

Tomorrowland Around the World 2020:

A Virtual Pilgrimage

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Abstract

The year 2020 was devastating to electronic music festivals and their attendees as the COVID-19 pandemic forced most festivals to cancel their events. Because attendance at these festivals is a sacred experience for many of their participants, this manifested as a loss for participants. Tomorrowland, however, created a virtual festival through filming DJ performances and working with visual effects teams. Tomorrowland Around the World functioned to constitute a global public. This paper will situate the electronic music scene in a spiritual context that promotes the well-being of its participants. Next, the paper will explain how the DJ performances worked with the visual production teams to create a sacred virtual space that promoted unity, love, life, and a general sense of well-being.

Keywords: electronic music, music festival, communication technology, numinous, publics

Introduction

The year 2020 was one like no other as COVID-19 mandated a radical change of daily life for all people, made travel limited, and shut down large gatherings of people around the world. This was particularly challenging for a culture of people who regularly attended (or virtually viewed), electronic music festivals. All of the major global festivals were cancelled, at least in their traditional in-person format. This was devastating for the attendees of the Tomorrowland festival that normally takes place in July in Boom, Belgium. This festival, in most recent years, has drawn 400,000 people over two weekends. It has been a notoriously difficult festival to get tickets for because it has sold out in minutes in recent years. Early in 2020, before the pandemic had struck the globe, Tomorrowland sold out in five minutes (Fielding, 2020). Procuring tickets to this festival has often been represented with great joy, and the attendees have commonly described their festival experiences as life changing. For almost a decade, fans who were unable to get tickets or unable to attend in-person for other reasons were able to view portions of the festival that were live-streamed and/or posted on YouTube or other social media outlets such as Facebook. Therefore, even for the people who could not actually attend the festival in person, the cancellation of the event was extremely disappointing. Nonetheless, the promoters of Tomorrowland organized a two-day virtual festival to compensate for the cancelled event. They promised performances from many of the most popular DJs in the world, (albeit a smaller number than the originally planned festival would have hosted). They also promised a unique virtual experience and were the first to charge an entry fee to an online festival (€20). Many DJs and festivals live-streamed during 2020. Tomorrowland, however, promised something more than DJs live-streaming from their homes, studios, or empty night clubs. Tomorrowland worked for three months, filmed DJ performances on four continents, and had a team of experts situate these performances in a ground-breaking virtual space. As will be explained in this paper, electronic music events have been interpreted to be spiritually evocative and emotionally uplifting to their attendees. This virtual festival sought to relieve the suffering of festival-goers, thereby increasing their well-being. Tomorrowland Around the World (ATW) constituted a public during that weekend, for two weeks after when the festival was available to viewers for a small fee (€12.5) and will continue to constitute a public through the sharing of the DJ performances on various media platforms and streaming services. This paper will examine how the festival spoke to the audience through the narrator, the DJ performances ministered to their audience using different musical techniques and visual effects produced by the technology teams, and public was

constituted connecting people in a time of social isolation.

Literature Review

Electronic music gatherings have long been studied as experiences far more meaningful than mere entertainment or hedonism. The rave, club, and now festival have functioned as spaces that united participants, promoted love, evoked spirituality, and uplifted attendees emotionally. Hagedorn (2006) explained that “an examination of the historical links between religio-ecstatic musical genres and the religious traditions from which they emerged suggests that the link between music and spiritual experience is, for some people, not only profound, but transcendent—and enduring” (p. 489). Electronic music is certainly not the only form of music associated with a spiritual experience, but the connection has been well-documented. Hagedorn further contended that music “helps the listener transcend despair, fulfilling (in an admittedly limited way) one of the purported goals of organized religion” (p. 494). Hutson (2000) applied this specifically to electronic music writing that “the analogy between rave and religion manifests itself at various sites... and rave is thus seen by some as a more ‘direct’ form of spirituality than organized religion” (p. 38). He explained the role of the DJ: “Through a tapestry of mind-bending music, the DJ is said to take the dancers on an overnight journey, with one finger on the pulse of the adventure and the other on the turntables” (p. 38). DJs have been often referred to as “technoshamans” by scholars as “the technoshamanistic journey is said to bring calm” through the techniques employed by the DJs (Hutson, p. 39). Ultimately, Hutson described what occurred at raves as “spiritual healing” (p. 39). Moreover, “transcendence of individual identity brings ravers to a therapeutic, non-differentiated state of being, in unity with gods and the world” (Hutson, p. 42). Gauthier (2005) maintained that “rave’s religiosity has primarily been shown to derive from its experiential core: the festival ritual itself” (p. 234). He explained that ravers became part of a global culture (p. 235). Gauthier clarified that “by answering quests for meaning, raves feed the subject with images and words to fill a void. They map out a ‘place for being’ within a larger web of communication and allow for the subject to transcend isolation. Finally, they orient and direct actions and desires as though a vector stretching from a group point to a horizon” (p. 236). The lasting impact is that “the rave ethos transformed and shaped the lives of those involved” (Gauthier, p. 245). Ultimately the rave, (and now the festival), could be understood as “alternative spiritualities” which provided “social spaces and cultural resources for religious affiliation, identities, and meaning-construction beyond the walls of the church, synagogue, or mosque” (Lynch, 2006, p. 482). Consequently, for many who feel alienated by organized religion, they may find a space within the electronic music

scene to experience spirituality. In fact, the increasing popularity of electronic music festivals has been interpreted as an alternative spirituality for younger generations abandoning traditional religions yet still seeking spiritual experiences (King, 2020).

The documentary *Electronic Awakening* (2011) assembled scholarly interpretations and DJ, promoters, and participant testimonies describing the transformative effect of the electronic music scene (Johner, 2011). This is, in part, achieved through the structure of the music and its repetitive rhythm which assists the participant in entering a trance like state, in which, the participant experiences bliss and transcendence (Johner, 2011). Furthermore, the movement of this scene from indoor warehouses or clubs to outdoor festivals has become in some ways more authentic to tribal dance rituals through the incorporation of nature (Johner, 2011). The spiritual element, the connection with other people, and the uplifting effect of participating in an electronic music event may explain why EDM is the fastest growing genre on the planet (“Just How Big is EDM”, 2013) It was reported by the IFPI Global Music Report that in the year 2019, dance/electronic music was the third most popular music genre in the world (Watson, 2019). Cultural anthropologist and electronic music scholar Graham St John sought to understand the spiritual appeal of electronic music in his book *Global Tribe* (2012). Electronic music culture searches “for an enchanted sociality facilitated by technology and counteracting the demise of community amid the isolation, loneliness and privatization of modern life” (St John, p. 6). It must be recognized that electronic music fans have assembled a global culture and this is, in part, due to the global crises. St John wrote, “the ‘globality’ that is of interest here is not simply a recognition of the ‘whole Earth’, but a recognition of a world haunted by the threat of ecological apocalypse, economic collapse, humanitarian disaster and psychological turmoil” (p. 8). Moreover, “In radical modernity, the disenchanting seek sensation, difference, expatriation in the radical immanence of the dance party, whose freak sociality potentiates the dissolution of difference (ethnonational, class, gender, sexuality, age)” (St John, p. 8). So, it was partially the conditions of the world that created a void in the human spirit and a longing to find something that fills that void. According to St John, “divinity inheres in a ‘universal sound’ or ‘undertone’, commonly represented in the Hindu sacred syllable Om... and dance would become a chief means by which one could best participate in or connect with this ‘energy’ or ‘vibe’” (p. 80). While the electronic dance music culture is not a religion, it contains religious tendencies.

St John (2015) more recently addressed the evolution of the dance music culture space explaining that it “possesses distinct festal roots,

in the club, the rave, the party. Beneath its diverse variations, it is an event-culture. But to refer to EDM festivalisation is to acknowledge the variegated ways in which the local events and native culture of dance music have evolved (and some might even argue devolved) into larger scale mediated cultural events and global festivals” (p.1). Moreover, St John (2015) described festivals as “transformational” in that “they permit entrants to become liminars (literally: threshold dwellers) while occupying the demarcated time-space framework of the event” (pp. 6-7). So, it is, largely, the journey to a place that makes the experience sacred. St John (2015) elaborated that “among the key recurring features of these recurrent events is that they are visited by participants who often travel significant distances (regionally and internationally)” (p. 10). Thus, attending a global festival can be interpreted as a pilgrimage.

Holt (2016) looked specifically at the Tomorrowland festival to understand how cultural events have become “mediatized” which means “transformed through processes of technological mediation” (para. 1). He focused on the creation of the Tomorrowland after-movie, which was “released after the festival, with the purpose of strengthening audience and media attention to the festival by allowing participants to relive the experience and share their excitement online” (Holt, 2016, Festival movies, festival worlds section). According to Holt, “the after-movies function as digital folkloric texts that everyone shares” (Holt, 2016, Festival movies, festival worlds section). Tomorrowland’s second after-movie, produced in 2011, “creates a cinematic experience of the cultural event. It offers an emotional journey through the festival with footage from locations, stages, and crowd situations that give a sense of the euphoric festival experience” (Holt, 2016, Festival movies, festival worlds section). In addition to the creation of after-movies, festivals began live-streaming portions of their festivals, allowing people unable to attend the physical events to experience them virtually. YouTube approached multiple large festivals in 2011 about live-streaming their events (Holt, 2016, Circular live feeds section). “A new festival world is created in the complex process of mediatization between the physical and digital spheres” (Holt, 2016). The festival was no longer simply a physical event but a virtual one that spanned the globe. A festival’s impact cannot be studied completely without considering the reach of the event through media. “If media happens everywhere, it cannot meaningfully be studied by one field alone. The work will involve more than conventional media ethnography. In the case of cultural events, it involves studying how the agendas of social situations are created and experienced in physical and digital spheres and how the flow between these two spheres is evolving” (Holt, 2016, Conclusion section). Even before the pandemic forced festivals to cancel or be virtual, the author of the present essay

pondered the meaning of the live-streaming of the festival and considered the question: could the spiritual ethos of the festival be communicated through technology and therefore experienced meaningfully by those not in physical attendance?

This leads to the question of the authenticity of communication technology, especially in relation to spiritual and communal experiences. Daniel Stout (2012) wrote that, “we have arrived at the point where virtually any religious phenomenon can be experienced through technology” (p. 19). He explained, “Individuals often describe media-related experiences in terms of euphoria, deep feeling, and reflection. A Muslim may feel inspired while meditating over the Quran. A Lutheran may engage in deep listening during a Bach organ recital. A moviegoer may experience a new level of thought during Mel Gibson’s film, *The Passion of the Christ*. A participant may describe a dance rave as ‘not of this world’” (Stout, p. 25). Stout described this as “mediated religion” and maintained that it is “experienced through mental states of consciousness” (p. 25). This may “range from meditation to the deeper state of trance” according to Stout and, specifically, “dance rituals in tribal religions often involve trance and deep states of consciousness. Similar behaviors are emerging in Western cultures in the form of trance music, trance films, dance raves” (p. 25). Stout explained the concept of numinous as “a broadly defined term whose application isn’t restricted to the experience of institutional religion or the supernatural” (p. 6). It may be associated with traditional religion, but it may not be. It may be experienced in physical spaces, but it also may be experienced through media. Stout wrote “The numinous requires the following elements: deep feeling (affect), belief (cognition), ritual (behavior), and congregation (community). When all four are present in an experience with the media, the audience members tend to describe it in religious terms; this is the numinous” (p. 6). Stout used raves as an example: “At the heart of the rave is the concept of the event, which combines elements of personal interaction, visual media, and sound to produce a sense of awe” (p. 31). Collins (2008) observed that numinous experiences are particularly meaningful for those in the midst of a spiritual emergency. “Numinous experiences have to be treated with respect and handled with wisdom; moreover, they should not be avoided. There is a reciprocal relationship between individuals who are experiencing spiritual emergencies and the collective response/awareness towards such events” (Collins, p. 206). Rituals are particularly important in this case. “It must be remembered that our human ancestors used rituals to mediate transcendent experiences; such as encounters with the numinous” (Collins, p. 207). Furthermore, “the modern phenomenon of spiritual emergency is recognized as possessing a numinous quality, which has

archetypal and mythical significance for human psycho-spiritual transformation” (Collins, 2008, p. 208). Numinous/spiritual/religious experiences are not confined to physical locations. Moore (2017) wrote “despite the physical and psychological transformations involved in the interrelations of body, mind, and technology, it is contended that the cyborg body-mind does not necessarily mark a radical departure from nature and humane values” (p. 326). In fact, “the interaction of technology, science and spirituality prompts techno-spiritual horizons” (Moore, p. 327). Therefore, the spiritual ethos present in the electronic festival has the potential to be transmitted through technology, especially in the case of a spiritual emergency.

It is important to consider, however, the reservations of communication theorists about technology and whether authentic communication experiences are possible. Carey and Quirk (1970) responded to the tendency to see technology as salvific in modernism and questioned this utopian vision. The idea of an “electrical utopia” “took root in Europe with the Enlightenment and the onset of industrialism. It began as a literary convention adopted as a cultural strategy: an attempt to explore the meaning of industrialization and the promise of technology for what Raymond Williams has come to call ‘The Long Revolution’” (Carey & Quirk, 1970, p. 395). Carey and Quirk were suspicious of “the rhetoric of the technological sublime” in that it had:

Invested electricity with the aura of divine force and utopian gift and characterized it as the progenitor of a new era of social life, which somehow reverses the laws and lessons of past history. Despite changes in vocabulary, the idea of an electrical utopia possesses a common rhetorical tendency whenever it has appeared over the last century: in invests electricity with the capacity to produce automatically, on the one hand, power, productivity and prosperity and, on the other, peace, a new and satisfying form of human community and harmonious accord with nature. (p. 396)

Carey and Quirk (1970) did not portray the electronic revolution as inherently evil but cautioned intellectuals to “demythologize the rhetoric of the electronic sublime. Electronics is neither the arrival of the apocalypse nor the dispensation of grace. Technology is technology; it is a means for communication and transportation over space, and nothing more” (p. 423). Schultze (1987) applied Carey and Quirk’s approach to American evangelicalism and problematized their embrace of radio and TV to replace ministry which he, in a prescient way, described as ineffective and maintained it would result in shallow religion. He wrote, “the transmission of data can be a simple task, but the communication of spiritual knowledge and the

creation of shared religious understanding are difficult to achieve even within North America, let alone across diverse cultures” (p. 258). Authentic religious experience must take place in local communities, not through technology, argued Schultze (1987).

Schultze (2002) later took up the question of the good and bad of communication technology and wrote to a more general audience about characteristics that would embody high quality technological communication. Schultz suggested “religious traditions morally leaven the secular-rational techniques of informationism” (p. 76). By “religious tradition” he meant “transcendently framed and morally directed way of life that faithfully aims to rebind the broken cosmos” (p. 75). Part of this manifests as caring for others. “Whereas the secular-rational worldview tries to remove suffering from our minds, the responsible caregiver tunes into the world’s suffering” (Schultze, 2002, p. 84). Schultze also suggested that ethical technological communication would embrace “cosmic diversity”:

Cosmic diversity can reveal not just our differences but also our common humanity. It admits that human knowing is not merely technical but also human and therefore moral. Cosmic diversity accepts differences in culture and personality but also seeks to identify truths and realities that transcend our differences. Our ‘opening up’ to greater diversity provides not just more variety but also greater ways of conceiving our moral unity as human beings. Each of us is intimately connected through the commonness of our shared humanity, including our shared responsibilities.

Conceived as a moral quest for both unity and diversity, cosmic diversity carries deeply spiritual overtones. (2002, p. 163)

While it is difficult to experience community authentically through technology, the best way to create ethical mediated communication is through moral wisdom (Schultze, 2002).

Mejias (2001) represented similar concerns about the potential of virtual communities to have positive or negative effects. He explained:

Sustainable communicational realities emerge when technologies are interiorized according to positive values such as equality, dignity, and justice. They result in a holographic view of the world, an interconnectedness between humans and their environment. Unsustainable communication realities, on the other hand, emerge when technologies are interiorized according to negative values as individualism, materialism, and reductionism. They result in a dichotomized, fragmented view of the universe, with humans in constant conflict with their environments. (p. 216)

Therefore, it is important for communication scholars to be mindful of the values represented and the resulting conditions of communicating through technology.

Electronic Music Festivals in 2020

Although 2020 was disastrous to public events, the electronic music community was uniquely prepared to adapt as it had been using technology to connect its fans through music for years. Many DJs performed a multiplicity of live-streams from their homes, studios, and outdoor locations throughout the year. Each festival handled their cancelled event differently, seeming to benefit from having more time and seeing what other festivals did before them. One of the first global festivals to cancel was Ultra Music Festival which was scheduled for March 20 – 22 in Miami, Florida. Ultra, where “roughly 170,000 people were set to attend,” announced their cancellation in early March (Bain, 2020). They did have a virtual audio festival (no video), where some DJs recorded sets that were played on UMF radio and posted on YouTube. While there are no numbers indicating how many people listened during the virtual audio festival, DJ Oliver Heldens’ set had the most attention with 860,828 views on YouTube.

Electric Daisy Carnival (EDC) was originally scheduled for May 15 – 17, in Las Vegas, Nevada, they rescheduled for October 2-4, and eventually cancelled. More than 465,000 people attended EDC in 2019 (Sunkel, 2019). In 2020, EDC live-streamed, “EDC Las Vegas Rave-A-Thon,” during the original festival dates using Twitch and YouTube. Multiple DJs played live sets from around the world in night club settings. Again, there are no numbers indicating how many watched the virtual festival, but the sets are available to watch on YouTube, and the most watched was David Guetta’s performance with almost 400,000 views.

Awakenings Festival, situated in The Netherlands, was scheduled for June 27 – 28. The Techno genre festival usually brings 80,000 attendees for a 2-day festival (Awakenings). In 2020, the festival live-streamed (through Facebook, YouTube, and their website) several DJ performances from their festival grounds replete with full light shows including lasers and fire. The cameras spanned the giant spaces showing the DJs, giant screens, lights on the ceiling, and multiple laser effects making it more visually stimulating than simply watching a DJ playing music in their home, studio, or nightclub. The platforms allowed the viewers to post likes, hearts, comments, and interact with one another. Belgian DJ Amelie Lens delivered a stunning performance at the Gashouder in Amsterdam. This set had over 2 million YouTube views.

Tomorrowland’s festival followed and they announced in April that they could not hold the festival scheduled for the last two weekends

of July in Belgium (McGlynn, 2020). Tomorrowland, however, approached their virtual event differently. It is difficult to compare the number of attendees of Tomorrowland and the other festivals because Tomorrowland has not posted their festival sets on YouTube. The other events were free and did not announce numbers of attendance during the live-stream of their festivals.

Tomorrowland

Tomorrowland had its first festival in 2005, eventually grew from one weekend to two weekends, and had almost half a million attendees in 2019 (McGlynn, 2020). Electronic music fans have travelled from all over the world to experience the festival and many famous DJs consider Tomorrowland to be the most important festival of the year with implications beyond the electronic music community. One of the most consistently popular and respected DJs in the world, Dutch DJ Armin van Buuren characterized Tomorrowland as a cultural phenomenon comparable to Woodstock, in the way that it unites people (Bonte, 2015). He described it as “the Super Bowl of dance music... Tomorrowland isn’t about me as a DJ, it’s really about Tomorrowland. It’s about coming together and uniting as one, especially at these times with the strange political situations all around the world” (Vargas, 2017). Tomorrowland was even given a bridge dedicated to it by the United Nations for supporting unity (Bonte, 2015). In past years, the festival has live-streamed many of its DJs’ sets, the visible audience has been composed of people of many races and cultures, and the diversity of its attendees has been exemplified in the massive number of international flags held by the festival goers.

After announcing the cancellation of the July event, Tomorrowland spent three months and \$10 million to create a virtual festival (Barrionuevo et al., 2020). The DJs filmed their performances in advance in four locations: Boom, Belgium; Sydney, Australia; Sao Paulo, Brazil; and Los Angeles, United States (Barrionuevo et al., 2020). One of the contributors, DogStudio CEO and Creative Director Henry Daubrez stated, “Our biggest challenge—is making sure festival visitors will be able to feel that they are being part of something larger than their own computer and their internet connection” (McGlynn, 2020). Tomorrowland asserted they had over 1 million people watching during the two-day festival on July 25th and 26th (McGlynn, 2020). Tomorrowland’s press officer, Debby Wilmsen stated that they viewed the virtual festival as something that will be continued in future years even if the live version happens in Belgium: “We think this can be a very nice thing next to the real festival. It gives many people the opportunity to experience the festival. People who are not able to come to Belgium [because of] age, visa, tickets, health; the digital festival is open for everyone”

(McGlynn, 2020). So, while Tomorrowland was forced to cancel its in-person festival which necessitated the creation of a virtual festival due to a global pandemic, this may very well be the beginning of a new way to increase access to festivals.

Method & Results

To explain the significance of the Tomorrowland virtual festival, the theory of Michael Warner will be employed to understand the definition of and characteristics of publics. Warner's (2002) conceptions are ideal to interpret Tomorrowland ATW as he wrote, "when people address publics, they engage in struggles—at varying levels of salience to consciousness, from calculated tactic to mute cognitive noise—over the conditions that bring them together as a public" (p. 12). The conditions of 2020 were particularly salient in that the world was suffering from a global pandemic that had affected people physically, economically, and emotionally. Furthermore, there were protests all over the world sparked by the killing of George Floyd by police officers in the United States. Moreover, the world was seeing increasing effects of climate change and an alarming future if nations do not take stronger action to change. With these conditions happening all at one time and social isolation caused by the pandemic, the public created by this festival was unprecedented. First, it is important to understand what Warner meant by public. According to Warner, there are three ways of understanding publics:

1. The public: a kind of social totality. Its most common sense is that of the people in general... as in Christendom or humanity... the public, as people, is thought to include everyone within the field in question... totality.
2. A public: Concrete audience, a crowd witnessing itself in visible space, as with a theatrical public. Such a public also has a sense of totality, bounded by the event or by the shared physical space.
3. The kind of public that comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation... the idea of a public, as distinct from both the public and any bounded totality of audience, has become part of the common repertoire of modern culture. (p. 66)

While the second type of public would have described electronic music events before they became mediatized, the third type of public (to which Warner devoted most of his attention), is most accurately applicable to the Tomorrowland ATW festival of 2020. These types of publics have specific characteristics according to Warner. First, "a public is self-organized" (Warner, p. 67). This means that "a public is a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself.... It exists by virtue of being addressed" (Warner, 2002, p. 67). In the case of Tomorrowland, without the DJs' performances, there

would have been no public. It was the texts that called the public into being. While the promoters facilitated the festival, it was the DJs' performances that attracted participants. The group of people who consumed the festival would have had no motivation to do this without the texts provided by the DJs.

A second characteristic of a public is that it is "a relation among strangers" (Warner, 2002, p. 74). The people who attended the Tomorrowland festival were complete strangers (with the exception of small groups of people who may have "attended" together). A public "unites strangers through participation alone" (Warner, 2002, p. 75). There was nothing unifying this group of people other than this event. The third characteristic of a public is "the address of public speech is both personal and impersonal" (Warner, 2002, p. 76). Those in participation felt personally addressed by the texts but were also aware that they were not solely addressed to them, but a larger community. Warner explained, "With public speech... we might recognize ourselves as addressees, but it is equally important that we remember that the speech was addressed to indefinite others, that in singling us out it does so not on the basis of our concrete identity but by virtue of our participation in the discourse alone and therefore in common with strangers" (pp. 77-78). The constitution as a public is determined by participation and nothing more. It was available to all.

A fourth characteristic of a public is that it is "constituted through mere attention" (Warner, 2002, p. 87). The public exists only if people pay attention to it. A public has a "free, voluntary, and active membership" (Warner, 2002, p.89). No one is forced to be part of this public and the discourse must evoke interest. The existence of the public is dependent upon creating attention. A fifth characteristic of a public is "the social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse" (Warner, 2002, p. 90). This is what is so fascinating about Tomorrowland ATW. If it were a festival that took place with a set group of people and no one else had access to it, it would have limited impact. With Tomorrowland ATW, people had the opportunity to pay for admission to the festival the weekend it premiered and watch any DJ performances they wanted. People had the opportunity to watch all of the DJ performances for two weeks, as many times as they wanted. Lastly, some of these sets have been shared on streaming media (Apple Music) and may eventually be shared on YouTube. Even the sets that have not officially been shared have been temporarily/unofficially shared by Tomorrowland, the performers, and viewers who recorded the performances, thus making the festival available to anyone with internet access for an infinite amount of time. Warner (2002) explained, "Circulation organizes time and vice versa. Public discourse is contemporary,

and it is oriented to the future; the contemporaneity and the futurity in question are those of its own circulation” (p. 94).

A sixth characteristic is that “publics act historically according to the temporality of their circulation” (Warner, 2002, p. 96). The historicity of this festival was crucial. The events bringing the discourse into being in the way they were circulated were intrinsic to its meaning. Further, the certain impact on future events is notable as well. A seventh and final characteristic is that “a public is poetic world making” (Warner, 2002, p. 114). This is where the performative dimension of the various genres of electronic music and the visual display created by the teams assisting Tomorrowland with the creation of this virtual event became essential in understanding the type of public that was constituted. Likely, only fans of electronic music were constituted as a public. But it was largely the DJs’ skills and techniques that drew the participants in. The festival’s reputation and investment in the creation of a visual event contributed to the positive reaction.

It is important to observe that Tomorrowland, in keeping with the electronic music scene, sought to transcend differences. Warner (2002) wrote, “No matter what particularities of culture, race, gender, or class we bring to bear on public discourse, the moment of apprehending something as public is one in which we imagine, if imperfectly, indifference to those particularities, to ourselves” (p. 160). This is in no way to say that diversity was ignored. It was, in fact, celebrated by Tomorrowland in its display of international flags and celebration of difference. Nonetheless, in the moment that people consumed the discourse of the festival, they became united with one another. This was emphasized by the festival’s narrator, the DJs and the visual effects, and in the connection formed between the participants.

[Tomorrowland Around the World: A Virtual Pilgrimage](#) [“Live Today. Love Tomorrow. Unite Forever.”](#)

One explicit way Tomorrowland ATW constituted a public was by creating a “relation among strangers.” (Warner, 2005, p. 74) This corresponds with the religious characteristic Schultze (2002) discussed in that it sought to rebind the broken cosmos during a time when people were socially isolated. The festival exemplified Schulte’s conception of “cosmic diversity” in that it both embraced and transcended differences by focusing on a shared humanity, unity, and diversity, which was deeply spiritual. One way the festival functioned to do this was through the voice of the narrator. Traditionally, Tomorrowland has deployed a faceless narrator that encapsulated the intention of the festival, speaking before each main stage performance and at the end of the festival. Tomorrowland’s

narrator has distinguished the festival from other festivals in that the voice articulated an explicit purpose for the festival: to celebrate life, express love, and create unity among its participants which they would then carry out into the world. At the 2020 virtual festival the narrator proclaimed:

The light of the reflection of love is connecting the rest of the world. It is spreading our message around the globe. Connecting all people with the light, is creating a unifying feeling. Combined in a pulsating symphony of light, it represents all people connecting in this single moment. Just like the countless billions of stars, their light is a true signal of hope. (Tomorrowland ATW, July 26, 2020)

The narrator also connected the phenomenon of the festival to nature, indicating that the event was bigger than music and the audience, by tapping into the energy of the universe:

Today, all continents of the world are connected. To create a positive message for the rest of the world to see, by tuning in to all that is positive and feed it back into the world. As the planets are revolving, a special moment is about to commence. An eclipse that marks the start of new things to come. It is time for this miraculous phenomenon to take shape. The start of this moment of reflection. Together we shall create this symbol of strength. Feel how all nations are becoming connected. (Tomorrowland ATW, July 26, 2020)

The visuals of the festival complemented this relation among strangers, congregation (numinous), and cosmic diversity by displaying international flags in its computer-generated audience, similar to the typical festival audience and representative of the reality that people were watching from all over the world.

The DJs also reinforced this relation among strangers and cosmic diversity through the words they spoke to the audience. Dutch DJ Don Diablo proclaimed, "Tomorrowland, we don't discriminate. Everyone is welcome here," which acknowledged the unrest inflamed by the murder of George Floyd (who Diablo specifically mentioned), the ensuing pain and frustration about the lack of social justice for marginalized races, and the resonance the horrific event had on the globe sparking protests around the world (Tomorrowland ATW, 2020, July 26). Armin van Buuren proclaimed during his set, "I'm on a mission to turn the entire world into a dancefloor" (Tomorrowland, ATW, July 25, 2020). Dutch DJ Martin Garrix both responsibly and playfully reminded his audience, "We're all in this together. Stay home. Stay safe. Stay sexy" (Tomorrowland ATW, July 26, 2020). These words of unification of a physically and socially divided world sought to create the numinous effect of congregation.

This reinforced the spiritual/religious tradition of electronic music spaces creating a global community and transcending difference.

A second way the virtual festival constituted its public was by acting historically “according to the temporality” of its circulation. The Tomorrowland festival is a yearly ritual, which is an essential element of the numinous (Stout, 2012). Additionally, rituals are particularly important in responding to spiritual emergencies in a numinous way (Collins, 2008). The year 2020 was a spiritual emergency in that people were suffering globally in various ways. Schultze (2002) articulated that a way to make technological communication virtuous was to care for others, which meant tuning into the world’s suffering. Many DJ performances did this through their music and visuals. Armin van Buuren started his set with his new song, appropriately titled “Mask,” which began with the words “help me take this mask off” (Tomorrowland ATW, July 25, 2020). It would be difficult not to recognize the significance of a song called “Mask” during a global pandemic when masks were an essential part of survival and would have to be worn until the pandemic was defeated. It is also important to note that the Tomorrowland ATW after-movie (a 15-minute summary of the festival available to the public for free: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nBBaHKQHxiU>), started with the same song. The song expressed the global pain felt around the world and was crying out for an end to the suffering and isolation. Van Buuren’s second song was called “Hollow,” which was a song that conveyed sadness and struggle: “I’m teaching myself to rest, healing myself. I’m treading water” (Tomorrowland ATW, July 25, 2020). By starting his set with these songs of personal struggle, van Buuren acknowledged the pain felt by many in the world. This constituted a public of shared suffering. Belgian DJ Charlotte de Witte also started her set with a melancholy mood. She began by playing “The Lullaby of Marian” by Subjected, which was outside of her typical Techno genre (Tomorrowland ATW, July 25, 2020). The instrumental song was whimsical and downbeat, representing the mood of the global population. De Witte sought to soothe her audience for a moment before jumping into more intense Techno music. After a transition from the lullaby into a pounding beat, de Witte’s third song was her own “Sgadi Li Mi” which can be described as a spiritual song, with a feminine voice crying out (Tomorrowland ATW, July 25, 2020). While the lyrics have not been officially released or translated into English, according to user comments on Soundcloud and YouTube the lyrical portion of the song is Bulgarian folk music. Again, de Witte expressed the sadness of humanity.

Lastly, Swedish DJ Eric Prydz also began his set with an acknowledgment of the suffering of the world utilizing very different techniques. Prydz used a combination of music and visuals to

indicate that the world was in a perilous time, starting his set with many visuals signifying danger. Multiple alert symbols were shown in the beginning such as a red “X,” red “CAUTION,” “POWER LOW” (along with a dying phone battery symbol), red “FAULT,” red exclamation point in a red triangle, and “SYSTEM FAILURE” (Tomorrowland ATW, July 25, 2020). The accompanying music was dark and serious sounding as if to sound an alarm, and many of his songs utilized an alarm effect. The visuals coordinated with music functioned to communicate that there was a problem. After a brief reprieve, Prydz returned to warning signs with visuals that stated, “ADVERSE WEATHER INCOMING” and “ACID RAIN DETECTED” (Tomorrowland ATW, July 25, 2020). The importance of the DJs acknowledging crisis was that it was the reality in which they were performing. To ignore the pain and suffering of the world would have been to minimize the lived lives of the viewers. By recognizing this difficult time in the world, (acting historically according to temporality), the DJs constituted a public through a message that they could identify with and connected them as strangers. Everyone in the world was struggling (albeit some more than others), and these DJs addressed that reality and sought to alleviate it with their artistry. This manifested through ritual as caring for others by addressing their spiritual emergency.

A third way the festival constituted a public was through poetic world making which describes the “performative dimension” of the event (Warner, 2002, p. 114). Through the integration of music and visuals the festival evoked deep feeling which is another essential element of the numinous (Stout, 2012). The technoshamans functioned to bring calm to a struggling world through their performances. In this way they demonstrated what Mejias (2001) described as “sustainable communication” (p. 216). Many of the stages’ visuals were so expertly created that it was not transparent that the festival was virtual, and theoretically, they may have imagined them as traditional festival performances. These efforts exemplified Warner’s characteristics of publics in that they were attention grabbing and poetic.

Figure 1. [CELL.], Eric Prydz, Tomorrowland ATW



Note: image from Thune (2020)

One of the most noteworthy moments from the festival was Eric Prydz's otherworldly set which used music and visuals equally to take viewers on a journey through space. Eric Prydz has been known for working with a visual team to create a futuristic element during his performances, prior to this festival. This year he called his show [CELL.] (see Figure 1) and it was performed on the Freedom Stage. It would seem that Prydz was the perfect type of DJ for this kind of performance: he does not talk during his sets, visuals are highly influential in his shows, and the focus is on the music and visuals rather than interaction with the audience. After the danger signs displayed in the beginning of his set, Prydz had a moment when the mood started to change and the visual said "RE-BOOTING" (Tomorrowland ATW, July 25, 2020). The music became more uplifting and about 11 1/2 minutes into his set his glistening logo "PRYDA" appeared larger than life, suspended in the air (Tomorrowland ATW, July 25, 2020). It was as if to say that he was there to address the problem. Prydz's visuals continued to tell a story as the viewers journeyed through space encountering some sort of space craft, the moon, the sun, and the earth (Tomorrowland ATW, July 25, 2020). The visuals of space created the feeling that the viewers were part of something bigger than themselves and in this way Prydz evoked spirituality. The bright shining sun had rays of light that seemed to emanate warmth and strength. Eventually, the journey made its way back to earth with messages "APPROACHING DESTINATION" and "GENESIS OBSERVED" (Tomorrowland ATW, July 25, 2020). The music became very uplifting and optimistic and

there was a moment of overwhelming white lights. Prydz's music and visuals evolved into a happier and inspiring tone. An astronaut appeared intermittently as "SENTIENT LIFE DETECTED" displayed on the screen. A theme throughout the set was the shape of the sphere: moon, sun, earth, lens, and astronaut head. At the peak of the set, Prydz took the sphere and turned it into a spinning record. This served as a metaphor for what Prydz was doing with his set. He was spinning the globe with his music and visual performance. In the end, the last message was "CELL RESOLVED" (Tomorrowland ATW, July 25, 2020). The viewer was left with a feeling of hope. The performance sought to comfort a world in sickness, economic struggle, scourged with racism, and social and emotional isolation. Being lost in space was therapeutic in that it provided a momentary escape from the emotional pressures of multiple global crises, and thus was a momentary elixir. The image of the horizon shown toward the end of the set reminded the viewer of hope for a better day.

The Core Stage was nestled in a forest, which created an effect of unifying people through nature. The stage was based on a real Tomorrowland stage, but because it was computer-generated, there was more freedom to develop the concept. The stage consisted of a feminine head growing out of the ground with leaves at the base of the neck (Tomorrowland ATW, July 25, 2020). Lights radiated from the stage as if it was a life force. The Northern Lights appeared in the background. The stage provided an interesting juxtaposition of nature and technology demonstrating what makes this festival unique. The producers used technology and music to create an experience, but also visually connected it to the earth, as the energy manifested by electronic music transcended technology and was juxtaposed with images of nature. While de Witte started softly with a lullaby and a lament, she took the listener on a journey through her set ending with a throbbing bassline and a race car sound effect, symbolizing momentum (Tomorrowland ATW, July 25, 2020). It is precisely because de Witte played on a stage that was positioned in a forest which was a powerful spectacle, that she reinforced the connection of all living beings. The DJ performances in conjunction with the visuals functioned as technoshamanism, which sought to take the viewers on a journey that ultimately brought comfort. The poetic worldmaking performances functioned to evoke numinous deep feeling and spirituality through the connectedness of nature and the universe.

Figure 2. Core Stage, Tomorrowland, ATW 2020



Note: Image from McGlynn (2020)

A thorough analysis of this festival must consider aspects that were less effective and consider how the constitution of the public may have been impaired. As Carey and Quirk (1970) observed, “technology is technology” and it has its limitations (p. 423). Schultze (2002) argued that “much of our cyber-messaging actually thwarts community by deflating the speech that binds us together” (p. 166). This is especially true for religious community. A major limitation of the virtual festival is that it did not efficiently allow people to communicate with other attendees. While there was a chat function in the festival site, it was quickly disabled, likely due to the inability to accommodate so many people at one time. Some users formed a live chat on Reddit and posted reactions and pictures in the Tomorrowland sub-Reddit, but this was limited to users of Reddit. There was a phone application that facilitated a chat, but this was not communicated effectively. The author of the present essay was unaware of it but discovered it during the 2021 version and was informed by the participants that it did exist in 2020. For the most part, however, the audience had limited ability to interact and connect with the other festival goers.

A second limitation of the effectiveness of the festival was the inauthenticity of the computer-generated audience and audience cheers. One of the essential elements of the numinous is belief

(Stout, 2012), and this aspect was simply reinforcing the unreality of the festival. Anecdotally, the most negative reaction to the festival (observed in the discussion on Reddit), was a distaste of the computer-generated audience. This perspective was strengthened by differences in following virtual events created by Tomorrowland: their New Year's Eve event on December 31, 2020 and their 2021 (July) virtual festival. These were similar events, but there were noticeable adaptations. The computer-generated NYE crowd was de-emphasized and appeared more as shadows with glowing wristbands rather than close-ups. In the 2021 ATW festival, the computer-generated people looked more realistic. Also, in some of the DJs' performances at both of these events, clips of real people dancing were integrated. It would seem that Tomorrowland paid attention to feedback and altered this visual technique. In fairness, the 2020 virtual festival was uncharted territory and festivals were forced to experiment to discover the most effective techniques.

Discussion

In a year marked by international pain, Tomorrowland constituted a global public which sought to soothe that pain and accompanying anxieties. Tomorrowland was forced to redefine how they constructed their public due to their inability to hold the festival in person. While it was a very different experience, it had a broader scope and was more accessible to people all over the world. For those who would have attended in person, it was certainly not as meaningful of an experience as it would have been to make a pilgrimage to the holy grounds of Boom. Nonetheless, the virtual festival gave them the opportunity to have some semblance of a festival experience, seeing DJ performances and connecting with others, albeit virtually and metaphysically. For the many participants who would have watched the festival through technology the festival was in some ways not as good and some ways better. Even though their method of accessing the festival was unchanged, it lacked the infectious energy of seeing a live audience and allowing the virtual viewer to live vicariously through the in-person attendees. However, the virtual festival was in some ways better in that it allowed the viewers access to more DJs' performances whom they might not have had the option of viewing had it been the typical livestream which only shows a selection of DJs. In 2020 they could view any DJs they wanted, and they could view the sets multiple times for a period of two weeks.

Tomorrowland ATW 2020 also spoke to the time, similar to the way Woodstock did in 1969. It constituted a virtual space for people to gather, unite with one another, be swept away by music, and feel that they were a part of something bigger than themselves. Tomorrowland constituted a virtual public that promoted well-being,

love, unity, and life. The DJ performances, visual effects, connection to nature, and escape from daily life functioned to create an experience somewhat comparable to a traditional festival. Some said Tomorrowland's 2020 virtual festival was better than nothing. Some said it was the best weekend of 2020. Some expressed having personally meaningful experiences. One participant even described it as the best weekend of his life.

This paper has thoughtfully reflected on a subject that is under-researched and rapidly evolving. The intersection of music, spirituality, and technology creates a space for cosmic diversity and shared humanity. The mythos of the electronic festival reveals that the virtual festival is not the same experience as the in-person festival, and therefore, should not replace the physical event. Nevertheless, the festival had already become mediatized (pre-pandemic) through the creation of after-movies and live-streaming of DJ performances, making it uniquely equipped to adapt to a global crisis that forced the physical separation of human beings. The virtue of a digital festival in 2020 was that it was a situation in which there was no option to have a traditional festival and the promoters created an event that offered an option to participate in the ritual gathering of Tomorrowland. The ritual aspect of festivals is absolutely essential to their spiritual ethos and this festival allowed that to occur uninterrupted despite the challenging circumstances. The future value of this festival is that, even if festivals are able to continue with physical gatherings, there can still be an option for those who cannot personally attend. This allows the religiosity of the festival a further-reaching, global audience. It is probable that some attendees had authentic spiritual experiences and some did not. Without quantitative or ethnographic research, this is difficult to assess, which is a direction future research should take.

Ultimately, at a time when positivity, connection, and spiritual healing was desperately needed, Tomorrowland created a virtual experience that spoke to the moment. At least a million people participated in this festival, and countless more will experience it through the viewing of various DJ performances posted on media outlets or through the Tomorrowland Around the World after-movie. The people could not make their yearly pilgrimage to their sacred space in Belgium, so Tomorrowland brought that sacred space to them through the use of technology in a virtual location. Tomorrowland ATW offered the best option in 2020 for gathering with other true-believers and served as an elixir to a troubled world. As electronic music scenes have functioned as sacred spaces for decades, Tomorrowland created a sacred space in virtual reality and allowed its fans to make their pilgrimage without leaving their homes. While not identical to the physical festival, Tomorrowland stayed true to its

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