

book review

**Festive Emplacements**  
**Burning Man and Goa Trance**

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Rachel Bowditch

*On The Edge of Utopia: Performance and Ritual at Burning Man*

Seagull Books, London, New York and Calcutta, 2010

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RRP £24; US\$35 (hb)

Graham St John (ed.)

*The Local Scenes and Global Culture of Psytrance*

Routledge, New York and London, 2010

ISBN 9780415876964

RRP £75 (hb)

November 2010, and Britain's *Observer* announces the 'return of underground rave culture' following a sizeable event the previous week in central London. The article locates this 'return' within the larger picture of increased discontent in the United Kingdom in the face of massive budget cuts, including conspicuously in higher education. These cuts are being made alongside a substantial increase in student fees (despite pre-election promises from the ruling coalition partners, the Liberal

Democrats, that they would oppose any such moves). Students taking to the nation's snowy streets present the kinds of iconic images of protest not seen in the UK since the 1980s; in the left-of-centre *Guardian/Observer* media stable's coverage of the events you can sense a keenness to argue that the country is witnessing a return to protest culture not seen since the heyday of the Thatcher years. Or, in the case of rave events, not since the heady days of the early 1990s and opposition to the John Major Conservative government's 1994 *Criminal Justice Act*. This contained, among many other draconian measures, the notorious 'anti rave' clause cracking down on outdoor events characterised by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats—which strangely enough would also make a folk devil out of waltzes or Morris dancing if scrupulously applied. So while the article does include some veiled nods to the idea that electronic dance music (EDM) scenes never totally died away, the clear preferred reading of the piece as announced loud and proud in the title is that recession-driven austerity, the decentralised ease of online promotion and the re-election of a Conservative government, is giving rise to a 'return of underground rave culture'. To bring the point home, a break-out box at the bottom of the page offers a quick chronological overview of iconic moral panic generating youth culture: the 1920s' 'Bright Young Things', the Teddy Boys, Mods and Rockers, and Punks.

But the tone of 'they're back' does a huge injustice to the strength and ongoing persistence of 'underground'—let alone Main Street—places, events, venues and sounds EDM and rave-derived sociality have given rise to, and which have continued alive and well into the 'noughties'. Two recently released volumes are a clear testament to this: Rachel Bowditch's monograph, *On The Edge of Utopia* and Graham St John's latest anthology, *The Local Scenes and Global Culture of Psytrance*. Indeed, St John's oeuvre in particular is evidence of the EDM scene's longevity in its various incarnations. This book is but the latest in a line of publications which includes the monograph *Technomad: Global Raving Countercultures* (Equinox, 2009), the anthologies *Victor Turner and Contemporary Cultural Performance* (Berghahn, 2008), *Rave Culture and Religion* (Routledge, 2004), and *Free NRG: Notes From the Edge of the Dancefloor* (Common Ground, 2001), not to mention his editorship of the online *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture*. Certainly, St John's work on Burning Man is a notable omission

from Bowditch's *On The Edge of Utopia*. Fraught links between EDM cultures (especially psytrance, see, for example, Ryan in St John (ed.)) and the Burning Man Festival are clearly there, a connection even present in *Observer* article: 'The [London] gig was organised by Scumtek, a grassroots movement that originated from squats and is closely linked to Teknival, a dance music subculture that fuses elements of rave, traveller culture and America's Burning Man festival scene'.<sup>1</sup>

But while the links are strong, they are not seamless. Tensions between the newer rave culture and the original west coast hippy originators of Burning Man remain, and to an extent are reflected in Bowditch's work where the few references to the rave camps are largely negative. But what she does bring to the book is her own expertise and particular interest in performance—Bowditch is herself a performer, director and performance studies scholar, and the book is published as part of Seagull Books' Enactments series dedicated to studies of performance, broadly defined. Thus, what unites the two books is less a focus on EDM and more a strong focus on the agency of place in creating a 'vibe' and/or community: for Bowditch, the temporary Black Rock City which emerges annually out of the play of the Nevada desert; in the St John anthology *Goa*, both itself and also as psytrance, has become experienced through a myriad of local sites and communities. In music studies, this has been theorised via the lens of Will Straw's 'scenes', and this is strongly evident in the St John anthology, whereas in *On The Edge of Utopia* uses a broader theoretical focus to interpret the creation of festive space in the desert.

*On The Edge of Utopia* draws upon the author's repeated visits to the Burning Man Festival (across 2001 to 2008) to offer us an analysis narratively structured around the temporality of the event itself—from its history, through to early preparations, arrival, daily rhythms, the peak fire events, packing up and moving on. Thus the book in many ways parallels the actual experience of attending Burning Man. Methodologically, it is principally ethnographic, incorporating interviews as well as the 'raw' (xxiii) immediacy of the author's own field notes, Partially inspired by the work of Deirdre Sklar, this is all brought together to think about how performance studies can be usefully applied within a participant-observation methodology. Among other things, this means that during interviews, in the author's own words, 'the "subjects" related to me on an artist-to-artist level'. (xxiii) This certainly allows the author insider entree into the research site, but it

can also potentially lead to a tendency to identify with interviewees to the point of losing analytical distance, something I don't think this book always overcomes. The focus on identifying notable and high profile individuals within the movement also goes a long way in explaining the absence of rave culture/camps from the analysis; these being sites where, ideally at least, participation and the dancing crowd, absence and disappearance are the focus. On the upside, however, the focus on performance does draw attention to the centrality of participation and not voyeurism as the appropriate mode of festival engagement. It also allows for significant attention to be paid to 'the work of play' (98–100) which goes into such festival attendance; that is, the effort which goes into the 'effortless' appearance of this carnivalesque time out from quotidian workday lives.

Following on from the work of de Certeau ('walking the city') and, especially, Pearson and Shank and their idea of 'desire mapping', the lovingly rebuilt space of the temporary city itself looms large in the story, with its spatial organisation and material realities furnishing it with agency within the overall experience of each year's event. Given that the site needs to be planned out in advance to accommodate the complex event infrastructure, it is most certainly not a massive, unplanned free-for-all, and quite a bit of the book valuably outlines the labour and thinking around utopic city arrangement, and how this unfolds experimentally in the desert. As Bowditch observes, this is not always easy when sexual freedom is a long-standing tenet of the festival, most fully realised in the number of camps organised around openly exploring various sexual practices. Now these sites are increasingly co-existing with sites dedicated to children and families as not only the event but its participants, grow and evolve. How to separate such spaces without compromising the event remains an ongoing challenge. The two main discourses the author sees as running through the text are identified as ritual and performance. The analysis looks at how physically moving into, occupying and leaving the site is conducted within a frame that pays attention to the ways each stage of this process also represents a psychic movement, with 'rituals' of welcome, return and initiation built into the immersive experience. The chapter 'Reinventing Ritual in Black Rock City' is particularly strong on this aspect. It is thus logical that the work of not only de Certeau, but also Victor Turner, Bakhtin, Foucault and Caillois, is repeatedly alluded

to in making sense of the event. However, engagement with writing on New Age movements and/or cultural appropriation is absent.

Bowditch offers a thorough overview of Burning Man from the first event held in 1986 on the beach in San Francisco, through to the present and the fifty thousand people who annually descend on the Nevada desert site. With its originary stories strongly influenced by the actions and memories of a number of key figures, negotiating the complex politics, egos and recollections of this is not an easy task but Bowditch acknowledges the difficulties and appears to negotiate them with some dexterity. Today, the event retains its largely white, middle-class (xxii and 23) counter-cultural demographic. Classic tensions and the 'growing pains' which surround any previously small, underground event that grows exponentially are a constant companion on this journey, a definite strength of the account. Burning Man attendances have grown from twenty people in 1986, through eight thousand in 1996, to almost thirty-nine thousand in 2006 and just shy of fifty thousand in 2008. (45) A tragic death at the festival in 1996 was a catalysing moment: something previously organised by a bunch of friends had grown too large for self-regulating informality and a greater degree of professionalism and organisation was recognised as necessary—not without opposition. As a result, Burning Man Festival was set up as a for-profit business 'owned' and run by key foundational players. This had obvious ramifications in terms of disaffection among the formative group, as well as latter participants, who feel the original political, cultural and non-commercial meanings behind the event are being sold out.

Some tensions have also been created by the central anti-commercial focus of the festival, a key part of its shared definition of utopia. To this day, the only trading sites allowed on site are the Center Camp Café, run since the early days by one of the elder statespeople of Black Rock City, and the ice stand (Camp Artica). The irony, however, is that the kinds of preparation required for the week on the playa—both of essential survival items (food, water, shelter), and more contentiously of 'fun' preparation (costumes, decorations and especially the ubiquitous 'gifts' to be exchanged with strangers as a key part of the interactive potlatch economy of the festival)—involves the commercial purchase of huge amounts of stuff, maybe not bought on the playa but certainly brought onto it, to facilitate the carnivalesque. This tension and the constant battle against 'MOOP' (matter out of place) and the effort

put into leaving the site as unmarked by the intense human activity as possible is another valuable focus of Bowditch's discussion.

The book offers an intelligent overview of Burning Man, rather than a sustained deep theoretical analysis—theoretical ideas 'dipped' into rather than systemically applied. It is of considerable value to anyone with even a passing interest in not only this event but in contemporary eruptions of the carnivalesque or utopian community more broadly. Overall, the structure of the book works well, furnishing the reader with a feeling of immersion, a sense of the event playing out in (real) time. This works effectively to convey, perhaps as much as can be done in words, a sense of the ritual journey Burning Man is all about for its participants. The author clearly loves the festival, although no reference is made to ever participating in the dance spaces, leaving the reader with no sense of this experience of the playa. Where brief references are made to the rave/techno camps, they are frequently negative such as the casting of raves as passive consumer events akin to a concert (118) or as the camp's main offenders when it comes to leaving behind MOOP on the playa. (308) More positively, in furnishing the reader with a feel for the daily rhythms of the city, Bowditch acknowledges the role played by the rave camps, located at the city's edges, in firing up the camp's energy levels through the night where the heat of the day subsides and most of the festival's action occurs. (127)

A more consistently positive and sound-focused story of place and EDM music emerges in the chapters collected together in *The Local Scenes and Global Culture of Psytrance*. What unites the books, however, is the argument put in the introduction by St John, that Goa trance, as distinct from other forms of the genre, is most accurately linked back to festival rather than club culture. (2) Mobility has always been central to psytrance, (8) and as such the chapters presented in this volume represent the transnational spread of Goa trance from its original site to key sites comprising their own local scenes around the globe including Australia, Czech Republic, Japan, Israel, Italy, Portugal, the United Kingdom and the United States. Psytrance's complex transnationalism, as well as its relationship to LSD and other psychedelic substances (hence the 'psy'), are explored here by twelve authors also from around the globe. Psytrance's origins are traced back to Goa's sixties' hippy trail scene, when the site was a key stop-off point for those undertaking the overland journey between Europe and Australasia. In this book, too, a generally diachronic

organising frame is employed, with the chapters grouped in sections that start us off at the parent 'original site of becoming' (1) of Goa trance, the former Portuguese colony of Goa on India's south west coast. As St John contends in the introduction, psytrance challenges traditional subcultural analytical models on a number of counts, but notably in terms of its wide age profile—it's not simply a young person's scene. As a result, he posits Maffesoli's neo-tribes and cosmopolitanism as more useful theoretical models.

The first section offers an overview of Goa trance itself. Luther Elliott undertakes an interesting (but too brief) use of David Harvey to examine how local scenes can find themselves in cycles of commoditisation, before moving on to the wider theoretical ideas underpinning the rest of the chapter, notably Appadurai and 'structures of feeling'. He outlines Goa's antecedents in the psychedelic culture of San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury scene (a further link to Burning Man), before moving on to the first hippie trail visitors' arrival in Goa in 1963. These were shortly followed by the psychedelic set, leading to a noticeable rise in Indian international tourism in the period 1967 to 1971. (26) Elliott then goes on to discuss the inevitable tensions between local culture, nascent commercialism and overly romantic attitudes towards locals held by travellers. Goa trance *per se* he sees arriving with a new group of travellers in the late 1980s/early 1990s who brought the attitudes and electronic sounds of the newly emerging rave culture to mix in with the psychedelic scene. The chapter furnishes the volume with a grounding overview of the Goa vibe or 'state of mind', covering reasons for the relative absence of early Goa trance recordings, the significance of local Indian domestic tourism (Elliott's claims for the degree of involvement is challenged by subsequent author, Saldanha, but supported by the following chapter from D'Andrea), and the involvement and eventual loss of authenticity. D'Andrea's chapter focuses on understanding the maturation or decline of advanced scenes, employing Goa as its central case study. In so doing, the chapter tries to cover too much ground too quickly, glossing over complex theoretical issues around scenes, subcultures and cycles of growth and decline. Saldanha undertakes in some ways a similar analysis but narrows his focus and introduces the idea of 'scene suicide' to understand the demise of the original Goa moment. He traces the beginning of the decline to the

period coinciding with the arrival of Israelis straight out of their compulsory military service, and uses Turner to examine their experience.

Part Two outlines the transnational shift from 'Goa' to 'Psytrance' through discussions of a number of rhizomatic eruptions of the sound and culture, mostly in the United Kingdom. The section opens with a chapter from scholar and DJ/musician Hillegonda Rietveld that unpacks the beat itself, examining how it is made and how its form afforded it transnational appeal. The beat's geographical trajectory is thus explored in terms of 'lines of flight' including its intersection with Ibiza's EDM sounds. Charles de Ledesma homes in on UK trance, which he identifies as central to the genre. The chapter valuably develops how technology (for example the DAT tapes which DJs in Goa had to rely upon given the local weather's unforgiving effects on vinyl) played a key role as an agent itself in determining the kinds of generic features of the psytrance sound. An overview of many of the key players in the UK trance scenes, such as the Dragonfly label, can be found in this chapter. The next chapter, by Lindop, also focuses on UK psytrance and asks the question 'what is psytrance?' Though Lindrop starts with a focus on sound, the piece moves into a greater focus on the visual ambience of venue spaces; the latter, the author argues, plays a key role in bringing out the 'psy' side of the sounds. The final chapter in this section foreshadows the rest of the book as it brings in other key transnational sites of psytrance activity: in this instance, Israel. At the heart of this chapter are the local scene's origins in replicating at home the post-army service experience of backpacking overseas; an experience and scene Schmidt sees as defined by its hedonism and desire for escape rather than any quest for a spiritual experience, and which the author thus also believes does nothing to challenge the mainstream Israeli society participants apparently seek to escape from.

Part Three continues the journey started in Part Two and extends trance's reach into newer sites where its sounds, and the liminality and carnivalesque of the scene, are experienced in the Czech Republic, Italy, Australia and online. Vito draws upon ethnographic fieldwork to offer an insight into the relatively new (since 2000) Czech psytrance scene. Drawing upon the notion of 'demence' ('ritualised dementia', 151), the chapter explores the Czech scene's emphasis upon metaphysical madness and the carnivalesque (rather than activism or spirituality) in events organised in idyllic rural locations to help facilitate this detachment from the everyday. Baldini's



chapter maps the Tuscan psytrance scene onto Euripides' *The Bacchae*, situated in terms of the early Goa scene and the role of sadhus (wandering holy men) within it. In drawing upon *The Bacchae* and the animosity and fear displayed towards them, the chapter offers an innovative take on the opposition EDM events can often face from local communities. Ryan's chapter traces the emergence of trance and the role of the internet which, she points out, took off at a similar time. In a discussion which is also perhaps a little too wide-ranging, this chapter moves us into the territory of the internet as public sphere, one which has proved a rich breeding ground for alternative ideas (including the Burning Man Festival which the author also refers to). Lambert locates Australian psytrance as consisting in two primary locations: bush doofs (outdoor EDM events) and online discussion forums. Weaving the two together, he discusses how the latter is a key site for the establishment and maintenance of the collective memory of the local scene; that is, the scene narrative. The final chapter by the editor, St John, operates as something of a conclusion, bringing the various threads of the book together. Harking back to this anthology's links to Bowditch's book, he argues that the Turnerian 'hyperliminality' of psytrance is best seen via its festivals. Offering a critique of shallow applications of Turner within psytrance analysis, he argues that psytrance is best viewed as a immersive 'social universe that is liminalised, in which spontaneity and indeterminacy are pursued and reanimated in consequential lifestyle and consumer practices', (226) rather than simply operating as a kind of Bakhtinian release of built up social and political pressure.

Both books offer excellent overviews of the scenes they cover and can be strongly recommended for anyone seeking to find out more about Burning Man or psytrance respectively. Indeed, *On The Edge of Utopia* operates best as a critical description of the annual desert pilgrimage, one easily accessible to a non-academic readership. With the benefit of multiple authors, case studies and perspectives, *The Local Scenes and Global Culture of Psytrance* goes a little further critically and represents a valuable contribution to academic understandings of, and writing about, the ongoing strength of EDM cultures.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Townsend, 'Return of Underground Rave Culture is Fuelled by the Recession and Facebook', *Observer*, 11 November 2010, In Focus, p. 36.