The Mineshaft: A Retrospective Ethnography

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SUMMARY. The Mineshaft, a male sex club, is described from the patron's perspective, in retrospect, and in the context of gay male urban life in circa-1980 North America. It is suggested that the Mineshaft functioned to provide, on a for-profit basis, a relatively safe environment for liminal erotic behaviors, and did so in response to a variety of sociocultural conditions. The latter include the lack of institutionalized anticipatory socialization for intramale sexual relations, and the tension between S&M and non-S&M gay male styles. The Mineshaft occupied marginal niches in terms of its physical location, its hours of operation, and its legal status. Access was ritualized, social structure was simplified, social control was informal but adequate. The setting was amenable to a wide range of fantasy, eroticization and erotic role playing.

The Mineshaft was a bar and sex club which operated for a number of years in New York's meatpacking district on the lower West Side of Manhattan. This bar gained great notoriety among gay men, was discussed in the gay press, and used as the setting for pornographic stories. Late in 1985, in an atmosphere of lurid headlines, right wing agitation, and panic over AIDS in the public school system, it was closed by order of New York State authorities for clearly political reasons (see Rist, 1985). In what follows I try to describe the Mineshaft in such a way as to ground it in sociological and anthropological theory.

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Specifically, I present an overall ethnography of the Mineshaft in its cultural and institutional context. My aim is to suggest some answers to the question "what did going to the Mineshaft do for those who went there?" While it is obvious, if not tautological, that customers in a sex club ordinarily obtain, or hope to obtain, sexual gratification by their participation, the question arises why in one such place and not another? Indeed, why in a sex club, as opposed to the privacy and intimacy of a monogamous relationship at home? And if in a sex club, why in ways quite so contradictory of dominant cultural standards (as were some common Mineshaft practices such as handballing, micturition, and S&M)? My contention is that the Mineshaft performed a variety of integrative social and cultural functions for gay men at the communal level, and that these functions were manifest in its physical and social structure and setting.

My analysis begins with a brief review of the literature on male recreational S&M which I believe offers a key to understanding the Mineshaft's cultural base. Then, after a brief note on my methodology and its limitations, I present my retrospective data and findings.

MALE RECREATIONAL S&M: FETISH AND FANTASY IN AMERICA

The Mineshaft was, by reputation, an "S&M" bar, and a well-known site to gay men of the late 1970s whom Mains (1984) would have described as "leathermen." Its customers evinced a hypermasculine style of dress and an ethos which posited sexual excitement as a self-justified basis for meaningful human relationships. In contrast to the dominant culture's requirement that eroticism be linked to gender relations, and thus that "real men" only desire women, the Mineshaft articulated the principle that "real men" not only can and do desire other "real men," but that "real men" can be *exclusively* homosexual. In order to examine this relationship between a gay male "S&M" bar and changes in the gender system, it is important to clarify what "S&M" means to gay men.

In the 1970s gay men found themselves strongly at odds with the dominant system of erotic norms. While the dominant system continued to be heterosexist, rationalized, materialist, power-oriented, and erotophobic, a counterculture prevailed among gay men which was in many respects Dionysian (see Maffesoli, 1983). So, for example, while both of these systems could have been described as "phallocentric," phalli themselves remained invisible, kept secret and taboo in the imagery of the

dominant system; while the counterculture, itself denied visibility, encouraged playfulness with and admiration of phalli. It has been claimed that a majority of American males experience homoerotic arousal, and perhaps half experience orgasm while engaged in homosexual behavior at some point in their lives. Yet male homoeroticism in the United States is legitimated with only extreme difficulty, and most men try to forget their pubescent sexual experimentation.

A significant contrast with many pre-capitalist societies concerns societal norms for rites of passage into adult male roles. Rather than being normatively initiated into a male *communitas* (see Turner, 1969), American males are normatively inducted into patriarchal, heterosocial bureaucratic structures. In fact, there is a dearth of universalized sacred rites of passage in American society. All of these characteristics can be viewed (e.g., by some gay men) as alienating and oppressive defects in the American system. My argument is that the Mineshaft functioned for some participants to address these defects, with partial success. Insofar as it did succeed, it took on meaning within the gay male community as a place of transformative experience and possibly awesome rituals.

"S&M" can be interpreted as "sadomasochism" or "Slave/Master" (Townsend: 1983:14-17). The latter meaning suggests two aspects of S&M, (1) Since slavery was abolished in the United States in 1863 it is not surprising that researchers have discovered that S&M is a kind of playacting or game; and (2) though a game, it is concerned with some of the more profound sociocultural contradictions in American culture.[1] Responding to the first meaning ("sadism" and "masochism," as per Krafft-Ebing, 1965) the literature discusses "recreational S&M," which it sharply distinguishes from popular and medicalized usages of "sadistic" and "masochistic" to refer to, respectively, cruel brutality and pathological self-destructiveness. Masochism of the latter sort is common among oppressed people in the form of "guilt-expiation rituals," and is often manifested among gay men appearing before psychiatrists (Adam, 1978:101), for whom psychiatric treatment is such a ritual. Empirical sociological studies of male recreational S&M (see Spengler, 1983/1977) have been rare and hermeneutic, but are more than adequate to discredit Krafft-Ebing's pathologizing concept of an inevitable progression of disease from "atavistic manifestations" to "the most monstrous acts of destruction." S&M is posited as a "career" which some gay men will follow and which begins with an early disenchantment with the gay world (Kamel, 1983a:75). It is critical for initiates firstly to come to view "leathersex" as a process in which psychosexual fulfillment is mutual and can only be achieved interdependently, and secondly to develop their acting

skills (ibid., p. 77). For this reason, supposedly, novices prefer submissive roles in which the script is seemingly prescribed. At some later point the initiate is likely to become a dominant partner himself (ibid.). Catalogs of paraphiliac activities which constitute the discursive universe of S&M have also been elaborated (Kamel, 1983a; Weinberg, 1983/1978), and include: pain, bondage, humiliation, domination, and watersports. Featured are analyses of dyadic relationships such as "master/slave." In Kamel's (1983b) scenario leathersex uses restraint (either physical or psychological) to establish dyadic roles, humiliation to carry them out, and fear to maintain them. Prior to erotic interaction participants use costume to signal desires to prospective partners and often verbally negotiate the question "what-do-you-like-to-do?" Frequently S&M sexual activity "culminates in masculine gentleness, warmth, and affection" (ibid., p. 171).

The final stage described by Kamel (1983a) in the development of the S&M career is a stage he calls "limiting," a period of deliberate experimentation with activities during which the experimenter establishes the boundaries of "his S&M tastes." This concept points directly to Lee's notion of socially organized risk reduction (discussed below), and Kamel claims that many of the implicit rules of the leather world revolve around this notion of limits. For example, a sadist's reputation hinges on his ability to decode and abide by a partner's limits. Individuals experimenting with "limiting" would clearly benefit from an environment where liminality, in the sense of threshold experience, particularly sensory threshold experience, could be engaged in while experienced persons willing and able to assist were present. It will be clear that the Mineshaft provided such an environment.[2]

At the community level, Lee (1983) and Weinberg (1983/1978) are concerned with the sociology of risk. They argue that sadomasochism is theater, invoking Goffman's concept of the "theatrical frame." What ideally occurs in the S&M world, says Weinberg (1983:106) quoting Goffman, is that participants "play the world backwards" and "the individual can arrange to script what is to come, unwinding his own reel." Through appropriate social organization the S&M world functions to reduce actual risks. Dyads and sex clubs are viewed as desirable means of creating and maintaining social support networks among participants.

Murray (1984:42) points out that the theatrical realization of fantasies and the reality of behavioral risk-taking may often coincide in S&M, and that not all participants in S&M scenes may "maintain role distance" as well as "adepts." Yet he agrees that S&M is theater, and argues on this basis, that the emergence of S&M in the 1970s may be part of a transition "from Mother Camp to Father Camp." In this respect he sees "a

continuity between female and male drag in the common focus on costuming and in choreographing near-caricatures of gender."

But who is the audience for this theater? Is it the hostile, oppressive heterosexual world, or is it the gay world itself? And Murray's own question remains unanswered: Why does this shift emerge at this particular time in this particular way?

Goffman argues (1963) the possibility of a minority within a minority being created, a community of deviants within a deviant community. The "shift" Murray describes is an emergence into *gay* discourse of an S&M controversy. It occurs about the time the Mineshaft opened in the mid 70s. At this time, in response to the new aspirations and conditions of greater tolerance created by the Gay Liberation movement, the traditionally closed S&M world was becoming more open and accessible to "non-adept" gay men. As it did so, the hypermasculine S&M style of dress and eroticism increasingly challenged the stereotypical equation of open gay identity and gender reversal (see Newton, 1972:24). S&M styles became at least a widely understood means of signaling desire for other men. But this change also brought to light an elaborate subculture available to gay men which systematically violated taboos against a wide range of sexual behaviors in addition to those against male homosexual relations. This was a time when gay bars were beginning to drop their traditional practices of hiding in remote locations behind blacked out windows, and becoming more visible. In this context of increasingly conceivable legitimacy for some as yet undefined gay male role in American society the new style appeared to some as a politically liable display of dirty linen. Indeed, if the Mineshaft exaggeratedly caricatured anything, it was a camp version of the gay past.[3]

If the Mineshaft is to be understood as an embodiment of "Father Camp," then the process by which "camp" itself becomes meaningful must be sought within the gay male world. I would suggest that camp has an interior, deadly serious side: perhaps an unnamed side associated with the neglected socialization needs of gay men.[4] The serious side of "Father Camp" might be the lack of institutionalized anticipatory socialization for male erotic relationships in American society. Behind S&M as theater might be a genuine compensation for this lack.

Murray also criticizes the view that S&M emerges more distinctly with diversification of the gay community, as implying that there is a "reservoir" of repressed S&M eroticism waiting to fill the expanding capacity. In effect, his criticism is that this is an essentialist argument.

Yet, as even Krafft-Ebing acknowledges, there may be a physiological basis for S&M which is inherent and normal in human sexual response. It seems to be the case cross-culturally that any adrenal arousal brings

human beings physiologically closer to sexual arousal. If so, the view that S&M emerges more distinctly with diversification of the gay community is not an essentialist claim, but emphasizes the role of culture in shaping and differentiating erotic from violent behavior. It emphasizes the cultural distinctiveness of patterns of life in the gay world: a sociocultural world which has, in dramatic contrast to the hegemonic "Rambo" culture of the contemporary United States, preferred the eroticization of adrenalin to the adrenalization of eros.

METHOD

What follows is retrospectively based on numerous observations and conversations in the Mineshaft between the spring of 1979 and winter of 1982, and recent conversations with a small number of friends who also observed the Mineshaft. All of these observations were made from the perspective of participants in the role of customers, rather than employees or managers of the Mineshaft. The Mineshaft was, however, a consumer-oriented business which functioned in a capitalist social context. These observations thus reflect an experiential impression that was "managed" with the intent of attracting and pleasing customers. The observations extend to a variety of customer sub-roles, including non-club member and club member; weekday night "regular," and weekend night "tourist"; and "novice" or "initiate." In short, some observations were made on weekends, during periods of employment in the "straight" world; while others were made during periods of unemployment when the Mineshaft served as an important communal focus for the researcher.

The observations are retrospective, and may suffer from the fallibility of memory, as opposed to systematic observation; they are selective, and are certainly not representative or random. As an ethnography, this study is rather incomplete. Since the data do not exist, I do not attempt to analyze the details of interaction in the Mineshaft; the glances, gestures, movements, and language(s). Since the site is closed, more systematic research and analysis will not be possible.

THE INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT OF A COMMERCIAL ANTI-STRUCTURE

The Mineshaft operated in a highly developed market economy which provided services to gay men.[5] It began operation as an "after-hours" "leather" bar in the "Triangle" district, three terms whose explanation

below will clarify the bar's market position. But more than a service, the Mineshaft was a focal point for symbolic ritual activity among gay men, and itself eventually acquired symbolic and political/media significance. For example, the movie *Cruising* began shooting on location in several S&M bars in New York, and a version of the interior of the Mineshaft was featured prominently in one vivid scene. While permission to shoot the movie had been granted the director, Stanley Freidkin, by various bar owners, the expectations that were raised in the gay male community that a "quality" movie would feature their lifestyle turned to rage when the nature of the script became known. This script recreated several actual sex-related Greenwich Village murders of gay men and implied that such violence was inherent in the world of leather and S&M, and indeed, in gay community life (Russo, 1981:236). Such distortions implicitly legitimated anti-gay violence as beyond the control of rational political authority (while the actual murders remained unsolved). The gay male community's anti-*Cruising* rage produced in 1979 the most severe gay/police confrontations in New York between the Stonewall riots of 1969 and the Liberty Centennial riots of 1986. (The latter protested the Burger court's antigay decision in the Hardwick vs. Georgia case.) It did not, however, prevent *Cruising*'s dissemination of exploitative and homophobic images of gay male life, in the established Hollywood tradition (see Russo, 1981).

Given Friedkin's history as the director of the much despised *Boys in the Band*, the trust exhibited by the bar owners in retrospect seems naive, at best. But Russo notes (ibid, p. 233) that gay men working in the film wrote an article at the time in the popular magazine *Mandate* explaining that their participation in the film was intended to project a new, masculine, gay image to the American public. In other words, some gay men perceived the Mineshaft and its world as symbolic manifestations of their own carefully constructed masculinity. Some believed that a deeply homophobic culture would attribute the same positive meaning to the Mineshaft that these actors did. Perhaps the community's rage would more appropriately have been directed at the culture that rejected their lifestyle than at the film's portrayal of it. It is clear, in any case, that from the perspective of that dominant culture, the Mineshaft was a convenient, if hazily perceived, confirmation of homophobic stereotypes of sexual evil and violence.

The "triangle" was a small triangular shaped block formed by an odd intersection in Manhattan's meatpacking district along the Hudson River just north of the West Village, and just southwest of the Chelsea district. Few lived in the triangle district, and the city's repeated efforts to run a major expressway through it lowered its commercial value, as meat-

packing plants nervously sought to relocate just across the river in New Jersey. At night this anomalous urban landscape of nineteenth century meat packing plants with their covered sidewalks was silent and deserted. At the same time it was geographically convenient to a variety of gay districts. It proved an ideal location for a series of after hours clubs and bars devoted to sexual/legal marginality. For example, the "Anvil" featured a large stage where those not engaging in other sexual or social activity could watch paid performers engage in extraordinary feats, on occasion with members of the audience.

It is likely that the floorshow at the Anvil popularized previously limited sexual practices such as "fisting," or handballing. During the period of observation informants made recurrent references to a legendary performance at the Anvil during which an adult female member of a family prominent in national politics allegedly got up from the audience and "fisted" an onstage performer. As this story implies, the Anvil (and the Mineshaft) had pretensions to attract members of the American elite. Whether this was at all the case, is not clear, but both bars often had long lines to get in, not a few limousines at their entrances, and long lines of taxis outside when people were leaving. Other bars in the triangle were less glamorous. The Mineshaft did not feature staged performances so much as a large space and multifunctional facilities for a full complement of sexual activities which ranged from "vanilla" sex to fisting, whipping, and the use of hot candle wax.

"After-hours" bars were bars that operated after the legal closing hours of the "regular" bars. They began to proliferate in the early 1970s, benefitting from a hands-off political attitude that characterized municipal government at that time (probably maintained through graft), and from the relative safety they offered to those who had been for many years engaging in so-called "anonymous" sexual encounters in a variety of increasingly dangerous open air sites in Greenwich Village along or close to the Hudson River. They survived the test of a raid by federal agents of nine such bars on the evening of July 17, 1971 (Weinberg and Williams, 1974:40-41). So, too, did the Mafia links that the raid was ostensibly intended to thwart. During the period of observation the Mineshaft itself was closed down for several weeks of the busy winter season. One rumor suggested that this was because of its lack of a liquor license. Another said that the Gay Men's Health Crisis, a community group, had discovered amoebas, the protozoans responsible for amebiasis, growing on the walls. At any event, it was much cleaner when it reopened and smelled less fetid.

Different after-hours bars attracted different crowds, had different

entrance requirements, and featured different atmospheres and activities. A common feature of after-hours bars was their "backroom" function, that is the sheltering of sexual activity. After the "regular" bars closed, their remaining patrons would migrate to the after-hours bars where they could be assured of sexual activity.[6] Employees of the regular bars would also go to the after-hours bars to relax after work. These bars were thus complementary in their market functioning to the regular bars, encouraging customers to stay until closing and reducing social pressures to meet and arrange sexual encounters. At the same time they competed for customers with other late night or all-night establishments which sheltered sexual activity such as the bath-houses and discos. In competing with the bath-houses and discos they generally offered lower admission costs and the availability of alcoholic beverages. The Mineshaft, in the rather thin guise of being a "private club," provided alcoholic beverages to patrons in exchange for "donations," and the $5.00 admission for a non-member would include use of the coat-check room and a "free" beer. Bathhouses and discos cost more, forbade alcohol, and offered greater prestige as places to go in some gay circles.

"Leather" bars were foci for the S&M world, and I have suggested that this world intersected the gay male world in such a way as to provide a measure of "in-group deviance" (Goffman, 1963:145) in relation to the latter. The S&M world has its own institutions, which include: dyads and social networks, specialty bars and clubs (which may or may not be "after hours"), publications, political organizations, and motorcycle clubs. Kamel (1983b) describes the cultural outlook of "leathermen" as distinct from both heterosexual S&M participants and other gay men who have not developed an "S&M career." Kamel claims that "leathermen" are devoted to "the ultimate in man-to-man interaction." That gay male S&M is not universally so perceived among gay men is fairly obvious. In the traditional "Mother Camp" slang among gay men in the ghetto, the term "leather queen," not "leatherman" was used. Such usage included a complex set of pejorative meanings: (1) There is an implication that S&M is a sexual specialty or fetish like any other and available to any gay man so inclined, since the formula noun + queen (Dynes, 1985: 119) implies an extreme of sexual specialization; e.g., "I thought he was just an ordinary queen, I didn't know he was a leather queen." (2) There is an implication that S&Mers' claims to ultramasculinity and more meaningful sexual experience are suspect, since the term "queen" has semantic roots which imply an "impudent woman, jade, or hussy" (ibid.). In a variant usage, leathermen were referred to as "leather girls," a word play on the British movie *The Leather Boys*, which is about the unrequit-

ed love of a gay male biker for a heterosexual biker. The pejorative connotations of these usages could have expressed a wish among many gay men to distinguish themselves categorically from S&M gay men, to cognitively bound gay S&M, and may have disguised a latent fear and insecurity about S&M. Or, on the contrary, as Stephen Murray suggests (personal communication), shown a familiarity-bred contempt for and skepticism of the leathermen's own distancing. At any rate, in spite of the ideological boundary between the leather and non-leather worlds, it is clear that "leathermen" and "normal gays" were highly interdependent components of the gay male ghetto. From the literature one would expect that the S&M world received a sizeable complement of initiates from the gay world at large. Indeed, in comparatively observing crowds in S&M and "normal" gay bars, one would be struck by the relatively larger proportion of older men in the former.

INSIDE THE MINESHAFT: LAYOUT, RULES, STAGES, PROPS, ACTS

The Mineshaft could be approached with a sense of abandon, reverence, anxious dread (typically the first time), but usually evoked some sense of excitement, however mild. On weekends few arrived before 2:00 A.M. and the crowd was dense until at least 5:00 A.M., but on weekday nights customers came in earlier and left earlier. The Mineshaft was laid out on two windowless floors: the front entrance led to a blackwalled flight of stairs on which one waited on line, with one's eyes at the level of the small of the back of the person in front. At the top of the stairs stood a bouncer and an assistant manager behind a small lectern where one showed identification and paid admission. "Members" paid a lower rate than "non-members," but "non-members" were given a "temporary membership pass" which advised them of the Mineshaft's rules of admittance and decorum. These included a dress code which expressly forbade designer clothes of any kind, suits and ties and dress shoes, "drag," and cologne. It also applauded clothes associated in American culture with working class masculinity: levis and leather, t-shirts, boots, lumber jackets and uniforms, and "just plain sweat." In practice, one would be refused admission for inappropriate dress, and in some cases the exclusion criteria were extended on the basis of unwritten rules by the employee at the door to judgements of appearance, deportment or reputation as well. For example, attempts were made to exclude pickpockets. In general, it appeared that the exclusion criteria were applied fairly consistently to

those wearing forbidden articles. If one was not a member, there was a greater chance of being refused admission. Memberships were sold at a variety of rates (for example $10.00 for three months) and entitled one to receive discount admission for the period in question. Membership meant one's name was put on a membership list, and a glossy black plastic membership card, the size of a credit card, was issued in that name. Members also recorded their "alias" or "code-name" while signing up for membership. These were typically masculine and informal such as "Butch," "Skipper," "Johnny Boy," or "Dick." This combination Boys' Club and pseudorationalized bureaucratic ritual may well have cosmeticized a genuine gatekeeping function defined by the need to circumvent legal authority.

The first room one entered after being admitted was the "front room." This was a large space, with spotlit pool tables, a long bar which was the most brightly lit area in the Mineshaft, a coat check area, and a few benches in the shadows along the far wall. The walls were mostly unvarnished planks and there was sawdust on the floor, as there was throughout the upper floor. Near the front entrance was the entrance to a red lit restroom which contained a number of stalls, urinals, and a small single sink which allowed water to splash onto the floor. At the coatcheck a sign offered a 5-cent discount to anyone who was "uncut and could prove it." Coatcheck employees were friendly and would without question check any and all articles of clothing a customer wished. This allowed some imagination to be used in devising appropriate costumes, since customers could check their street clothes and don something more exotic. One evening, for example, I was startled to realize that the man standing silently next to me in the shadows was wearing a New York City policeman's uniform. When I could speak, I whispered "I think it's a raid," and was informed by someone nearby "Huh? Oh. No, he always does that." On crowded evenings, a coatcheck line would form during peak entry hours, and again at closing. The coatcheck thus represented a second transition zone, one where minus the uncertainty of admission one could get into costume, or look around and stake out the territory. The front room was the most convivial area of the Mineshaft, as it was the only area where "talking out loud" was not frowned upon. It was a place to "get in the mood" for further activity, or to "relax" prior to returning to the outside world. People spending time in the front room were often willing to have friendly conversations, but the front room was also a favored place for initiating sexual contact. Scenarios that used verbal scripts to develop erotic momentum found a place here. Occasionally it became the scene for a variety of simple activities that used the pool table

or the bar as props: people would bend over a pool table, sit astride it, or stand at the bar, while their partners would penetrate or fellate them. It was especially appropriate for those who enjoyed a sense of public spectacle, exhibition, or humiliation. Activities at the bar were somewhat constrained by the expectation that those standing there would order drinks. A sign over the bar listed the suggested "donations" of $1.00 for beer and $2.50 for liquor. If erotic activity began close by people whose conversation was unrelated to the activity, the talkers might move away slightly so as not to be in the way, they might ignore it, or, rarely, they might lower their voices and watch. The front room set a tone of non-competitive respect for and indulgent nonchalance about sexual activity that became the rule throughout the Mineshaft.

Activities begun in the front room might also move into an adjacent area. The red lit restrooms were often the site of watersports. A more dramatic transition was the darkened archway that led to the blackwalled "playground." The playground had its own set of rules which were spelled out on the temporary membership pass: no talking, no laughing, no dishing in the playground. Above the entrance another sign gave the more practical advice: No winter coats in the playground. The playground (and the entire lower floor when it was in use) were usually maintained at a higher temperature than the front room. It was much dimmer than the front room, contained a small bar, a table, some wooden stalls, two recesses which contained slings, and featured a spotlit wooden frame in the center with a sling about six feet off the ground. The slings were used to suspend men who wished to be fisted, and the bartender at the small bar would provide paper mayonnaise cups of crisco and handfuls of paper towels to those doing the fisting. The wooden stalls could be used by those wishing to exclude others, but also had "glory-holes" to allow both voyeurism and pseudo-anonymous fellatio. The table was moved about from time to time and used variously. One evening I observed a man lying on it while another stood over him dripping hot wax from a red candle on his nipples. The playground also had its own small restroom.

The lower level could only be reached through the playground, and was only open during the weekend crush. In effect, then, it was an extension of the playground belowstairs. Two flights of stairs went down. One, reached through a door, was a standard, wide, steel-inforced stairway that presumably conformed to fire regulations. The other, spotlit and situated just behind the central fisting frame, was a ramshackle, single-width, barely navigable wooden staircase, which presumably looked appropriate to an abandoned mine. Customers did not appear to have any preference

between the two stairways. The lower level was more extensive than the upper but was internally divided by concrete walls, which were painted black throughout. The first part of the lower level was virtually a maze. The floor was not level, and the area was difficult to navigate, pitch-black in some corners. Most of the darkened corners were the setting for ordinary fellatio or intercourse, between pairs or in groups. Beneath the wooden stairway were several more wooden stalls with glory-holes. In one section, kept especially warm, were several bathtubs. Men would sit in the bathtubs, usually naked, but occasionally clothed, waiting for others to urinate on them. The silence of this activity was occasionally broken by whispered encouragement. In another room was a stage, but I never observed it used for a performance. The last room on the lower floor contained a large bar, which was overshadowed by an enormous mirror in which one could observe the room as if from a bird's eye view. This room was used primarily for "backroom" style sex, that is, whatever activity people wanted to engage in with those adjacent to them in the crowd.

The Mineshaft was equipped with a sophisticated sound system which was used to play original tapes. The tapes were eclectic, but favored avant-garde, punk, and classical music. The sound system operated at a lower volume in the front room than in the playground areas.

ROLE SYSTEMS AND RITUAL DRAMA

In spite of the complexity of the institutional, cultural, and psychological forces which appear to have been at play in the Mineshaft on a typical Saturday night, it nevertheless appeared that socially structured roles in the formal sense were rather simple. Since, at least from the customer's view point, the meaning of a Mineshaft experience was a highly personal one, it was necessary for individuals to feel free to develop their own fantasies and create their own roles to match. Such personal improvisation was a form of self-education, and I would hypothesize, unlike Sambian initiation, was largely self-directed. I would suggest, however, that two simple role systems operated independently of individual fantasy. These can be described as the distinction between employees and customers, and between members and non-members.

The former corresponds to the capitalist political economy which created and sheltered the Mineshaft. From this perspective the Mineshaft was part of the American entertainment industry, and its employees provided a service. The distinction between employees and customers exists

in any commercial organization. Like most employees in the ghetto, Mineshaft employees were workers in the secondary labor market, and dependent on tips.[7] They dressed like customers, fraternized freely with customers, and in some cases might become customers during their free time. This apparently vague line between the two roles was characteristic of ghetto employment, but was especially vague at the Mineshaft. This might have been partly a result of the relatively high complement of ghetto workers among the Mineshaft's clientele, whose expertise would make them demanding; and partly due to the Mineshaft's marginal legal status, which would make management wary of any overt conflict with customers. Since the municipal police were probably paid off to ignore the Mineshaft's existence, they could hardly be called in to deal with any altercation. Along with their manifest duties, employees would look out for the welfare of customers, who might, for example, require medical attention. They would eject pickpockets. On one occasion, I observed someone who had passed out being carried up the stairs.

The line between members and non-members was less formal than it sounds, and I have already suggested that it could be operationalized in a variety of ways, such as weekend versus weekday night attendance, or newcomers versus old hands. It has been described in a romantic short story about the Mineshaft (Preston, 1984:80) as, in effect, the difference between "The Committed" and the presumably not-so committed. The significant variation was one of degree of socialization.

Of course, the normative standards of membership in the Mineshaft did not assume any single definition of masculine erotic reality. Indeed, the ability of the Mineshaft experience to accommodate the individual homoerotic realities of hundreds, if not thousands of gay men, was its most interesting feature. While each participant performed his own ritual with his own meanings, the Mineshaft functioned somehow to hook up all these performances with a common set of facilities, rules, symbols, and emotions. It suggests on the one hand, the possibility of non-violent community in a fragmented, specialized, and culturally atomized society; or forces one to "consider the dionysian as an archetypal aspect inherent in every society" (Maffesoli, 1983). Thus, in contrast to the two simple, socially imposed role systems just described, ritual dramatic roles at the Mineshaft were flexible and complex. Nothing prevented an individual who so desired from assuming a variety of roles in any number of different activities, even during the course of a single evening. The lighting was dim, there was no reason to speak aloud, and one could change costume. Men who were tired of playing erotic subjects could find a way to be erotic objects, and vice versa. Some ritual activities, especially

those involving more than two participants, were far more complex than simple dyads. Indeed, spontaneous orgiastic combinations centered on fellatio, masturbation, and anal intercourse were quite liminal. Even clearly defined active/passive dyads in the context of the Mineshaft were often transformed into group experiences, and informants have described their experiences in the Mineshaft as having had a religious meaning. For example, consider the following description of a playground whipping from Preston's romance:

> The men who crowded us couldn't help but try to touch him. Even while my belt thudded on his back their hands would reach out and worshipfully attempt to feel some part of him. They were awesomely silent. It was as though a new, precious icon had appeared in this house where men were venerated. (1984:82-83)

In this story the narrator decides that the man he is whipping does not really want these others around, that "it broke the finely tuned communication between us." So after an interaction wherein "he kissed me just a little," the restored dyad "go back to the front." "People followed us from room to room hoping that the ritual this man and I were performing would be repeated," reports the obviously boastful narrator.

As in this example, the main problem of social control in the Mineshaft centered on this tension among the tremendous variety of erotic fantasies people might be acting out in any given encounter. This tension was usually contained by an extraordinarily fine-tuned etiquette of glances, gestures, movements, and whispered encouragements or "dirty talk." During the entire period of observation I only witnessed one incident involving actual rage or violence, an exception which revealed the rule of ritualized social control. This took place on an especially crowded weekend evening on the lower floor in the superheated area near the bathtubs. A man called out very loudly "I said STOP THAT!" and apparently struck another man. The crowd was stunned, and in Goffman's terminology, the frame was obviously broken–no one knew what to do. All sound but the disco tapes ceased. People all around stopped what they were doing and stood frozen as if in a tableau. The man continued to shout and struck out several more times. It appeared to me that he struck out at random, and may have injured more than one person. Someone called out "Hey, no fighting!" One injured man left the area. Finally people close to the assailant began to take action appropriate to the situation, taking hold of the man and talking to him. The assailant was maneuvered away, while some of those who had witnessed the incident edged

out of the area, clearly disturbed. Meanwhile newcomers moved in, and the frame was re-established within a few minutes.

CONCLUSION

What then do we know about the Mineshaft?

Decoding the language of social control used in the Mineshaft would need systematic study of a similar site. Such a study would need to include such symbolic languages as costume, pose, and choreography. The boundary between the front room and the playground suggests Mead's discussion of the relation between games and play (1962:151-163). The Mineshaft fostered both intense play, where one took on a single role and played it, and the greater complexity of the game, where knowledge of other roles (and the roles of others) was also required. The Mineshaft needed to accommodate different levels of understanding of every language it used. If an initiate was unable to articulate his needs through costume, or moving in a certain way, or standing in a certain position, he might still be able to stumble upon fulfillment in the dark, or just stand still until someone with clever hands decoded his secret. The complex and ill-lit layout necessitated slow, stage-like movement, even when crowds were not present, and simultaneously facilitated fantasy.

But analysis must move beyond the symbolic; it must also examine touch, smell, taste, and non-verbal sound as non-symbolic avenues of culturally meaningful experience. In a highly verbal culture, where words and mass-produced images dominate socially constructed reality, the dim lighting and primarily non-verbal communication of the playground eerily emphasized the openness of touch, smell, taste, and non-verbal sound as avenues of experience. These zones were as much a vacant niche in the psychocultural landscape of America as the meatpacking district in which the Mineshaft was located was a vacant niche in the political economy of the urban landscape. The playground especially was devoted to the way things literally *felt* to participants. It was a place where cultural inhibitions were displaced, rather than discussed; that is, an arena of critical practice, rather than critical discourse.

The Mineshaft may have addressed unarticulated and neglected desires of gay men for social sanctioning by allowing individuals to act out their fantasies and "unwind their reels" in a group setting. If so, how deeply did these experiences affect people? How did they interpret what was going on around them? How well did their experiences match the diversity of their fantasies?

The Mineshaft probably functioned to socially organize risk reduction at the nexus of the S&M and larger gay male communities by maintaining an environment in which limiting experimentation could be carried on in the presence of experienced persons. Relative to less organized alternatives such as the streets and dockside, it was a safe place for initiates into the S&M world to meet those with developed S&M identities. It was at times a site of awesome and liminal rituals of initiation which the culture in which it was situated maintained in secrecy and considered taboo. As was also true in the Sambian rituals, humiliation and fear were linked with affection and mutual erotic satisfaction.

At the same time the Mineshaft was not under the control of the homoerotic male community. It was clearly the creation of secondary labor market capitalism and maintained through traditional forms of political corruption. Its owners allowed its use as a vehicle for media exploitation of gay men.

Nevertheless, nightly, it clearly demonstrated the power of culture and social organization to transform sensation and physiological response into erotic experience.

NOTES

1. Such as those between, on the one hand, normative ideals of "equality" and "freedom," and on the other hand, the realities of inequities of power and constraints on opportunity.

2. Liminality, and its relationship to *communitas,* is a central concern for Turner (1969). In a *rite de passage,* the individual or group undergoing the rite is first separated from social structure or cultural givens before becoming liminal, i.e., not subject to social definition, "neither here nor there" (op.cit.:94-95). *Communitas* is the relatively unstructured society which emerges in the liminal phase. As will be shown, the Mineshaft could well have provided its customers with such experiences.

As a more classical example of ritual liminality it is interesting to note Herdt's (1982, 1987) discussions of Sambian initiation. The initiation experience, as Herdt describes it, is "deeply awesome" (1982:68) if not terrifying, rather than "fun," although for the older participants it seems enjoyable enough. This difference between the experience of the initiates and that of the older males seems due primarily to the secrecy which is maintained about the rites, as a result of which the initiates have no clear expectation of what will happen to them.

During the ceremony, violence and joking hostility are exercised by the older males on the initiates, and a homoerotic norm is successfully introduced and established in most cases. This norm involves an explicit association between fellatio and flute playing, whereby the flutes are eroticized. The young boys are taught that performing fellatio on older males is necessary in order to become

men themselves. They ultimately learn to enjoy this activity and enter into various libidinal liaisons with older men to whom they are attracted. The initiation also prepares them for their subsequent role as older participants in such relations.

A startling surface similarity between the Sambia and the United States lies in the secrecy attached to homoerotic socialization. However, the secrecy attached to the Sambian rites is hegemonic within the tribe, secret knowledge which is a source of power for its practitioners. In the United States the secrecy attached to homoeroticism is resistive, a result of domination.

3. The Mineshaft's decor, for example, was in some ways suggestive of a late evening at some of those outdoor sites in its vicinity at which many patrons would have erotic experiences under conditions of considerably greater personal danger of, among other things, being mugged. Certainly, as will be discussed below, the Mineshaft's location was as out-of-the-way and its admission policies as elaborate as anything necessitated by police surveillance during the early 1960s.

4. For example, the need to develop stigma management skills, or overcome internalized negative stereotypes of gay identity. This has improved somewhat in that there are now books available on how to come out to one's parents or maintain a long-term relationship with another man, and in large cities psychotherapists willing to help one develop a positive gay identity. But where does a 15-year-old go to find true love, or failing that, to practice sexual risk reduction techniques, with other young men?

5. A service economy centered in Greenwich Village had emerged with extraordinary vitality from the underground during the previous decade. During the early 1960s as few as five packed gay bars might be serving the entire metropolitan New York area at a given moment, and these were subject to Mafia administration and police pay-off, and of course, raids. Even private gay parties were subject to raids. The "Stonewall Rebellion" of June, 1969, was essentially a communal response to a bar raid, but marked the beginning of a new era of relative governmental indifference to non-political group activities of gay men.

6. As Barry Adam has reminded me, there were also back rooms in some bars in operation during regular hours.

7. Secondary, relative to primary labor market employment, is characterized by low pay, low status, short or non-existent career ladders, lack of benefits, non-unionization, job insecurity, and transience

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