

It must have been in the car with my father, in the early 1990's, that I first heard the lyric: "Out on the road today / I saw a Deadhead sticker on a Cadillac / Little voice inside my head said: / 'Don't look back, you can never look back.'" By then I was well on my way to becoming a Grateful Dead fan, or a "Deadhead," as they are known. Thus, this lyric, as well as the general easy-listening vibe of Don Henley's 1984 hit "The Boys of Summer," struck my pre-pubescent brain as an anathema: one that was thoroughly at odds with my constructed fantasies and projections onto the dreamy, heroin-inflected, hippie-rock of the Dead. In hindsight, the Reagan-era nostalgia and sentimentality of Henley's solo outing seems far more pertinent to the cultural shift that was taking place in the early 90's, foreshadowed in the neoliberal turn of the previous decade, than the dreamy twang of Jerry Garcia's noodling guitar solos. However, at the time, all this seemed like a moot point. I was barely ten years old and on a frantic quest for identity: one that led me to pore over cassettes at Tower Records in Flushing, Queens, carefully scanning album art in order to imagine the music inside. And indeed, it was the graphic work on the Grateful Dead record covers, not to mention their name, that first drew my attention to the band. Being completely oblivious to the corporate strategies behind packaging, I was seduced by the world offered up in these covers: a world of psychedelia, death, and the attendant sex and drugs.

The desire these album graphics generated in me was strong enough to suppress the disappointment I felt upon first hearing the music, which came across as bland at best, and which seemed far out of line with my fantasies. Jarring as this disconnect was, the need to believe won out: I forced myself to get "into" the band. The T-shirts and stickers were just too cool for my ten year old self. Besides, I had a vague hunch that at the very least, whether my heart was in it or not, becoming a Deadhead might get me in with some older boys I knew who had access to weed. The chronology is fuzzy, but sometime after purchasing my first cassettes, I acquired *The Grateful Dead Family Album*: an official, band sanctioned coffee-table book full of pictures of concerts, band members, parties and, much to my liking, topless hippie girls. The signifiers scattered therein functioned as a self-contained universe: the bikers – associates of deceased band member, Ron "Pigpen" McKernan – sporting Nazi/SS insignia, titillating my young Jewish brain as the ultimate, perverse, "bad boy" sign; the hippies with their bellbottoms, long hair and tie-dye; and about two decades worth of graphic work consisting of roses, skulls, elaborate lettering and, of course, plenty of bears. There was a whole iconographic universe connected with the band, one that eclipsed the music, promising a totalizing identity to which I eagerly and fully subscribed. I naively accepted that skulls, marijuana leaves and SS bolts were filled with symbolic power, a system of meaning that promised to liberate me from the constraints of what I understood as an oppressive normativity. My bristling at Don Henley's reference to the sell-out culture by then associated with the Dead was in fact one of my first, anxious encounters with a certain kind of contradiction, namely, the historical contingency of the sign.

Simply put, the idea that a Grateful Dead bear could be synonymous with the dark side of 60's psychedelia, a cute 80's patch sported by yuppie kids blowing their brains out on LSD, and, ultimately, a corporate symbol much like the Nike swoosh or the Michelin Man was well beyond the scope of my understanding in 1990-something and perhaps still is. How else to explain my initial reaction to seeing Tina's paintings, as I clumsily asked her: so, are you into the Dead? Years of bullshitting around in faux-academic theory circles could not undo the basic, naive desire to master the sign with a simple, fixed association, rather than accepting that painting Grateful Dead bears on primed linen in 2019 is as good as painting anything else. That the repetitive legibility of the bear becomes a stand-in

for “painting” itself; painting something, anything really. And as the bears are forever the same, minor variations on a theme, so are the works. They may vary slightly in color or texture or the quality of the brushwork – never quite masterful, nor beautiful, more like functional – they ultimately perform as nothing more than Tina’s logo, jarring if only because of their initial recognition as “Grateful Dead bears.” Once the viewer accepts that Tina is not inscribing these bears onto canvas because she is a fan, but rather because the bear is simply a sign plucked at random from a sea of signs, then one realizes that what was hard to accept at the cusp of puberty remains difficult still. I am referring here to the loss of meaning at the heart of the contemporary iconographic landscape, in which everything, particularly the construction of personal identity, is coded in a carefully balanced set of infinitely malleable signs designed for consumption. There is something of the tragic in all this, and perhaps therein one could imagine the strength of the work to be located: namely, in the juxtaposition of the cute and childlike bear with the anxiety produced through its repetition and complete dissociation from meaning.

In an interview with VH1 from the early 90’s, George Harrison described how, upon finally meeting the Grateful Dead in Haight Ashbury in the summer of ’68, he promptly returned to his hotel room and poured out a vial of LSD into the toilet, never to touch the drug again. His disenchantment with the reality of the hippie experiment presaged the gradual, general disillusionment with all things utopian in both its social and political form. This disenchantment is hammered home by Tina in oil on canvas, in the form of a dancing, grinning, bear. If, when I was in high school, a Metallica patch and a Biggie Smalls T-shirt were unreconcilable, today they are interchangeable. In this light, the bears can perhaps be read as an apt metaphor for the disappointment offered up by the consumer fantasy of seemingly infinite choice, itself a panic inducing prospect when one realizes that all choices are essentially the same. Or, in the words of Michelle Houellebecq: “Anything can happen in life, especially nothing.”

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