

COMMUNITY THROUGH EXCESS: BATAILLE'S FESTIVAL OF RAPTURE AS A "KEYHOLE" TO THE DEADHEAD CONCERT EXPERIENCE

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Grateful Dead community feeds on Grateful Dead music for its energy and intensity. In the concert setting, this powerful yet subtle form of improvised communication gives rise to a space of intimate connection and collective rapture. In its initial manifestation, Grateful Dead space arrives only implicitly, in the guise of possibilities first announced in the sparse tunings emanating from the stage. Even before these delicate gestures have spoken to us, we have been drawn close together by the reflexive expectations of those who wait patiently in line with tickets in hand, and before this, by the shared intimacy of smiling faces that marks so decisively our collective passage from outer world to inner. How odd it would come to this: that we would connect most intimately through our collective immersion within the inner world of the festival, when so much of our lives are spent living "together" in the outer world.

The tunings and suggestive phrasings emanating from the stage are the first tentative gestures of a special form of communicative expression emanating from an ocean of electrical impulses. As the familiar structures of certain songs take flight, we sense the stirrings of prescient, pregnant formulas for spontaneous nuance and expressive experiments in collective improvisation. It may seem ironic that the destiny of these energies is total dissipation under the inertial advance of each unfolding song. And yet, in the midst of these excessive cycles of creative expenditure, feelings of "magical subversion" can strike like a bolt of lightning, triggering temporary ruptures in our everyday preoccupations with "outside life," and leaving in their wake a "fusion" of intimacy and exposure, structured as a form of shared inner experience. Any resistance we might have to the corresponding loss of outer meaning is quickly abandoned to the ecstasy we experience in "letting go." In this "letting go," we no longer aim to take hold of things in order to possess them. Any effort to make sense of these experiences or to control the meaning of these singular events in our lives is thoroughly abandoned to the singular intimacy and exposure of our collective rapture.

Of course, we do eventually "emerge" from our rapture, but by then the special communicative event and corresponding abandonment of self have ceased to hold sway over our lives. As we collect ourselves and cross back over the threshold to the outer world, does Grateful Dead community cease as well? Or can it be sustained beyond the narrow (yet thoroughly expansive) confines of Grateful Dead space? What insights can we derive from constructions of community in Grateful Dead space? What sort of "community" are we even talking about? If rapture is the key attractor, live musical improvisation is the vehicle for delivering us over to the transformative experience we are seeking. Are there lessons in these experiences to carry over into our "outer worldly" constructions of community? Or, as Adorno might suspect, have we simply succumbed to yet another musical fetish fomenting the destruction of our individuality? Are there liberating forces at work in these

experiences, or does the experience of musical improvisation merely camouflage an underlying presence of more traditional forms of social domination? Is the rapture we experience in the midst of the musical journey a genuine facet of our liberation from prevailing structures of social domination? Or does this rapture offer no more than a momentary (and compellingly illusory) escape from commodified society and mass culture, that is, a flight of fancy from the otherwise unavoidable setting of our lives?¹

Let's begin with some comments from core members of the Grateful Dead regarding the improvisational dynamic at work in their performances.² Speaking in late 1981, Bob Weir comments on the "directional" flow of Grateful Dead music:

There's a big difference between a happy accident and a real, genuine musical revelation -- which do come to us with a fair degree of frequency, even these days. Happy accidents are wonderful stuff -- you could almost live on a steady diet of that, but you need a little bit of control to get a genuine revelation. And at the same time, you have to get uninvolved egowise. It's sort of a tightrope you're walking: on the one hand, you're trying to forget yourself, and at the same time you're trying to maintain control and be assertive. About what, you only have ... sort of an inkling -- you have your intuition to go by, and that's it. Music for us happens best when we rely on our intuitions more and our egos less. (Gans, 128)

In early 1983, Jerry Garcia and Phil Lesh provided David Gans with a remarkable interview in which they expand on this theme in connection with their penchant for the "ongoing, continually changing" dynamic of Grateful Dead music, which includes above all the commitment to keeping it going, as Garcia says, "Wherever it goes." Much of the interview is relevant here, but several comments by Garcia and Lesh are especially poignant. "Why does it work?" the interviewer wonders. Garcia responds:

Everything like that works because the people involved in it believe that it will work. The belief system gives form, and the energy has some channel through which to work, and somehow it works.... (Gans, 210)

Lesh agrees, commenting "we have a paradigm here that could be really meaningful in the new age.... There's less ego involved here, for one thing.... [T]he way the Grateful Dead works is three-dimensional; every move has three dimensions to it...." "It's quantum stuff," Garcia adds, before summarizing his point:

¹ See Adorno's influential essay "On The Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening," reprinted in Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, J.M. Bernstein (ed.) (Routledge: 1991), pp. 29-60. This essay was written in 1938, after the birth of jazz, but well before the postmodern turn in jazz or the development of psychedelic improvisation in the rock concert format. My suspicion is Adorno's position with respect to contemporary musical performance as a fetishizing industry that debases musical listening (cf. pp. 44-49) would be difficult to apply to Grateful Dead performances and their audiences.

² All comments are taken from interviews conducted by David Gans, as published in *Conversations With the Dead: The Grateful Dead Interview Book* (Citadel Underground: 1991)

[Y]ou have to be able to allow the entire range of human possibility. Here. Right here and now on this earth, in this life... It's not often that things fall into a kind of focal plane where you can look at them and talk about them and say, "Hey, maybe it's this or that," you know what I mean? Sometimes that level of comprehension isn't around for years. And then every once in a while it drops in. It's like that moment of clarity, at which point we can look across things and say, "Look, here's where we are now and this is what we seem to be doing." And it seems possible to talk about it and describe it for that moment. And that moment will be as much as we can explain ourselves, and that will have to hold everybody because we won't know any more about it than anyone else...until the next time it comes up. It's kind of like that. It's dynamic. (Gans, 210-11)

This moment of communication, of understanding, is something the band explicitly recognized, as Garcia explains:

[Y]ou'd look out there and you'd see that guy and he'd look up and go, "Yeah, I know what you guys are doing. I know what you guys are up to!" And you knew that they knew. It was one of those things. It was like one on one. Recognition, it was flashes of recognition. (212)

"It's communal," Lesh adds. "It's as close as you can come to being somebody else." Garcia calls it "a moment of true knowing" and Lesh points to "suspicions confirmed" that there really is something like this going on between people. All along, he suggests, "We've known it among ourselves, and now we know it can happen between us and total strangers." And how does it work? "Mostly it's subconscious," he continues. "We've trained ourselves in a certain way."

Garcia: That's right. We've had faith in that unspoken, unseen, unknowable in that frontal sense, you know? You've got to trust it just because of reportage. What so many people say about the Grateful Dead has that objective ring to it because they all report it. The reportage is consistent.... They're all experiencing something ... something that's working on some level, and that's the thing that counts.... I don't want to assign a word to it. Why limit it? I want it to surprise me, to continue to surprise me. I don't want to know anything about it. I experiment with it as much as I can, with my little part of it. That's one of the reasons why I know that it isn't us. It's not something we're cookin' up--

Lesh: Who could have cooked up something like this: None of us, not in our wildest dreams. (Gans, 213-15)

This odd juxtaposition of "training" and "experimentation" lies at the heart of Grateful Dead improvisation, which is clearly the driving factor behind this communal connectivity. Yet Garcia and Lesh clearly agree there is no controlling intention orchestrating these events:

Garcia: Right, you can't manipulate or control it like you could something like a religion. It isn't something that I'm doing, and that's what makes it

real special. It's not something I'm causing. We're not originating, we're not making it happen.

Lesh: It's got us... I don't know about the Deadheads, but I'll tell you what it is for me. I have faith in this thing, whatever the fuck it is.

Garcia: Yeah, me, too. And it's taken a long time to get it...to get comfortable with it. (Gans, 215)

The capacity of Grateful Dead music to put listeners in a zone of acoustical concentration without overriding the focal point of their conscious immersion is perhaps unparalleled in the annals of Western music. We can probably blame John Coltrane for this. Lesh and Garcia both credit Coltrane with introducing them to the vision that would drive their improvisational explorations, the "Cowboy Neal" of their transits through the richly interwoven spaces and musical textures they are famous for revealing to their audiences.³

But regardless of who influenced which facets of this extraordinary form of communication, the music produced in Grateful Dead concerts captured the fascination of multitudes of devoted fans. In many instances, fans embraced the Grateful Dead as a soundtrack to their lives. The music touched us and made us listen with compelling concentration. Moments of rapture were not uncommon, even in the midst of a simple melody or touching lyrics. These exploratory spaces connected us as active, attentive listeners; the shared concentration produced an odd sort of fusion, as when life "slips from one person to another in a feeling of magical subversion," as Georges Bataille has written.⁴

The marvel was that all this could happen without disrupting the singularity of our communicative dance with the music. The music had the power to put us right in the moment, to pull us right in, fully operational, on all cylinders. Bataille reminds us that rapture is not a window on the outside, but a mirror; opening us to a field of ecstasy, not a place of satisfaction, but a space of "extreme surrender," a place where "one can let oneself go" (Bataille, 82). Rapture begins when the self "gives itself up to non-knowledge," which in turn "lays bare ... what knowledge was hiding up to that point." The experience is replete with "the loss of myself," though, at the same time, it is still clearly my rapture. As Bataille explains:

In rapture, my existence finds a sense once again, but the sense is referred immediately to *ipse* ["the subject, me"]; it becomes *my* rapture, a rapture which I *ipse* possess, giving satisfaction to my will to be everything. As soon as I emerge from it, communication, the loss of myself cease; I have ceased to abandon myself -- I remain there, but with a new knowledge. (Bataille, 83)

The Deadhead's experience of being locked in and transcendent at one and the same time manifests the state of "becoming" inherent in the experience of rapture highlighted by Bataille. Every return to self announces a new point of departure, as a pregnancy just waiting for that moment of transcendence through

³ The power of Coltrane's influence is articulated in several significant places: cf. Phil Lesh, *Searching For the Sound* (Little, Brown and Co.: 2005), p. 27; Blair Jackson, *Garcia: An American Life* (Viking: 1999), pp. 107-08; and Dennis McNally, *A Long Strange Trip: An Inside History of the Grateful Dead* (Broadway Books: 2002), pp. 91-92.

⁴ Georges Bataille, *The Bataille Reader*, F. Botting and S. Wilson (eds.) (Blackwell:1997), p. 61.

which one marks passage into the here-and-now of imminent discovery and self-translation. Bataille continues:

The movement begins again starting from there: I can formulate new knowledge (I have just done so). I arrive at this notion: that subject, object, are perspectives of being at the moment of inertia, that the intended object is the projection of the subject *ipse* wanting to become everything, that all representation of the object is phantasmagoria resulting from this foolish and necessary will (that one postulates the object as thing or as existing matters little), that one necessarily ends up speaking of communication by grasping that communication pulls the rug out from under the object as well as from under the subject (this is what becomes clear at the summit of communication, when there is communication between subject and object of the same type, between two cells, between two individuals.” (Bataille, 83)

For Bataille, there is a paradox at work in this revelation, for intimacy of this kind “is violence, and it is destruction, [precisely] because it is not compatible with the positing of the separate individual.” We become individuals to the extent that our apprehension ties us “to the results of labour” and to “the demands of the thing” (214). In our ordinary lives, this condition promotes anguish through the recognition (however subconscious it might be) that “the world of things” has posited our duration as the “basic condition” of our worth:

Man is afraid of the intimate order that is not reconcilable with the order of things. Otherwise ... the intimate order would not reveal itself in the destruction and the sacred anguish of the individual. Because man is not squarely within that order, but only partakes of it through a thing that is threatened in its nature, intimacy, in the trembling of the individual, is holy, sacred and suffused with anguish. (Bataille, 214)

How Grateful Dead music transformed this reality, for those who “got it,” is a crucial tale to tell. We start where Bataille directs his attention next, to the festival. He notes that the festival plays a remarkable yet highly restrained role, providing us with the opportunity for a highly confined experience of “letting loose.” Our question ultimately concerns the manner in which the Grateful Dead festival was able to transcend these societal constraints on the dynamic field of play, to bring joy to our anguish and community to our collective yet singular consciousness, all the while holding open a deep space of affection for the intimate order of becoming. Bataille draws us closer to this phenomenon through a reorientation to the notion of the sacred:

The sacred is that prodigious effervescence of life that, for the sake of duration, the order of things holds in check, and that this holding changes into a breaking-loose, that is, into violence. It constantly threatens to break the dikes, to confront productive activity with the precipitate and contagious movement of a purely glorious consumption. (Bataille, 214)

This dynamic quality of breaking loose through glorious consumption captures the intimacy of engagement often experienced within the safe haven of the Grateful Dead festival.

The festival assembles men whom the consumption of the contagious offering (communion) opens up to a conflagration, but one that is limited by a countervailing prudence: there is a conservative prudence that regulates and limits it. On the one hand, all the possibilities of consumption are brought together: dance and poetry, music and the different arts contribute to make the festival the place and the time of a spectacular letting-loose.

Here, of course, the emphasis is on the dance, the flow, the engagement with listening, not from the intention to follow but from the urge to be there, in the happening moment, flames of expenditure harnessed to a wave of becoming:

But consciousness, awake in anguish, is disposed in a reversal commanded by the inability to go along with the letting-loose, to subordinate it to the need that the order of things has ... to receive an impetus from the outside. Thus the letting-loose of the festival is finally, if not fettered, then at least confined to the limits of a reality of which it is the negation. The festival is tolerated to the extent that it reserves the necessities of the profane world.

If the energies of letting-loose begin to spill out beyond the societal limits of their confinement within the festival, forces of negation promise to rise up and hold them in check. The limits of free-play are carefully calibrated to norms of social acceptability. But in some rather extraordinary way Grateful Dead festivals managed to impart to Deadheads a space of dynamic attunement that carried over into the dynamic of our daily lives. Those caught up in the heat of immersion were engaged by mind-altering patterns of complex improvisational chemistry giving our neuronal pathways a radical workout and recalibrating our sense of attunement to possibilities. Bataille concludes his point in an especially poignant manner quite apropos to the Grateful Dead concert experience:

The festival is the fusion of human life. For the thing and the individual, it is the crucible where distinctions melt in the intense heat of intimate life.
(Bataille, 214-15)

But what does the festival liberate? What is the nature of the “interruption” produced by the festival? Bataille writes that, in a very “basic” sense, “what is *sacred* is precisely what is *prohibited*.”

But if the *sacred*, the *prohibited*, is cast out of the sphere of profane life (inasmuch as it denotes a disruption of that life), it nevertheless has a greater value than this profane which excludes it. It is no longer the despised bestiality; often it has retained an animal form, but the latter has become *divine*. As such, relative to profane life this *sacred* animality has *the same meaning* that the negation of nature (hence profane life) has relative to pure animality. What is denied in profane life (through prohibitions and through work) is a dependent state of the animal, subject to death and to utterly *blind* needs. (Bataille, 250-51)

We experience this “sacred animality” amid the dance born from our immersion in the musical leitmotiv unfolding within the jam structure of a song, or welling up

as an especially poignant lyrical phrase that touches us without separation. Bataille continues:

Drawing on their input, the movement of the festival *liberates* these animal forces, but now their explosive liberation interrupts the course of an existence subordinated to ordinary needs. There is a breakdown -- an interruption -- of the rules; the regular course of things ceases: what originally had the meaning of limit has that of shattering limits. Thus, the *sacred* announces a new possibility: it is a leap into the unknown, with animality as its impetus.

What came to pass can be summed up in a simple statement: the force of a movement, which repression increased tenfold, projected life into a richer world. (Bataille, 251)

Bataille captures what is at stake in this discussion, and in the process echoes sentiments reflected in the comments by Lesh and Garcia:

Everything that 'justifies' our behavior needs to be re-examined *and overturned*: how to keep from saying simply that thought is an enterprise of enslavement; it is the subordination of the heart, of passion, to incomplete economic calculations." (Bataille, 259)

Surely Bataille would resonate here with Garcia's penchant for unadulterated openness, as reflected for instance in the following observation, in which Garcia remarks: "I like things wide open, with question marks hanging over it, everything changing -- nothing settled." (McNally, 545) Boundaries work to hem in the festival space --the space of our letting-go from "subordination" to "ordinary needs." But in those remarkable times when the music is playing the band and the dance organ is traveling the way of the sojourn, we can sense that "life is not a destination but a journey."⁵

As we experience these "privileged moments" of attunement inherent in our musical journeys of acoustical envelopment,⁶ the "philosophical attitude of becoming" gains subtle traction with respect to the momentum of the normalizing/exclusionary forms of subordination instantiated in the rhythms and forces of our mundane daily lives. Nowhere is this more evident than in those moments when we lock in on a musical nuance suspending us in a space of synergized lines of flight, which in the

⁵ Marjorie C. Luesebrink, "The Grateful Dead Legendstock: Based on Alan Trist's *Water of Life – A Tale of the Grateful Dead*," in Robert.G. Weiner (ed.), *Perspectives on the Grateful Dead* (Greenwood: 1999), p. 144.

⁶ This notion of "privileged moment" is drawn from a highly relevant analysis of Thomas Wolfe by the existential phenomenologist Maurice Natanson. See "The Privileged Moment: a Study in the Rhetoric of Thomas Wolfe," in *Literature, Philosophy and the Social Sciences* (Martinus Nijhoff: 1962), pp. 131-140. Central to Wolfe's rhetoric is his capacity for "the placement of meaning and insight in the moment," and for revealing that "the passion of the moment is in its givenness." These epiphanies of fixated attunement are "the expression of consciousness divorcing from its interest, momentarily, the irrelevancies which bind us to the meanings sedimented in reality." In this liberation of consciousness, we learn "how to see what is given us in experience." (139) Wolfe wrote passionately of privileged experiences when life is caught in the vortex of the immensity of the moment, when "the privileged moment" reigns supreme "in which human consciousness discovers its passion and power, its capacity to bind up the wound reality inflicts upon those who discover it, and in discovering it, transcend it." (140)

case of the Grateful Dead were commonly expressed in the form of improvisational jams, but also through poignant lyrical portals and ecstatic musical epiphanies.⁷ My first live “Playin’ in the Band” (Winterland/12•10•72) was not musical accompaniment to my first Grateful Dead concert experience; it was a musical space into which I took flight as a willing accomplice, and as such revealed through me something of Bataille’s notion of “the crucible where distinctions melt in the intense heat of intimate life.” The second set “Other One” sucked me in again -- sucked us all in -- and the flow of becoming reigned supreme.

If we follow a suggestion expressed in Gilles Deleuze (by way of Nietzsche), the stakes are won or lost in the battle between Being and Becoming.⁸ The great achievement awaiting our recognition is to embrace Becoming as the seed of our self-overcoming, the path that is “for our steps alone,” “for *the* way -- that does not exist!”⁹ At stake here is the formulation of our concept of self, between the notion of the subject “as a fixed and full substance or completed project” and “as a work in progress.” As one Nietzsche commentator has remarked, “the central idea is that, as a work in progress, ones life is never complete. One is always ... on the way, and the emphasis is always on the process of going rather than the destination reached.”¹⁰ Grateful Dead music has helped us experience this in a way that, more often than not, cut through the anguish and took us straight to the joy of being “*ipse absorbed*” in the tension and openness. Lost in the process, facing the mirrored shards of our *ownmost radical singularity*, we commit to the path of becoming what we will be, which is to say, to the process of becoming-*other* than what we *are* -- and not as a fulfillment of teleological destiny, either, but as an ongoing achievement that must find its way on its *own* terms, without justification, forever in question, and receptive to the ever-shifting lateral forces and radical contingencies of the moment. “And if you go no one may follow / That path is for your steps alone.”¹¹

The Grateful Dead have taken lots of people on a tour of this reality, and the ecstasy of letting ourselves go along for the ride has fueled a passion for the signature sound that so miraculously reanimates the recognition of belonging that comes to those who “get it.” Some people might consider this a presumptive community of people who have lost touch with reality, a tribe of counterculture dropouts or pretenders who have stepped away from their “true” priorities in life -- the ones that promise to shape us into the socialized people we are “destined” to be. They might laugh at the bumper sticker that offers this insight into Grateful Dead rapture:

⁷ This notion of “lines of flight” derives from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, translation by Brian Massumi (University of Minnesota Press: 1987). See index, p. 600 for relevant entries.

⁸ This is a major theme in the later writings of Deleuze, including especially *A Thousand Plateaus* (note 6 above) and *What is Philosophy?* (Columbia University Press: 1994).

⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Part III, “On The Spirit of Gravity”), translation by R. J. Hollingdale (Penguin Books: 1961), p. 213.

¹⁰ Alan D. Schrift, “Nietzschean Agonism and the Subject of Radical Democracy,” *Philosophy Today*, Vol. 45:5 (SPEP Supplement 2001), p. 155. For a more involved yet highly accessible discussion of this aspect of Nietzsche’s thought, with special attention to the role of improvisation, see Graham Parkes, *Composing the Soul: Reaches of Nietzsche’s Psychology* (University of Chicago Press: 1994), especially pp. 106-111 and 121-155 and 363-371.

¹¹ Robert Hunter, “Ripple.” See *A Box of Rain: Collected Lyrics of Robert Hunter* (Viking: 1990), p. 185. Better yet, listen to the original studio recording on *American Beauty* (Warner Bros. 1970).

SURGEON GENERAL'S WARNING: Grateful Dead music may cause changes in lifestyles and attitudes.

But they wouldn't get it.

On some level, I suspect even those of us who have lived in the space of Grateful Dead community cannot truly fathom what has been laid bare through intimate contact with Grateful Dead improvisation. But we seem to know enough to pay attention when we meet with it in our experience. This emphasis on attention -- this intensification of the listening component of experience -- is central to the orientation we identify with Grateful Dead community.

If I were to pursue this theme of community, I would want to explore some threads of consideration regarding normalization, exclusion and excess. I would want to consider whether this form of community really can escape the trappings of social processes that otherwise promote conformity within schemes of normalization. I would be curious whether such a community actually circumvents the influence of our classic pop cultural normativities, the ones that otherwise constrain the scope of our lives. For instance, we might ask, does Grateful Dead music help us break loose from the "individualizing" seductions of repetition and production? Does it help us overcome the influence of consumptive desires that otherwise serve as our blueprint, and literally gear us to attaining the accomplished life of a successful social human being?

It would be interesting to explore the normalizing practices that operate within Grateful Dead community, for surely they are there to be found in the attitudes, rituals and routines Deadheads have grown comfortable with over time.¹² I would especially want to think more about the traditional Deadhead view of Deadhead community as an inclusive, accepting, and open way of relating to our fellow brethren, and as a rejection of exclusionary practices that are all-too-present in the numerous social settings of our lives. Finally, I would want to think about the role of excess in fueling the Grateful Dead engine, that is, the role of expenditure for the sake of becoming, on the premise that "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger."¹³

The community of Deadheads is a mode of recognition amplified to infinity in the moment of rapture, a connective experience we share in which "life slips from one person to another in a feeling of magical subversion" (Bataille, 61). The spatial articulation of this privileged moment of magical subversion is conveyed in an appropriately abstract and ambiguous manner in the following lines from Robert Hunter's "Uncle John's Band" (the encore, incidently, to my 12•10•72 initiation to the Grateful Dead festival):

*It's the same story the crow told me
It's the only one he know—*

¹² For an instructive analysis of restrictive, normalizing practices and attendant normative priorities in the festival/concert setting of Grateful Dead subculture, see Natalie Dollar's analysis of "norms of interacting at shows," in "Understanding 'Show' as a Deadhead Speech Situation" (Weiner, pp. 89-100) "Displaying such competency is one way Deadheads use communication as a means of connecting with other Deadheads, of realizing a shared identity, of accomplishing the communal function." (97)

¹³ This is a famous aphoristic comment expressed by Friedrich Nietzsche. See Robert C. Solomon's discussion of Nietzsche's use of the metaphors of strength and weakness, in *Living With Nietzsche: What the Great Immoralist Has to Teach Us* (Oxford University Press: 2003), pp. 105-109.

*Like the morning sun you come
And like the wind you go
Ain't no time to hate,
Hardly time to wait
Whoa-oh, what I want to know,
Where does the time go? (Hunter, 233)*