

Communications and revelations through extreme street costume

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Abstract

Burning Man is attended by people annually from all over the world. It takes place at Black Rock City, which is built for just one week each year, and becomes for that brief period of time, one of the largest cities in Nevada. The environment is harsh with temperatures up to 40°C during the day and down to 2°C at night. Alkaline, cement dust like sand is lifted up by feet and is blown into every possible crevice during dust storms. Yet, despite the hostile environment, almost 40,000 people attended the event in 2006, and most were dressed up in elaborate costumes for the occasion. The harsh environment and complete freedom of expression have led to the development of a spectacular variation of the street fashion scene. Garments worn during the event are often carefully designed and crafted. Therefore, the terms costumes or street costumes are more appropriate to use while describing the emerging themes. They represent a visual link and interaction between the inner and outer worlds of the person; between the personal and social; between the subconscious and the conscious. The costumes are facilitators for communication and a tool to establish rapport and to express artistic creation. Is dressing up a soul's creative vacation from the mundane dress code imposed by society and the social order? Does dressing up relax our attitude toward the dress code back home? What happens when the Burning Man attendees return to normal life? This paper is a report on street fashion at Burning Man 2006, and an investigation into the reasons for dressing up during such events. This research is based in grounded theory and provides information for further inquiries. Data analyzed for this paper include in-depth interviews with Burning Man participants, field observation and digital images.

Keywords:
street costume,
self expression,
visual communication

Introduction

I have been fascinated by the Burning Man event and its participants (Burners) ever since I attended the event for the first time in 2001. As an artist, I was impressed by the amount of artistic expression there. As Sylvan states: "...any survey of the incredible proliferation of camps and installations reveals a mind-boggling array of artistic, conceptual, and technical expressions, forming a surrealistic tableau that feels like a waking dream" (Sylvan, 2005, p.4). The flat ancient lake bed, now Black Rock Desert, would serve as a neutral backdrop for the participants to set up their art.

As a formally trained fashion designer, I could not help but pay attention from a marketer's point of view to about 40,000 consumers attending Burning Man. Without prior knowledge of the income levels of any Burners, I saw that it would be challenging in the very least to attend the event without substantial disposable income available or a generous sponsor to cover the expenses.

What fascinated me most was that I felt transferred into an 'All the world's a stage' setting in the extreme. I saw people transformed into angels, devils, fairies, supermen, cyberpunks, kings, their jesters, clowns, aliens, and many literary characters.

When I was a costume designer in Latvia, I noticed the incredible transformation that actors experience while changing into costumes. As a four-time participant of Burning Man, I was able to recognize similar transformations when participants of the event were getting into costumes. I have always wanted to observe and document these personal metamorphoses, feelings, and revelations that occur before, during and after the costumed event, as well as the reasons why people dress up in costumes in the first place. I wanted to inquire whether changing into a costume or wearing a costume would affect the participants' behaviour, language and interaction, and whether there is a visible change in participants' moods as they acquire an imaginary identity. I was curious to understand the phenomenon of extreme dressing up in this extremely harsh environment.

Methods

I did not begin this project with a preconceived theory in mind. I hoped to find insight and enhance understanding of dressing up in costumes

as part of human endeavor. Using a grounded theory approach during the research process allowed me to build, rather than test, theory, as well as identify, develop and relate concepts that became the building blocks of theory (Strauss, Corbin 1998). A grounded theory approach will also let me look at data creatively and flexibly.

To gather substantial data, I chose to conduct intensive, in-depth interviews with participants who dress up in costumes during Burning Man. According to Charmaz (2006): “An intensive interview permits an in-depth exploration of a particular topic or experience with a person who has had the relevant experiences,” as well as, “the in-depth nature of an intensive interview fosters eliciting each participant’s interpretation of his or her experience” (p. 25). During the interview I hoped to be able to delve beneath the surface of ordinary conversation to gather data and at the same time give the interviewee all “conversational prerogatives, such as: being an expert, and expressing thoughts and feelings disallowed in other relationships and settings” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 27). I would encourage my interviewees to tell me their stories about their experiences and feelings while dressing up in costume, and form an uninterrupted narrative, because “Story is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which his or her experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful” (Clandinin, Connelly, 2006, p. 477).

As a frequent participant of costumed events and to gather additional data, I recorded my own feelings and shifts in attitude as I designed, created and, finally, changed into a costume. I observed whether my borrowed identity affected my communication with other participants of other costumed events.

A field observation of a costumed event organized by the Toronto Burning Man community gave me further insights into the dynamics and interaction between costumed and non-costumed participants. I observed the participants as they entered the party and mingled at the gate with already costumed participants.

In addition to field observation, interviews and my personal journal, I collected my own images and images of other photographers who generously allowed me to use them for this research project. According to Sarah Pink (2005): “Images are ‘everywhere’. They permeate our

academic work, everyday lives, and conversations. They are inextricably interwoven with our personal identities, narratives, lifestyles, cultures and societies, as well as definitions of history, space and truth” (p. 17).

Having attended Burning Man four times, and numerous other smaller scale events organized by the local Burning Man community members in Ontario (Burners), defines me as a ‘partial insider’ (Sherif, 2001) of the Burner community. I have not been involved in major decision making, organizing or the staging of events for community members. Instead my contribution to the community would be volunteering for a particular event. However, I have managed to build rewarding relationships with many community members. According to Sherif (2001): “The cases of partial insiders who have background ties to the cultures being studied provide a certain insight into the dynamics that can occur in the research process” (p. 446). During my research as an insider, I was also aware of possible constraints that I might encounter along the way, such as not being able to notice some “cultural arrangements as worthy of analysis rather than as taken for granted features of social life” (Acker, 2000, p. 194).

I would also like to emphasize that this research project is just the beginning of a hopefully long term inquiry into the dress-up phenomenon. I am planning to conduct more interviews in the future and continue to attend Burning Man on a yearly basis.

Black Rock City

“It is very much a ‘blasted heath’ to borrow a Shakespearean term, and not so much as a single blade of grass grows upon it. Perhaps more than any other place in the world, it invokes an idea of an eternal and immutable timelessness, seeming to simultaneously exist at the moment before time began as well as after the point that it ended. This makes it is a perfect place to build a surrealist city”
(Mark Van Proyen, 2005, p.177).

Black Rock City is constructed for just one week each year, and becomes, for that brief time, one of the largest cities in Nevada. It features a preplanned circular ground plan with the Burning Man Sculpture as a centre piece.

It has almost all the functions of a real city: emergency medical services, a municipal airport, a Center Camp Café, a dressed-up ice sales concession, a recycling centre, a daily newspapers, radio stations, and “...the city’s sanitation needs are met by several hundred regularly serviced chemical toilets placed at key junctures amidst its highways and byways” (Gilmore, Van Proyen, 2005, p.4). The city consists of theme camps, RVs, tents, larger and smaller shade structures, endless art installations. The city gives the impression of being an enormous outdoor art gallery without borders. The main means of transportation in Black Rock City are by foot or by bicycle. Participants would also drive modified vehicles known as art cars. Driving unmodified vehicles is limited to emergency and infrastructure personnel. The speed limit at Black Rock City is five miles per hour.

Black Rock City “...temporarily manifests itself every Labour Day weekend as a massive camp-out that doubles as a subarite’s utopia ministering to a polyglot congregation of urban nomads, amateur cross-dressers, and sun-starved toilers...”
(Mark Van Proyen, 2005, p.178).

Spending a week in this city for the last four years inspired me to observe, inquire and research extreme street costumes worn by extreme people in an extreme city.

The citizens

“It has been said that it is absurd for any one individual to take credit for Burning Man as it would be for a surfer to take credit for a wave, so in that spirit we would like to start by expressing our profound gratitude to the many thousands of Burning Man participants who have embraced the event’s ethos of participation, self-expression, and radical self-reliance. They provide the remarkable substance that brings the canvas of a dry desert event to life with their blood, breath, and vision”
(Gilmore, Van Proyen, 2005, p.ix).

Demographics

Burning Man 2006 was attended by Burners of all ages. I saw babies carried on a parent’s back or in dusty strollers, I saw young children heavily equipped with the latest technology of long range walky-talkies, teenagers, twenty-somethings, the whole age range of baby boomers, as well as senior citizens. While striking up conversations with strangers, I discovered that people have come from all over the world to visit Black

Rock City. I chatted with people from Germany and the Netherlands. I heard stories about people from Japan and Australia.

At the time of writing this paper, the census data from 2006 and 2005 are not yet available on the website. According to non-scientific Black Rock Census data of 2004, Burning Man was attended by 35,400 people. "2004 Census data was collected via paper surveys completed and collected on the playa during the Burning Man event. Of the 35,400 Black Rock City citizens who joined us on the playa this year, 4,676 residents participated in the census. This number represents a statistically significant response of 13% for the data collected. The information provided is anonymous and cannot be linked to individual respondents" (2004 Census).

57% of the participants identified themselves as male, 41% as female, 1% as transgender. 36% of the attendants were between age of 31 to 40, 31% from 21 to 30, 27% of the citizens were baby boomers aged between 41 and 60, 2% were between 60 and 70, 4%, were under 21. 40% of the participants had finished college, 21% had graduate or postgraduate degrees. These numbers indicate the amazingly diverse mix of people attending the event. And most were dressed in elaborate costumes for the occasion at some time or another.

Rejuveniles

"... *rejuvenile* describes people who cultivate tastes and mind-sets traditionally associated with those younger than themselves... and rejuveniles are challenging a rarely examined assumption: that one's age should dictate one's activities, social group, and mind set" (Noxon, 2006, p.4).

To understand the phenomena of dressing up in costumes at Burning Man, I first wanted to understand this large and diverse group of people who would make an effort to dress up in costumes in such a harsh environment.

After analyzing the interviews, my own journal and the notes from the field observation, I discovered that first and foremost, Burning Man attendees are hard core rejuveniles. This term was invented by Christopher Noxon in his book *Rejuvenile; Kickball, Cartoons, Cupcakes, and the Reinvention of the American Grown-up* (2006):

It's hard to imagine adults in previous eras so unashamedly indulging their inner children. But these are not the adults of twenty years ago. They constitute a new breed of adult, identified by a determination to remain playful, energetic, and flexible in the face of adult responsibilities. Whether buying cars marketed to consumers half their age, dressing in baby-doll fashions, or bonding over games like Twister or stickball, this new band of grown-ups refuses to give up things they never stopped loving, or revels in things they were denied or never got around to as children. Most have busy lives and adult responsibilities. Many have children of their own. They are not stunted adolescents. They are something new: juveniles. (p.2)

At times I have heard Burners compare Burning Man to Adult Disneyland, Disneyland in reverse, or Disneyland without commerce and interestingly, Noxon (2006) mentions Disney in his book as “the most influential juvenile of the twentieth century, the person most responsible for the blurring of adult and child sensibilities” (p.4).

The theme of being an adult and reflecting on one's inner child, sometimes even on a daily basis, came up in the interviews I conducted. For example, Zoë told me:

...somewhere in you there's a five year old that just wakes up and says I want to wear purple stripes today and I said I think that's a lot of what makes me wear what I wear...it's 'cuz there's that five year old in me that wants to wear cat ears or wants to wear crinoline..., and, sometimes it definitely is childhood. I was kind of surprised at the superhero that I made. It was very ... I, I hadn't, I don't think that I had ever made a superhero costume so that one was kind of fun. That one was very like “I am five and I can fly”, and you ask me “I can fly...” oh, no you can't ... “Yes I can” Like there was just no more that nervy ridiculousness that there's no dislocation as a child to “you can't do something”. It was like, “of course you can” (personal interview, February 15, 2007).

Another Burner, Beige Dude, said during the interview: “...well, as an adult, I'm still a kid... You know, despite the fact I can vote and do all the other things. Drive a car... I'm still kind of a kid... you know...” (personal interview, November 14, 2006). Beige Dude certainly acknowledged childlike characteristics in himself.

One of the many attributes that would also classify Burners as juveniles, according to Noxon (2006), is that: “Most are from the

urban upper classes – free time and disposable income being important components in the rejuvenile lifestyle. Those in creative fields and high technology are more likely to display rejuvenile tendencies” (p. 5). According to 2004 census data 24% of the participants earned between 25, 000 to 49, 999 dollars, 14% earned between 50, 000 and 74, 999, 9% between \$75, 000 and \$99, 999, moreover, 11% of participants claimed to earn more than \$100, 000 annually.

After attending Burning Man, reading various papers, and analyzing my own research materials, I claim that Burners are an extremely diverse group of people that are incredibly difficult to classify. As Davis (2005) states: “Black Rock cliché has it that you can’t say anything very penetrating about Burning Man because its diversity and contradictions undermine any generalization you might be tempted to make...” and “...by setting our bullshit detectors on high alert, Burners ward off pretension, self-consciousness, and all of the prepackaged “experiences” that have come to define late capitalist objectivity. On the playa, we are united in our evasion of significance” (p. 15).

The costumes

“At Burning Man, the human body itself becomes another blank canvas on which to express creativity. In addition to widespread nudity, body painting, and outrageous clothing, there are amazing costumes on display, from eight-foot-tall satyrs to glowing machine men to aliens. And these costumes are usually not mere decorations, but are employed in all manner of performance that is constantly happening – dance, theater, ritual, music, and so on. (Sylvan, 2005, p.4)

Many fascinating themes emerged from the interviews, more than I could possibly discuss in this paper. However the themes that stood out were the hybridization and juxtaposition of images in costumes, the transformative power of a costume, and the costume as a communicator.

Merging and juxtaposing concepts

Creatively playing with, merging and contrasting identities and symbolic meanings as the costume evolves is one of the most significant themes I derived from the interviews. For example, the participants’ creativity often would go way beyond the usual perception of a given character. Participants would play with costumes by mutating,

transforming and merging various characters to achieve maximum visual impact of the costume and tease the preconceived notions of a given image. For example, as you strolled by a fully built and functional Thunderdome from a Mad Max movie, you could encounter Red Riding Hood dressed up as a fierce and gruesome combatant, ready to fight her Wolf, which could look like a fragile forest fairy with translucent dragonfly wings. For example, Xavier, another Burner who claimed to dress up in costumes on regular basis, told me:

... one year I was to take ... a pair of leopard print ... fabric and sew on top of jogging pants to make ... the idea was to make a smurf, but it wasn't just a smurf, it was twisting that notion to be the illegitimate love smurf of Hefty the ... 'Hefty the Smurf' and Azriel the Cat. So my entire upper body was painted blue and ... the bottom was the leopard printed pant... (personal interview, February 10, 2007)

This theme powerfully intertwines two other themes – the creative process of the designer and costume as a visual communicator. For example, Beige Dude describes the process of designing a costume as he simultaneously composes a powerful symbolic idea that the costume will communicate:

Sometimes, like I said, you're looking for one thing, ya know, totally different concept comes out. Out, like, out of... you stumble upon something and it's like "wow, okay well that's what this is going to be..." I was looking for... I was going to be Santa Claus this year, but instead, I ended up as a boxer, or whatever, you know like there's something else that's sort of comes because I go into a department store and, as I'm looking for Santa Claus related things, I go down the sporting goods aisle and I find a pair of boxing gloves, and now I'm 'Scrapper Claus: 'will fight for peace'. That sort of thing, you know, like that's, that's how a lot of these costumes come about. (personal interview, November 14, 2006)

Here we have an example of Beige Dude creatively considering 'Santa Claus related things' to build the costume, at the same time playing with and merging contrasting symbolic icons of Santa Claus, Fight and Peace into one costume. He recognizes that the red boxing gloves could become this oxymoronic prop to manifest the idea of human longing for Peace on Earth and the sometimes dubious ways of achieving it.

Eric Davis (2005) describes this theme in his paper *Beyond Belief; The Cults of Burning Man*. He calls it the 'Cult of Juxtapose': "A potential

effect of all collage and assemblage, the energy of juxtaposition is released especially where heterogeneous elements are yoked together without the intent to smooth out their differences. Juxtaposition is the fundamental strategy of surrealism and its postmodern descendents, which most certainly include Burning Man” (p.30). He lists several large scale art installations that embody this juxtaposition, for example huge seated Ronald McDonald, gold-painted inflatable sporting a Nepalese third eye. (Davis 2005, p.31)

It is the combination of a child’s mind and adult’s erudition that inspires rejuvenile Burners to create deeply playful costumes that manifest identity, absurdity, instability, irony, merge contrasting concepts, and communicate an idea.

Transformations and communications with costume

A garment exposes the body to a continuous transformation, organizing in signs – that is, in culture – what the natural world possesses as mere potential, as the tendency of the sensible to become significant. Even though we may not often think about it, dressing has to do with feeling of pleasure and with recognizing that such pleasure consists in transforming nature, in ‘working’ it semiotically. (Calefato, 2004, p.2)

I recognized that Burners successfully identify what they want to be transformed into and that they enjoy the dress-up experience and their transformed identity. For example another burner, Epiphany, told me: “I deliberately dress up to bring out parts of me that I wish I would have, for example for the Clown Rampage I dressed up like a really nasty sexual clown. So I was... the costume kind of allowed to liberate myself and let’s say hump other people’s legs which I would normally never do, umm...” (personal interview, February 10, 2007). The transformational power of a costume was also evident in the interview with Beige Dude:

if I’m wearing an eight-year-old girls ballerina outfit you know that I manage to squeeze my hundred-and-eighty-five pound frame into, I feel not only a little different inside but well a lot different on the outside... and where I’m going with this is that some costumes are just... you can’t help but feel different. Coming back to the cowboy-type outfit. When you wear cowboy boots, you can’t help but be...come cowboy-like, and therefore you start to take on some of the attributes or many of the attributes of... of the cowboy. Like in the cowboy, you

become the cowboy... the costume points you in that direction...
(personal interview, November 14, 2006)

Zoë told me :

I've got this one ridiculously big, puffy princess dress that is very similar to something I had that my mother bought me as a party dress as a kid ... And these two dresses are very similar and I wore the pink crazy fabulous dress at my last birthday party because its just so ridiculous ... but when you wear it, it kind of turns it on its head again because you are wearing it with adult intention, so its subverting that child naiveté and twisting it and I think that that's ... there's a lot of that trickster element to costuming and being an adult and wearing it because there's always two levels and you can play off that with other people because people will engage with you as in 'you're innocent', or they'll play with you 'oh, you're *playing* innocent, and I know you're not' so it opens up a range of experience I think and allows you to kind of play in between those two things if you want to... (personal interview, February 15, 2007)

In this example, once again, the costume powerfully intertwines two other themes – Zoë being a rejuvenile, the juxtaposing notions of adult intention versus a child's innocence, twisting these concepts, and communicating this idea to other people.

Another form of transformation and communication happens when a person wearing a costume communicates outwardly his or her inner identities. This type of communication has many layers – first the wearer has communicated with his/her inner self, and then, he/she designs a costume that will visually convey to others his/her inner identity regardless of gender. Like: “our body for others and for ourselves as others” (Calefato, 2004, p.2). This theme of costume as a visual communicator strongly connects with the theme of a costume's transformational power and gender issues. For example in Beige Dude's opinion:

If you look at a lot of guys when they dress up as women or even if they put fishnets on, they become or, at least in their minds, and in their manner, they become more effeminate. And so, you start to see them move differently. I've seen Rob in a tutu or some kind of... just absurdly short women's dress... and... he wasn't quite as gracious but you know he's... There was still that kind of feminine quality. (personal interview, November 14, 2006)

According to Woodward (2002): “The bodies that we inhabit clearly offer limitations to what is possible, to the identities to which we might like to lay claim” (p.104). Wearing a costume to explore a hidden identity can become a “gesture of profound joy and delight, of pleasure in masquerade, and sensual enjoyment. A synaesthetic game.” (Calefato, 2004, p.2)

Durability of the costumes

As a designer, I also noticed how efficiently the participants merged functionality and aesthetics in their outfits. The harsh environment sets many rules for dress:

The Black Rock Desert is a thoroughly flat prehistoric lakebed composed of a hardpan alkali, ringed by majestic mountains. Daytime temperatures routinely exceed 100°F and the humidity is extremely low, which rapidly and continually wicks the moisture from your body ... At nearly 4,000 feet above sea level the atmosphere provides much less filtering of the sunlight that causes sunburn. As a result, you will burn much faster and more severely than at lower elevations... However, when the sun drops over the horizon, temperatures can quickly plummet fifty degrees. Overnight lows in the 40's can seem exceptionally cold after extensive daytime sun... The playa can be subject to sudden bouts of fierce, unpredictable weather. Likewise, dust storms can prowl the playa in packs or sweep in a broadened front across the plain. Suddenly besetting us, they can produce instant "white outs". Winds can exceed 75 mph... (*Your body versus the elements*)

The participants' costumes have to withstand these extreme weather changes, be comfortable and accommodate bodily functions:

they're very practical and you'll notice this about most of my costumes that there aren't bits and pieces that'll fall off, and there aren't bits and pieces that I have to explain to somebody – this is why I'm doing this, no – it's I wear this because it's practical – boxing gloves as 'Scrapper Claus' well, they double as mitts outside they actually kept my hands warm, they fit a beer quite nicely so they served actually as a beer cooler despite the fact that it was cool outside also on the inside it cooled right and I could take them off and wear them very practically and that's the only sort of accessory that I have put on a costume because otherwise the costume itself I try to morph into and I try to use it for its practical purposes so if it's got side pockets or if it's got little hideaway areas and I always make sure that there are these things, umm, then I use them but I'm very comfortable using them – I can ride my bike. I test them out before I go out, and if I don't feel

comfortable in them, if I don't think I can wear them for an entire night then I don't wear them. (Beige Dude, personal interview, November 14, 2006)

Another strict requirement that has to be considered when building costumes is that it is a 'Leave No Trace' event. For example wearing a feather boa would be strongly discouraged. Anything that could possibly fall off the costume could potentially become garbage picked up by wind.

The environment at Black Rock City is an amazing test ground for textiles, notions and accessories. I clearly saw products that could stand up to this challenge.

Conclusion

After this research, I still cannot claim that I know all the reasons why people dress up in costumes. I feel as if I have just scratched the surface of an incredibly interesting phenomenon of humans – the desire to alter their appearance and express themselves through dressing-up.

Radical inclusion is one of the guiding principles of Burning Man, and no prerequisites exist for participation in the community (*10 Principles*), and participants often embrace this principle to the extreme. At Burning Man “one is bound by the limits of one’s imagination, and these limits seem to be temporarily suspended out on “the playa” (Sylvan, 2005, p.4). This radical inclusion and suspended limits to imagination have made it possible for the Burners to unleash their creative powers when building costumes. There humans become a work of art on so many levels. This human phenomenon of dressing-up in costumes is worth investigating further.

Another reason to continue with my research is that I found how deeply satisfying it is for my participants to tell their costuming stories. Reflecting on how they create costumes and transform their identities often allowed the participants to realize their creative potential.

From a marketer’s and designer’s point of view, further trend research would allow us to tap into this new and exciting market – ageless juveniles. Burners are juveniles that have managed “to be both productive and spontaneous, effective and serendipitous, smart and silly” (Noxon, 2006, p. 248). They have grown up without getting old, and have the “power to radically alter our conception of maturity”

(Noxon, 2006, p. 248). Nevertheless, as I identify this market segment, I hope Burning Man will never be commercialized.

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