Another Example from Popular Culture

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We have already applied this perspective to Radway's Smithton women. Indeed, that was an obvious example: in their case, the narrative text-worlds were literally narratives, romance novels. But what about other forms of popular culture that are not so dependent on stories? Perhaps another example may prove helpful. We shall explore the potent mix of mind-altering drugs and dance music popular in London during the late 80s. This example may prove more challenging, since narrative plays so little a part in dance music. Perhaps we shall find that there are such things as non-narrative or "quasi-narrative" text-worlds that function like narrative text-worlds. In this way, we shall see how it too functions as a popular religion.

"Shoom": The Chosen Few of the 80s London Acid-House Scene

Popular cultural religion manifests itself in amazing diversity. One could not get much further from mid-western American housewives than Shoom, one of the most exclusive of the Acid-House clubs in London during the closing years of the 1980s. But there are parallel religious motifs nonetheless.

Mireille Silcott chronicles the history of rave music in America (and to a lesser extent, Britain), mostly through personal interviews, in *Rave America: New School Dancescapes*.[72] House music grew out of disco, and it highlights the role of DJ-as-creator, not just playing records, but adding his own elements into the mix to create a signature sound, even creating his own songs over what he was playing.[73] "Acid House" music (that is, House music with psychedelic synthesizer effects added) had been imported to England from the U.S. (particularly Chicago and Detroit) in 1986-87 by way of the dance clubs at the Spanish resort island of Ibiza. In Ibiza it was mixed with the drug ecstasy (commonly known as "E").[74] This was the historical root of the mass-raves of the infamous British "Summer of Love" of 1988. A popular cultural phenomenon to be sure, but a religious one? Let us explore it, focusing on one club in particular, using the biblical appropriation of Ricoeur's narrative theory that I delineated above.

1. What is the pre-narrative context out of which this popular cultural text-world emerges? For the London youth of the late 80s, it was a feeling of isolation, marginalization and political disaffection bordering on despair. A music magazine editor, nicknamed "Push," covered the dance club scene for a couple of British music weeklies in the late 80s. Commenting on the explosion of Acid House in London, Push remarked,

> We were going on ten years of Thatcherism and a government who didn't give a [explicative deleted] about this country's youth. Everybody I knew grew up with this total hatred of Thatcherism but at the same time felt completely unable to do anything about it—there was just this feeling of no hope. England's youth needed release and escape.[75]

The tensions of everyday life provoked a religious response from the Smithton women. Analogous tensions had the same effect on the London youth of that period. And just as the Smithton women's tensions had a revelational significance, I would argue that the same is true in this case. The powerlessness and despair, even if only temporary or caused by a specific political regime, still points past itself toward the "wrath of God" mentioned in Romans 1. From a Christian theological perspective, this disaffection with Thatcherism and experience of exclusion from society was an experience of hell writ small, where they will experience exclusion eternally (unless repentance breaks this pattern of alienation). The hellishness of experience functions as a revelation of hell (God's wrath eternalized) itself.[76]

2. So what was the religious text-world, the religious response to this revelational provocation that emerged? Unlike the preceding example, we have no clearly narrative text-world like a popular romance book. But we do have “texts” in a looser sense. The music itself, while not narrative, was a text of sorts designed to guide the dance-experience, as was the drug that was taken during dancing, as was the décor of the clubs in which all of this took place, and the clothing styles worn by the DJs and dancers. Though the music lacks rich lyrical content (the lyrics are usually simple phrases repeated over and over), and even significant musical development (the music is repetitive, using a heavy synthesized bass line and insistent beat), it does build a simple musical architecture that dancers can inhabit, an enclosed sonic environment. The music creates its own “world” for habitation.

The drug ecstasy (MDMA)[77] played a significant role in this “enclosed world.” First used by New Agey American psychotherapists in the 70s for marriage counseling and for patients suffering from anxiety or depression, it soon became popular for recreational use. Ecstasy releases the neurotransmitter serotonin which floods the synapses, leading to heightened sensory awareness (things look, feel, sound, and taste better and more intense), along with a sense of well-being, of empathy and closeness with others, even of euphoric connection.[78] Ecstasy spread into the general population as a mellow “bonding drug” (it was legal to purchase in the U.S. until 1985), and was first used as a dance drug in Dallas clubs.[79] It came to London via Ibiza, where it was popular with the hippie/psychedelic crowd in the late 80s. Several London DJs were summering in Ibiza and were completely inspired by the combination of open-air disco, drug-induced euphoria, dance music, and emotional openness. They came back to London in the fall of 1987 and sought to recreate their summer experience by founding several exclusive dance clubs.[80]

The most revered of these clubs was Shoom, founded by DJ Danny Rampling in December of 1987.[81] Shoom tried to recreate the psychedelic Ibiza experience even in what its patrons wore. Loose, summery clothing, wire-rimmed glasses, unisex ponytails, hand-painted T-shirts, and smiley-faces were everywhere.[82] The attitude was one of unbounded optimism: like the hippies of the 60s, Shoomers loved everyone, and they were going to change the world. The ubiquitous feeling was one of childish innocence: the dancers often brought toys into Shoom, and Rampling and his wife would often serve popsicles. The club was filled with a strawberry-flavored smoke, which added to the dreamlike atmosphere, the feeling of togetherness in a world apart.[83]

The music, the ecstasy, and the club all became elements to create something very like a fantastic text-world, and one with religious implications, ready for ritual inhabitation. So even though there was no narrative text-world, there was something very much like a narrative text-world forming. What Shoom lacked in specific plot, it made up for with its own sense of timelessness, its own unique sense of space, its own mood.[84]

3. How was this world entered, and how is that habitation religious? Can dance and dress and drug-taking function as religious ritual? The terms in which early patrons and DJs described the Shoom experience certainly have religious and ritualistic connotations. DJ Mark Moore says, “When dancing at Shoom, all you could do was fall into your own trance,”[85] conveying something very close to the way religious ritual creates a sense of sacred space and time, of transcending the everyday. Further, the early patrons protected Shoom as if it were a holy shrine. Many knew about Shoom, but only a select few were chosen to join. The address was kept a secret so that only those in the know could find it. Nick Spiers, one of the Shoom “elect,” said, “There was a feeling among the people at Shoom that if too many found out about it, it would ruin things. Shoom was so special and optimistic, we really felt like we had discovered the secret of the ages.”[86] Shoom ritualistically built its own sense of community (communitas), and its own sense of personal transformation. People were transformed from despairing disaffected youths to a warm loving family (at least while the dancing lasted). Spiers relates:

> People would just come up to you and hug you, smiling like mad, asking if you were enjoying your night. Shoomers brought toys and silly things like whistles into the club—it seems stupid now, but then it was all about this huggyness, this childlike aspect of taking E for the first time and being reborn. It was amazing. In England, people did not usually hug strangers and

things like that.[87]

People were transformed by this world (or refigured, to use Ricoeur's terminology), if only for a little while. And the terms with which they described the transformation are unmistakably religious ("secret of the ages," "being reborn"). It is not too much of an overstatement to say that this religious text-world, the world of Shoom, became a church of sorts, and members gained entrance into the brotherhood through the sacrament of E and the participatory ritual of dancing to Acid House music.

Notice how carefully tailored this text-world and ritual participation corresponds to the revelational provocation. London youths felt like outsiders in their own society. Shoom gave a select few a place to come inside. They felt hopeless and alone. The Shoom experience gave them euphoric hope and a community. It is an almost perfectly contextualized religious experience. According to the theoretical framework of the threefold mimesis, Shoom (and, by extension, the whole Acid House scene of the late 80s) had a pre-narrative, general revelational provocation and structure of youth disaffection (mimesis1), a coherent, religious text-world comprising music, drugs, and a general aesthetic (mimesis2), and a ritual means of habitation, through dancing and drug-taking (mimesis3). Shoom, like romance reading for the Smithton women, counts as an alternative religion.

Notes...

[72] Mireille Silcott, "Musical Roots and Reinvention: From the Disco to Storm Rave," chap. in *Rave America: New School Dancescapes* (Toronto, ON: ECW Press, 1999), 17-46.
[73] For a more detailed description of Acid House, see the technoguide website (accessed 13 September 2005), [1].
[74] Actually, ecstasy had been used as a dance drug earlier in Dallas nightclubs, but the style of the mix of dance and the drug was completely Ibiza. See ibid., 27, 30-31.
[75] Silcott, 33.
[76] It is important to note that the pre-narrative context (general revelation) need not always be negative, despite the examples I have chosen (the patriarchal oppression of the Smithton women, the political disaffection of the Shoomers). General revelational provocation to popular cultural religion can also be positive. Think of, for example, the way natural beauty can inspire New Age type nature worship; or how parental love and concern can lead to an idolization of the family; how a concern for social justice can lead to projecting onto the state god-like powers; how a concern for fair-play can lead to an idolization of the free-market; how the experience of romantic love can lead to a modern day worship of Eros, and so on. Any created structure can lead to idolatry. See above, footnote 25.
[77] MDMA stands for Ecstasy's chemical composition, 3,4 methylenedioxymethylamphetamine. See Silcott, 29.
[78] Silcott, 30.
[79] Silcott, 29-30.
[80] Silcott, 30-1.
[81] Silcott, 31.
[82] Silcott, 32.
[83] Silcott, 32.
[84] By "mood," I mean to invoke Northrup Frye's use of the term as an emotional unity that emerges from the imaginative landscape of a poem. See Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 74, 80-1.
[85] Silcott, 32.
[86] Silcott, 33.
[87] Silcott, 32.

Links:
[1] http://www.turnau.cz/book/export/html/32