

# **Burning Issues: Young People and the Fascination for Fire**

**By Mike Presdee**

## **Introduction**

On Monday 6<sup>th</sup> December 2004 in Indian Head, Washington, USA, unknown arsonists put a complete new up-market housing development to the 'torch', burning 26 houses in one spectacular conflagration! It was a five million pound bonfire that was deliberate, and organized, changing both the landscape and society in one swift and totally destructive act (*Independent on Sunday*, 13 December 2004). But what was its meaning?

Here I want to explore in a cultural criminological sense the 'story' of fire, the state's fear and criminalization of fire and the fascination of fire within the everyday life of young people. Fire is always about context, and specifically social context, being not just a 'technology' but also an interaction with social events and relationships. There is a tension between fire and society that is human and it is this human context that I wish to explore here. It involves the rational/scientific use of purification by fire. Such as the deoderisation of 'smell'; the cooking of putrefied meat; and the forging of metals in the purifying of rock. But it also involves human emotions entangled with fire. Fire is indeed 'useful' and its uses have been socially organized but it is also pleasurable in many ways making fire more a social reality rather than a natural reality. As Bachelard poetically points out: 'Fire smoulders in a soul more than it does under the ashes. The arsonist is the most dissembling of criminals' (Bachelard 1964:13).

Through the quest for pleasure we all have the potential to become dissembling deceivers. In a more consumer driven society do we become less receptive to pleasure? Do we have less pleasure? Do we as a result seek more than ever before the pleasure hidden within transgression? The pleasure of fire! However, there is another dimension. Why is it that 'fire' attracts, creates, destroys? Why is it so central to all our lives; possessed, controlled, criminalized? Where does its power come from? Bachelard, in his *Psychoanalysis of Fire*, observing in his typical philosophical and poetic way that:

Fire and heat provide modes of explanation in the most varied domains, because they have been for us the occasion for unforgettable memories, for simple and decisive personal experiences. Fire is thus a privileged phenomena which can explain anything. If all that changes slowly may be explained by life, all that changes quickly is explained by fire. Fire is the ultra-living element. It is intimate and it is universal. It lives in our heart. It lives in the sky. It rises from the depths of the substance and offers itself with the warmth of love. Or it can go back down into the substance and hide there, latent and pent up, like hate and vengeance. Among all phenomena, it is really the only one to which there can be so definitely attributed the opposing values of good and evil. It shines in Paradise. It burns in Hell. It is gentleness and torture. It is cookery and it is apocalypse. It is well being and it is respect. It is a tutelary and a terrible divinity, both good and bad. It can contradict itself; thus it is one of the principles of universal explanation. (Bachelard, 1964:7)

## Background

In any one week in England and Wales there are on average 2,100 deliberately set primary fires recorded that result in at least two deaths, 55 injuries and a cost of £40 million. Here a 'primary' fire is officially defined as 'Any recorded fire incident that occurs in buildings or property, or where there are any casualties or where 5 or more appliances attend' (Office of Deputy Prime Minister, 2004:3). The bulk of these fires involve the burning of cars with approximately 200 burnt out every day, whilst 17 schools and 4 churches or places of worship suffer an arson attack every week and in the last decade there have been 2.4 million recorded arson fires, 32,000 injuries and 1,200 deaths (Arson Control Forum, June 2003). Recorded offences continue to rise massively. In 1963 there were only 1,129 recorded offences which by 2002/3 had exploded to 53,200 with 103,000 deliberate fires reported to the fire and rescue service.

Yet detection rates remain low at only 8% compared to 24% for all other offences. This low detection rate results in low conviction rates. For example, there were only 450 convictions in 1963 that rose only to 2000 in 2003. (Office of Deputy Prime Minister, 2003). Of those found guilty at Magistrates Court, 60% were under 18 years of age and 32% under 15 years. Of those found guilty at a Crown Court, only 32% were under 21 years of age (Arson Control Forum Statistics, 2004).

This can be contrasted to the USA where in 2002 there were 44,500 intentionally set 'structure' fires reported, plus 41,000 deliberately set vehicle fires, resulting in 350 civilian deaths at a cost of \$1.2 billion. When outdoor fires and a proportion of suspicious fires are added, this rises to an annual cost of \$2 billion (US Fire Administration, 23 June 2004). Overall 52% per cent of arson arrestees are under 18 years, whilst only 2% of fire setters are convicted (National Fire Protection Association, 2000).

As always, official statistics only include recorded and reported incidents. But the intrinsic nature of fire and its place and meaning within the social and cultural activities of everyday life makes it impossible to even begin to attempt to estimate the actual numbers of deliberate fires, big and small, that happen in any one day. At specific times of the year, such as the weeks leading up to and proceeding the fire festivals of Halloween and Guy Fawkes night, we experience a festival of fire where 'fire and fireworks [are] celebrated throughout Britain, [which] literally lights up the country in a veritable carnival of noise and destruction that excites all classes and all ages' (Presdee, 2000:31). Destruction through fire becomes at this time a central cultural activity for the great majority of the country. This is a time when arson is both practiced and celebrated by millions.

What is surprising is that there has been no real cultural analysis within criminology of the causes or genesis of arson with studies, instead, concentrating on the small number of offenders convicted (Soothill and Pope, 1973; Soothill et al., 2004.). A more cultural criminological approach can excavate the place and meaning of fire in a social and historical sense, bringing a greater depth and understanding to the question as to why at this time we are experiencing an increasing fascination with fire that results in both death and destruction. As I have remarked elsewhere:

...cultural criminology reflects ... the history of the discourses of 'limit' and 'transgression'; boundary making' and 'boundary breaking'; 'control' and 'hedonism'; 'rationality' and 'irrationality', alongside the examination of the 'inner' experience of

individuals free from moral reasoning and safe from the 'outside' world. The individual 'inner' experience becomes the seat of wrongdoing and immorality par excellence. It is when this inner experience becomes exteriorized into the rebelliousness and resistance of carnival (or fête) that disorder becomes defined as law breaking rather than harmless fun - much the same way in which there is an instance when the fascination with fire becomes arson. (Presdee 2004:278).

Experience is, then, the end product of the needs and dilemmas that we all face in everyday life, being no more or less than social action reified. There are only rare times when social action is truly 'senseless', therefore we need to explore not events, or incidents but the social context within which such incidents occur. As Ferrell (2004) suggests 'experiences and emotions have also come into focus as part of cultural criminology's emphasis on everyday existence as an essential arena of criminality and control. Cultural criminology highlights the currents of carnivalesque excitement, pleasure, and risk-taking that animate everyday life, but equally so the many capillaries of daily control designed to contain and commodify these experiential currents.'

Cultural criminology attempts to articulate deeper and wider 'human concerns', 'expectations' and 'yearnings' than methods of enquiry that are bound by the methodological constraints and shackles of ascertainable evidence, rather than a more creative criminology that attempts 'to reflect the peculiarities and particularities of the late-modern socio-cultural milieu' (Hayward 2004:pp155-163).

Within this theoretical context I want now to explore the ways in which fire has become an important part of the culture of everyday life and is more and more becoming an integral act of rebelliousness and resistance, defiance and destruction. Throughout I have used writings on fire produced for me by final year students at one 'High School' in the South East of England, who wrote about their experiences as well as their feelings for fire and what it meant to them. The original spelling has been retained in the extracts presented, as well as fictional names of both schools and pupils. Also I have returned to 'field notes' that I made whilst observing the actions of a group of young people in the Longlevens district of Gloucester on 'bonfire' night of 1999.

## **The meaning of fire**

The element we call fire has been a central phenomenon in the development of both the natural and human worlds and has been a part of the process of shaping terrains, the countryside, flora and fauna, and also human societies and their ways of living. Since early primitive societies, humankind has remained frightened yet fascinated by fire with its innate and immense power to destroy and create. Early humans quickly learned that it gave both light and warmth and that it might keep predators at bay through its central overwhelming ability to frighten.

Humans quickly learned to cook their prey and, as they watched natural fire chase animals from forests, they began to use the power of fire to kill and destroy as their prey were driven over cliffs, into clearings or marshes where hunters waited for the kill (Barnouw, 1979; Pyne, 1995; Goudsblum, 1992). They also noticed the abundance of new growth that happened after fires and began a crude and simple form of farming with fire. In other words, they began to play with the awesome power of fire, its destructive ability

on the one hand and its creativeness on the other. The fascination with fire had led to playing with fire.

For Freud the beginning of civilization only begins with this ability to retain and control fire when he suggested in a footnote in *Civilisation and its Discontents* that:

... primal man had the habit, when he came in contact with fire, of satisfying an infantile desire connected with it, by putting it out with a stream of urine ... The first person to renounce this desire and spare the fire was able to carry it off with him and subdue it to his own use. (Freud, 1955)

Levi-Strauss (1975) also saw the importance of the mastery of fire for human culture and development when he concluded that culture and creativity were not possible until humankind moved from eating the uncooked to the cooked, thereby beginning the social and cultural ritualisation of eating and social interplay.

The importance of fire to the continuance of social life led inevitably to fire becoming an important aspect of social and cultural life wherever and whenever societies developed and quickly found its way into the ceremonies and celebrations of social life. Fire marked both life and death, the beginning and end of seasons, the powerful and the powerless. Whoever had the technology to create fire at random became the alchemists of ancient societies holding as they did the power to change minerals into either weapons or tools. Here was the power to destroy or create held within one magical ability, to make fire for whoever, whenever, wherever. They became the professional players with fire and in the absence of any notion of science became the 'keepers' of life, the wardens of the passage through life to death and therefore the early priests of primitive religions and spirituality.

This duality of destructiveness and creativity, held within the abstraction of fire, resulted in a profound polarity buried deep within the consciousness of human cultures to the extent that it seems now in contemporary society to be a natural and therefore instinctive, innate and emotional cultural response to fire. But it is in reality the result of social actions over time, played out through social structures and relationships that have slowly manifested themselves through forms and formations of culture. Fire has slowly permeated our emotional makeup entering our cultural consciousness in a deep and layered way. Fear yet fascination; destruction yet creation; death yet life. These dualities of fire lie buried within us, erupting from time to time, whenever and wherever the passage or survival of social life and social identity becomes a burning issue.

At the Bay High when year 11 leaves they get their ties, tie them round lamp-posts and set them alight for leaving and surviving school. It's a celebration thing. (Ellie, 17)

Last year on the last day at school before the summer holidays all the year 12s was burning their blazers!! There were fires all down the road! You couldn't wear those again!! (Jackie, 17)

For these young people the power of fire was used to mark their passage from one social era to another. To destroy the power of adults and in so doing create a new future they hoped would be theirs.

The possession of fire enabled humans to literally play at god, to control life, to conquer and create yet also to resist, thus moulding our emotional responses to the possibility of its power. Ancient tyrants could install fear through the burning of towns and villages yet the oppressed could, in turn, use fire to destroy the possessions of the tyrant, making fire a genuine tool of resistance. The same fear and the same resistance can be achieved through the burning of a car in contemporary Canterbury. The same fears, the same fascinations and the same feeling of power which young people in France continue to exercise. In the Banlieues of Paris in 2005 8,973 cars were put to the torch in 20 days of resistance and riot at a cost of over 200 million euros, and again in late March 2007 when 300 young people swarmed through the Gard du Nord burning litter bins and smashing shop windows in protest at a homeless person being arrested for trying to achieve a free train ride. Here young people through fire resisted the arrest of one of the many dispossessed. (The Times 29/3/07 p47)

### **Fête and Fire**

My field notes of a trip to a housing estate in Gloucester on November 5<sup>th</sup>, Bonfire night, tells the story of a large group of young men and young women who lit a fire in a quiet place on their estate, away from the official adult-controlled displays. I positioned myself on the far side of the field in which they gathered and watched as they performed their own spectacle of fire. My notes went on to describe the 'spectacle' as:

the young people danced in the fire, bouncing on mattresses placed over the fire. Like Fijian fire walkers they danced and dared each other to stay in the fire longer and longer. They dangled ropes into the heat of the flames and hurled them out and swung the burning ends around their heads. Later they withdrew to the black corner of the green and watched the dying fire and sat listening to the background staccato bursts of shell fire.

Then they got wooden boards and placed those over the fire and as the flames rekindled the fire dance began again. They faced each other bouncing on the bridges of burning boards, jousting with each other with burning sticks as the howling wind made the flames more dangerous. Like mediaeval knights they fought in the fire and the watching crowd feasted on this spectacle of fire.

Then they noticed me sitting in the darkness of the trees and began to advance swinging the burning ropes above their heads. They began to charge and, as they got closer, I saw both young men and young women laughing, excited by this unexpected chase. As the fire sticks and ropes got closer I left them to their spectacle and to their fire.

This celebration of fire through fire festivals is a cultural acceptance of its power and its properties. Halloween, a Christian festival tacked onto the Celtic pagan fire festival of Samhain, celebrated the autumn solstice and the move from light to darkness and the importance of fire for life. Bakhtin talked of the roman fire festival of 'mocoli' and its importance in everyday life.

The heart of the matter is the ambivalent combinations of abuse and praise, of the wish for death and the wish for life, projected in the atmosphere of the festival of fire, that is of burning and re-birth... (Bakhtin, 1984:248)

Bakhtin also described renaissance fire festivals such as the one Rabelais attended in Rome in 1549 which was ‘performed in a piazza, a battle was fought with dramatic effects, fireworks, and even casualties....The traditional hell was presented in the form of a globe ejecting flames’ (Bakhtin, 1984: 158).

Modern festivals continued to be popular on a global level. In Europe midsummer fires were described by Sir James Frazer in *The Golden Bough* as having ‘three great features...bonfires, the procession with torches round fields and the custom of rolling a wheel.’ (1922) There was much throwing of fire and jumping through flames as, like Prometheus playing with fire stolen from the gods, the meaning of fire became lost in folklore whilst the excitement, the fear and the fascination remained.

This fascination with danger and excitement was a continual theme within the writing of my group of young people:

I think people like fire because it’s dangerous. The danger of fire encourages excitement. Every year I go to the bonfire and everyone really enjoys themselves. I think it’s because its fascinating for people to see something nice like a table turn into ash in seconds. Fires are a bit unpredictable which creates suspense for people. (Becky 17)

Fire...looks nice it looks soft and elegant. It’s interesting and strange and it can destroy so much. I remember once when 4 or 5 best friends come round and we were sitting in the garden not doing very much and then my cousin got a lighter and some tissue and burnt it in front of us. It was fascinating because it flowed through the tissue, curling it and turning it into nothing. It looked so beautiful but it has an immense power to destroy everything. (Melissa 17)

I have a fascination for burning candles. Especially big ones and watch them disintegrate. They melt into all sorts of grotesque shapes. I just watch the flame go right down to the bottom...then there’s nothing. (Hannah 17)

In America the ‘burning man’ festival attracts 30,000 people to a celebration of creativity and then destruction, as people of all ages descend on the Black Rock desert of Nevada to transgress through an orgasm of pyro-fetishism. In Japan, the Nachi, Kurama and Oniyo fire festivals are the biggest, whilst the Dosojin fire festival involves much fighting with and throwing of fire like the Samoan Fire Knife dancing annual championships that celebrates fighting with fire.

It is through these official carnivals that ‘misrule’ ‘resentment’ and ‘resistance’ are lived out as the ‘logic of late capitalism’ asserts itself within the weave of everyday life. It is at this moment that the need for the carnivalesque, the search for the carnivalesque, becomes an essential element within the culture of everyday lived life as we seek to find solace in transgression in order to free ourselves from the rules, regulations and regimentation of rational contemporary life. In some way the carnivalesque promises freedom.

### **Carnival, excitement and fire in everyday life**

In contemporary everyday life the fascination with fire continues within a society where identity is forged through a process of consumption that demands an extreme

individualism marked by hedonism and uncertainty. Bakhtin in his discussion on the need for carnival saw that 'capitalism created the conditions for a special type of inescapable solitary consciousness' (1984:287-8); a solitariness caused, according to Weber, by 'puritan ... ascetism turned against one thing: the spontaneous enjoyment of life and all it had to offer' (1984:167-8). This spontaneity is where the formation of identity is forged. Without it we feel strait-jacketed and shoe-horned into a constricted and restricted way of life where consumption is central and where to 'have' is to exist and where to 'have nothing' is to be 'nothing'. The creation of 'things', consumer items, becomes ruled by rational processes as the conveyor belt of production becomes the only rational way of life as late-modernity becomes characterized by life determined by the collective experience of the stifling nature of 'rational production', on the one hand, and the individual loneliness of consumption on the other. There can be no place for emotions within the productive process whilst the process of consumption depends on it.

It is in the activities of everyday life that we come to negotiate and manoeuvre our way through the imperatives of production and consumption. Here in everyday life is where we create the 'impulse that drives us to unsettle or confound the fixed order of things', as 'our shifting sense of ourselves as subjects and as objects, as acting upon and being acted upon by the world, of being with and without certainty, of belonging and being estranged.' These combine to produce a contemporary culture of loneliness and loss of certainty. (Jackson 1989: 2). We struggle to assert ourselves, demanding to be taken notice of, to say we exist, as we strive to be considered free agents in a world of enforced rationalism. Banging on the boundaries created by rationalism is how we can express our humanity as we make our existence real through real social action. Empty lives become filled through transgressing the boundaries set for us. The performance of transgression makes up for the lack of spontaneity in contemporary everyday life as we transport ourselves from the realm of the mundane to the world of excitement. This 'lust for life' is what I think Weber meant by 'eudaemonism' or what Nietzsche called 'Dionysianism'. An 'unending turbulent lust and longing ... that drives (us) to conquest, to drunkenness, to mystic ecstasy (through drugs), to love-deaths...and cannot be long restrained.' (Brinton 1941: 39).

If you get a bottle and fill it with, like, body spray stuff and put it on the floor, light it and jump on it, the flame shoots out the end! It's really, really, exciting!! (Jessica 17)

The thing about fires which personally pleases me is the excitement of getting caught! Knowing that I would be in trouble if I was caught lighting a big fire with my friends...it excites me. (Megan 17)

This cultural process presents to us the possibility of reconciliation with real life and through it, the setting fire to a car, or indeed fighting a fire as a 'fire fighter', can make us feel human and is proof that we 'exist.' Fire is a very conspicuous spectacle, as is television and film. It is seen by many, enjoyed by many and like conspicuous consumption, conspicuous spectacle has become an integral part of the process of identity formation. If we are what we consume, then we come alive through the spectacle we create! As Bakhtin remarked, 'The most intense and productive life of culture takes place on the boundaries' (1984:191).

However, the breaking of boundaries and the urge to resist rules and regimentation in the past often found expression within the spectacle of carnival. Here was a world turned inside out as well as ‘upside down’ where, in the case of fire, its characteristics could be explored, celebrated and practiced. Yet in contemporary society the license for misrule is no longer held by the structure and constraints of carnival and so determined by those who took part, but is now held by the State and exercised through law and legislation. In other words, licensed misrule becomes captured and contained within the rational processes that make up the modern bureaucratic State. For late-modernity, carnival is dead but the need to transgress and resist is not and, although it is ‘increasingly difficult to take to the streets or indeed to party’ (Presdee, 2000:45), carnival life, transgressive life, still happens in the creases of everyday-life creating instability, disorder and disturbance. ‘It is as if, through the dual forms of scientific rationality and containment, carnival has shattered and its fragments and debris are now to be found in a wide variety of contemporary forms, but hardly ever, ironically, in the remaining shell of what is still called carnival’ (Presdee, 2000:45).

The fire of carnival that I mentioned earlier now becomes part of the ‘debris’ of carnival driven into the back alleys of cities where fires erupt in a seemingly spontaneous fashion as cars, fences, rubbish bins and backyard doors disappear, consumed in the flames of transgressive burning transformed into spectacles of the sublime. Through such acts we become once more acquainted with our lost or hidden humanity underlining our need for relationships rather than politics. The memories of a lost life can literally be burnt away, cleansing the feelings of humiliation created by the confusions arising from the loss of identity.

If you’ve had a bad day and you light a fire and burn something, its as if you are burning that bad day away. I know of a lot of people who have had bad experiences in their lives and feel that by burning a fire they are burning that bad experience. (Megan 17)

Fire can also get rid of memories, you can set light to the past and move on. (Tom 17)

### **The Search for the Sublime**

This search for the sublime that I have just described has long been recognized as a motivational force that has become heightened under the imperatives of late capitalism. In the discourse of transgression it is associated with the ‘edge work’ described by Lyng and others (2004) that gives us the sublime experience of transgression. As I have suggested in the past:

There can be no more exciting way of doing ‘edge-work’ for the law-abiding’ than ‘law-breaking’. Transgressing takes us to the very edge of ‘lawfulness’, where we stand and stare into the canyon of ‘lawlessness’. It takes us to the edge of all that is approved of and defined as respectable. It carries the threat of being sent into social oblivion tantalizingly held before us, with its accompanying promise of a life as an outsider, to be dominated by the degradation of the rejected. We are confronted by the challenge of being lawless every day as we gamble, play with and push to the limits the fine line between order and disorder. The more successful the gamble becomes, the more heightened becomes the associated pleasure (Presdee, 2000).



This 'heightened pleasure' becomes transformed into a 'sublime' experience that springs from the font of danger and excitement but, unlike extreme sports, this is a subliminal experience that emanates from the possibility of social death rather than physical mortality. Crime and, therefore, arson is social edgework where there is a risk of a social fall rather than a physical fall. It is, put simply, the blending together of pleasure and terror through transgression. Coleridge called it a 'delightful terror' and a 'fantastic pleasure' and John Ruskin, in a letter to his father from Chamonix in 1863, talked of the need for fear and danger which he felt made a 'better man, fitter for every sort of work and trial and nothing but danger produces this effect' (Macfarlane, 2003:85). In 1688 John Dennis, when in the Alps, talked of walking on 'the very brink of destruction ...the sense of all this produced different emotions in me viz a delightful horror, a terrible joy, and at the same time that I was infinitely pleased, I trembled' (Macfarlane 2003: 72).

There is, then, a feeling of the sublime to be salvaged from the socially destructive nature of crime and arson. Fire is in itself a source of fear and terror which is heightened by the edgework involved in breaking the law, making arson the 'sublime' crime *par excellence*. As Edmund Burke pointed out in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757 and 1990) 'any sort of terror...is a source of the sublime, that is, it is productive of the strangest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.'

A couple of years ago my friends and I got an old wheely bin that had been in this field, filled it with leaves and branches and set fire to it. It was well fun. We knocked it over and then my friend started to run through it. I waited for my turn and felt sick. I didn't want to show I was frightened. Just before my turn it got bigger and started to spread so we all jumped through it. The flames seemed huge. It was brilliant and my shoes started to melt. (Vicky 17)

### **Performance and everyday life**

One of the characteristics of contemporary everyday life is the way that the media has blurred the delineation between drama and reality as both TV and film seek to present the spectacle of 'drama' and 'performance' to a mass audience. If we consider that the term 'drama' is Greek for action, then we can come to understand how action can be misunderstood as drama. The structures of drama, theatre, performance, create certain limits on action, certain disciplines that restrict the social outcome. But experimental drama attempts to break through, to fracture theatre, in an attempt to get close to the 'real', get close to the energy of the real, until performance becomes real and the real becomes performance. Now the performative dimension of everyday life produces fire as theatre without vicarious experience. In other words, if you cannot 'play with' life (the vicarious) then you do 'reality'. Cars or buildings for burning, become reified objects separated out from reality and ripe for ritualistic destruction; they become the props of spectacle and performance. If you cannot make drama, you make reality through the performance of transgression and it is through playing, through performance that we come to 'realise' what we want to be. If we play tough, we become the representation of toughness thereby redefining the 'self' through performance. From being dull to being interesting. From being powerless to being powerful. From being a nobody to a somebody. From meaningless to meaningful. Culture brings power, no matter the form of

culture, be it the drama of theatre or drama of the street. For young people, fire culture, fire theatre, is permeated with power which spectators are powerless to stop in the same way as an audience cannot stop a murder in a play. Once the performance of fire begins, then there is an inevitability held within the dramatic dynamics of reality. A fire happens or is caused to happen:

A crowd gathers to see what's going on. The crowd makes a circle around the event ... Talk in the crowd is about what happened, to whom, why ... Even after the event is 'cleaned up' some writing marks the site. For example, bloodstains, knots of witnesses, and the curious. Only slowly does the event evaporate and the crowd disperse. I call such events eruptions (Schechner, 1988: 159).

In lives with no history and no future then the immediate is where we forge our identities. We perform, we present ourselves literally in the present. Nothing else is important, not consequences, not tomorrow, only the performance of now.

In the background of everyday life we can hear the shrill shouts of the political classes protesting against the social activities of the dispossessed as they make clumsy attempts to control social behaviour through absurd 'anti-social behaviour' legislation. At the same time, politicians create paternalistic and protective social policies supported by an army of social workers who set out to salve the collective guilt of the 'chattering' classes. The more politicians attempt forgiveness for their failure to achieve real change through social policy the more extreme will be the actions of those who seek more meaning in their lives than being the thankful poor. As I have stated elsewhere:

... we are all acutely aware that nothing has really started (politically) simply because nothing has really come to an end (inequality). The political promises of progress, equality and liberty are woven into the seams of history alongside the threads of failure. (Presdee, 2004:42)

It is in the social relationships of everyday life where we learn of the 'unpleasant social facts' that we are continually confronted with as we grow older. That we will never be affluent; never be fully educated/schooled; never be equal. Parents and politicians conspire to protect the young as slowly horizons narrow rather than widened as the realities of a powerless life, indeed dare we say a working class life, begin to be realized.' (Presdee 2004: 45). This is the great trick of modernity, full of the mischievous lies of life, where we learn that the world as we will live it is far from the social world that we desire or want.

## **Conclusion**

In the end the festival of fire, the sublime experience of fire, the spectacle of fire, the performance of fire, provides an element to everyday life that means more than all the failed rational social policies of the past or on offer for the future. To understand why 'fire' has become such a 'burning issue' at this particular moment then politicians, policy makers and criminologists need to understand the everyday experience of a life lived within the constraints and constrictions of policies created by one group to make rational another. In other words, policies that make, for politicians, an ordered world - neat, tidy

but unbearable to those who live within it. Fire is a response to the unbearable nothingness of contemporary life and brings fun, meaning and resistance to the meaninglessness of the political, rational world inhabited by both politicians and policy makers alike.

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