lives. There is a frequently heard saying that "no one returns from Burning Man unchanged." The experiential event is valued and renowned for its transformative abilities, which celebrate and accelerate modern consumer culture's mutability of the self.

The Liminoid Body. The mutability of the self is also manifest in participants' costumes. This garbing is often reinterpreted as an intentionality of being, an expropriation of self-creation away from the institutions of fashion and industry (cf. Thompson and Haytko, 1997), and an expression of larger truths. We asked "Mustard Sally," a long-term attendee, festooned

in twisting metal spirals, crepe, and yellow body paint, to tell us about her costume.

Mustard Sally: I like the idea of it not being a thing, that it actually is what reality is.

Interviewer: It being the costume?

Mustard Sally: Yeah. The way I am is the way everything should be and is. And people that are dressed like you should feel really odd and out of place.

Interviewer: Okay [laughs].

"This is who I really am" is a commonly asserted affirmation of the playa self that a pilgrim comes to discover in a week of aesthetically mediated leveling and bonding rituals that draw him or her into intimate association (or in this case, demarcated insider-outsider boundaries) with her fellow travelers. The adoption of pseudonymous but self-revelatory "playa names," similarly, are seen as a chance to reform the self, to choose one's own self and self-representation, at least for a few days per year. The costumes worn by nomads as gifts to one another are effective masks, allowing multiple personae to emerge from the multiphrenic self, harnessing play in the service of self-discovery and self-disclosure, and expressing it in carnal form.

The burning of things, including money, is also highly symbolic of transformation and the revelation of essence. This burning is a literal form of consumption, a wastefulness and lack of environmental sensitivity not unlike the waste for which consumer society is frequently criticized. "Nevada Joe," the creator of a theme camp that burned a lot of diesel fuel argued as follows: "Look, companies dump a ton of stuff, they pollute the Earth all the time, right, but they do it for greed, for money. Yeah, I'm creating my own little environmental disaster right here. I know it. But I'm doing it for a much more important cause, right? I'm doing it for fun" (Burning Man 1999 interview). Nevada Bob is here arguing that his unenvironmental campaign is transformative. It is important because it defies and discharges the rational logic of the marketplace. Like potlatch, it is wasteful consumption that changes self and world by enchanting them both. As with many holidays, the festive behavior at Burning Man is "built in large part on wastrel prodigality, on surplus and abundance, on conspicuous consumption" (Schmidt, 1995, p. 8). It may be "the new American holiday" (Sterling, 1996), but it is a DiY holiday, a holiday not created by Hallmark or Macy's. It is a new holiday that consumers call their own.

Offering further symbols of the liminality of transformative potentiality were the ubiquitous and often inverted clowns, demons, angels (see Figure 17.2), butterflies, and shamans (see Figure 17.3) who appeared often in the guise of witch doctors, magicians, soothsayers, ecstatic drummers, clerics, and the like. Cross-dressing, which St. John (2001) asserts indicates the body's potential as "a site of resistance," is extremely common.



Figure 17.2 Participants costumed as angelic figures.



Figure 17.3 A modern primitive in shamanic garb.

The chance to regress to childhood is another important tool used by participants to emphasize the added malleability of self-present at Burning Man. In this regression equation, playgrounds of diminutive and gigantic scale are scattered throughout Black Rock City. Trampolines, swing sets, life-sized interactive board games, toy boxes, and sports equipment are offered by nomads to one another in theme interactive camps. Doll Camp, a theme camp, makes huge inventories of dolls and actions figures available to participants, who sit, pose, caress, model, and play with dolls—alone and in groups. One of the founders of Doll Camp told us of the way his doll camp had evolved to take on elements that blended humor and spirituality with Burning Man's participatory culture:

'Action Man': Porn stars are one kind of ultimate action figure, but so is a guru, a cult leader, right? A spiritual action figure. So we decided to start our own cult. And we have a guru we just made up and we have people contribute dogma to our cult. And once we get enough dogma we can start manipulating the world. 'Pigneesh' is our guru, over there (smiling widely, points to an image on an altar).

Interviewer: Is this non-serious or does it have a serious side to it?

'Action Man': Everything always has a serious side to it. (Interview, Burning Man 2003)

Although it might seem strange at first, Action Man's notion that sexuality, play, and spirituality are interrelated is common at Burning Man, and in a range of other popular New Age belief systems, such as the human potential movement (including Werner Erhard's est) and Tantric Yoga (for an example closer to home, see also Gould, 1991). At Burning Man, sacred play includes human sexuality. "Sacred sexuality" is preached and practiced in many of the theme camps. Consider, for example, the 2004 theme camp called "TempleWhore," whose description reads: "TempleWhores are historically recognized and defiled hellions who bliss ya out and open the doors to the vault of heaven. TempleWhore camp is an outgrowth of our Seattle gang, and we will provide massage, Reiki, herbal teas, and hotsauce, all served or bartered with a Kali-smile" (from burningman.com website). Another camp, "Camp Cunt," was founded on a mission to reclaim the ancient and sacred meaning of the currently defiled word "Cunt."

Similarly, consider the description of the long-standing theme camp, the Temple of Atonement: "Black Rock city's premier BDSM [bondage, domination, sadism and masochism] camp. Take part in our sanctuary of decadence as we pursue transformation, education and personal development amidst our dark fantasies. . . . TOA is a complete 2500 square foot sanctuary and dungeon with wall-to-wall carpet, lots of SM equipment & a chill space. It is a place where we make our (& your) dark fantasies a reality." Sexuality and gender are publicly problematized and communally

celebrated. Nudity is common. Public displays of hetero- and homosexual affection abound, and, as this fieldnote excerpt demonstrates, alternative forms of sexual expression are almost unavoidable.

After a wandering night that started with shots of Kahlua, we were walking back to our campsite with X and Y. We were turning the intersection before our campsite at Daguerrodrome when suddenly, from out of the darkness, came a she-male of awesome proportions (who we later discovered was named "She-Ra"). S/he was at least 6'1", impressively muscle-bound with huge thick, chiseled arms, clad in black leather chaps, with large fully exposed round breasts and an equally impressive man-thigh dangling down between his/her thick, well-defined legs. Immediately commanding our full attention, s/he rapidly approached us, scanning us, raising her whip. John and I cowered and instinctually held back, and poor X (a Burning Man first timer) was her target. S/he commanded him to bend over and good-naturedly, he did. S/he began by stroking his behind with the whip, then slapped him with it, calling him "Slut!" She called him a few other choice names, increasing the power and venom of each stroke, and by the time she reached "Bitch!" the whipping sound of leather hitting X's pants almost made my eyes tear. With those huge biceps, s/he packed quite a whallop. As s/he angrily calling X a "Cunt!" you could see the real pain on X's good-humored face. (Fieldnotes, Burning Man 2003)

Burning Man is a liminal zone on almost any level that invites self-reassignment, as the story of our close encounter with "She-Ra," a transsexual pilgrim in a stage of gender reassignment, exemplified (She-Ra is also an entrepreneur who has an extremely successful Internet web-page). Our encounter shows how the sexuality, experimentation, and liminality of the place are almost unavoidable. As the experiential immediacy of choice was emphasized in the last section, the carnality of embodiment is the focus of the mutable self, a self whose boundaries can dissolve quickly in the crucible of Burning Man's liminoid zone.

Defining Autothemataludicization

Although the term is a tad unwieldy, we believe that, somewhat like the infamous Mary Poppins tongue-twister supercalifragilisticexpialidocious, whose constituent parts signify (somewhat like German words) a particular thought, namely, "atoning for educability through delicate beauty," the word signifies an important phenomenon or process that no other social scientific term yet does. Autothemataludicization describes a process in which meaningful experiences are self-created (auto as in "autobiography" or "auto-erotic") not only by individuals but also by collectives. The term "themata" relates historically to the administrative divisions established in

the mid-seventh century after the Muslim conquests of Byzantine territory. These initial themes were military in nature and represented a form of governance of an area of land by the military units that had conquered them. In our conception, *themata* resonates with the idea of a particular area of land (we also include online spaces as well as intellectual real estate in our definitional domain) being encamped on and taken over. It also relates to themes as broad, general ideas, messages, or morals, as in the notion of theme parks or themed flagship brandstores (see, e.g., Gottdeiner, 1997; Kozinets et al., 2002). Although the past of *themata* dealt with warfare, the next and final term, “ludic,” indicates that the process we are considering deals with fantasy, play, and the boundless human imagination.

Thus, our term *autothemataludicization* refers to a *contemporary process in which consumers collectively create of their own initiative, customized, meaningful, and playful spiritual experiences in a particular location, following some particular, and likely proscribed theme*. These ideas demonstrate how an overarching event like Burning Man can suggest and manage a coordinated set of individual themed camps, each of which individualizes and shares a playful spiritual expression.

Participation in Playful Spiritualized Spectacle

Clowns originate as sacred characters. Bast, the Egyptian cat-headed goddess, was a patron of play and playfulness. Games of chance have sacred oracular origins. The spirit of play consumes us still; the playfully spiritual is all around us. In a society where religion becomes popular culture (O’Guinn and Belk, 1989), it should come as little surprise that popular culture becomes religion (Kozinets, 2001; Mazur and McCarthy, 2001; Porter and Maclaren, 1999). For, as Mazur and McCarthy (2001, p. 12) explain, for many Americans “‘religion’ is identified with institutional religion, and it is precisely their resistance to those institutions that makes such things as music, food, sports, and film attractive alternative sites for meaning making.”

This meaning-making tendency takes on enormous fecundity in the barren spaces of the Black Rock desert, as a fantastic array of parareligious forms with popular culture roots branch out and intertwine. Elmo is crucified. Spock Mountain Research Labs forms their endlessly logical religion on a Star Trek character. McDonald’s becomes McSatan’s Beastro. Photoshopped Absolut Ads parody every aspect of the event. The ancient Wheel of Fortune becomes the basis of a lewd gameshow. Religion itself is parodied as a type of random, chance, set of spiritual beliefs (see Figures 17.4 and 17.5). Canadian hockeymen battle it out in a full-scale rink in the middle of the Nevada desert. Nude Twister is a popular game. The Thunderdome, based on the Mad Max movie series, enacts simulated bloodsport to the thrill of onlookers. Every aspect of culture and popular culture is contained and parodied. Burning Man as it is known could not exist if it



Figure 17.4 A theme camp’s religious parody.



Figure 17.5 An anonymous parody of religious prayer displayed in center camp.

did not partake of and invert ordinary, mainstream society. Like all New Age religions, it exists and gains meaning in opposition to the dominant belief systems and spiritual systems of its day, but it uses them in a manner that is perhaps most overt of all. As surely as it takes over the space of public land, the imaginary communities of popular culture are co-opted.

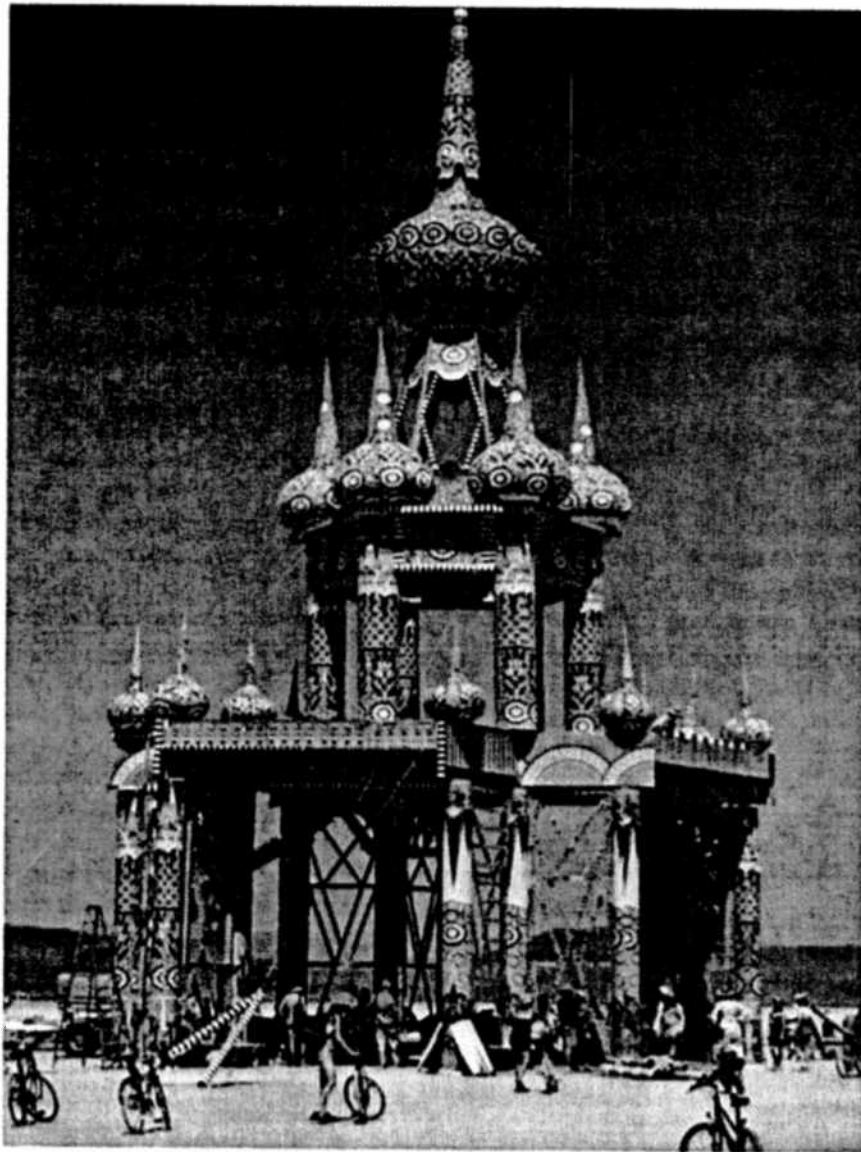


Figure 17.6 The Temple of Honor, 2003.

Jesters and Jokers. Devils, angels, and interesting hybrids also populate the event. Sacred clowns of many sorts pervade the festival, and, relatedly, there are manifold expressions of political parody and calls to action as well. In 2003, a complex piece of sound and light art combined a projected visual image of President George W. Bush's gigantic head (like an Orwellian Big Brother image) onto the billowing cloth of a dome tent. The head was accompanied by clips from Bush's speeches that were altered, according to the artist, "to take the lies that were said and splice them together to make them say the truth" (Interview, 2003). Some of the many sayings it offered, in George Bush's own voice, include: "God will help the American economy," "Your enemy is running your country," and "Innocent Iraqi women and children will be killed." Another artwork vividly displayed George W. Bush as the Antichrist 666. In 2004, a major installation depicted President Bush and his cabinet as the Mad Hatter and his cohorts from *Alice in Wonderland*, all spinning in a mad teacup party. Another installation piece, glowing green in the middle of the desert, was the Statue of Liberty locked in a cage. In the Temple of Honor in 2003, there were many memorials dedicated to innocent Iraqis killed in the invasion (see Figure 17.6). Like good art, these examples use the image of culture to critique it. United by the context of the spiritual meanings of the event, they appear as mobilizing forces in a religiously charged movement.

Undermining the status quo by using its core images, the spectacle serves an authentically self-expressive function that many have propounded is missing from traditional religion and spirituality, which emphasizes rationalized, conformist values like obedience, discipline, and self-denial over creativity, innovation, experimentation, self-expression, and authenticity. The theme of the festival in 2003 year was "Beyond Belief," and many installations created an *Alice in Wonderland* effect that encouraged people to playfully question their beliefs. That year, Zachary Coffin's "The Temple of Gravity" was an engineering and logistical marvel. It presented a pair of crossed metal pieces from which hung several slabs of granite ranging from 15,500 to 18,000 pounds each, dangling from chains (see Figure 17.3). These megaton slabs swayed as pilgrims climbed and then danced on them to the theme's rap and rave music. Writer Brain Doherty (2004, p. 180) reflects meaningfully on the significance of the artwork: "As its name suggested, it made you contemplate the core forces in this universe, weight and solidity and their undeniable reality—and the equally undeniable reality that we are clever enough to defeat these forces, to keep the tons of stone suspended for our contemplation and play. It all added up to a mighty victory for the spirit of mankind."

As with the Temple of Gravity, this artwork often incorporates ingenious technology, such that stationary sculptures of swimmers stroke to life under the influence of stroboscopes, or musical tones emanate from invisible lyre strings as pilgrims move their hands through empty space or laser beams trace out the shape of the Man overhead, for the amusement of any watchers from



Figure 17.7 The Temple of Gravity.

the sky. Humble works are present as well, from elegant postings of poetry, through terra cotta warrior-type battalions of statuettes, to the occasional nonfunctional phone booth or drinking fountain. One phone booth offered a direct line to God (usually busy). These many examples demonstrate not only how the serious and playful intersect, but also how they are co-created in the intersection between managed production and communally co-created encampment. The next section of our chapter draws some conclusions about how these ideas fit together into our conception of autothemataludicization and how they can further advance our thinking about the nature of spirituality in contemporary consumer culture.

Re-enchanting a Disenchanted Consumer Consciousness

In a society where much religion is seen as divisive, distant, and ossified, Burning Man provides a way to recharge self and belief. The state of flux and encampment that typifies the process of autothemataludicization translates well into both Bey's (1991) terminology of "temporary autonomous zones" of resistance to authority and Jenkin's (1992) notions of involved consumers as "poachers" on corporately copyrighted textual territories. As with McKay's (1998, p. 2) conjecturing of do-it-yourself (DiY) culture as "a kind of 1990s counterculture" in which youthful expressions of resistance combine "party and protest," Burning Man combines parody with art, performance with resistance, and inversion with expression. The "party/protest pleasure/politics fusion" (St. John, 2001, p. 51) combines political

activism and personal growth into a single experiential and experimental endeavor. In the service of re-enchanting the world, individual and tribal identities are exalted, and spirituality is decommodified.

One of the key processes enabling and establishing these sacred fusions is autothemataludicization, the contemporary process of collective consumer co-creation that involves customized, meaningful, and playful spiritual experiences manifesting in a particular location, following some particular and likely proscribed theme. Through autothemataludicization, we may understand better how identity, ritual, and self-transformation—themes often visited by consumer researchers interested in consumer culture and community (e.g., Kozinets, 2001; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Thompson and Haytko, 1997)—can be theorized as responses to consumer culture. The essence of autothemataludicization seems to be a suspension of the routines and guiding social logics of everyday life into a mythical realm where higher-order questions of meaning, self, and existence can be pondered and, at least momentarily, suspended. We can see the hallmarks of its creative communal customization across many consumption experiences. For example, Harley riders experience "a spirituality derived in part from a sense of riding as a transcendental departure" (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995, p. 50); Star Trek fans see the show as "a myth, a sacred text, a type of holy relic" (Kozinets, 2001, p. 81); Newton user groups are filled with "supernatural, religious, and magical motifs" (Muñiz and Schau, 2005, p. 745); and social media and technology users tend to have a history of utopian, religious, and spiritual communal formation (Davis, 1998; Kozinets, 2008).

Many scholars and thinkers from a vast variety of disciplines have argued that consumer culture withers the human soul (see, e.g., Cushman, 1995; Debord, 1995[1967]; McKibben, 1990). Revealed by our own powerful spiritual experiences, and the revelation of self-transformation by informant after informant, Burning Man offers and delivers a mystical moment ingredient of the first order that is largely, but certainly not entirely, absent from both wider, secular consumer society (e.g., Ritzer, 1999) and most people's experiences of organized religion. Although choice, the mutable self, and popular culture are distinct consumer culture themes contained, and even embraced, by the Burning Man event, the event transcends them, flips them on their heads, and reveals the paradox within them. It does this by linking deep play and consumer co-creation with a dialectics of re-enchantment: this is the essence of autothemataludicization, its driver.

However, autothemataludicization is also wider than this. It also is fueled by the importance of marginality, liminality, stigma, sacrifice, and struggle. Positioned at the margin, Burning Man gives consumers not only what they want but also much of what they do not want. The structure of the themata is constraining, as are the boundaries of communal sacrifice and display. Often the initially undesired is present in the unbounded physical, natural being, which is positioned as the literal ground of what is real, true,

and authentic, and it can signal and actually contain considerable danger (cf. Arnould and Price, 1993), as do the many modes of freed, expressive, individualistic social and human beings (cf. Brown et al., 2003; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; St. John, 2001).

Burning Man's "unconsumers" assert that the event shocks them out of their normal daily consciousness, which we term here a *consumer consciousness*. The notion, originating from Weber's work on rationalization, that modern consumer consciousness is, to some large extent, rationalized and "McDonalidized" has been an underlying theme of much sociological, critical, and consumer research critique which asserts that the end result is consumer emptiness and disenchantment, a form of soullessness (e.g., Cushman, 1995; Firat and Dholakia, 1998; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Ritzer, 1999). To ameliorate this state, consumers turn to extraordinary experiences like energizing natural retreats (Arnould, Price, and Otnes, 1999), deep play (Kozinets et al., 2004), or communally constructing mysteries and enchantment from commercial texts (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003; Kozinets 2001; Muñiz and Schau 2005) to re-enchant their worlds. Lately, these consumer culture theorists have noted that commercial offerings have been rejected, or their aura of commercialism bracketed through subculture and ritual, in the service of re-enchanting the world, adding back the transformative possibility of authenticity and mystery, portending a shift in consumer consciousness.

We have portrayed the Burning Man experience in terms of a pilgrimage-like search of the sacred. We imagine Burning Man to represent a flight from dullardism, through a re-engagement with the sacred, to a reconnection with paradoxical consciousness. Like a memetic virus disguised as part of the cultural immune system, this paradoxical consciousness works from within consumer culture. Autothemataludicization plays an important focusing and decentering (from the center of consumer consciousness) role in this transformation. As related in the findings sections above, the process of autothemataludicization takes the model of consumer choice and applies it to the notion of belief—joining a variety of sacred temples, partaking in the rituals of varieties of New Age and neo-pagan experience—but it limits consumer choice itself. The theme dictates. The community dictates. The proscriptions are a form of scripture and of stricture, and they must be followed. And, although one can choose to be or become almost anything at Burning Man, one cannot choose to become a typical consumer. The event's edicts and social norms demand participation and expression. Autothemataludicization demands not only compliance, but that one takes the events into one's own mattering, that one invest one's self into it, breathe personal and communal life into its meaning, and, perhaps most remarkably of all, *have fun doing it*.

Similarly, the costumes, playa names, new identities, and rituals of transformation treat self as a highly mutable construct, as it is in consumer culture. But these changes are cast at Burning Man as a type of unfolding of an actual or true underlying self, a paradox not lost on participants. When all

fashion and ritual are socially constructed as social constructions, revealing the hidden corporate puppeteers of the systems of consumer culture control, the quest for a truer self becomes self-involving rather than merely self-absorbing, a site of endless experimentation with true self rather than never-ending simulation of self.

Accelerated far past its normally supersonic speed, the pace of self-creation rapidly reaches a critical mass that reveals an underlying profundity, a calm center of enchantment within the consumer's normally rationalized hurricane of doing and being. The engagement of popular culture images, ideas, and icons in the context of the autothemataludicized experience involves inversion, reversion, critique, and parody. Like Macbeth's witches, participants at Burning Man combine in a seething cultural cauldron an ear of Spock with an altered logo and a clipped Bush phrase to create an alternate mirror-world, a funhouse version of mainstream popular culture that permits a diving beneath its bubbling superficial surface, a conscious deep drink from the intoxicating mythical brew it has become.

Choose from a million beliefs, but you cannot choose to be a consumer; change yourself a million times in a week while finding your true self; celebrate the million milieu of the mainstream as a mythic cultural realities, but worship them with inversion and parody. Step out and step aside, step up, then step inside. Make your own world: that is the imperative, the injunction of the autothemataludicization challenge. Play with your reality. Make your reality. With guiding themes and the cushioning of communal involvement, create something radical and expressive and new. Finally, the moral of the theme grows simpler and even more powerful: make reality. At this level, Burning Man's autothemataludicization is simultaneously a sacred playground and a serious lesson. At this point, in our final analysis, it looks a lot like life itself.

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Consumption and Spirituality

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