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HOLY MADNESS

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I've been told that's it's the oldest and the last rock & roll venue in town and therefore a good place to begin this story. It's in Belville just off the N1, surrounded by factories and car yards. The drink of choice is brandy and coke, the music is Dolly Parton and Kenny Rogers' "Islands in the Stream" and the kids are dancing *langarm* anticlockwise into the past. I feel like dropping to my knees and weeping at the innocence of it all but then I've always been a sucker for country and western. Instead I make my way to the bar where one of the regulars explains how to get laid: you ask a girl to dance (you'll always get at least one dance) and if she likes you, you might persuade her to have dinner after or go to another club and maybe end the night with some heavy breathing in the car (because probably you both still live with your parents) . It costs a lot less than an escort, the guy at the bar tells me. But why are there no coloured people here? I ask. They are completely welcome, I am told, " we let you in didn't we?" And the coloureds? "They don't like *lang-arm* ". Well it's not quite rock and roll but it will do.

On the sixth floor of a empty city building is a venue of another kind. Painted on the floor and walls are fractals, aboriginal symbols and a monkey called Hanuman, the Hindu god of chaos; and on the ceiling, projected images of stars and space ships . On the dance floor everyone dances their own dance and whoever is not dancing or pacing or rocking or making strange pointing

gestures seems to be asleep on white cushions. In fact, the entire spaceship is filled with huddled bodies as if in suspended animation for an interstellar journey. You can't ask anyone to dance and people are drinking only water - what is going on?

As dawn approaches and the music increases in volume, the slumberers rise and move to the dance floor. There is a kind of heraldic moment, a change in beat, and we seem to have reached a breakthrough. "I think the space ship has landed," I say to someone. "No," she says, "we're about to take off."

When the light comes up and the nylon drapes and sugar sack cushions are revealed it is clear that the journey has been one of mind. "You realise that the plants are plastic and that the really exciting rainbow thing you were playing with was just a piece of white nylon stuff under the laser lights" is the description one dancer gives me. Not that this means it's entirely unreal. One can leave the planet simply by raising one's vibration level to higher octave, I am told, provided one has the right conditions. Problem is, the same conditions will allow extra-terrestrials to land and not everyone thinks they have good intentions. Also, no one's quite sure yet what these right conditions are except that they may have something to do with the rave.

A remote desert pan perfect for an extra-terrestrial landing is the site for a rave party celebrating the summer equinox. I spend my time staring at a tortoise slowly making its way across the pan. The pattern of its shell has the same fractal appearance as the parched earth. The last event of any significance around here was when Donald Cambell broke the world land speed

record in 1929. They sold a lot of champagne and have been talking about it ever since. Now the locals are at the pan to observe the arrival of another group of people. Hoping to make the most out of it they have set up a well-stocked tent bar but the only thing they seem to be selling is water. A raver explains that they are going to dance all night and at some of the people will take... umm... stay-awake pills.

So now it is 4.00 am and the music is reaching meltdown. A local tries the creeping hand routine around the waist of one of the ravers. She is dressed in hot pants and a tank top. He is wearing shorts, no top and is built like a tank. Strange... she seems totally unaware of him. He puts his arm around her then retracts it nervously as the music reaches a point of paradoxical climax. The laser with its green-cold beam spells out "no future" on the desert floor and a giant straw wickerman with extended fingers and firecrackers strapped to its body bursts into flame. A friend who has recently discovered the rave turns to me: "It is madness, Ruben", he says, "but it's holy madness".

One thing is clear: Rave events are not about pairing off . But if it's not about sex then what is it about?

Leo, an advertising copy writer, describes it as a kind of carnival. "The music has that fantastical feel, the lasers are fantastical and people are dressed in quite a fantastical way. It's like stepping into Alice in Wonderland; a combination of the Mad Hatters party, Plan 9 from Outer Space and a Fellini movie."

Some clarification might be needed at this point - 'rave' is a word that covers many music types and their corresponding cultures. Going from a 'house' party to a

'trance' party is as different as going from Elvis Presley to Pink Floyd. House is about fun but it's pre-sexual fun. Trance is about mind so the material world, the corporeal realm, is not even on the agenda. What they have in common is the technology and the fact that people dance from midnight to dawn.

But what about the recurring theme of aliens and UFOs? To the psychologically-inclined, it's a regression to childhood with the alien as Peter Pan in lycra gone high-tech, a metaphor for the paradisaical world of early childhood.

Others see it as an opportunity for spiritual evolution . "It's as though the Father-God notion were being replaced by the alien-partner notion," says author and spokesperson for the culture Terence McKenna.

To yet others, the sensation of ecstasy is engineered by extraterrestrial beings called the 'greys' in order to manipulate people into an acquiescent state, so as to prepare the way for colonisation, not so much of planet Earth, but of its occupants.

People who claim to have been abducted by aliens generally report that their sexual and reproductive organs were tampered with. (The aliens, you see, are without emotion and are therefore unable to replicate.) Not surprisingly, they often report having experienced a sensation of bliss at the time.

Is this, I wonder, a displacement of some unsatisfied infantile curiosity, an incest fantasy blown out to cosmic proportions? Or is the laser the penetrating proboscis of an inter-galactic sex worker and the rave (excuse my over-stimulated imagination) an invitro fertilisation

programme set to music from another world?

Writer Ashraf Jamal sees it as a retreat from being; an obliteration of self rather than a transcendence. "There is neither triumph nor defeat of will here, only abandonment to a form of music so loud that it can no longer be listened to, only felt." The culture which exists within a "post-industrial corporate space" is, he says, increasingly reliant on the use of sophisticated marketing techniques to sell both the rave party and the substances that go with it.

The bleakness of this view provides me with the resting place I need before catching the next wave that will carry me to the end of my story.

The place is Rustler's Valley, an alternative music centre near the Lesotho border. On a summer night under a starfilled sky in the company of a small group of people I enter into a blissful and timeless zone. The volume is low, there is an open fire, and I have the sudden feeling that in some way my presence here is connected with the positions of the stars overhead and with each person. The closest I can come to describing it is a sudden glimpse of the inner workings of a very complicated clock in which every part is linked in some way with every other. When the dawn comes I and the others are still dancing. I have consumed no mood or mind-altering substances of any kind.

Back in town, the venue is the production room of a large film studio. From a booth at one end, a pencil-thin beam of pure green light crosses the space and then splits into a zillion beams while the overhead lights swivel in time to the music. Alone in his booth, the DJ in headphones is the mad scientist; turning dials, darting

from one set of knobs to another (or he's a worker from Fritz Lang's Metropolis harnessed to the machine, depending on your point of view.) The laser is the inorganic soul of the machine. It's the searching green probe of an alien spaceship, the sidereal roadway disappearing into infinity, the beam of a cosmic projector. We are inside the circuitry. There is nothing left but to move.

And now I can hear the throb of the engines in hyperdrive as the galactic train hurtles through the tunnel. This is Star Wars, and we're dancing it into existence. The music stops for two heartbeats (a change in hyper-dimension?) and then the beat comes crashing back in at double time. We are diving into the vortex at the edge of a black hole and entering the great paradox.

What we are facing, says MacKenna is nothing less than the end of history and he has put a date to it - the year 2012, give or take thirty years. It's the same date as prophesied by the Mayans. Others agree with the date but see the end as an event engineered by outside forces. For them the stakes are high. The more we prepare the openings in the surrounding magnetic fields (so that we can rise to another level ,) the more the sinister 'greys' can get in, but of one thing they are certain: we are reaching the end . In fact, says McKenna, we have already reached it. The opening in the ozone layer is so far advanced as to be irreversible. We are going to have to either fly or fry.

I am sitting outside my tent by the river enjoying the warmth of the morning sun. Gerard, a former priest turned shaman walks down the hill to join me. He sees the trance as dissolving the boundaries between

individuals and the world and therefore as the opportunity for transformation. In traditional cultures the trancer is propelled on a journey under the guidance of a shaman who has travelled that path before. To take that journey without knowing one's purpose and destination is, to him, simply foolish. He is concerned about the lack of direction of the rave: "It's easy to get into the fuzz," he says, "but it's difficult to come out of it with something that's useful." "Bearing gifts in one's body" is the term he uses. To be transformed by the experience you need to be able to integrate it into your normal self and to bring back the results, not just for yourself, but for your community.

I started this article talking about the sex game and here we are back at Rustlers Valley talking about transformation. In fact, if we get right down to it and follow McKenna into the eye of the void, we have no choice but to take the journey right out of Euclidian reality and into the utter alienness of the beyond.

The beat I am hearing is the amplified sound of my heart hitting my eardrums from inside. The condition is called *ecstasis* and that's what this story is about; the bliss of being re-connected to the larger order of things; of breaking through the boundary of one's own separated loneliness without colonising another person, without sex. In a pamphlet given out by RaveSafe, an organisation providing information about mind-altering substances, a cartoon character called Peanut Pete looks down at his shrivelled genitals. "At least it proves it's good E," he says.