

I then sketch an alternative approach to studying the Grateful Dead, drawing on modernist and postmodern notions of the sublime in order to highlight terror.

### *A Mildly Distasteful Campbell's Soup*

There is little methodological consensus on how best to analyze Grateful Dead concerts. It should not surprise us that analysis of the Grateful Dead phenomenon would gain traction from intertextual paradigms. But one paradigm in particular seems to have acquired a significant degree of popularity: cross-cultural comparison that celebrates *affinities* between the shows and a romanticized conception of premodern religions.

In February 1986, the famous octogenarian mythologist Joseph Campbell attended his first and only Grateful Dead show at the Henry J. Kaiser Convention Center in Oakland. "Rock music had always seemed a bore to me," admitted Campbell (2008, 185). But "at that concert," startlingly, "I found eight thousand people standing in mild rapture."

Several months later, Campbell joined Mickey Hart and Jerry Garcia in a symposium, "Ritual and Rapture: From Dionysus to the Grateful Dead," at the Palace of Fine Arts, San Francisco. A Grateful Dead show, Campbell now observed, "is more than music. It turns something on in here (the heart?). And what it turns on is life energy. This is Dionysus talking ... a wonderful fervent loss of self in the larger self of a homogeneous community. This is what it is all about!"<sup>2</sup>

Comparativist *par excellence*, Campbell summoned not just Ancient Greece but also Russian Easter, the Cathedral of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico City, and the annual *rathna yatra* (procession of deities) staged at the Hindu temple dedicated to Lord Jagannath in Puri, India. "It doesn't matter what the name of the God is, or whether it's a rock group or a clergy. It's somehow hitting that chord of realization of the unity of God in you all." One night in Oakland, the Grateful Dead crystallized the pan-human essence of religion!

Campbell also tied the Grateful Dead to emancipation from the Cold War. "The Deadheads," he said during the 1986 symposium, "are doing the dance of life and this I would say, is the answer to the atom bomb." Later, Campbell elaborated on this redemptive message (1990/2003, 224–25; 1990/2008, 184–85). Some religious systems unite a community in violent opposition to other societies. By contrast, Grateful Dead concerts recalled "Dionysian" religions that emphasize an "awakening of your nature" and "the common humanity."

To this "world ecumenist" who reduced all myths and rituals everywhere to the same spiritual oneness (Segal, 1990), the devil was indeed in the details! Campbell's vision of religion and the Grateful Dead, however consonant with Western liberalism, always seemed to lead to Christological communion with a dash of Zen, a pinch of tribal magic, and a sprinkling of mysticism.

## "MYSTERIES DARK AND VAST": GRATEFUL DEAD CONCERTS AND INITIATION INTO THE SUBLIME

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Grateful Dead shows could be terrifying.

"When the Dead are playing their best," wrote Robert Hunter, the poetic muse for many of the band's most textually brilliant compositions, "blood drips from the ceiling in great, rich drops" (Hunter, 2000, 11). Hunter continued darkly:

Together we do a kind of suicide in music which requires from each of us just enough information short of dropping the body to inquire into those spaces from which come our questions. It is partly about how living might occur in the shadow of death, and that death is satisfactory or unsatisfactory according to how we've lived and what we yield. The contemplation of death for the unfulfilled is a nightmare, and it is good that it should be. The vision of life without a great deal of responsibility is hollow.

This was *no* trivial experience.

A Grateful Dead show *at its best* offered a *sublime* experience. And as with any significant encounter with the sublime—like any glimpse of existential mysteries dark and vast, what Boone (1997, 184) dubbed "the sweetness and ephemerality of existence"—these performances were not merely or solely enjoyable, as Hunter so aptly recognized. They were *terrifying*.

My goal in this essay is to explore the (somewhat implicit) terror that animated Grateful Dead shows with experiential force. Writing as a cultural anthropologist with fieldwork experience in Papua New Guinea, I begin polemically by critically engaging scholars who anchor the phenomenology of Grateful Dead shows to primitivist notions of ancient, Asian, and tribal ceremonies.

Campbell notoriously focused only on select, partial incidents from myths—never tales in their entirety. His exegetical method was thoroughly modernist by reducing all local voices, meanings, motivations, and interpretations to a univocal, universal “monomyth” (Dundes, 1980, 231–32; see also Segal, 1978; Dundes, 1997, 17–18). Campbell also neglected to consider what many societies deem fundamental: proprietary and gendered restrictions on who can own, recite, hear, and understand sacred knowledge. And Campbell seemed oddly content to neglect other scholars of myth, religion, and anthropology. Reading Campbell is akin to listening to the Grateful Dead on Top 40 FM radio. The songs are catchy, appealing, and fun. But they don’t particularly challenge our expectations or adequately represent the band’s repertoire.

However much Campbell is beloved by Deadheads, Grateful Dead scholars and members of the band, he did not seek to understand the Grateful Dead as a locally-constituted, historically-situated social reality. Instead, he cast aside as epiphenomenal all the unique qualities and practices of the Dead—the melodies, improvisations, lyrics, symbolism, set structures, and so forth—in order to reduce the Grateful Dead to the *Ur-religion*.

Deadhead scholars, like any devotees, attribute significance to nuances that might strike casual observers as picaresque, neurotic, or simply baffling. Many of us keenly distinguish the Grateful Dead from all other genres and bands. Even categorizing the Dead as “rock and roll” is likely to raise our hackles! Here, difference *makes* a difference. But when Deadhead scholars appeal to other cultures, significant differences can suddenly make *little* difference. The Grateful Dead somehow bears an essential similarity to a whole host of metaphoric exemplars: medieval courts (Shank and Simon, 2000, 68–69), Sufi mystics and Senegalese trances (Sutton, 2000, 112, 188),<sup>3</sup> the Eleusinian mysteries (Smith, 2007), shamans (Reist, 1997, 1999), Taoism (Noonan III, 1999), totemic animals (Goodenough, 1999) and Aboriginal Australians (Norden, 2007, 106–107).<sup>4</sup> These are all of a piece—indistinguishable ingredients in Joseph Campbell’s soup.

Anthropologically, these premodern cultural and religious expressions evidence little in common other than a privileged position in the Western imagination as primitivist exemplars of authentic spirituality and celebration supposedly (and woefully!) lacking in the industrialized West. From this angle, the Grateful Dead resemble the Noble Savage. Rousseau in concert!

### Conjuring Communitas

Many popular and scholarly accounts of the Grateful Dead also find inspiration in Victor Turner’s thought. Turner is best known for devising the concept of *communitas* to elaborate on the transitional or liminal stage of Arnold

Van Gennep’s (1909/1960) tripartite schema for *rites de passage*. *Communitas* refers to a temporary ritual community united through the antithetical enactment of everyday rules (Turner, 1967, 1969).

In his later years, Turner imbued *communitas* with a “liberating” quality and also, like Campbell, elided over cultural context in order to posit cultural affinities across vast expanses of time, space, and history. Turner thus likened hippies to mendicant friars, the Virasaiva saints of medieval India, and “ritual liminality in tribal societies” (Turner, 1974, 244–46). From Turner’s point of entry, Grateful Dead performances appear as carnivalesque renditions of *communitas* that celebrated collectivism, primal truths, and “higher consciousness” rather than individualism, consumerism, and materialism (e.g., Goodenough, 1999; Wilgoren, 1999; Sutton, 2000). The Grateful Dead guided fans into a qualitative, not quantitative, experience by momentarily thwarting the Cartesian rationality that robs our everyday lives of magic.<sup>5</sup>

By drawing on Campbell, Turner, and also Mircea Eliade (e.g., 1965, 1987), scholars construe the Grateful Dead as a grand cipher for a kinder, gentler humanity of romanticized shamans, mystics, and first peoples more generally. These *hyper-real* tribals stand as balms for the angst and alienation of modernity. They are not real tribal people<sup>6</sup> but, rather, personifications of a long-standing Western desire to return to the Garden and restore Paradise Lost.

My concern is *not* with analyses that see the Grateful Dead as an alternative to mainstream American society—although, as others note (e.g., Wood, 2003, 56–61), the music and lyrics are deeply rooted in quintessential American traditions (see also Palm, 1999). Moreover, I seek *not* to deny or invalidate the role of primitivism as a liberal sociopolitical agenda in the Grateful Dead experience. Asian mystics, tribal initiations, Jungian synchronicities, magic, and *communitas* all figure prominently in *local frames of reference* through which Deadheads and the band made sense to *themselves* of the Grateful Dead (e.g., Carr, 1999). Clearly, parallels with other cultures often lent an aura of authenticity to the Grateful Dead experience.

Jerry Garcia himself in various interviews spoke about transcendence, transformation, expanded consciousness, primal energies, and a “seat-of-the-pants shamanism” (Henke, 1991, 37). Garcia and Mickey Hart have each appealed to the “ancients” and a “spiritual existence” accessible only through music (see Meriwether, 2007a, xxxii–xxxiii). “We’re not shamans in the classic sense,” commented Hart. But “we fulfill some of their function.”<sup>7</sup> The Deadhead’s on-the-ground (*or in-the-stratosphere!*) phenomenology of a Grateful Dead concert owed much to these primitivist tropes. I seek *not* to question the role of this symbolism in shaping those experiences. Rather, my goal is to challenge scholars of the Grateful Dead who blur distinctions between *local experience* and the *analysis* of that experience in a manner that risks evolving into an uncritical, sometimes Pollyannaish, apologetics.

## Deconstructing the Psyche

*Communitas* typically takes on a joyful sense when applied to analyses of the Grateful Dead. But I suggest that true *communitas* must also include an element of sheer terror and fright. *Communitas* entails a radical, typically traumatic shattering of everyday social and psychological norms—a literal deconstruction of the normative content and categories of thought. *Communitas* thus requires some extraordinary, often brutal, prompting; whether willfully self-induced or forced by others. *Communitas*, especially during tribal initiations, dissolves the basic representations of reality, and splinters the foundational continuities of selfhood. The personality is fundamentally and indelibly fragmented, reorganized, and reintegrated anew. *Communitas* is not an amusing cognitive experience you nonchalantly don, like a concert T-shirt, and then casually doff as you shuffle through the turnstiles a few hours later! *Communitas* is serious ritual violence.

In some Plains Indian societies, wrote Victor Turner (1967, 100), "Boys on their lonely Vision Quest inflicted ordeals and tests on themselves that amounted to tortures." Why call them tortures? Perhaps because the liminal quality of ritual *communitas* requires something on the order of a cognitive breakdown. Only then can the ritual reorient the basic axioms of social and psychic existence. This process most certainly characterized Grateful Dead shows to some, perhaps even most, members of the audience. But we are unable to comprehend this dimension of the Grateful Dead experience by refusing to attend to psychological fright while appealing to a smorgasbord of cross-cultural comparisons.

The symbolic content of *communitas* and initiation ceremonies often resembles Freud's "primary process." Thus ritual sacra, Turner observed (1967, 105), typically assume the appearance of grotesque, monstrous beings. These anthropomorphic and theriomorphic creatures were not aimed, Turner maintained, at "terrorizing or bemusing neophytes into submission or out of their wits." Instead, the imagery intended to startle "neophytes into thinking about objects, persons, relationships ... they have heretofore taken for granted." I agree. But I also think that Turner too quickly dismissed the frightening countenances of these beasts. Moreover, I want to suggest another explanation for this ritual teratology: the grotesque aesthetic, including the visual and lyric iconography of the Grateful Dead, both reflects and contributes to the shattering of normative cognitive categories that makes many rituals powerfully and terrifyingly efficacious.<sup>8</sup>

The psychological terror of *communitas* may be intentionally pursued, and thoroughly enjoyed, but it is terror nonetheless. For corroboration, consider the fate of sojourners who never return from *communitas*: they are lost to the world, akin to an ascetic *sadhu* in India who renounces mundane existence to sit, as some do, in the desert staring at the sun.<sup>9</sup>

## Initiation Wrongs and Rites

Initiation rites in the romantic imagination involve tribal "wisdom keepers" benevolently escorting the next generation to timeless verities and spiritual rebirth. Let me outline a different portrait based on traditional Melanesia, specifically, the Sepik River region of Papua New Guinea.

Broadly speaking, a pervasive gender dichotomy structures Melanesian social life (see Silverman, 2004). Child-raising is the task of women and female kin. Hence, boys and girls both initially acquire a core feminine identity. Yet boys must eventually enter the world of fathers and men. Male initiation, then, annihilated a boy's originary female identity while dramatically imprinting masculinity onto his psyche. This extraordinary degree of cognitive and emotional transformation does not come easy. It requires a significant, life-altering ordeal. Among the Iatmul people, male initiation traditionally began when men, dressed as spirits, snatched sleeping boys from their mothers. Some shrieking boys soiled themselves. The novices then spent the next six months in the men's house. Henceforth, they would view all relations with women as antithetical to manhood.

The initiation rite "grew" boys into men by emulating female fertility, especially gestation and birth. Melanesian men see female bodies, and especially menstrual blood and birthing fluids, as polluting. Yet these liquids represent the very fertility men desire and express in ritual. The parturient fictions of manhood thus sustain and subvert an ideology of masculine primacy while acknowledging and denying an existential dependence on motherhood (Silverman, 2001).

Neophytes underwent a brutal regimen of privations, humiliations, and outright beatings. A central drama of Iatmul initiation was not the transmission of esoteric but, instead, the horrifically painful process of scarification. Initiators sliced hundreds of small cuts on novices' torsos. This bloodletting expelled from the boys' bodies the last vestiges of maternal blood they acquired at birth so they could fully grow into men. The resulting welts resembled the skin of spirit-crocodiles who govern human fertility. The scars, too, evoked women's breasts and genitals. This way, initiation cut boys off from mothers while carving maternal fecundity into their bodies and psyches, thus again dramatizing the irreducibly dialogical relationship between manhood and mothering.

Elsewhere in Melanesia, neophytes learned other ways of purging female pollution gained through birth and sexual intercourse that nonetheless mirrored menstrual fertility and purification (see Herdt, ed., 1982).<sup>10</sup> To bleed, men slashed their penises and tongues, jabbed sharp leaves up their nostrils, and yanked thorns in their urethras. Some Aboriginal Australian men practiced subincision, or the slicing open of the underside of the penis to resemble the vulva. Among the Sambia of Papua New Guinea, initiators "grow" boys into

men by feeding them semen, the source of masculine potency, through ritualized fellatio (Herd, 1984; Herdt, ed., 1984). I hazard the guess that writers on the Grateful Dead who appeal to initiation ceremonies have something *else* in mind other than *these* Melanesian practices!

Through costuming, flute music, singing, drumming, screaming, stomping, death threats, and the presence of powerful spirits, the violence of male initiation moved into the experiential realm of "nightmarish horror" (Tuzin, 1982, 337; see also Bateson, 1936, 133). The blood that dripped from the ceiling in Robert Hunter's account of the Grateful Dead "playing at their best" was metaphorical; in Melanesia, the blood is real.<sup>11</sup>

My intention here is not Hobbesian. Rather, I simply wish to challenge a more pervasive, romanticized primitivism in Deadhead social science,<sup>12</sup> one that sees Grateful Dead concerts as fulfilling the same function, and communicating the same message, as "a traditional society's initiation rites" (Goodenough, 1999, 176; see also 2007, 172). I now sketch my own approach to the phenomenological force of a Grateful Dead concert, beginning with the sublime and, ironically, Romanticism.

### *The Sublime as Crushing Human Experience*

During the Romantic era of the mid-18th century, Edmund Burke penned a *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*. Burke attributed the sublime to pain, danger, terror, fear, horror, vastness, and astonishment. We experience the sublime through multiple sensations: vision, hearing, scent, and especially bodily anguish. But the somewhat macabre, synaesthetic sublime was also "that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended." The sublime immobilizes the psyche: the "mind is so entirely filled with its object that it cannot entertain any other." We are at one with the enormity of the world—and lost in the experience.

Burke opposed the sublime and the beautiful. While beauty evokes pastoral feelings of tranquility, shelter, and delight, the sublime demands reverential awe and power. In beauty, the self beholds the object of its contemplation. But Burke's masculine sublime, writes the literary theorist Terry Eagleton (1990, 54), seizes us in "admiring submission." The sublime "resembles a coercive rather than a consensual power, engaging our respect but not," as in the case of Burke's feminine beauty, "our love."

In *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson (1991, 34) wonderfully defines the Burkean outlook on the sublime as "an experience bordering on terror, the fitful glimpse, in astonishment, stupor, and awe, of what was so enormous as to crush human life altogether." Kant and Schopenhauer similarly tied the sublime to cosmic immensities so diminutive of human existence that the mind reaches the limits of representation. In

a sublime experience, we confront emotional and cognitive incapacity—the mental boundaries of our existence. We are crushed.

I propose the sublime as an aesthetic concept for understanding part of the experience of a Grateful Dead concert *at its best*. I am especially interested in the paradigmatic "second set" of a performance—sometimes, say, in the 1980s. The opening songs, writes Goodenough (1999, 178), "carried the audience up to the heights." Later, during the improvisational, atonal, and other-worldly "Drums and Space" composition consisting of feedback, electronic wizardry, and unusual percussion, the audience "encountered chaos, disintegration of the ego ... symbolic dismemberment or death ... depths." Eventually, the band moved into a "wild, Dionysian" genre, "followed by a slowly building revelatory type of song, which reached a crescendo and peaked in a moment of epiphany or rebirth."<sup>13</sup> My sense is that most Deadheads would more or less agree with Goodenough's vivid portrayal of a second set. My sense, too, is that many Deadheads would find the topographic contours of this description, and the positioning of audience and band as voyagers, especially relevant to performances enhanced or informed by psychedelic experience.<sup>14</sup>

But what is missing from Goodenough's sketch of a Grateful Dead concert is sufficient consideration of fear. When the mind is unable to "wrap" itself "around" an object of contemplation—when the sublime halts normal mentalization and "crushes" experience—the world becomes worryingly strange. From this angle, Grateful Dead shows *do* reveal an affinity with tribal initiation rites and communitas—but in ways not yet fully acknowledged by scholars of the Dead. All three contexts "work" by shattering conventions, thus offering a jarring encounter with the limits of conventional thought.

In "Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?" Jean-Francois Lyotard (1993, 43) identifies two modalities of the sublime. The modernist sublime sought to present the uncontainable within a beautiful form. This genre of the sublime would correspond, I suggest, to those Grateful Dead compositions that best correspond to the normal, unambiguous conventions of traditional Americana and rock-and-roll song writing, melody, narrative, and genre—the typically shorter, upbeat, first-set tunes and closers.

Quite different is Lyotard's characterization of the *postmodern* sublime. This sublime forgoes all conventions of taste, beauty, form, and decorum. During Grateful Dead shows, the postmodern sublime surfaced during the longer compositions characterized by lengthy unscripted jams, complex improvisations, extemporaneous sounds, cyclical song cycles, and, of course, Drums and Space. The latter especially presented the audience with an eerie, sonic rendition of uncontained or unrepresentational immensity that refused to abide by singular or simple standards of musical etiquette. Not surprisingly, many Deadheads recall their most intensive, frightening hallucinogenic experiences at Dead concerts occurring during these adventurous, free-form musical experiments.

Other essays call attention to tropes of terror, dread, and darkness in Grateful Dead songs, concerts, and iconography (e.g., Malvini, 2007, 12; Goodenough, 2007, 164–68; Meriwether, 2007b; Smith, 2007). But few writers on the Grateful Dead theorize this terror as *central* to the Grateful Dead experience or phenomenon. This terror did *not* arise from the sources of fright often attributed to other, especially Heavy Metal, rock bands. The Grateful Dead did *not* glorify or advocate violence. The music, and most fans, did *not* aim to intimidate. The band took great pains *not* to engage in overt moralizing (Gimbel, 2007). And although the band consisted mainly, and sometimes solely, of men, I recall no overt displays of masculine aggression or eroticism. From where, then, did the sublime originate at Grateful Dead shows?

### *The Dark Vastness of the Grateful Dead*

For many Deadheads, the full experience of a show *at its best* necessitated, or at least mirrored, a psychedelic experience. The alteration of normative frames and framing—cognitive, emotional, visual, and sonorous—pushed the Grateful Dead experience, like male initiation, into the sublime. In a wonderful essay in *Poetics Today*, Brent Wood (2003, 41) encapsulates the view of many Deadheads and other “experimentalists” with LSD.

The psychedelic experience ought not to be seen as a distortion of reality, but rather as an alternative experience of the universe in which the compartmentalization of reality endemic to our rational, everyday mind-set begins to break down and the ability to see connections between one sphere of experience and another is set free.

Three dimensions of the psychedelic experience, I now argue, accounted for the presence of the sublime during a Grateful Dead performance. They are:

- Dissolution or fluidity of ego boundaries, leading to an uncertain sense of self and an instability of personality;
- Absence of semantic stability, promoting a fluid and unstable sense of external reality, especially in regard to the denotative meanings or everyday functions of objects and practices; and
- Entrapment in the hermeneutic circle, leading to an uncertainty in interpersonal communication, as well as unsure definition of the boundaries between self and world.

I further propose that these three phenomenological alterations of everyday perception are not “fun” in any trivial way. They are terrifying, and so explain why many serious Deadheads approached live performances with reverence and trepidation.

The loss of ego-boundaries, or “ego death,” explains the sense of “rapture” so often reported by Deadheads as vital to the experience of a show. Deadheads

seemingly endorse Tolstoy’s famous theory of aesthetics (see also Gettings, 2007).<sup>15</sup> They report a powerful sense of communion, or shared subjective experience, enveloping themselves, the band, the music, and often the world. To be sure, the experience of this oneness can be wonderful, even sacred. At the same time, it can appear frankly terrifying.

The Western idealization of the mystic notwithstanding, secure and stable ego boundaries *are* important. They define the “I” that makes everyday life possible. Too rigid, and the self feels violated at every turn from an expected routine. But if ego boundaries become excessively permeable, as during a hallucinogenic experience, then crucial aspects of the self simply fade. That experience of fading—of losing one’s self—contributes to the *frisson* or apprehension many people report at the start of a “trip,” shortly after ingesting hallucinogenic substances. And the “warmth” often reported towards the end of a “trip” results, conversely, from the pleasant sense of security associated with the restoration of ego boundaries and hence the self.

Stanley Spector (2003, 2007) offers a similar insight drawing on Nietzsche’s opposition between Dionysian and Apollonian aesthetic principles in *The Birth of Tragedy*. The Apollonian voice represents the world of individuation, definition, and structure—the world of dreams. The Dionysian represents non-individuation, unity, and the absence of boundaries—what Nietzsche called “dispossession” (Johnston, 2007, 57). For Spector, the effectiveness of a Grateful Dead performance arose from the experiential *conversazione* between these two aesthetic voices.<sup>16</sup> Nietzsche’s Dionysian aesthetic might strike us as an exhilarating departure from the strait conventions of everyday social reality. And so they were during Grateful Dead performances! But there was *frightening* risk involved. After all, writes Spector (2007), the Dionysian “shatters both the psychological individuality of a person and the discreteness of objects.” In a world of dispossession and nonexistence, the self disappears. You are deconstructed away in an experience that was often said to resemble the imagination of death. Just as Robert Hunter envisioned!

Semantic instability is no less frightening that the loss of self. During a hallucinogenic experience, writes Wood (2003), pragmatic meanings seem trivial. Instead, the “tripper” thinks poetically. Words, images, and things acquire enormous semantic depth and texture. Psychedelic drugs obviate all linguistic signs as conceived by Ferdinand de Saussure in the 19th century. Conventional signifieds are snapped from their signifiers. The world appears irreducibly metaphorical and polysemic—an endless chain of self-deconstructing, free-floating signifiers that offers no stable linguistic anchor on which to tether an understanding of the world. The totality of reality dissolves into a Joycean world of polysemy and “stream of consciousness.” We regress to primary process, and primary process alone. This is play at its most frightening seriousness!

The semiosis of Robert Hunter’s lyrics enhanced the loss of ego boundaries and semantic instability. The songs, as Wood (2003) discusses, evoke no

singular or fixed referents. Lacking “narrative authority,” the wretched lyrics, to draw on Roland Barthes, demand the active participation of the listener to achieve resolution. The songs keenly evoke “moods and feelings ... without being limited to any specific context.” Members of the audience could thus personally connect the meaning of a song to events within their own lives. In this sense, a full experience of the Grateful Dead entailed the dissolution of the semantic boundary between self and song.

During concerts, Deadheads frequently detached lyrical phrases from the narrative context of songs to serve as aural-conceptual signposts for the psychedelic “trip.” These lyrics framed the hallucinogenic experience and also served to halt the endless process of psychedelic signification. In effect, Deadheads “hung onto” lyrics in order not to become totally lost in the “trip.” You were not “in” an arena or some physical location, writes Tuedio (2003, 31), drawing on Merleau-Ponty, but “in” the “space” of the song. The Dead, then, offered their audience a musical portal through which to enter a hallucinogenic landscape. As topogenesis, Dead songs during a concert served as a literal utopia—a real “no place.” It was a “place” in which to get lost—but also in which, ideally, to find oneself.

But the music and lyrics, too, represented a window, however barely perceptible, through which the traveler in this imagined landscape could nonetheless glimpse shadows of the pre- and, hopefully, post-hallucinogenic self. The lyrics continued to connect the Deadhead to some vestige of normative perception—allowing, in a sense, a portion of Ego to maintain its grasp on normative space and time—or at least to know, at some level, that it was possible to do so. This accounts for the serious trust so many Deadheads invested in the band. It was axiomatic that the point of the show, in a sense, was to allow the band to guide you to a place of psychic danger and uncertainty—and then to bring you home. The music would take you away to a “space” lacking ego boundaries, selfhood, and semantic continuity. But the music also prevented your worst nightmare from becoming a reality: you would return.

The third and final source of terror I wish to highlight for a Grateful Dead concert of hallucinogenic import concerns the hermeneutic circle. Classically, the hermeneutic circle refers to the idea that all knowledge of the world is first and foremost “grounded” in one’s prior experiences. Understanding is ultimately self-referential, thus dashing facile or positivist ideals of objectivity. Indeed, the hermeneutic circle even calls into question the assumption of an objective reality existing “out there” in the world. Even if the external world *does* in some sense exist, we are unable *ever* to access this external reality *directly* since *all* perceptions of the world are mediated by the terms of our own interpretive experiences. Nonetheless, *most* of us are able *most* of the time to ensure that our own private meanings more or less correspond with the external world as seen by others. Humans everywhere live in social realities.

Most of the time, too, we are able to negotiate shared experiences

sufficiently to allow for genuine and meaningful communication. We are not, in other words, irredeemably trapped within our own hermeneutic circles. We can talk, empathize, pass judgment, laugh with others, and love. We reach out existentially to connect with others. “Sometimes,” as Jerry Garcia reminds us during *Eyes of the World*, “the songs that we sing are just songs of our own.” At least we can usually still join others in singing! Hence, the hermeneutic circle does *not* prevent us from ordinarily forging human connections and community. We might need to pause and listen carefully to where others are “coming from,” but we generally get there.

Not so for a hallucinogenic experience! If a psychedelic experience becomes sufficiently intensified, “trippers” feel incapable of adjusting their private meanings to the contours of the external world. They also find it difficult, if not impossible, to communicate those private meanings to others. Conversely, “trippers” are unable to understand another person’s utterances and communications. In effect, “trippers” are trapped alone in a world of their own unwitting creation, a world nobody else can see or reach, unable to burst free from hermeneutic recursion, and so unable to connect with any other person or object. As in the sublime, they are “crushed.” This degree of solipsism is cold and terrifying—like Edward Munch’s *The Scream*.

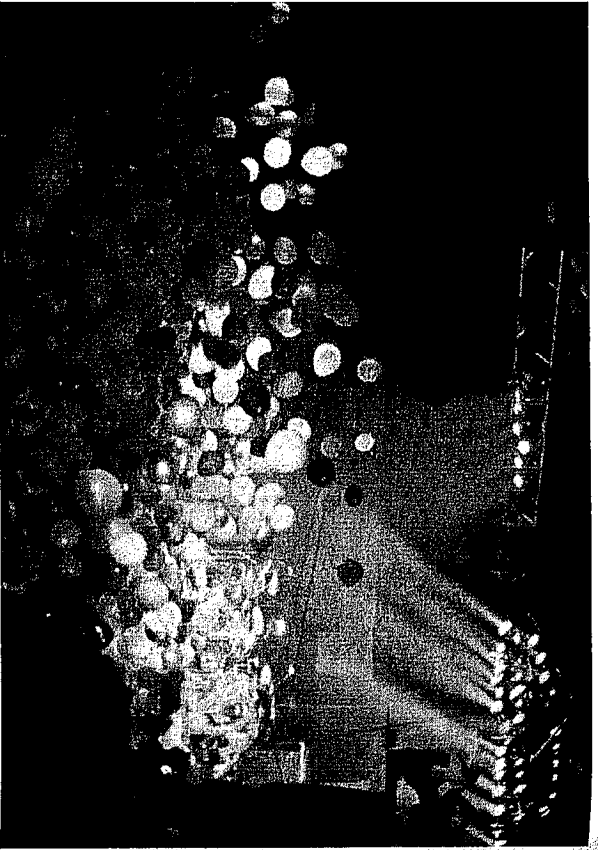
When the Grateful Dead are playing *at their best*, and blood drips from the ceiling “in great, rich drops,” you have entered a landscape where far more than mirth is at stake. You have entered the topos of the sublime. Prepare to be existentially *crushed*. Anything less, and it is just a concert.

### A Final Teratology

I concur with a central thesis shared by Joseph Campbell and others (e.g., Carroll, 2007). Many Deadheads *did* see the wider Grateful Dead community as an aesthetic and ethical alternative to the terrible ravages of war, militarism, alienation, and industrial capitalism that vitiated the latter half of the 20th century.<sup>17</sup> I know I did. Grateful Dead concerts were palpably, wonderfully liberating and rejuvenating. There was, and remains, *nothing* like a Grateful Dead show.

But the overt ethos of peacefulness, compassion, family, collaboration, and kindness that suffused the Grateful Dead experience did *not* preempt the type of existential, or psychological, terror I have tried to identify as central to the concert experience. To focus *only* on the lighter side of the phenomenon is to consider only one aspect of the phenomenological power of the Grateful Dead. And to reduce the Grateful Dead experience to a mere concert phenomenon is unacceptable. Just ask Robert Hunter, or anyone else who saw blood dripping from the ceiling in “great, rich drops.”

In *Traces of the Spirit: The Religious Dimensions of Popular Music*, Robin



Lost in the crush of sublime balloons.... Winterland, December 31, 1978 (courtesy Pat and Dena Lee, all rights reserved).

Sylvan (2002, 96–99) draws attention in passing to a powerful vision reported by the journalist Steve Silberman in a 1996 interview. Silberman was discussing the presence of an ethereal, hovering, spiritual “presence” that makes itself known during Grateful Dead shows. This “deity,” known by all “serious” Deadheads, Silberman continues, was some sort of inchoate yet animalistic phantasm, “waiting for me inside the experience” of a show, “wrathful and benevolent ... like a beast ... partly lizard, partly mammal ... more than two eyes ... big teeth. And it would just sit there and look out at you.” It probably fed off the rich drops of blood described by Robert Hunter. Truly.

What was Silberman’s beast? As I see it, along with Sylvan, who draws upon interviews with various Deadheads, this grinning, smirking monster was none other than a personification of the hallucinogenic experience. Any true psychedelic “trip,” any real Grateful Dead show, necessitated an encounter with this or a similar ogre. The monster represented the frightening loss of ego-boundaries, the dissolution of semantic stability, and the entrapment in the hermeneutic circle. This beast was the *terror* of the psychedelic contours of a Grateful Dead experience *at its best*.

You did not play fetch with a beast like this! Quite the opposite: you were the object of its own capricious playfulness. *That* was the difference between a mere rock concert and a Grateful Dead show *at its best*. Only through this beast

could one arrive at mysteries dark and vast, and return home. Actually, this is not quite correct: for many Deadheads, the beast *is* home itself.

## Notes

1. Support for fieldwork among the Iatmul people, Sepik River, Papua New Guinea (1988–1990, 1994, 2008) was graciously provided by a Fulbright Award, Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, Institute for Intercultural Studies, DePaul University, and Wheelock College. I also attended a numerically significant but indeterminate number of Grateful Dead shows from 1981 to 1993.
2. The many sources for Campbell’s comments at this symposium include [http://www.sirbacon.org/joseph\\_campbell.htm](http://www.sirbacon.org/joseph_campbell.htm), <http://www.tekgnostics.com/DEAD2.HTM>, and Brandelius (1989), 234. Campbell’s show is generally dated February 11, 1986. Returning the favor, several members of the Grateful Dead — Jerry Garcia, Mickey Hart, and Brent Mydland — contributed to the soundtrack of the film *The Heroes Journey: The World of Joseph Campbell*.
3. Hartley (2000) writes about the now-disbanded Church of Unlimited Devotion, a community of ascetic Deadheads, often called the “Spinners,” who blended Catholicism with Krishna Consciousness and endlessly twirled during shows to the divine energy channeled through Jerry Garcia’s guitar.
4. Equally common are popularized Jungian concepts such as synchronicity, archetypes, and the collective unconscious (e.g., Goodenough, 1999).
5. Of course, only keen attention to physics, quantity, and mundane rationality made it possible to tabulate the number of days between performances of “Dark Star,” flip cassette tapes, and hear electric guitars!
6. On this point, however, see Yennum (1999).
7. See Sutton (2000), 118, who cites Jackson (1992), 199.
8. Grotesque imagery during ritual also appeals to folks seeking psychic integration unavailable in everyday experience (see Obeyesekere, 1981).
9. For stunningly beautiful color photographs of sadhus that should swiftly erode any romanticism, see Hartsuiker (1993).
10. I exclude here consideration of a bloody male ritual many readers have personally experienced: Jewish circumcision (see Silverman, 2006).
11. Female initiation ceremonies significantly differ in content, symbolism, and socio-political implication from male rites (see Lincoln, 1991; Lutkehaus and Roscoe, eds., 1995). In future work, I hope to discuss matters of gender, especially masculinity, and the Grateful Dead.
12. For a survey of social science research about the Grateful Dead, see Dollar (2006).
13. Goodenough connects the drumming with the low tones of the bullroarer, as reported by Elide. In Melanesia and elsewhere, bullroarers figure prominently in myths about the male theft of sacra from ancestresses (see Dundes, 1976). For ritual sounds more generally, see Tuzin (1984).
14. For geographic dimensions of the Grateful Dead and their songs, see Everett (1999), 133–134, and Culll (2004).
15. For Deadheads and ego-extension, see Lehman (2000).
16. Mikhail Bakhtin’s literary dialogics (e.g., 1984) offered a similar conversation between the “moral” and the “grotesque.” Other references to Bakhtin in connection with the Grateful Dead include Lucas (1999) and Culll (2004). For a Bakhtinian analysis ritual, see Silverman (2001), and Lipset and Silverman (2005).

17. In an earlier paper, I explored how this ethos relates to the themes of violence and desperation that so often punctuate the narratives of Grateful Dead songs (Silverman, 2007).

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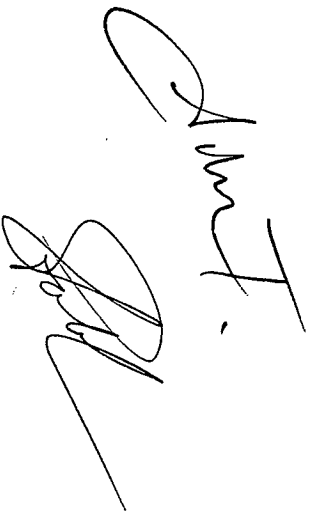
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# THE GRATEFUL DEAD IN CONCERT

*Essays on Live Improvisation*

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Handwritten signatures of Jim Tuedio and Stanley Krippner.



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