

## THE GRATEFUL DEAD PARALLAX

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The Grateful Dead had an uncanny ability to bring dark to light and light to dark, to blend the voices of hope and honest despair, to sing on high from the depths of lost innocence, and through this to bring us home to ourselves in the most surprising, eye-opening ways. This paper explores the phenomenon of Grateful Dead performance as a “place” of growth and challenge, that is, as a place of translation exposing us to shifting perspectives and constellations of meaning, and to a heightened awareness of the shadowy, primordial side of human existence. This awareness was manifest in many forms, but perhaps the most intriguing was how a Grateful Dead show was so often experienced as a “coming home” to where we belong, as a “place” of belonging, and at the same time as a place of exploration, and of exposure before our own alterity.

I will focus here on a fundamental dimension inherent in much of the Grateful Dead’s music, one that is best explained in postmodern terms. This dimension, experienced in what can be termed a mode of spontaneous arrival, helps to account for how engaged listeners can be so easily drawn to the “place” of the song, how they can arrive so spontaneously in a place of translation intrinsic to their own unfolding life; in other words, where universal or extrinsic experience becomes personal or even uniquely emblematic—and explanatory—of their own lives and circumstances. I will focus on how the band’s signature improvisational style, embodied in their jams and trademark, free-form “Space,” sustains this field of “home” which is at the crux of the Grateful Dead experience. What *is* this place to which we are drawn in the midst of jams and space? What makes this place so fresh and alive in our experience, so rich in movement, so much a moment of our life? Welcome to the enduring allure of the Grateful Dead parallax.

Over the course of a Grateful Dead concert, poignant lyrics were interwoven with a musical tapestry informed by lyrical jams and exploratory motifs. In rare moments, an environment of experience would catch fire in a place held open by the flowing, spontaneous anticipation of the musical traveler. In a moment of spontaneous arrival,

embodied listeners could find themselves transported to a place of creative intuition, lodged in a mood of dark recognition or soaring ecstasy, struck by a powerful flash of new meaning, or kissed by the “privilege” of what Thomas Wolfe once called a “moment’s flash of grace and intuition.”<sup>1</sup>

All we had to do was trust in the song and the band would do the rest. The trick was to hold open a place for the lyric to resonate, for the jam to steal us away from time, or for some space to capture us, as if suspended like a rope over the abyss (as Nietzsche’s Zarathustra characterizes human existence).<sup>2</sup> In these modes of attunement, the listener is open to experiencing one of those “privileged moments” in which we find ourselves in motion, literally “on our way,” transported along a pulse of existential translation firing at the point where silent anticipations intersect with a spontaneous release of intuition.

Grateful Dead shows often gave rise to these moments. On the one hand, jams and lyrics would allow us to ride a crest of anticipation, like the delicate surfer who knows how to “let ride” the crest of a breaking wave. The transformative nature of these experiences, the feeling of being suspended in the moment, and the episode of intuitive recognition would all continue to carry weight in the living tissues of our memory, like near epiphanies. They did so in large part as indicators of a place where we once came home to ourselves in a most unfamiliar way, lodged in the midst of song and jam, passing through a turnstile of emotive or cognitive recognition, however subtle the experience might have been.

Waiting for a new flight of song and dance, suspended in a moment of trusting anticipation, our bodies would sway gently like the tops of trees dancing in a soft breeze. The atmosphere of the concert-place often evinced the feel of being in a most public of private places, a vulgar public gathering (in the classic sense of the term), as individually diasporatic as it was communally focused.<sup>3</sup> As each traceable song took flight, organic waves of sound and feeling would gather in the energies of the body and diffract the simple message of a song into multiple levels of meaning and nuance. Interwoven bass and lead guitar lines would diffract the musical energies otherwise held in sway by percussive heartbeats and familiar pace and rhythm. Familiarity with the tune allowed us to anticipate

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Wolfe, *Of Time and the River*, (Charles Scribners: 1935), p. 590.

<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Hollingdale (tr.), (Penguin, 1961). See especially “Zarathustra’s Prologue,” section 4.

<sup>3</sup> I consider this to be one of the more remarkable features of the Grateful Dead concert experience.

the cresting of a lyrical phrase. How many times did entire sectors of the crowd rise to meet the crest of a song? How many times did the entire audience respond as one, touched by the honest truth of a simple lyrical phrase, each singular experience spawning a multiplicity of possible worlds as it passed through us, through our minds, through our bodies, and into the very essence of our souls?

Our bodily space was nourished in a dance of immanent reversibility.<sup>4</sup> Our mental space was nourished in a dance of translational intuitions. In this mutual transference of energies, bodies were made to feel a part of mind and minds to feel a part of body. And made to feel this not just as a *part* of mind or body, but as a living fusion of mind and body. And not just a fusion of the mind and body we happened to bring with us into the concert-space. This fusion of mind and body incorporated transformative dimensions as well. Lyrical “tase” (or the capacity to hold and release the emotive muscles and ligaments of a song)<sup>5</sup> played a key role in this experience. Indeed, under the subtle influences of Grateful Dead melody, improvisation, and lyrical tase the experiential boundary zones of mind and body were opened up to exploration, drawing us out into the group environment—the collective embodiment—of the Grateful Dead experience. In rare cases, this aroused kinesthetic feeling could open us to the place of our living exposure before an overflowing reality, all the while sustaining a special mode of perceptual attunement at once as receptive and engaging as it was withdrawn and reflective.

As the exploratory medium of our living insertion within a common-sense world, this collective space of embodiment is our point of contact with a cultural homeworld held in place by musical motifs and lyric images. When dance is expressed through the body as a blending movement of structure and improvisation, a new type of experience announces itself. Caught up in the unfolding beauty and sweep of a Grateful Dead jam, we live in a moment of suspended time within the “place” of song, framed by the interplay of

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<sup>4</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty considered this phenomenon of immanent reversibility to be a basic ground of human perceptual experience. See his landmark work *The Visible and the Invisible*, Alphonso Lingis (tr.), Northwestern University Press: 1968). I develop this aspect of his position in section 2 of “Merleau-Ponty’s Rejection of the Husserlian Ideal of a Rigorous Science,” *Philosophy Today* 25 (Fall 1981), especially pp. 206-09.

<sup>5</sup> This is my own definition; I first encountered the term when Robert Hunter’s “An Elegy for Jerry” was published on the internet immediately following its reading at the private eulogy: “without your melody and tase/to lend an attitude of grace/a lyric is an orphan thing”. The word ‘tase’ was changed to ‘taste’ in the version sent out through GDTS. If the term ‘tase’ was a typographical error in the internet posting, it was entirely serendipitous. Hunter set up the context in the previous lines of his elegy when he spoke of the challenge “to compose an ode worthy/of one so particular/about every turn of phrase./demanding it hit home in a thousand ways before making it his own....” A tasimeter measures subtleties of pressure, after the Greek word ‘tasis’ (stretching, extension).

anticipation and creative enactment, the engagement of a wondering expectation with an active, critical understanding.

Repeated exposure to these experiences at Grateful Dead concerts began to arouse my curiosity about mental experiences spawned by our bodily anticipations of environmental input. What I find most intriguing is what these experiences reveal about our bodily access to the sense of the world. I am struck by the impact of our contact with the sense of the world we experience through the body's kinesthetic emplacement in the experience of the concert, and most especially in the jam space of the songs. Here, where ordinary time consciousness morphs into an expanse or continuum of temporality in which time is suspended, the crowd's attunement might suddenly permit a collective epiphany, transporting us to the crest of a jam where, "in the strangest of places," we might suddenly "look at it right" and experience a subtle (or not so subtle) translation of meaning and sense in our life.<sup>6</sup> In the midst of these experiences, ordinary mental filters would simply dissolve, opening a rare and privileged conduit to a transformative, direct encounter with a moment of intuitive recognition.

These concert experiences could bring the stirring undercurrents of existential recognition to the surface (leaving us to discover ourselves caught in midstream, already "on our way," negotiating rivers of translation like some rarefied immanence overflowing its boundaries—as if touched by transcendence in the very moment of touching our ownmost finitude). Perhaps we were held "in place" by the progressive reach of a jam. Or caught in suspended animation while some uncharted "space maneuver" held sway over various layers of instrumentation. With clear, powerful amplification and mixed with a light show of orchestrated improvisation, Grateful Dead music could draw a crowd to the experiential interface with rolling jams and interlocking space movements. There were moments in shows—yes, even places one might inhabit—where the musical substructure of the jamming helped to lock in the existential mood of the listeners. This could happen regardless of whether we were absorbed in creative thought, reflective consideration, emotive interpretation, or free imaginative variations performed on the emotional subtexts of our life. In times like these, it often felt like some musical form of gravity was holding sway over the universe of song and my life was caught in the balance.

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<sup>6</sup> The lyrics are from Robert Hunter's "Scarlet Begonias." See [A Box of Rain](#) (Viking: 1990), p. 197.

In the midst of an unguarded moment we were easily seduced by a subtle melodic passage or fluid jam. These passages of music often provided transport from one musical motif to another, carrying us along for the ride. A good jam could serve to transport us to a connecting insight or sudden flash of intuition, and of course, to the accompanying translations of sense and meaning in our life. The familiar lyrical progression of songs often sustained moods of focused, collective attunement, all the while preparing us to ride the cresting jams of improvisation.

Grateful Dead concerts also drew us into places shaped by the existential significance of a special turn of phrase, especially one sung with a special touch of passion or emotion, arriving in our life when it really mattered to us—and suddenly, something was at stake in our experience of the song. Whether it was a small matter or something momentous, the stakes would spring to life within a constellation of musical ideas. Lyrical tase played a key role in drawing together the instrumental layers of the jam structure or power surge of a live performance. To trust in the song was to allow translation to occur without interruption. Without interruption, but not without filters. There are always filters. But the filters brought into play were often reflected in the lyrical passages of the song, trumping the force of our everyday filters. In rare moments, the assorted energies feeding into the fluid dynamic of song, place and crowd came together to produce a space for personal transit, a space in which translations of sense and meaning were the primary currency of exchange. In times like these, the music was driving the band and people were going places. Once we were caught in the Grateful Dead parallax, things were never quite the same.

There is an interesting notion of “cultural parallax” lurking in the background of my discussion of the Grateful Dead parallax. Once we see what it is, we will be able to see how Grateful Dead shows gave us access to a “counter parallax,” much as counterculture movements offer a break from the dominant mythos of “mainstream” culture and its distorting ideal of coherent values and uniform spiritual development. Cultural parallax is described by Gary Nabham as a structural distortion, as a phenomenon that sets in play leveling distortions that reduce the diversity of cultural relationships to, say, our local environment, and translates these into a uniform view “as if all the diverse cultural

relations with particular habitats on the continent can be swept under one all-encompassing rug.”<sup>7</sup> Strictly speaking, “parallax is the apparent displacement of an observed object due to differences between two points of view.” Nabhan’s example draws on the view of early European settlers in North America who not only failed to see how native peoples were “actively participating in the dynamics of the habitats within their home range” but who also transposed these experiences of nature into an external view of natural habitats as “landscapes,” by which they had in mind “a portion of territory the eye can comprehend in a single view.”<sup>8</sup> But, as Nabhan explains, “so long as human consciousness remains *within* the hills, canyons, cliffs, and the plants, clouds, and sky (as it did for the native peoples), the term ‘landscape’ ... is (completely) misleading.”<sup>9</sup> Settlers were so intent on taking possession of the land for their own uses, they “hardly paid attention” to evidence that the land had already been cultivated and managed, albeit on “a different scale and level of intensity.”<sup>10</sup> Under the force of this cultural parallax, John Muir could see the Yosemite region as a pristine natural wilderness, when in fact the Miwok culture had been burning, pruning and selectively harvesting the area and calling it “home” for many centuries.

The Grateful Dead concert provided an important counter parallax, offering a new vantage point on the taken-for-granted influences of our cultural endowments. Under the force of jams and free-form improvisational space, within the realm of mood songs and their simple, poignant truths, and through the subtle nuances of listening and interaction, the listener became more fully conscious, more fully attuned to the liberating questions that must first work their way to the surface from the depths of our repressive, locked-in selves. The Grateful Dead parallax gave us a new vantage point on our life, a new perspective on our environment, a new sense of community, and a new mode of awareness; and in a most striking way, these transformative modes of consciousness all came to life in the midst of the musical journey. Of course, not everyone “got on the bus.” But those who did were never the same, and they knew it. They took the experience with them, took the lessons they had gleaned from a show, and walked back out into the space of cultural parallax, forever more sensitive than they had ever been before to the dynamic complexity—the contrary and conflicting forces—at work in the structures of human and social life. One of

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<sup>7</sup> Gary Paul Nabhan, “Cultural Parallax in Viewing North American Habitats,” in *Reinventing Nature?*, p. 91.

<sup>8</sup> Nabhan, pp. 91-92.

<sup>9</sup> Nabhan, p. 91.

<sup>10</sup> Nabhan, p. 94.

the classic vehicles for the emergence of this type of experiential translation was the jam into space, and though there are many to choose from, I will focus on just one classic exemplar of this transformative musical energy to close my discussion of the Grateful Dead parallax.

In its prime, the thunderous, howling roar of “The Other One’s” crescendo often came over us like a giant wave of anticipation. Building to a climax, the elements of this song would blow in with a full head of steam. The first hints of its arrival might manifest themselves in the space of an ever-tightening drum solo, emerge as the hidden motif of a galloping, unfolding roll out of “Truckin’,” rumble out of the soft melody of a delicious, meandering “Spanish Jam,” rise from the epicenter of a pyrotechnic jam, or soar above time like eternity in heat, rising in the wake of a spiraling coda to “He’s Gone.” The opening chords would announce the pace, intensity and rhythm of the song. Always the same gripping melody and ever-familiar lyrics, often evaporating without a trace, eclipsed by a jam suspended in a vacuum of concentration. Galloping along at the leading edge of the spiral, traveling with the music into deep space, a cast of thousands could lose themselves in a new sense of place, one well-suited for exploring new frontiers of the soul. A classic “Other One” meant only one thing: there we were, blissfully alive and dancing at the edge of the abyss.

“The Other One” was a signature song of the Grateful Dead experience, each new iteration reflecting stages in the band’s musical development. In its prime, this song could strike like lightning, and it often gave the band a powerful vehicle for discharging the surplus effluent of its Dionysian spirit. More importantly, “The Other One” served as a proving ground for the band’s dynamic approach to musical exploration. In a concert, the development of the improvisational components of this song often foreshadowed developments in the jam structure of songs chomping at the bit to emerge from the maelstrom (like “Born Cross-Eyed,” “Caution,” “Truckin’,” “Playing in the Band,” “Eyes of the World,” and “Let it Grow”). By 1973, this exploratory role was starting to shift to other songs (most notably “Playing in the Band,” “Eyes of the World,” and of course, “Space” itself). From that point on, “The Other One” settled into a more predictable improvisational format, exhibiting an ebb and flow of intensity that more or less matched the creative and dynamic energies of the band on a given night. As a barometer, it was less and less a vehicle for gaining access to the Grateful Dead parallax.

In part because it mirrored the cultural tension of the times, the 1969-73 musical development of “The Other One” (much like those ethereal 1969-70 versions of “Dark Star”)

exhibited a power to affect the way its listeners thought and experienced. On one level, the space/jams were drawing us “out of the box” and depositing us smack in the midst of a place of attunement rich in complexity and ambiguity. The intensive concentration required to follow a maturing version of “The Other One” into Grateful Dead “Space” was literally “occupying” us. In the process, this concentration played a remarkable role in transforming our capacity to reflect on who we were becoming, what we were experiencing in our lives, and what to make of our surrounding world. The crucial element of this experience was that we were caught in the present without the mediating interlude of language. When the band was on, we were on. Being “on” meant living in a mental/bodily space subtended by the musical interplay. It meant being caught in animated suspension at the intersection of a steady run of highly punctuated, often exploratory Phil notes and a wild, sometimes eerie cataclysm of high-pitched Jerry notes, played out against an ethereal jazz-inflected background of percussion, keyboards and Weir’s exploratory guitar riffs. From the spring of 1969 through the summer of 1973, “The Other One” was a stellar vehicle for transporting us to magically transformative places. It became a signature song in this regard, and remained so long after its explosive, exploratory powers had diminished.

In later years, the transformative power of Grateful Dead music came to life in classic “mood” songs like “Wharf Rat,” “Stella Blue,” “Crazy Fingers,” “Morning Dew,” “Standing on the Moon.” It came to life in the jam transition from “Scarlet Begonias” to “Fire on the Mountain,” and in the orchestrated beauty of “Terrapin Station.” Indeed the parallax could strike at almost any moment of a show. More often than not it came by way of a Garcia/Hunter composition performed with that subtle flash of grace and intuition. And while there is no doubt the tape recordings capture these moments for all to hear, the Grateful Dead parallax closed without return on August 9, 1995, when something inside of us died and left us to travel our own path in a wake of scattered ashes. The stark realization of what we had lost became increasingly apparent in the ensuing months, as we struggled with our longing for that old, familiar parallax-inspired homecoming. Most of us went looking for it in new places, but the synergistic “X” factor seems to grow more elusive the harder we press to experience it. The magic of the Grateful Dead parallax lay in how we were suddenly caught in the transformative space, already in flight and on the way before we even had time to wonder if we should punch our ticket for the ride. The Radio City marquee didn’t lie: “They’re not the best at what they do, they’re the only one’s who do what they do.” The symbiotic power of the band’s instrumentation was pivotal to the parallax affect.

Fortunately there are other ways to engage transformative awareness, but seldom in our lifetimes—indeed, in history—can we engage this so regularly and in so profound a communal setting as we were privileged to occupy at a Grateful Dead show. With the demise of “the band beyond description,” we have lost a dynamic and broadly accessible point of entry to large-scale conscious awakening. The Grateful Dead parallax embodied a special transformative space made possible by an extraordinary blend of improvisational attunement and lyrical tase that grew out of the interplay between a broad array of musical influences and the shocking dynamics of a counter-cultural movement, the likes of which we may not see again in our lifetime. We will study this phenomenon for years to come, looking for clues to help us understand and replicate its striking power to awaken our minds and bodies to questions and insights otherwise locked away deep within our souls. But the factors required to make it happen again could prove to be as elusive as the genius of a Mozart or Shakespeare. In this regard, the Grateful Dead phenomenon—and the parallax factor in particular—is likely to remain a subject of great curiosity, especially for those who have a subtle hunger for self-transformative engagements and a natural bent for existential exploration. At the very least, these studies (and the continuing appeal of Grateful Dead music) should help to preserve our lasting fascination with the dynamic features of Grateful Dead community. We should hope these attractions will continue to spur our hunger for the lessons embodied in this extraordinary cultural phenomenon.

The pull of the cultural parallax is strong as ever, and the “good conscience” of a counter parallax is hard to come by. How Grateful Dead music made it easier to draw on this good conscience is a mystery, but the affect was hardly an illusion. That the counter parallax required the “live moment of engagement” to intensify and realize its affect is perhaps central to understanding the mystery. The sheer power of synergized music amplified through specially configured sound systems was enough to reconfigure the atmosphere of the body’s place in time, and once the transporting notes of music opened their doors to us we were thoroughly exposed to exploratory consciousness. But wasn’t it all just an illusion? If there is a structural illusion implicit in the view from the counter parallax, it is more likely produced and sustained as a consequence of the cultural parallax than from a distortion in the counter parallax. Our intuitions speak to alternative views all the time, but only in special environments do these intuitions take flight and draw us out to ourselves in transformative ways. Grateful Dead shows opened up extraordinary musical access to these environments. How much of this phenomenon we brought with ourselves, and how much was provided through the affects of the music, is likely to remain

a mystery. But without question, the lived-immediacy of the music played a key role in producing this transformative attunement. Perhaps, as I have proposed elsewhere,<sup>11</sup> engagement with this special form of music opened a field of human freedom, suspending our ordinary life in everyday time and space and allowing us to free-range our way through ever changing environments of possibility. In this context, it was easy to feel connections in my experiences, to make sense of complexities, or to see the point of a question I'd never thought about before; nor was it so unusual to see a face in my musical mind drawn from a pivotal scene of my life, and to understand its meaning (and my life) in a completely new light. Moments like these could indeed "steal your face/ right off your head."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See "The Engagement in Lived-Immediacy: A Phenomenological Uncovering of the Field of Human Freedom," Auslegung 6 (Feb. 1979), pp. 97-111.

<sup>12</sup> "He's Gone," Box of Rain, p. 95.

