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Green Flames: Thoughts on Burning Man, the Green Man, and Dionysian Anarchism, with Four Proposals

Burning Man as a “temporary autonomous zone.”

Burning Man was born in free and visionary revelry, and matured on the Black Rock Desert into a great gathering of the tribes, from the cyber-freaks to the lushy rednecks to the altered-consciousness pentathletes to the nasty punks to the fuckin’ hippies. And everything in between. This alone, from a historical perspective, is a matter of wonder and for rejoicing.

There was another big event, not as big as Burning Man in numbers, but also historically important, in Golden Gate Park, forty years ago, that was called “Gathering of the Tribes.” Gary Snyder spoke at that event, as did Allen Ginsberg, Timothy Leary, Alan Watts, and others.

Such gatherings often take place in what Hakim Bey calls a “temporary autonomous zone,” in cracks and hidden openings overlooked by the guardians of the State. Bey was careful to refrain from defining TAZ rigorously, but it is clear that TAZ is applicable to the free spirit and the festive excesses of Burning Man:

The TAZ is like an uprising which does not engage directly with the State, a guerilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere/elsewhen, before the State can crush it.

–Hakim Bey

Other forces besides the State can quell a temporary autonomous zone: it can be co-opted by the market; it can exhaust its imagination and good will; or it can compromise itself into a more acceptable form. All of these forces continue to exert tremendous pressure on Burning Man.

Many burners feel that the “true TAZ” aspect of Burning Man peaked in the mid-1990s, and has declined ever since. Others, of course, say “stop complaining and party.” Whatever the truth, Burning Man is still a vibrant force with far-reaching social, political, and artistic potential.

Dionysian Anarchism

There has been a debate going on in philosophy for 2500 years about human nature. In fact, it is the only really crucial question of philosophy. At stake is the rationalization for a hierarchical, oppressive state. Before philosophers, religion imputed that human society should be like that of the gods, usually with a top god, and with the others doing their respective parts. These early state religions stressed that the kings on earth, if not divine themselves, were reflections of the order of heaven.

Plato, in the *Republic*, introduced the “Noble Lie,” that the wise should tell the commoners lies and myths to keep them in their place. A corollary is that if you don’t assist this process, you are not one of the wise, and you will be punished, if not with death or imprisonment, at least with marginalization.

Thomas Hobbes said that people were rapacious beasts, who would start killing and eating each other if it weren’t for an armed police force. Our mainstream culture seems desperate to maintain this viewpoint. During Hurricane Katrina, while the self-organizing cooperative efforts of thousands and tens of thousands of citizens to help each other went largely unreported, a scene of looting was replayed over and over. The clear message is “see, people can’t be trusted. We need the police.” In fact, police (or private security goons) broke up, and even fired on, the emerging cooperatives.

So who is on the other side? Many, actually. First off, we have the evidence of anthropology and human prehistory, which is overwhelmingly cooperative. We have the core teachings of deep mystical traditions.

Jean Jacques Rousseau offered that much of the sickness, the antisocial, and criminal behavior in society was not the result of our intrinsic natures, but of the society itself. Many are quick to dismiss Rousseau with a put-down—“ahh, the Noble Savage.” Rousseau never talked about any noble savage. The term was invented by a mid-nineteenth century pro-slavery American anthropologist, and has been an astoundingly effective little lie to cut off discussion on this topic.

Dionysian anarchism sides with the mystics and with anthropology. It sides with the way that people carry on their affairs most of the time: that is, cooperatively, and generally with a sense of good will. It sides with the spirit of DIY: do-it-yourself. Dionysian anarchists stress that means and ends have to be in accord, and if we can just stop things from getting worse, society will spontaneously realign itself towards freedom. That is our nature. As long as we have free horizons, as long as we are headed towards freedom and not away from it, we can relax a little with a long term view.

Forty years ago poet Gary Snyder, in answer to those who say that cooperative, non-coercive living is against human nature, wrote that we must patiently remind such

people that they must know their own true natures first, before they can say that. That those who have gone furthest into deep mind, into deep nature—mystics, meditators, and visionary explorers—have been reporting for several thousand years that we have nothing to fear.

Gary's solution included Buddhism and other inward-looking spiritual traditions, working within the context of tribal community, and opening to the radical teachings of the wild: wild places, wild animals, and wild plants—the true sources of our culture from our earliest beginnings. Timothy Leary stressed psychedelic visioning. Alan Watts talked about a philosophical sensualism. Ginsberg modeled the ecstatic spontaneity of the dancing bhakti.

But let's look briefly at where we are.

Despite the pervasive rhetoric of progress from our politicians and media, for most people in the United States, for most plant and animal species, things are not getting better.

Real wages have been declining for over a generation. Measures of the quality of life have been declining. How much someone has to work to get by has been increasing. Infant mortality has been increasing. The percentage of the population in poverty has been increasing. Both the number of people and the percentage of the population in prison has risen dramatically. The United States has the largest prison population in the world, both in numbers and by percentage. Plants, animals, and habitat are being consumed at an ever increasing rate by global corporations which, by their definition and legal charter, can never have enough.

There is of course an upside—for those near the top of the heap, things are better than ever. There is sort of a choice here, *aristos* vs. *demos*. One can get with the program, stop complaining, and with some smarts and a good birth you can join the winners.

The Aztecs had a pathway for the commoners to gain entrance to the elite by becoming warriors and capturing sacrificial victims in the “flower wars”—wars maintained not for conquest of territory but for just that reason of providing victims. (One had to capture five victims to gain the highest ranking, with its attendant privileges, such as the right to drink chocolate.)

Freeing the Imagination

The first anarchist act is to free the imagination, to cut through our years of conditioning about what is “unthinkable.” By imagination, we do not mean mere reverie, but our imaging of the world, our mental picturing of who we are and the

fundamental nature of existence, of reality. This is imagination in the sense that Blake used the word: the fire of consciousness, the fire of mind. Freeing the imagination means that you can act spontaneously in the world, not only artistically but in all of your interactions.

This is not as easy as it sounds. How to do that?

For poets, artists, musicians, dancers, meditators, and visionaries, it is a matter of continuing practice: plumbing the depths of mind, learning how to listen, and then sharing our insights through performance. This is the ancient wisdom of all gift economies.

Ecology and Deep Ecology

The Black Rock Desert was one of Gary Snyder's favorite places to come and camp long before Burning Man ever came here, and it is one of the major inspirations for his poem "Mountains and Rivers without End."

On the Black Rock, the environment is impossible to ignore: it fills our eyes and tents and drinking cups with every dust storm. It roasts us or freezes us. On the Playa, the spirit of place is never far away, even for newbies who have never heard of Lake Lahontan.

At first glance, Burning Man, with its penchant for fire, excess, inebriation, celebration, sexuality, radical self-expression, and generators, hardly seems a candidate for greenness. But there is a connection—a connection in mythopoesis, at a deeper level than our laudable efforts at recycling and solar electricity and "leave no trace."

This connection relates to the difference between management ecology and deep ecology. Management ecology we need, desperately, but deep ecology we need even more. The Green Man is deep ecology—his leafy speaking is animistic. Plant intelligence, with its sense of place, and wild intelligence, with its sense of freedom, speak through his mouth.

The Green Man is the bridge, and the Green Man is madness. Ecstatic madness. Madness that recognizes that the earth is alive. What do we mean by that? Not that the earth is composed of cells with a DNA library, but that the earth is not a separate thing, distinct from our own living minds. Buddhists state that, ultimately, the seeming objectivity of the "external" world, is an illusion, that our own true nature and the salt of the playa are not separate. This is the message that mystics and yogis and shamans have maintained for millennia. Once this is realized, the problems don't go away, but cutting away a hillside, building a house or factory,

putting explosives into the earth, are all recognized as having a transgressive nature. We then have a tendency to try to ask permission—what does the earth have to say about what we are doing, the hillside, the animal that we are going to eat? And then we try to make things right, with a sense of gratitude and perhaps a bit of shame, or even guilt, to bring things back into harmony with the spirits. We recognize that we are being gifted, that countless generations of effort, sacrifice, and imagination make possible our birth and our sustenance. So we want to give something back. Snyder states: “Performance is currency in the deep world’s gift economy.”

The Green Man, Dionysus, and Divine Madness

In his last published essay, “Dionysus in 1990,” philosopher Norman O. Brown extended ideas of Georges Bataille and Marcel Mauss and others to invert the Marxist focus on production to that of consumption—more to the point, “wasteful consumption.” The idea of wasteful consumption is anathema to conservationists (and to all sane and rational people). The idea is, frankly, madness. Brown bets all with Socrates that if the madness is inspired by a god, that is, divine madness, it is the source of our greatest blessings. We might say that divine madness is the “wild” of consciousness.

The name of the god, for Brown, is Dionysus. Iconographically, it is easy to recognize Dionysus in the Green Man, the one whose very speech is wild nature.

Now Brown is not expecting people to actually bow down and worship Dionysus. For Brown, Dionysus is a shorthand for an irrepressible wild and joyful energy. The opposite of this energy is the Grand Inquisitor, with his benevolent lies. Success or failure seems to pivot on the issue of passive entertainment—Blake’s “spectral enjoyment.” The Inquisitor is betting that circuses will satisfy the masses. The Dionysian bets he is wrong. That is the idea behind “no spectators.”

The traditional manifestation of Dionysian energy has always been through festivals. Barbara Ehrenreich points out that in medieval Spain a third of the days of the year were holidays for festivals. There was a backwards day, a Feast of Fools when a donkey was led into the cathedral and the bishop’s miter placed on his head. Blasphemies were uttered, echoes of the Dionysian festivals of Greece. The Greeks were wise enough to recognize that although Dionysus meant trouble, the suppression of Dionysus was even worse—that trying to suppress the Dionysian spirit entirely, to end all licentiousness, all blasphemy, all risk, led to false madness, profane madness, and the sacrifice of children. Moloch. That is the true idolatry, when the blasphemies of art are petrified into literalism. The Romans, by the way, an Apollonian people, suppressed the Bacchanalia with much bloodshed—perhaps the first “War on Drugs.”

The church made occasional attempts to suppress the festivals—these moves mostly coming from Rome. The local priests generally resisted this suppression, saying that without the festivals they would have no congregation. Festivals, it should not surprise us, were sometimes the springboards for political rebellion.

A harder force against the festival was the Enlightenment, along with mercantilism, and the Industrial Revolution. “Reason,” remember. Lenin even went so far as to praise the capitalists for disciplining the working classes.

We must remember that anytime large groups of people can get together cooperatively, it puts the lie to the Hobbesian thesis that people are innately irresponsible and dangerous. That is the real reason that the government insists on police presence—even though they are clearly unnecessary. Free festivals are a threat to the whole rationalization for the existence of the armed, coercive forces of “internal security.” Such a free festival would be a light to the world for centuries: proof that cooperative living, free from armed coercion, is not “unthinkable,” but the way things should be. Free the imagination!

In Brown’s system (which I go into more deeply in my *Inspired Madness, The Gifts of Burning Man*, published last year by North Atlantic Books), the rites of Dionysus, with their attendant licentiousness, danger, fire, blasphemy, and wasteful consumption (combustion for its own sake), must be seen as prophylactic: they protect us from calamity—the Greeks certainly understood them thus. I like to joke that in a more enlightened age Burning Man would be given a grant from the Defense Department, in gold. The alternative worship, as Brown clearly stated, is war.

There is, alas, no proof for this thesis. The mythopoetic foundation is very strong, but in the end it comes down to a wager. Everyone must choose a square.

A Few Proposals for Burning Man, LLC.

1. Stop the undercover stings by police. If you can’t stop them, at least speak out against them, LOUDLY and PUBLICLY. This violation of trust and goodwill is the opposite of everything that Burning Man stands for. Smoking cannabis may be illegal, but lying and violating another’s trust—“hey man, you got any weed you can share?”—is immoral and despicable. It is a poison that spreads distrust and division. It is the worst model of civic behavior. In the face of such behavior for Burning Man to state “we have an excellent relationship with law enforcement” amounts to collusion.

Personally, I believe that *all* police presence should be reduced. And reduced again. Let’s free our imaginations and not dismiss this possibility as “impossible.” Why do

we let police strut through the dance clubs? It's time to push back. Tell the BLM we'll take the festival somewhere else—see what they say then. (The High Sierra Music Festival had some remarkable success with this tactic.)

2. Stop the car searches. This one is easy. It's wrong that the very first encounter upon arriving at Burning Man is someone demanding to search one's car, someone who tells me "I can't take your word for it." That's "spectator" thinking.

How big a problem would it be if a few people who can't afford a ticket sneak in? Maybe they should be there. Maybe they have something important to contribute. How many would there be? Three percent? Five percent? I'll pay five percent more to cover them, until they can get their acts together. Isn't our way to educate by example? Let's see if we can make it work through the peer pressure of responsibility and good citizenship. Spirit of giving, anyone?

3. Consider dropping charges against Paul Addis (the man who set fire to the Man on Monday night). Perhaps such a benevolent act of clemency could bring him back into the fold. Make him do community service at Camp Arctica to cool him off and help him make some new friends. At least talk to the guy—he clearly wants to say something.

4. Wouldn't "Dreaming America" or just "Dreaming" be a better theme for 2008 than "The American Dream." Consider the contradictions in the theme announcement.

Beneath a background of red, white, and blue (originally the flag of the East India Company, the English-speaking world's first transnational corporation), Burning Man has announced that next year's theme will be "about patriotism." While one might pledge some allegiance to "the soil of Turtle Island," the Burning Man theme is presented entirely in a nationalistic context. This kind of patriotism is one of the greatest diseases of civilization, responsible not only for the deaths of many millions of persons, but for wide scale scorching of the earth.

While waving a flag, Burning Man says this theme is not about flag worship (and, as well, that "flag burning [will] play no part in this year's theme," a rather ironic proscription). Presenting us with ideology, they say "leave ideology at home." They seem to think that politics has to do with "the blue states and the red," politics only in its most myopic and degenerate condition.

Astonishingly, beneath this banner of patriotism and the American Dream, we are given a (misquoted) fragment of Robinson Jeffers' poem "Shine, Perishing Republic." Jeffers, a wise man, is not turning in his grave, but, rather, "sadly smiling." The point is the next line of the poem (not quoted):

“But for my children, I would have them keep their distance from the thickening center; corruption
Never has been compulsory.”

Time for a regional?