

Creativity in the Dark: A Qualitative Study of Cult's Members Battle between True and False Self in Heterotopia

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Abstract : Cults are usually thought of as suppressive organizations, where creativity is systematically stifled. Except for few scholars, creativity in cults remains an uncharted terrain (Boeri and Pressley, 2010). This paper focuses on how cult members sought real and imaginary spaces to express themselves and even used their bodies as canvases on which to assert their individuality, resistance, devotion, pain, and anguish. We contend that cult members' creativity paves their way out of the cult. This paper is part of a larger study into the experiences of former members of cults and cult-like New Religious Movements (NRM). The research is based on in-depth interviews conducted with thirty Israeli men and women, aged 24 to 50, who either joined an NRM or were born into one. Their stories reveal that creativity is both emplaced and embedded in power relations. That is why Foucault's idea of Heterotopia and Winnicott's idea of the battle between True and False self can benefit our understanding of how cult members creatively assert their autonomy over their bodies and thoughts while in the cult. Cults' operate on a complex tension between submission and autonomy. On the one hand, they act as heterotopias by allowing for a 'simultaneous mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live. As counter-hegemonic sites, they serve as 'the greatest reserve of the imagination', to use Foucault's words. Cults definitely possess elements of mystery, danger, and transgression where an alternative social ordering can emerge. On the other hand, cults are set up to format alternative identities. Often, the individuals who inhabit these spaces look for spiritual growth, self-reflection, and self-actualization. They might willingly relinquish autonomy over vast aspects of their lives in pursuit of self-improvement. In any case, cults claim the totality of their members' identities and absolute commitment and compliance with the cult's regimes. It, therefore, begs the question how the paradox between autonomy and submission can spur instances of creativity. How can cult members escape processes of performative regulation to assert their creative self? Both Foucault and Winnicott recognize the possibility of an authentic self - one that is spontaneous and creative. Both recognize that only the true self can feel real and must never comply. Both note the disciplinary regimes that push the true self into hiding, as well as the social and psychological mechanisms that individuals develop to protect their true self. But while Foucault spoke of the power of critique as a way of salvaging the true self, Winnicott spoke of recognition and empathy - feeling known by others. Inviting a dialogue between the two theorists can yield a productive discussion on how cult members assert their 'true self' to cultivate a creative self within the confines of the cult.

Keywords : cults, creativity, heterotopia, true and false self

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