

1-1-2015

Tell Sir Thomas More We've Got Another Failed Attempt: Utopia and the Burning Man Project

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Tell Sir Thomas More We've Got Another Failed Attempt:

Utopia and the Burning Man Project

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Liberal Arts
with a concentration in the Humanities
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Date of Approval:
March 19, 2015

Keywords: Counterculture, Hope, Ernst Bloch, Decommodification, Radical Self-
Reliance

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge my advisor, Dr. Andrew Berish, for assisting me through the process of mediating this difficult terrain. Thank you to my committee members, Dr. Sara Dykins Callahan, and Dr. Benjamin Goldberg for their continued faith in the viability of this project. The members of my Humanities cohort, Dan, Danielle, Eric, Max, Rene, and Vincent have not only provided thoughtful feedback, but also some much needed comic relief, and to Sean Swenson for entertaining my varied neuroses. Lastly, I owe a huge debt of gratitude to my parents, Richard and Cary Kovacik, and my brother and sister, Matt and Mary, without whom I would not be here.

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ABSTRACT

Burning Man, a weeklong experience in Black Rock Desert, Nevada, has become an oasis for those looking to escape the corporatized grasp of modern culture. Burning Man serves as a reprieve from judgment and allows participants to embrace and perform their inner identities. The intensions of Burning Man have been widely debated, from scholars concentrating on the rejection of consumerism to analyzing sacred space and religious connectivity for festivalgoers. What deserves further analysis, however, is the utopian nature of the event. I will explore previous utopian attempts—literary, political, etc.—and define what characteristics from those societies were present during the inception and following early years of Burning Man. Using the work of Ernst Bloch I will establish Burning Man as a *not-yet-conscious* utopia, a product of Larry Harvey's vision, and define the increasingly imminent threats to the event's utopianism. The segregation of ideas at Burning Man, between veteran Burners and newcomers, is attributed to the perpetual struggle to balance and create meaning within a society designed to provide autonomy for its citizens. I will look at how changes in popularity and population have transformed the once utopian retreat into an amalgam of conflicting ethos. I argue that this once thriving counterculture is facing an extreme shift away from the original structure of the event in terms of meaning, experience, and understanding.

INTRODUCTION

Countries across the world, and specifically the United States have experienced a boom in music and arts festivals over the last decade. Some of the most popular festivals including Lollapalooza (1991) and Glastonbury (1970s), that have been around longer, have become the prestigious framework on which these new budding festivals emulate. Possibly the most well known, Woodstock, defined what it meant to be a part of the American counterculture in 1969. More recently, though, festivals have become integral to popular culture with the birth of newer festivals such as Governors Ball (2011), Firefly Music Festival (2012), and TommorowWorld (2013). Schedules are planned around festival season, and lineup announcements are eagerly awaited. Festivals, whether art, music, or both, are a transformative place and fulfill a larger desire than simply hearing popular bands live. There is a yearning to seek out community, inclusion, spontaneity, and freedom, and festivals provide it. During a time dominated by a surge of dystopian blockbuster films and best-seller books like *The Hunger Games* and the *Divergent* series, we are either preoccupied with constructing the ideal space, or tearing it down. It is this obsession, or desire, for change that is so intriguing. Burning Man embodies both of these preoccupations, but in different ways. To some, the ideal space is just beginning to be constructed in Black Rock Desert, while to others it is already in the process of being torn down. It is my intention to address the utopian nature of Burning Man, using previous examples of utopian text, and explore dystopian threats that could make it crumble down.

An impromptu *burn* on Baker Beach in 1986 was the catalyst for a countercultural phenomenon that now attracts over 60,000 participants to Nevada's Black Rock Desert during

Labor Day weekend. Burning Man began as a form of “radical self-expression” for Larry Harvey and friend Jerry James and has evolved into a temporary city that provides visitors with autonomy, experience, and meaning. This anarchist retreat became a place away from societal rules, expectations, and judgments—a venue where participants could experiment with drugs, guns, and most famously, fire. Black Rock Desert thus served as a blank canvas for participants to paint their inner selves, a contemporary utopia. Burning Man does not imitate any other social structure that we have seen in the past; it is completely unique. However, many of its characteristics have utopian tendencies, from the enforcement of inclusivity, to the isolated desert where it takes place. Originally, awareness of Burning Man spread through strong ties, friend to friend through word of mouth, attendees in the close community were united through one or two degrees of separation. However, increasing attendance rates and popularity within mainstream culture has led the event to depart from its original structure, despite opposition from veteran Burners.

This departure has threatened the utopian nature of the event and, ultimately, my research will pose the question of the possibility of such a utopian society in 21st century America, and what it means in the larger contextual issue of community. Burning Man, undoubtedly, began as a high-minded countercultural phenomenon, adopting utopian characteristics with the aim of creating a unique space with shared ethos. Its primary tool in this creation was hope. Through my research I have found that increased population, media coverage, and outside capitalist pressures have continued to erode hope, thus transforming the Burning Man utopia into a voyeuristic, mass-consumed, popular culture charade. As the Shins say in their song *So Says I*, “tell Sir Thomas More we've got another failed attempt,” because Burning Man has missed the mark.

Burning Man is a weeklong experience, beginning on the last Monday of August and ending with the first Monday in September. Originally located on Baker Beach in San Francisco, Burning Man eventually relocated to its current home in Black Rock Desert in 1991. The event gets its name from the large wooden figure, or effigy, that is burned the Saturday before the festival's end, a figure that the founder claims bears no meaning. The city, titled Black Rock City for this week alone, is arranged in a series of concentric half-circles that ultimately form a crescent shape. Each circle is named according to that year's theme and used as demarcations for the street grid. The innermost circle was, is, and always remains titled Esplanade. On these avenues hundreds of theme camps, or campsites where participants adopt a singular identity, are erected. Among the list of creative camp names are Camp Illuminaughty, Tectonic and Friends, Galactic Jungle, and one of the most well-known camps, Opulent Temple.¹ Burning Man is not only an experiment with communal living, but an art festival as well. Black Rock Arts Foundation is responsible for providing grants to artists looking to fund their installations out on the desert and, some would argue, that art is the most integral part of Burning Man. In addition to Black Rock Arts Foundation, Burners Without Borders was formed in 2005 to assist in relief from Hurricane Katrina. The inception of these two offshoot organizations inspired the evolution of the Burning Man Organization and, in March 2014, they completed a transition to non-profit.

Brian Doherty's *This is Burning Man: The Rise of a New American Underground* and Steven T. Jones's *The Tribes of Burning Man: How an Experimental City in the Desert is Shaping the New American Counterculture* offer a comprehensive history of the Burning Man event. Beginning with Burning Man's inception in 1986 and concluding in 2004, the book *This is*

¹ "Theme Camp Archive," Burning Man Organization, accessed March 9, 2015, <http://burningman.org/culture/history/brc-history/theme-camp-archive/?ix=C>.

Burning Man documents Larry Harvey's life leading up to the pivotal first "burn," and the progression of the event thereafter. He uses ethnographic research and his recollections to map the momentum gained through collaborations with The Suicide Club and the Cacophony Society. Doherty's book chronicles the difficulties of creating a temporary city in the harsh climate of the desert, dealing with permit issues and the county of Washoe, and facing increasing growth and loss of intimacy accompanied with said growth. Placed intermittently throughout the work are whimsical stories of art cars, fire cannons, makeshift bars, and the electric shows of Dr. Megavolt. This book serves as an anthology for other writers and academics to base their research, specifically writer and editor-in-chief for the San Francisco Bay Guardian, Steven T. Jones.

Beginning with the reelection of President George Bush, the book *The Tribes of Burning Man* was based off of Steven Jones's experience with different themed camps between the years of 2004 and 2010. As a reporter and Burner, Jones covered the Borg2 rebellion, the inception of Burners Without Borders, the failed Green Man event, and the 2010 Metropolis theme. Jones ends his book with the beginning of the Burning Man transition to a non-profit, 501(c)(3), status. I find his book particularly useful in conjunction with our September interview. The interview, critical of the corporatized route Burning Man and the Borg has taken, seemed comparatively pessimistic to his book, which looked optimistically towards the future of Burning Man. This change in attitude, I have found, is mirrored quite frequently with other Burners. These books offer an extensive, if sometimes biased, history of Burning Man. All emphasize the event's utopian impulses, as well as the challenges to these ideals.

There is a series of terms that Burning Man attendees have adopted into their vernacular and, remaining true to the integrity of the event, will be used throughout this thesis. The moniker

Burner is embraced by all Burning Man participants and describes anyone that identifies with the Burning Man ethos. The term *ethos* refers to the Burner way of life, stressing the importance of inclusivity, expression, and creativity. Burners leave what they call the *default world*, their world back at home where they have responsibilities, jobs, families, etc., and head out to the *Playa*, or Black Rock Desert. While out on the Playa, Burners adopt *Ten Principles* created by the Borg, or Burning Man Organization; Radical Self-Reliance, Radical Self-Expression, Radical Inclusion, Gifting, Decommodification, Communal Effort, Civic Responsibility, Leaving No Trace, Participation, and Immediacy.² Radical Self-Reliance means each Burner must use their resources to survive for the week in harsh desert conditions. Radical Self-Expression allows Burners to explore who they are and what Burning Man means to them as individuals. Radical Inclusion ensures that Burning Man maintains a welcoming community, only requiring that everyone Participate, by working, playing, or simply opening their heart to the community, ultimately resulting in their Immediate experience at the event. Burning Man encourages Gifting, an act of gift giving that does not require reciprocation, and Decommodification, a principle intended to combat exploitation from commercial sponsorships, transactions, and advertising. Communal Effort enforces cooperation and collaboration while Civic Responsibility assures that participants assume responsibility for their actions in accordance with the default world's laws. Finally, Leaving No Trace means that Burners must leave the Playa in the same condition it was in when they arrived. Many of these principles will be referenced again in relation to utopianism throughout this thesis.

I will begin my first chapter constructing and deconstructing the notion of utopia. This includes determining the different types of utopia—political, literary, etc.—what makes societies

² “The 10 Principles of Burning Man,” Burning Man Organization, accessed March 9, 2015, <http://burningman.org/culture/philosophical-center/10-principles/>.

utopian, and historical attempts or representations seen in the past. By exploring previous examples of utopia, I can provide a broad historical context in which to place Burning Man. The examples that I study more in depth include the Hebrew Prophets, Amos and Deutero-Isaiah, Plato and his *Republic*, and Thomas More with *Utopia*. To conclude, I will offer insights of the theorist most relevant to Burning Man, Ernst Bloch and his writings in *The Principle of Hope*.

My second chapter discusses the inception of Burning Man, beginning with the early life of Larry Harvey and the collection of events that led to it becoming one of the largest countercultural experiences in the world. In addition to outlining the utopian aspects of the festival, the intentions of this chapter is to establish Bloch's theory of hope within the Burning Man framework and illustrate how Larry Harvey's life before the initial *burn* corresponds with his theories of the not-yet-conscious. The third chapter will detail the changes that have happened at Burning Man since its move to Black Rock Desert and through its rise into popular culture. I will incorporate viewpoints from veteran Burners through blog sites such as Burners.me and online newspaper articles. Primarily, being that my work will build upon Bloch-ian notions of hope, I will determine whether or not the principle of hope is still present at Burning Man, and what outside forces are a threat to utopia and Burning Man, in general.

CHAPTER 1: THE HISTORY OF UTOPIA

To place Burning Man within the utopian narrative, it is important to understand previous attempts or representations of utopia. It is also necessary to understand that all utopias are not interchangeable; they vary depending on the political, economic, and religious climate in which they were authored. This chapter serves as a broad historical sweep of utopia and identifies the characteristics that are common through each. Furthermore, by using the Ten Principles as a guide, it establishes the components that they share with Burning Man, keeping in mind the shift in cultural preoccupations between then and now.

The Burning Man festival revolves around a series of ten principles in order to ensure the preservation and integrity of the event. These principles were created by founder Larry Harvey and adopted into the Burning Man mantra, the Burning Man Organization website lists them as: Radical Inclusion, Gifting, Decommodification, Radical Self-Reliance, Radical Self-Expression, Communal Effort, Civic Responsibility, Leaving No Trace, Participation, and Immediacy. While unique in their phrasing and application, the Ten Principles are not, of course, the first set of rules or standards applied to a community to maintain order. Further, while Burning Man is not the first or only festival that features art, music, and a communal atmosphere, it is unparalleled in its attempts for a high-minded and long-lasting societal impact over a short-term reward. Contemporary versions of utopia are controversial at best, between Hitler's Nazi Germany, Stalin's Soviet Union, and Mao's China, it would seem that not only are utopias unrealistic, but also come at great cost to the nations involved. Despite these previous divergences, the need for an alternative society is ever present. Utopia is intended to be revolutionary in creating a better

world from the one we inhabit now. “Burning Man provides a sense of the tension behind the often exploitative social endeavors of late capitalism and the constant utopian yearning for a more communal world.”³ Burning Man, while idealistic to some, has proven itself worthy of inclusion into the annals of utopian history alongside the Hebrew Prophets, Plato, and Sir Thomas More. To understand a contemporary utopian project such as Burning Man, it is helpful to see it in a much broader historical context. Through exploring these past utopian constructs, we can outline what components are plausible, discover what has been appropriated into later utopian works, and ultimately answer the broader questions like: what is utopianism? how has it manifested itself? and most importantly, what can we learn from the past to help us make sense of utopian projects in the 21st century?

In 1515-1516, Sir Thomas More wrote *Utopia*, a book designed to address and combat the problem of social chaos. *Utopia* is about an idealistic and, some would claim *unrealistic*, society, void of all the shortcomings plaguing modern society. Brought forth by the ushering in of the Renaissance humanism, *Utopia* was inspired by freedom of knowledge, discovery, and the revolution against the monarchy, nobility, and the reign of the Catholic Church. This book title would later become synonymous with all societies of this nature; however, More’s *Utopia* is not the first instance, nor the last, of attempts at an ideal or perfect state. While it is true that Thomas More was the first to coin the term *utopia*, he is not credited with inventing *utopianism*. Through rejecting a narrow view of utopia as only that which fits into Thomas More’s model, widening the definition of what can be considered a utopian state, we can further broaden the spectrum of who we consider to be utopians and thus allowing Burning Man within the larger discourse of

³ Lee Gilmore and Mark Van Proyen, eds., *Afterburn: Reflections on Burning Man* (New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 2005), 102.

utopian projects. Although many of the aspects of these utopian societies are unrealistic in practice, key elements from each are incorporated into the design of the Burning Man event. Ultimately, the broader historical compilation of utopian attempts serves as a theoretical guide for Burning Man to follow.

In her book, *The History of Utopian Thought*, Joyce Oramel Hertzler states utopia is “a conception of social improvement either by ideas and ideals themselves or embodied in definite agencies of social change.”⁴ The Hebrew prophets can be considered champions for a utopian state because of their enthusiasm for a complete societal overhaul and their records of the attempts demanding it. She identifies six prophets as forerunners of utopian thought; Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Deutero-Isaiah. Consider Amos, he viewed the post-war northern kingdom Israel as a decadent bacchanalia of celebration and guilty of a misguided worship of material goods. Thus he denounced the kingdom and predicted its destruction.⁵ Amos argued that they had oppressed the poor and failed to uphold justice, and this corruption was due to citizens placing faith in false idols. Amos encouraged social justice, the treatment of neighbors as equals and ultimately for righteousness to reign supreme. His utopian view was a society ruled by ethics, come about by individual and collective shifts in social relationships. Amos created an atmosphere of hope with promises of a new Israel, one that would be purged of all wrongdoing, a paradise once again.⁶ Amos, above all, called for Civic Responsibility when recognizing that the kingdom of Jeroboam II of Israel failed in upholding justice. While civic responsibility in Israel at this time cannot compare to a more modern version of civic responsibility today, a very similar sentiment pervades the ethos of Burning Man. Because of the

⁴ Joyce Oramel Hertzler, *The History of Utopian Thought* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1965), 2-3.

⁵ Hertzler, *The History of Utopian Thought*, 10.

⁶ Amos 9:11-15.

self-sufficient nature of the event, the members of the community are responsible for public welfare, including conducting themselves within the parameters of local, state, and federal laws. Civic Responsibility, combined with Communal Effort—creative cooperation and collaboration that protects public, artistic, and social interactions—allows for participants to embrace Radical Self-Expression while simultaneously upholding the ethics that sustain Burning Man.

Deutero-Isaiah did not discuss men's sins with the same disdain as Amos, but instead spoke of an eternal new Jerusalem, one that welcomed all nations, not just the chosen people. In addition to the purification associated with the purging of sins, Deutero-Isaiah's utopia was one that discouraged exclusivity and encouraged inclusivity, ultimately creating a righteous world for all of mankind.⁷ The Radical Inclusion principle of Burning Man encourages anyone to come and experience the event with no expectations of him or her except that they participate. Similarly to Deutero-Isaiah, this principle dissolves any boundaries that are in place in the default world, including race, gender, socioeconomic status, political affiliation, etc. Radical Inclusion and Deutero-Isaiah's utopia are intended to welcome everyone as equals and, therefore, establish a greater civilization for humankind.

Moving forward over 300 years brings us to another pivotal representation of utopian thought: Plato's *Republic*. Plato, 427-347 B.C.E., was the pupil of Socrates and one of the most influential Western philosophers in history. Written circa 393 B.C.E., Plato addressed the oppressive oligarchical state of Greece after the end of the Peloponnesian War. He believed that individual freedom led to a corrupt government and atrocities against its people. Thus, he

⁷ Hertzler, *The History of Utopian Thought*, 46.

proposed a renewed city-state that relied on a collective moral code combined with the socialized state.⁸

The city-state model provided the framework for Plato to develop his theory; small enough that it is capable of forming a close-knit, isolated, homogenized community united under a moral and ethical code. A commonwealth any larger than a city-state risked alienating its citizens and becomes more and more difficult for individuals to identify as parts of the whole.⁹ Plato attempted to recreate earlier Hellenistic tradition of limiting individual freedom and sacrificing personal interest for the betterment of the state. He encouraged viewing the state not as a political or governing body, its purpose is only that as groundwork for an organization, but rather as a community bound by a collective purpose. Plato also discouraged monetary exchange, claiming that money is the root of all-evil. When there is no buying and selling of property there is no ownership and, therefore, one man is not positioned in power over another.

Black Rock City, created briefly each year for the Burning Man event, embraces the city-state model that Plato championed. Although it is not a sovereign state, and still falls under the jurisdiction of local and federal government, it is far enough removed from civilization that it is independent and self-sustaining. The grid on the Playa is erected in a half-moon shape, easily navigated and carefully labeled with street names. While it bears characteristics of a city, it is still small enough to combat alienation, small enough that individuals still feel like an integral part of the success of the Burning Man event. One of Burning Man's most significant principles, Decommmodification, revives Plato's attitude towards money. Participants instead encourage Gifting, whether it is in exchange for another gift or without any expectation of reciprocation.

⁸ Hertzler, *The History of Utopian Thought*, 100.

⁹ Ernest Barker, *Political Thought of Plato and Aristotle* (Massachusetts: Courier Corporation, 2009), 8.

This rule serves as a boundary, to protect the Burning Man culture from exploitation. While individual self-expression is foundational to Burning Man, and seems quite contradictory to Plato's desire for a homogenized state, the Burner community is still united under the ten principles that delineate their cultural ethos.

Sir Thomas More wrote *Utopia* in 1515-1516 during a time ripe with injustice and prepared for complete social upheaval.¹⁰ His version of utopia, as we have seen in the past examples, is also a reflection of the environment and spirit of the time in which he lived. During the time following the War of the Roses and before the Protestant Reformation, More bore witness to the corruption of the Church. The clergy became untrustworthy, allowed the nobles and gentry to abuse power, and sentenced the poor to lives of suffering. "For one man to abound in wealth and pleasure, when all about him are mourning and groaning, is to be a gaoler and not a king."¹¹ More used satire and a thinly laid veil of fiction in order to address these wrongdoings and chastise the nobles for their extravagance.¹²

More's utopian ideals are found predominantly in his second book. He envisioned a crescent-shaped island in a distant world, founded by King Utopos—a shape that is customary in Black Rock City. More abolished any form of class distinction and centered his society around equality, ultimately removing ownership of material possessions, similar to the abolition of monetary exchange at Burning Man. Because everyone in *Utopia* is equal, they all have access to arts, sciences, and education, eliminating desire or envy. When equality reigns supreme, money

¹⁰ Hertzler, *The History of Utopian Thought*, 128.

¹¹ Thomas More, *Utopia* (New York: Barnes and Nobles Books, 2005), 80.

¹² Hertzler, *The History of Utopian Thought*, 131.

no longer serves a purpose, and no man or woman is in need over another.¹³ This society, ultimately, anticipated the later social structures of communism and socialism.

One of the most prominent themes within More's *Utopia* is religion, and specifically religious toleration. This means that although everyone may believe in the same divine entity, the way in which they worship or honor that God varies. Because they believed that their religion was founded through reason, they also thought that the correct form of worship and correct interpretation of their religion would be ultimately determined through reason as well. This belief in reason over revelation eliminated any arguments or disagreements over which religious sect was correct.¹⁴ "The bases of morality are duly safeguarded, but otherwise every man in Utopia is permitted to cherish, without let or hindrance, the religious belief that is adapted to his idiosyncrasy. Reason, the sole test of beneficent rule, justifies no other provision. Where no religious views were aggressively expressed or repressed, no strife of sects with their anti-social results were to be feared."¹⁵ Participants on the Playa are also welcomed to express themselves and their religiosity, or lack thereof, freely. Annually, in addition to the construction of the Man, a temple is erected to allow participants to reflect, meditate, pray, or simply take solace in its shade. The purpose of the temple is not necessarily religious or spiritual but, similar to the ideas of Thomas More, it allows each attendee to experience their dedication in their unique and individual way. The temple is set ablaze the evening after the *burn*, traditionally a Sunday and, despite the various meanings the temple has individually, participants are united once more under the familiar flames Burning Man is known for. In More's *Utopia* religion is used as a unifier, while everyone is free to celebrate religion in their distinct and private ways, they see no

¹³ More, *Utopia*, 162-165.

¹⁴ More, *Utopia*, 149-151.

¹⁵ Hertzler, *The History of Utopian Thought*, 144.

need for disagreement or hatred from those differences.¹⁶ The goal of More's work was to not only create an efficient society, but also a happy one.¹⁷

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were inundated with works that depict an ideal utopia. After the Renaissance, many utopian thinkers had the freedom to critique social issues and break out from oppressive structures of control. Shifts in political and intellectual discourse after the Renaissance encouraged and allowed these thinkers to envision alternate ways of existing and ideas about the future. There are some striking agreements among these thinkers, indeed, among utopian theorists up through contemporary discourses. Utopian scholars generally agreed on a unified state, whether it was from ethics, a moral code, or religion. They believed in a centralized power structure, and knowledge handed down from that structure. And most importantly, they believed in equality. However, while depictions of utopia through the nineteenth century were revolutionary, they were also troublesome in their rigid and teleological nature. These previous utopias were treated as already established with no consideration to how. Rather than define the process of achieving utopia, nineteenth-century depictions only detail the unwavering conclusion. The 20th century brought a more modern and flexible approach to utopian theorization, and we see with the work of Ernst Bloch the theory of utopia moves from an idealistic and impossible vision to a plausible and possible step towards a better world.

Ernst Bloch was born in Germany in 1885. Living in Ludwigshafen, across the river from Mannheim, Bloch experienced firsthand the stark contrast between socioeconomic classes during the *Gründerzeit*, "the founder epoch".¹⁸ This period saw the birth of the German proletariat, and marked not only a time of rapid growth in German economy and industry, but also one of

¹⁶ Hertzler, *The History of Utopian Thought*, 144-146.

¹⁷ Hertzler, *The History of Utopian Thought*, 281.

¹⁸ Richard H. Roberts, *Hope and Its Hieroglyph: A Critical Decipherment of Ernst Bloch's Principle of Hope* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1990), 3.

increasing social problems. The rise of the railway structure, and advances in science, technology, and commerce allowed for Germany to compete with other developed countries in addition to expediting economic growth. However, in addition to alienating the unpropertied workforce with agricultural machines and increased agricultural efficiency, the workers' dwellings were unsanitary and unhealthy, therefore leading to an increase in tuberculosis across the urban areas. His close proximity to class struggle inspired Bloch to incorporate the works of Marx, Engels, and other socialist revolutionary theorists, and the breadth of the influence of these theorists will become apparent in later analyses of Bloch's work.¹⁹

The conjectures of utopian scholars leading up to the work of Bloch are rather abstract. Utopian states up to this point existed in an imagined world on an island or in an imaginary city-state, and the utopian structure is then placed upon it as an inevitable happening, as if there was no transitory phase from corrupt society to complete utopia. Ernst Bloch, however, argued for a *concrete* utopia, a term borrowed from Hegel. The term comes from the Latin word *concreescere*, which means in the context of Hegel's thought a "growing together of various strands of materiality and thought into the specific point of the present moment."²⁰ Thomas More presented his utopia as an already established idea with no consideration towards its development or foundation, Bloch noted that his concrete utopia was something that materializes out of the process of trying to achieve utopia. Bloch stated that humankind is living in constant pre-history, the moment before the creation of the best possible world. He did not look towards the future as a definitive ending point, but rather as the end of a tireless laboring process. This allowed a constant reorientation when the vision of change is too altered; Bloch's utopia exists in our

¹⁹ Roberts, *Hope and Its Hieroglyph*, 4.

²⁰ Peter Thompson, "What is Concrete About Ernst Bloch's 'Concrete Utopia'?" in *Utopia: Social Theory and the Future*, ed. Michael Hviid Jacobsen and Keith Tester et al. (England: Ashgate Publishing, 2012), 34.

dreams and desires of an ideal world, but does not have a tangible and definitive ending point labeled “utopia”.

Confusion and anxiety come from life’s basic questions, who are we? why are we here? etc. From this anxiety fear takes over, as is seen in the history of Bloch’s time. Bloch, however, believed that by throwing ourselves into hope we can reject passivity—or fear—and accept the activity of hope, and thereby freeing ourselves. Bloch noted that the emotions of fear and anxiety are not a natural state, and challenging those emotions through hope is an open protest against the enterprise of fear. We can begin to challenge these emotions through locating hope in daydreams. *Denken heisst überschreiten*, “thinking means venturing beyond.”²¹ This phrase does not imply a leap into the abstract space of beyond, but a movement into a reality that is already in motion. Bloch juxtaposed the words *vorhandenen*, that which exists, and *bewegt*, that which is in motion, to emphasize that hope is engaging with a reality-to-be soon to be actualized. Though not explicitly stated or recognized in the accounts of Amos and Deutero-Isaiah, or in the works of Plato and More, hope is the core and foundation of their utopian thought. They promulgated change and envisioned a new world built from reformed communities, a vision impossible without a basis in hope.

Bloch rejected the psychoanalytic view of the unconscious in preference of what he deemed the *not-yet-conscious*, which implies that our impulses are latent within us, have the power to be realized, but have not yet been articulated. His restructuring of Freud and Jung’s work was due to his criticism that the unconscious is only based on a series of accumulated knowledge and experience from the past. Thus, rather than considering utopia as a final destination, it must be treated as a constant reorientation of the present as an ideal to work

²¹Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1986), 4.

towards: “Today is already pregnant with tomorrow, just as yesterday contained the seeds of today, and thus what is always carries with it that which is not-yet.”²² Michael Hviid Jacobsen and Keith Tester argue in their *Utopia: Social Theory and the Future* that there are particular steps that need to be taken in order to work towards utopia, with the argument in mind that utopia is not an ending point. The first step on the journey to utopia is the confidence in the success of working towards this achievement. Additionally, there has to be hope for the journey in order that its travelers might experience success. And lastly, those that undertake the journey must realize that the world contains latent tendencies, or the desire to return to common practices rather than continuing the arduous quest towards utopia. These latent tendencies are a threat to utopia and, when identified, have lead to dystopia.²³

Bloch believed that there was a causal connection between social and historical context and envisioning the future. Through the rising and falling of society, our perceptions of the future rise and fall in parallel. It is during the dark times of a society that fear begins to manifest and latent tendencies are identified.²⁴ The condition of “no-hope”, he stated, survives in one class, the bourgeoisie. Bloch stated that the bourgeoisie project their failure into a reified ontology, making their hopelessness fundamental to their existence. Bloch concluded, however, that hopelessness is not a natural state and, therefore, must be eliminated. “Hopelessness is itself, in a temporal and factual sense, the most insupportable thing, downright intolerable to human needs.”²⁵ Hope is the condition in which Burning Man needs to remain to achieve success, and no-hope is its constant threat.

²² Michael Hviid Jacobsen and Keith Tester, *Utopia: Social Theory and the Future*, (United Kingdom: Ashgate Publishing, 2012), 2.

²³ Hviid and Tester, *Utopia*, 1.

²⁴ Roberts, *Hope and Its Hieroglyph*, 27-40.

²⁵ Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, 4-5.

Utopia serves no purpose but to provide a betterment of society for the present and the future. While some may be quick to dismiss utopia in light of its idealistic nature, it is that very nature that makes it so successful in its goals. The ideal state is not something that is tangible, a goal with a finite finish line. It is something to be continuously worked toward, reoriented according to individual and societal needs. It is only once the ideal is reached that it becomes obvious a new ideal has settled in its place. Change must be enacted in a slow but deliberate manner.

It is a Blochian concrete utopia that Burning Man evolves from, barely an idea in the mind of its founder, his not-yet-conscious creation. In the following chapter, I will discuss the relevance of Ernst Bloch's work to the Burning Man event and demonstrate how characteristics from these previous utopias have evolved and been incorporated into Bloch's work.

CHAPTER 2: UTOPIA MEANS ELSEWHERE

Commonly referred to as a “spontaneous act of radical self-expression,” the birth of Burning Man was rather understated in comparison to the event’s current eccentricities. Additionally, while its inception seems quite arbitrary, it is in actuality very foundational when placed within the context of Ernst Bloch’s *not-yet-conscious*. Having identified the work primary to this thesis, Ernst Bloch’s *The Principle of Hope*, the second chapter seeks to establish how Burning Man is a product of the *not-yet-conscious* and that Larry Harvey’s early life, leading up to the initial *burn*, is fundamental in his desire to create a better and unique future.

Larry Harvey was the son of Dust Bowl refugees that relocated from Nebraska to Oregon when the black blizzards blew in from Oklahoma. Adopted and raised in the Midwest, Larry Harvey considered himself an outsider in the west coast town of Portland, and in his family, in general.²⁶ He recalls his mother struggling to communicate or show emotion with him as a child, specifically referencing a Thanksgiving dinner that had yet to conclude when she stated “how nice this was,” unable to live in the present.²⁷ Larry satiated his craving for unconditional love in art, he viewed it as serving no basic purpose but to be the receptacle of love and adoration, and that love exists in art simply because it was created. Harvey eventually abandoned his lifestyle in Portland and relocated to San Francisco, a move that would ultimately change the course of the American counterculture.

²⁶ Brian Doherty, *This Is Burning Man: The Rise of a New American Underground*, (Dallas, Texas: BenBella Books, 2004), 20.

²⁷ Doherty, *This is Burning Man*, 20.

San Francisco or the Bay Area, in general, was at the forefront of the New Left and countercultural movements in the 1960s, and the catalyst for the culture wars in decades to come. The Free Speech Movement, FSM, gained momentum in the Bay Area in 1963-64 and the politics of space jumped to the forefront of radical discourse.²⁸ “The sixties radical opened his eyes to a system pouring its junk over everybody, or nearly everybody, and the problem was to stop just that, to escape being overwhelmed by a mindless, goalless flood which marooned each individual on his little island of commodities.”²⁹ The sixties became a polarizing decade, threatening to dismantle traditional values that had long been held. Vice President Dan Quayle maintained that the baby boomer generation’s legacy was its war against traditional values, and George Bush blamed inner-city problems on government programs established in the sixties.³⁰ The New Left, women and civil rights activists, and other radical movements broke down walls previously erected in earlier decades and sparked a social upheaval capable of permeating throughout the rest of the country. Haight-Ashbury became the epicenter of the Summer of Love, and in 1970 San Francisco caught the nation’s eye with the establishment of The Castro, an urban gay village. The Gay Rights Movement gained momentum when Harvey Milk was elected to the Board of Supervisors. This disruption set the foundation for a countercultural movement and placed activism and participation at the forefront of intellectual thought. Although the sixties and seventies in San Francisco can be credited with a countercultural reformation, they were culturally, economically, and politically limited. Through the 1980’s there was a large high-rise construction boom and the San Francisco counterculture faced oppression from increasing

²⁸ Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, (Bantam Books, 1993), 1-7.

²⁹ Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 9.

³⁰ Gitlin, *The Sixties*, xiv.

gentrification, which, in turn, increased the necessity of finding a new place for individual and cultural expression.

After a series of odd jobs, Larry purchased his own landscaping business, which he named Paradise Regained. He did not simply want to adorn front yards with pots and plants, he desired creating a unique experience that spoke to the individuality of its owners rather than the popularity of landscaping trends. “Just adorning plants, who cares? I didn’t want to create a comfy, cozy space. I wanted to create *Mars*.”³¹ Through Paradise Regained Harvey first met Jerry James, a contractor that aided Harvey in building according to his design whims, and a friend that would later help to introduce this countercultural phenomenon to the world.

Mary Graubeger, a sculptor in the late seventies and friend of Larry Harvey’s then girlfriend, began hosting tribal gatherings for her friends at Baker Beach in San Francisco. These “happenings” as she lovingly called them were an opportunity for Mary to gather articles washed up from the sea and create a sculpture with the ultimate intention of burning them and incorporating their ashes back into the earth. Mary enjoyed the temporary quality of her sculptures but stopped her happenings in the mid-eighties, for no reason in particular. In 1986, inspired by Mary, Larry approached Jerry Jones and suggested building a figure of their own and burning it on the beach. The Burning Man Organization acknowledges eight people officially in attendance at the initial *burn* on Baker Beach. The Man, not yet *the* Burning Man we know now—Larry had not yet named it—was a crude version of the contemporary wooden figure, and the decision to erect it in a public forum was pivotal to the Burning Man cause. Shortly after the man ignited, strangers began to join in, marveling the grand spectacle. Numbers doubled, and then tripled, and the crowd formed a half-circle around the burning statue. A woman ran forward

³¹ Doherty, *This is Burning Man*, 23.

and grasped the lumber arm in a participatory gesture with the *burn*, and with each moment that the embers crackled, the onlookers grew closer together in an overwhelming communal experience.³²

The following year Larry and Jerry allotted a series of weekends to work on the Man, allowing family and friends to assist them in the process. That year, 1987, the Man reached fifteen feet tall and would continue to increase exponentially in size over the next few years. The annual beach *burn* gained momentum when it landed on the Cacophony Society's radar in 1988. This underground movement, ostensibly an island of misfit toys, was a society designed to welcome punk rockers and hippies alike that found themselves marginalized in Reagan's America. This group sought experiences outside of the norm of mainstream society, often traversing the city of San Francisco dressed in costume and pushing the limits of juridical rules. The Cacophony Society listed the annual *burn* in their 1989 newsletter, reaching more attendees than ever before.³³

In 1990 the event had grown so large the police were no longer turning a blind eye to the events transpiring during the summer solstice on Baker Beach, forever making it the year that the beach *burn* didn't happen. Coincidentally, many Cacophony members in the Burning Man circle had recently become familiar with Black Rock Desert in Nevada, and had been taking what they deemed Zone Trips out to the desert and other locations. The term Zone Trip is adopted from the Andrei Tarkovsky film *Stalker*, the "zone" in the film is a place where the laws of physics don't apply, in the zone there is a room that grants wishes according to your unconscious desires. While early participants may not have known it, the desert became that room. Simply put, Larry Harvey and friends desired a brief communal experience with like-minded individuals; looking

³² Doherty, *This is Burning Man*, 31.

³³ Doherty, *This is Burning Man*, 37-46.

back they achieved a new revolutionary form of community that had long lasting potential. Rather than wait for another summer solstice to burn the man, the group decided set out for the desert in an 80-person caravan during Labor Day weekend. Once they arrived they drew a line in the dirt, and once they crossed it they knew they had entered the zone, a place in which anything could happen.³⁴ And so began the first year on the Playa.

Harvey and James do not recall the moment they decided to continue the tradition of burning the Man, while others began to question what it meant or what their ultimate motivation was. Harvey is weary discussing the first *burn*, the events that led up to it, and why, “to seek the source of things in that way, to affix great significance to the first act, is like looking for the tiniest trickle of a tributary that eventually flows down into the Mississippi and confusing *that* for the Mighty Mississippi. In fact, it’s the sum of a thousand tributary waters.”³⁵ His attitude towards the inception of the event is consistent with Bloch’s theory of the *not-yet-conscious*, which implies that our impulses are latent within us, have the power to be realized, but have just not yet been articulated. Harvey considers himself well versed with the works of Freud and Jung and does not combat attributing his motivational force to the subtle workings of his unconscious. Bloch, however, rejected the psychoanalytic view of the unconscious, believing that the unconscious is only based on a series of accumulated knowledge and experience from the past with no acknowledgment of the future.

Even though Larry Harvey has a past that surely inspires the desire for a better future, he only uses his past as leverage for this future. Bloch argued that the bourgeoisie had no need to look towards the future; Marxist beliefs only accounted for the past in relation to its impact on the present and therefore looked only towards the future. “Primarily everybody lives in the

³⁴ Doherty, *This is Burning Man*, 50.

³⁵ Doherty, *This is Burning Man*, 25.

future, because they strive, past things only come later, and as yet genuine present is almost never there at all. The future dimension contains what is feared or what is hoped for; as regards human intention, that is, when it is not thwarted, it contains only what is hoped for.”³⁶ Harvey was an adopted son that felt like he was unable to fit in with his surroundings, identifiable with the majority of the Burning Man community. The suicide Club Members, Cacophony Society Members, and Baker Beach Burners were fringe members struggling to survive in a time of Reagan conservatism. He was raised by a mother always living in the past that could never truly love him the way he desired, Burning Man’s ethos centered around purging the past and embracing love through art and community. Even his unique approach with his landscaping company seems prophetic. It is appropriate that the son of Dust Bowl refugees is also the creator of a countercultural phenomenon that takes place in the desert with frequent storms of loose alkali dirt.

“The not-yet-conscious as a whole is the psychological representation of the not-yet-become in an age and its world, on the Front of the World. The making conscious of the not-yet-conscious, the forming of the not-yet-become, exists only in this space, a space of concrete anticipation, only here is the volcano of productivity to be found pouring out its fire. Mastery in the work of genius, a mastery which is foreign to what has normally become, is also comprehensible only as a phenomenon of the Novum. Every great work of art thus still remains, except for its manifest character, impelled towards the latency of the other side, i.e. towards the contents of a future which had not yet appeared in its own time, if not towards the contents of an as yet unknown final state.”³⁷

³⁶ Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1986), 4-5.

³⁷ Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, 127.

This equation initially would only seem to bolster the argument that Harvey was unconsciously looking to create a community he had never belonged to before. These thousand tributary waters, while derived from the past, only assemble to act as a springboard for the future. “There were all these things that led to that simple act in the beginning and disposed us to continue acting in certain ways. The problem with this question”—Why did they burn a man on the beach on the summer solstice in 1986, and then why did they do it again, and again, and again?—“is that the answer becomes my entire life story.”³⁸

The journey through Black Rock Desert and into the *zone* that grants wishes yet to be known creates an alternate universe for onlookers, a moment suspended in time that there is a unique combination of destruction of the past and creation of the future. Harvey is also quick to recognize that their efforts are not conceived through an original entrepreneurial spirit, but an inspiration of society’s greatest experiments over time: “In practice, what we do has historic parallels. In the ancient world, half the world’s religion came out of the desert or mountains, with the idea that you were in contact with powerful natural forces...But we’re not feather fathers, we’re not druids (although many come here to pretend to be), but we are laying the infrastructure of a temporary civilization. It’s a laboratory to consider how perhaps society can be constructed and how we can critique it.”³⁹

The remote location where the annual *burn* takes place is vital to the experience of its participants. The drive out to the Playa is an arduous one. The town of Gerlach, the closest town to Black Rock City, is well out in the Nevada landscape, so far that all sense of locality, time, and distance are lost. Few cars pass the opposite way as you wind through the sprawling valley. In Thomas More’s *Utopia* the neologism, utopia, began with two separate meanings. Initially

³⁸ Doherty, *This is Burning Man*, 25.

³⁹ Matt Wray, “Burning Man and the Rituals of Capitalism.” *Bad Subjects* (1995), 21.

used to label the unknown island in his book, it was thought that the word referenced an imaginary or paradisiacal place. In order to describe this new place, a new word was adopted using the Greek *ouk* meaning not and *topos* meaning place. The suffix *-ia* indicates place, therefore making utopia a *place* that is simultaneously a *non-place*.⁴⁰ The etymology of utopia seems serendipitous when applied to Black Rock Desert, a place in the middle of nowhere that can be considered non-existent to anyone outside of the Burning Man community.

The entrances to the Playa are named after the mileage it takes to get there from the town of Gerlach, the Three-Mile or the Twelve-Mile. In the early days of the event, before the population boom of the late 90s and early 2000s, it was pivotal that drivers were precise in their route. If they were off in their measurements by even a half-mile, they risked missing the correct turn and jutting off into the vast desert terrain with no real hopes of finding a way back. It is absence and the unique juxtaposition of city with wilderness that defines Burning Man. In *Spaces of Hope*, David Harvey explains the frustrations of city-living: “It is hard to untangle the grubby day-to-day practices and discourses that affect urban living from the grandiose metaphorical meanings that so freely intermingle with emotions and beliefs about the good life and urban form.”⁴¹ City life is so distracting that we never take time to understand our environment; these daily practices stifle emotive and creative capabilities. The remote desert functions as a space far removed from everyday conveniences, from the monotonous nine to five rat race, and, as David Harvey states, grubby day-to-day practices, and allows attendees to understand the importance of community in city-living. The drive out to the Playa is an

⁴⁰ Fátima Vieira, “The Concept of Utopia,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, ed. Gregory Claeys et al. (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2010), 4.

⁴¹ David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (California: Univ of California Press, 2000), 157.

opportunity to adjust mindset, abandoning common notions of modernity and embracing a brand new, uncivilized world.

Traveling to the desert is hardly a new phenomenon, the fourth-century Desert Fathers sought release from urban trappings in order to achieve clarity and avoid distractions. “The simple men who lived their lives out to a good old age among the rocks and sands only did so because they had come into the desert to be themselves, their ordinary selves, and to forget a world that divided them from themselves.”⁴² In his *America*, Jean Baudrillard reflects on the grandeur of the desert, “A product of the gaze that stares out and finds nothing to reflect it. There can be no silence up in the mountains, since their very contours roar.”⁴³ To Baudrillard, the desert could not bear a cultural comparison to the populated west; it was, rather, a void of all cultural implications or characteristics. The desert, a sort of *artificial paradise*, is monumental because its forms exist without plan or structure. “A desert where the miracle of a car, of ice and whiskey is daily re-enacted: a marvel of easy living mixed with the fatality of the desert.”⁴⁴

The harsh climate of the desert demands radical self-reliance. The ground consists of alkali dirt that easily turns to dust when dry and disrupted by movement, or transforms to thick restrictive mud when wet. The kicked up dirt leads to dust storms, the chalky powder invading your nasal passages, eyes, permeating into your clothes and campsite, and wreaking havoc on your cars engine. The midday heat is relentless, sparking the unofficial mantra of “piss-clear” to remind participants to combat dehydration, and when the sun sets the temperature plummets. The early days of Burning Man were a social experiment unlike any other. Attendees were forced to interact with, trust, and rely on one another not only to succeed in their voyage, but also

⁴² Thomas Merton. “*The Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings from the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century*,” (New York: New Directions, 1961), 23.

⁴³ Jean Baudrillard, *America*, trans. Chris Turner (London and New York: Verso, 1988), 6.

⁴⁴ Baudrillard, *America*, 8.

ultimately survive. The definition of community evolved according to the needs of the group and Burners were allowed to incorporate the aspects from home they enjoyed while excluding what they considered the faults of the default world. The process of building shelter, expanding camps, and repairing dwellings after destructive dust storms encouraged communal experience. This landscape became a place of inclusiveness, where fringe members of the default world were welcome regardless of socioeconomic standing, race, gender, political affiliation (although attendance generally leaned left), etc. The desert became an empty canvas, and participants were prepared to paint their ideal image. “To find it, to find the right thing, for which it is worthy to live, to be organized, and to have time: that is why we go, why we cut new, metaphysically constitutive paths, summon what is not, build into the blue, and build ourselves into the blue, and there seek the true, the real, where the merely factual disappears—*incipit vita nova*. ”⁴⁵ *Incipit vita nova*—enter a new life.

⁴⁵ Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford UP, 2000), 3.

CHAPTER 3: BURNING MAN NOW

Having placed Burning Man within the utopian framework and established it as a product of Larry Harvey's *not-yet-conscious*, it is only appropriate to acknowledge the event's future in relation to its past. Since the initial *burn* in 1986, Burning Man has been in a constant state of flux. Growing and modifying according to the needs and desires of its participants. Facing increased stratification, this chapter will outline how Burning Man has changed, how veteran Burners are adjusting to this change, and how the Borg is reacting to the public outcry. This will allow further speculation, in the conclusion, about the different threats to utopia, and therefore Burning Man.

Burning Man has undergone extensive changes from the original spontaneous caravan of the early nineties to the booming temporary metropolis it is today. In 1995, the originally free event began requiring attendees pay an entrance fee of thirty-five dollars. While trivial to some, ticketing participants marked change in the organizational structure of the Burning Man festival, that there was organization altogether. In 1996 the camp adopted an official theme of Inferno, the *man* was placed upon a pedestal, bringing it from the previous forty feet to forty-eight, both literally and metaphorically raising it above participants, and guns were banned in the central camp. Burning Man suffered its first loss that year when a motorcycle collision during a game of chicken led to a fatality, and others were injured when a tent was run over by a careless driver. The following years the ticket prices continued to rise, the man was constructed taller, and more regulations were placed on vehicle usage including imposing a speed limit and creating a street grid complete with names and signs. These changes caused John Law, one of the most prominent

organizers of the event, to disaffiliate with it altogether; “I could see where it was going, its like we’re going to keep doing this event, we’re going to have to have a bureaucratic infrastructure and, you know, spin stuff. And I couldn’t do that, I couldn’t be a part of that.”⁴⁶

Burning Man, at that point, was no stranger to divisiveness. In 2004 a Burner named Chicken John circulated the We Have a Dream Petition, calling their collective Borg2, with the call to increase art funding, democratize the selection process, and have rotating guest curators from the community.⁴⁷ Burners that signed the ultimately failed petition threatened to leave the event if their requests were not met. While this may have been the first real attempt at revolt in the Burning Man sphere, it sparked a debate amongst the community that did not die with the We Have a Dream Petition. By 2007, the population level had reached 47,366, and ticket prices ranged from \$195-\$280. Paul Addis, frustrated with the calcified event, created an elaborate plan to burn the *man* early. While successful in his plan, the *man* did burn early, Paul Addis was sentenced to a two-year jail stint for felony charges after costing the organization 30,000 in rebuilding costs.⁴⁸ The 2007 early *burn* is argued by many participants to be the peak of Burning Man, the jumping of the shark, and the beginning of disillusionment with the organization as a whole. In my interview with Steven T. Jones he addressed his reaction to the legal ramifications of the early *burn*, “I think that action and the way the organization responded to it, I think for a lot of people it seemed like a top-down corporate response. And I think for a lot of people it caused them to sort of feel like this isn’t really community anymore, and we don’t treat our even

⁴⁶ *Spark: A Burning Man Story*, dir. by Steve Brown and Jessie Deeter (Spark Pictures, 2013.), Film.

⁴⁷ Steven T. Jones, “State of the Art,” *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, accessed March 4, 2015, http://www.sfbg.com/39/10/news_burningman.html.

⁴⁸ Jones, “State of the Art.”

hopelessly fatally flawed people in our community that way, we handle it in our community, but it wasn't handled that way.”⁴⁹

‘Jumping the Shark’, a phrase coined in reference to the 1977 episode of *Happy Days* where Fonzie jumps over a shark while water-skiing, is used to describe the moment in a television show when it begins to decline in quality. This idiom spread throughout popular culture and is now used across all cultural mediums, including Burning Man. The San Francisco Bay Guardian recently reported, “Burning Man has truly jumped the shark, launching from the ramp of a high-minded experiment and splashing down into the tepid waters of mass-consumed hedonism.”⁵⁰ With the influx of plug-and-play campsites, celebrity appearances, and well-known DJs playing at the event, there is increased social stratification. Pre-fabricated camps have begun to limit their accessibility to the public, and ticket prices over the years have continued to rise, ultimately alienating those with lower incomes and stunting diversity within the festival. This exclusivity has become a point of contention between Burners that consider themselves participants and Burners that adopt a spectator attitude.

Considering the important role traditional and digital media played in describing and promoting the event, the notion of ‘jumping the shark’ is a useful metaphor. The same year that Burners relocated to Black Rock Desert, the Internet became widely available for public use. This technological advancement later birthed chat forums such as eplaya and tribe.net, which created international cyber-communities and increased awareness of the event. Burning Man became co-opted with the media in 1990 when Larry Harvey produced and edited the event’s first documentary, and in 1992, the Playa newspaper titled *Black Rock Gazette* saw its first

⁴⁹ Jones Interview, 2014

⁵⁰ Steven T. Jones, “Burning Man Jumps the Shark,” *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, accessed March 4, 2015, <http://www.sfbg.com/2014/08/19/burning-man-jumps-shark>.

circulation. In 1994, the Burning Man Organization became an online presence with the launch of their website in addition to event coverage by media outlets in Australia, France, Germany, and Great Britain.⁵¹ In 1995, CNN began yearly coverage of the event, and in 1997, ABC's Nightline, NBC, Time, and the Washington Post joined the coverage. Soon, television shows adopted the quirky and mysterious event into their plot lines.⁵² In 2003, *Reno 911!* featured an episode in which the police officers attended Burning Man undercover.⁵³ In 2005, and much to the chagrin of attendees, Burning Man was featured on an episode of *Malcolm in the Middle* in which two of the children hitch a ride to the festival, ultimately creating a family trip where each member finds themselves in prosaic and stereotyped predicaments. Not wanting to accept the eventual end to the festival, son Reese accidentally burns down the family RV while lead Malcolm falls in love with a healer.⁵⁴ By 2006 media presence had grown to over 300 registered outlets. There have also been a series of documentaries produced in attempts to capture the spiritual/transcendental/overwhelming experience of Burning Man including: *Burning Man: The Burning Sensation* (2002), *Burning Man: Beyond Black Rock* (2005), *Dust & Illusions: 30 Years of History* (2009), and most recently *Spark: A Burning Man Story* (2013).

One of the most notorious and controversial Burning Man attendees was political conservative Grover Norquist at the 2014 *burn*. He tweeted before heading off to the desert, "Its official. Samah and I are off to 'Burning Man' this year. Scratch one from the bucket list."⁵⁵

⁵¹ ""Burning Man Timeline," Burning Man Organization, accessed March 9, 2015, <http://burningman.org/timeline/>

⁵² "Burning Man Timeline"

⁵³ "Reno 911!" IMDb. Accessed March 9, 2015.

http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0370194/?ref_=nv_sr_2.

⁵⁴ "Malcolm in the Middle." IMDb. Accessed March 9, 2015.

http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0212671/?ref_=nv_sr_1.

⁵⁵ Norquist, Grover (GroverNorquist). "Its official. Samah and I are off to "Burning Man" this year. Scratch one from the Bucket List." 28 July 2014, 4:47 p.m. Tweet.

Burning Man as a theoretical check mark on a bucket list further suggests the notion that the event has become a pre-packaged experience and attendees are paying to participate in a preconceived product for consumption rather than a spontaneous happening. BRC Weekly has taken to referring to the 10 principles as: Radical Seclusion, Gifting, Project Branding, Radical Self Compliance, Radical Self-Indulgence, Corporate Support, Plausible Deniability, Petroleum Powered Space, Appropriation, and Expediency.⁵⁶ While the attendance at the event increases yearly, the dedicated Burners decrease. Only 7% of attendees in 2013 had been to 5-7 past burns, and the percentages only decrease with greater length of time.⁵⁷ With that, the volunteer force willing to work to recreate experiences from past years decreases. Richard Flacks, a New Left thinker, wrote in 1974 that organizations are no longer effective if they fail to work efficiently at the local level. “Organizationally, SDS, the Resistance, and other national student-based movements of the middle sixties were loose networks. Their real life occurred in hundreds of autonomous local groups and chapters. Few coherent policies were adopted nationally. Few manifestos were issued from above. The national organization gave a kind of historic dimension to local activity, but did not direct it. Had this experience been taken seriously, it could have helped create the basis for a sustainable New Left organizational format.”⁵⁸ He went on to add that SDS at a national level failed to interact in the day-to-day activities of the sixties student activists and, therefore, their perspectives were “increasingly remote from those shared by most

⁵⁶ Steven T. Jones, “Burning Man Shark Jump Creates Media Pile-On,” *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, accessed March 4, 2015, <http://www.sfbg.com/politics/2014/08/25/burning-man-shark-jump-creates-media-pile>.

⁵⁷ “Burning Man 2013 Census,” Burning Man Organization, accessed March 9, 2015, <http://burningman.org/culture/history/brc-history/afterburn/2013-2/census/>.

⁵⁸ Richard Flacks, “Making History vs. Making Life: Dilemmas of an American Left,” *Working Papers for a New Society*, 2 (1974): 68.

members.”⁵⁹ The members of the Burning Man board are now far removed from the basic day-to-day interactions out on the Playa. Secluded in their private RV park, allowing only approved guests to gain entry, Burning Man now operates as a very top-down organization that relies on a bottom-up volunteer force for sustainability. This can have but one result, two combating notions of community.

Larry Harvey has argued that Burning Man’s intentions are not anti-capitalist in nature, but rather anti-consumerism. Anyone that has attended, read about, or even spoken with past and present Burners can say that is far from the truth. Stepping off the plane into the Reno airport is only the start of the week’s expenses. The radical self-reliance principle encourages participants to stock up on camping gear, food, and gallons of water even before reaching the Playa. Burning Man has adopted its distinct fashion, and Burners have even opened up clothing stores that make furry and colorful coats worn during the cold nights. In my interview with Steven Jones, he responds to my observation of the contradictory anti-consumerist/consumerist Burning Man ethos; “Its really great to go live in the city without money for a week, but you’re absolutely right that Burning Man promotes a lot of consumption. You need a lot of stuff just to survive out there. And there is this sort of keep up with the Joneses mentality where then you need all the coolest costumes, the fashions, the this and the that. Not to mention the impact that 70,000 people buying a metric fuck ton of illegal drugs has on our relations with Latin America.” The Burning Man organization has recently transitioned to a non-profit company, however, they still maintain Decommodification LLC, which is the recipient of all revenue from branding and logos. They have also increased their board size as of September 2014, which boasts a whopping 18 members, including large names like Jim Tananbaum of Foresite Capital, Matt Goldberg of

⁵⁹ Richard Flacks, “What Happened to the New Left?,” *Socialist Review* (1989): 98-99.

QVC, and Chip Conley from AirBnB, a relationship that has Burners questioning the direction of the event altogether.⁶⁰

It is this exact radical self-reliance principle that enforces exclusivity at the event. Ticket prices for 2014 were raised to \$380, and ticket sales are conducted through an online buying process. This discourages anyone without regular computer, internet, and credit card access to purchase a ticket, and although there is a low-income ticket available, it is only provided to less than 10% of the population. According to Burning Man's 2013 census, the average Burner is an unmarried heterosexual male, 34 years old, liberal, educated, Caucasian, and earns median personal income of \$50,000-\$51,000,⁶¹ which speaks to a larger diversity issue. "But when an organization asserts a set of high-minded utopian values, it's only fair to judge it by those standards. And when it claims the economic value of the labors of tens of thousands of voluntary participants as its own company assets, questions of accountability and commodification naturally arise."⁶² The principle of decommodification is in place to protect Burning Man culture from exploitation, but does not protect the large overseas labor force responsible for constructing the tents, sleeping bags, backpacks, boots, etc. that Burners purchase for the event every year, laborers that will most likely never have any hopes of attending the actual event.

Additionally, speaking to the larger Marxist sentiment, exploitation of the labor force has recently hit home at the Burning Man event. Following the 2014 event, a Burner that worked as what she called a sherpa at a large plug-and-play⁶³ camp posted a story about their experience on

⁶⁰ "Plug-and-Play Goes All the Way...to the Top of the Pyramid," *Burners.me*, September 5, 2014, <http://burners.me/2014/09/05/plug-n-play-goes-all-the-way-to-the-top-of-the-pyramid/>.

⁶¹ "Burning Man 2013 Census"

⁶² Jones, "Burning Man Jumps the Shark."

⁶³ Plug-and-play camps, also referred to as turnkey camps, are pre-constructed camps that provide participants with the supplies and sleeping quarters needed, typically for a substantial

Facebook. Burners.me, a popular blog that discusses everything Burning Man, found the story and posted it online, keeping the identity of the author and the camp they allude to anonymous. This camp, referred to as “Popsicle Camp” in the Facebook post but later identified as Caravancicle, cost \$17,000 per participant, 120 participants in total, and employed 50 workers responsible for carrying out the unique vision of its organizer. The camp was exclusive to the Caravancicle guests and, although building plans indicated that there would be a lounge built for camp customers to embrace the gifting policy by handing out popsicles, it was never built. Employees were required to work ten-hour days at minimum, with one day off for the entire week, but the author recalls fifteen to twenty hour days were more common. “I spent an entire day not entering the city that I came to be part of. An entire day dedicated to people that built tall walls to separate US from THEM. This event is meant to bring people together and it felt like it was invaded by a wall of money and power there to make sure we would be separate.”⁶⁴ Caravancicle failed to do what Burning Man has succeeded so well at in the past, which was following the teachings of Amos, treating their neighbors as equals. According to Amos, where equality does not exist, righteousness cannot reign supreme. The author was ultimately asked to leave the camp after expressing concerns over the treatment of the staff. Bloomberg Business released an article entitled *The Billionaires at Burning Man: Move over Google Bus, There’s a New Symbolic Fight Over Tech Money, Class, and Privilege*, identifying CEO of Foresite Capital Jim Tananbaum as the host of Caravancicle. Burning Man faces a crisis between appealing to Silicon Valley techies that can further spread the Burning Man ethos, and maintaining strong community ties with veteran Burners. Co-Founder Harley Dubois comments on plug-and-play

price, so that they can begin their Burning Man experience upon arriving at the Playa. These camps have stirred up controversy regarding their adherence to the radical self-reliance principle.
⁶⁴ Anonymous, “What!? You Mean I’m a Sherpa!? A Tale From the K-Hole at Burning Man 2014,” *Burners.me*, September 12, 2014, <http://burners.me/2014/09/12/a-sherpas-tale/>.

campsites stating, “the benefit of having these kind of camps is, is that we are getting people that could influence the world. That can telegraph further, wider, and better if we get our message out to people who are influential and can help with it. The trick is, do they really get it?”⁶⁵ The Burning Man 2013 census concluded that 40% of attendees that year were what they deemed “virgins,” or experiencing their first year on the Playa, and 56% claimed their primary reason for attending was to play or party.⁶⁶

Larry Harvey weighed in on the plug-and-play campsite debate stating, “I think the current controversy over Plug and Play camps is not so much about equality, but concerns a very different though related concept: inequity – a basic sense of unfairness. Whenever a select group is allowed special access to tickets, especially when these tickets are in short supply, this can inspire ill feeling. This is doubly so if such a camp is widely perceived to be flouting nearly all of Burning Man’s Ten Principles.”⁶⁷ There is no doubt the inequity, which Harvey refers to, allows a festering of emotions to the detriment of the high-minded social experiment. Thomas More believed that one of the greatest threats to his utopian society was pride. He stated that with the death of money came the death of vicious things such as strife, chiding, murder, treason, and poisoning. In his time, the rich in the commonwealths enacted laws solely for their benefit under the pretext of what he referred to as “color of the commonality” or under the pretext of serving the people.⁶⁸ Abolishing money simultaneously abolished the rich’s capabilities of hoarding food away from the poor during crop shortages or using money as a platform to create a hierarchy. He argued that wealth was not measured strictly by summation of property, but by the ability to hold

⁶⁵ Brown and Deeter, *Spark* (Spark Pictures).

⁶⁶ “Burning Man 2013 Census”

⁶⁷ Larry Harvey, “Equality, Inequity, Iniquity: Concierge Culture,” accessed March 4, 2015, <http://blog.burningman.com/2014/12/news/equality-inequity-iniquity-concierge-culture/>.

⁶⁸ Thomas More, *Utopia* (New York: Barnes and Nobles Books, 2005), 143.

the possession of commodities over another. “She measureth not wealth and prosperity by her own commodities, but by the misery and incommunities of others; she would not by her good will be made a goddess, if there were no wretches left over whom she might, like a scornful lady, rule and triumph, over whose miseries her felicities might shine, whose poverty she might vex, torment, and increase by gorgeously setting forth her riches.”⁶⁹ By removing these vices from his experimental civilization, the risk of domestic dissent is also removed.

Bloch believed that the bourgeoisie is incapable of orienting themselves towards the future, a condition that he labeled no-hope, and that they insert themselves into the cultural discourse through ideological hegemony.⁷⁰ While Harvey insists that the one-percent have no influence over the other ninety-nine percent in attendance at the event, there is an outstanding threat to the hope that originally constructed such a high-minded countercultural experience. We see the emergence of technological utopias, and this is especially prevalent with the attendance of Silicon Valley techies at Burning Man. Some of the most notable attendees are Google founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin, who have even developed a Google “doodle” to commemorate their trip to the Playa. It is my argument, however, that these technological advancements are not a nod towards the future or products of the not-yet-conscious, but instead a constant return to the past. Achievements in technology come by improving the iPhone from the previous models, progress only built upon past progress. Advancements in technology are, also, motivated by capitalist tendencies. Improvements are made with sustaining profits in mind, and although new technology creates new jobs, it displaces workers that do not have the evolved skill sets to remain in those jobs.

⁶⁹ More, *Utopia*, 145.

⁷⁰ Richard H. Roberts, *Hope and its Hieroglyph: A Critical Decipherment of Ernst Bloch's Principle of Hope* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press: 1990), 31.

The intentions of Burning Man are similar to those of a religious pilgrimage. Theoretically, after attending, you are then equipped with the knowledge of a different kind of community and are able to bring that knowledge back with you into the default world, ultimately spreading communitarian ethos and changing the world from the inside. Longtime Burners have yet to find this change from the techie elite. Although Steven Jones has spent a large portion of his career dedicated to Burning Man, he did not attend this past year's *burn* stating, "It sort of broke my heart in many ways. It disappointed me that it didn't live up to its own stated values."⁷¹

⁷¹ Jones Interview, 2014

CONCLUSION

Burning Man has been established as a countercultural phenomenon, creating a space of inclusivity and community. It's a gathering that encourages high-minded values and challenges established social norms. This social experiment can be seen as a modern attempt at a utopian state, embracing values taught by the Hebrew prophets, Plato, and Thomas More. Its foundation is hope, the hope of Larry Harvey's not-yet-conscious. But, like all utopias we have seen in the past, the threat of dystopia is always looming, and some would say inevitable. Burning Man is no exception, the presence of the media, added stress of the increasing population, dissent from veteran Burners, and the outside capitalist world, are at constant war with Burning Man's communitarian ethos.

Increased media presence at Burning Man has no doubt assisted its entry into the mainstream. Burning Man has been used as a plot line in television shows such as *Reno 911!*, *Malcolm in the Middle*, and most recently *The Simpsons*. Major news outlets such as CNN, ABC, and NBC have covered it, and multiple documentaries have been produced on its behalf. The most recent documentary, *Spark: A Burning Man Story*, is available to watch instantly on Netflix. Advancements in technology are not all negative in regards to Burning Man, chat forums such as eplaya, tribes.net, and Burners.me have helped to connect the Burning Man community across the globe and assisted in maintaining the valued community ties. And, while Burners are not inherently against being a part of mainstream culture, they fear that increased attendance will result in a decrease of the Burning Man ethos. Less informed attendees may not understand the

participatory culture Burning Man has established, and veteran Burners fear an influx of voyeuristic partygoers.

Population may have added unneeded tension to the otherwise well-oiled machine that was Burning Man. Frequently, social reconstruction can only happen with a slow, incremental change. If change happens too quickly, it is destined to fail. These modifications are run by trial and error,⁷² and as population grows, the errors become increasingly difficult to fix, especially in an experiment that is so temporary. Conservatives believe there are two consequences of social change, intended and unintended, and these consequences spark heated debate. The unintended results may ultimately overshadow the intended desires and thus cause those involved to lose faith, or *hope*, in the mission altogether. This is what Frederick Hayek refers to as the “fatal conceit,” or the rationalization that through social and political maneuvers, the human condition will be improved.⁷³ Those that fall in line with the Marxist way of thinking believe that there may be unintended consequences, but they can be confronted upon their conception.

Erik Olin Wright in his *Envisioning Real Utopias* states that envisioning utopias is only a subset of a much larger discussion of *emancipatory social science*, emancipatory meaning freedom from oppression that restricts human flourishing, social refers to the dependence this human flourishing has on the social world, and science allows for a systematic and scientific understanding of the world. He believes that the foundation for diagnosing why social structures impose harm on people is brought forth through two broad claims, social justice and political justice. Social justice refers to allowing individuals equal access to the means to provide themselves with a flourishing lifestyle and political justice requires people have the ability to

⁷² Erik Olin Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias* (London: Verso: 2010), 5.

⁷³ Frederick A. Hayek, *The Fatal Conceit: The Errors of Socialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

make decisions that will affect their lives, and have equal access to collective decisions which affect the community as a whole. Some of the harms that come from repressing social and political justice include ill health, social isolation, and psychological harms of social stigma.⁷⁴ Participants at Burning Man attend in order to escape social stigmas from the default world and, although Larry Harvey maintains that Burning Man is not about equality, the inequity that participants feel as a result of the plug-and-play campsites allows potential harm to the human flourishing that Wright champions. These theories are not unique to Wright, however, Amos, above all, encouraged social justice, Deutero-Isaiah applauded inclusivity, and More disapproved of any class distinctions. “This is why the inclusion of *social* means is crucial, since disrespect, discrimination and social exclusion based on status attributes can constitute as serious impediments to flourishing as economic inequality.”⁷⁵ With the population now exceeding 60,000 participants, the city-state model that Plato called for in his *Republic* is becoming decreasingly feasible. The beginning of disillusionment, or hopelessness, with Burning Man is obvious with longtime Burners such as Steven T. Jones, a man that has dedicated a large portion of his career to spreading the Burning Man ethos, no longer attending the annual *burn*.

Capitalism carries the largest potential to disrupt a utopian community. Speaking reductively, in capitalism, means of production are privately owned, the owners have power over those means and use the labor force to set the production in motion. However, the labor force has no claim or power over the means of production. Similarly, a small group of board members collectively hold the power over the Burning Man event. The labor force, partially paid but predominantly unpaid, are vital to the construction, unfolding, and deconstruction of the festival. They also carry the momentum into the next year and the following, nurturing the blossoming of

⁷⁴ Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*, 8-9.

⁷⁵ Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*, 11.

their movement. They, however, are not included in the basic democratic process of selecting board members, or curating the art projects seeking funding. The alienation that Plato warned against became apparent with the We Have a Dream Petition, when Chicken John demanded that the Burners have an influence in the art selection process in addition to an increase in funding. “People should control as much as possible those decisions which affect their lives. “Freedom” is the power to make choices over one’s own life; “democracy” is the power to participate in the effective control of collective choices that affect one’s life as a member of the wider society.”⁷⁶ Wright devised a list of eleven criticisms of capitalism, some of these include: capitalism has a systematic bias toward consumerism, capitalist commodification threatens important broadly held values, capitalism corrodes community, and capitalism limits democracy.⁷⁷ These criticisms can, ostensibly, be appropriated to a list entitled Why Capitalism is Bad for Burning Man. The Burning Man *zone* may bear more similarities to *Stalker* than originally thought. Later, in the film, it is revealed that the room grants wishes from a person’s unconscious desires with the admission that the previous *Stalker* was granted great wealth instead of the return of his dead brother. Sometimes unconscious desires shouldn’t come true.

So what is the possibility of a utopian state in the 21st century? As Wright pointed out, we live in a time when our radical ideas are more likely to be mocked than embraced. This cynicism, or hopelessness, is destructive towards social and political growth. Utopia may seem idealistic to some, but without the possibility of an alternate state, a promise of change, all hope is lost. If the utopia constructed by the Prophets, Plato, or even More, is unobtainable, society still needs something to look forward to.

⁷⁶ Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*, 12.

⁷⁷ Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*, 24-25.

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