

THE PERFORMANCE OF A CULT OF THE SENSES. A FEAST OF FANS AT JIM MORRISON'S GRAVE IN PARIS

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This article deals with the different ways fans commemorate and venerate the American rock star and poet Jim Morrison (1943-1971), at his grave at Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris and for which the senses play an important role.

Keywords: *Jim Morrison [rock star]; commemoration; senses; cultus.*

Avtor razpravlja o različnih načinih, na katere oboževalci komemorirajo in častijo ameriškega rokovega zvezdnika in pesnika Jima Morrisona (1943-1971) na njegovem grobu na pariškem pokopališču Père Lachaise. Pri tem imajo čuti zelo pomembno vlogo.

Ključne besede: *Jim Morrison [rokovski zvezdnik]; komemoracija; čuti, kult.*

More than thirty years after his death, Jim Morrison, the singer of the American rock group The Doors and a poet that would not be dictated to or let himself be controlled by anyone, was finally fenced in by authority in April 2004. Crowd control barriers, connected to one another by heavy metal rods and anchored in the ground, were placed around his grave and several adjoining graves at Père-Lachaise Cemetery in Paris [Henley 2004].

This was the culmination of a 25-year-long series of confrontations between Morrison's fans, the informal community that formed around his grave and annexed it with their specific youth culture, and the powers that be. The placement of the barriers is an intervention that has inverted the meaning and functions around his grave. On her visit to the grave that year, a German woman described it as *painful*.¹ She found it primarily painful for Morrison, but she was also very much affected herself. When she touched the cold and unmovable anchored metal of the fence with her hands for the first time, she experienced mental and physical exclusion from the person she was coming for. The fencing and the permanent surveillance by policemen and functionaries of the cemetery made it impossible for anyone to touch or stroke the grave and to have the bodily experience of proximity to the grave and physical contact with the sacred place. Several fans I interviewed all confessed that this made it difficult to experience the right feeling at the grave. The fans were no longer able to imitate their hero in his anarchistic and spiritual or shamanistic way of life. They could no longer perform the necessary rituals or reenact the social gatherings at his grave on the yearly memorial days: his birthday (8 December) and death day (3 July).

¹ Visitors' quotes come from fieldwork carried out by the author at and around Morrison's grave on 20–23 May, 2–4 July, and 8 December 2004, and 2–3 July 2005, as well as from a separate questionnaire sent out in 2005.

Sacred places are subject to contestation [Eade and Sallnow 2000]; in the case of conflict, vigorous measures are often taken to control the situation. However, at Père-Lachaise it did not start in this way at all; it was only years afterwards that the grave became a place of pilgrimage. Five days after Morrison's death on 3 July 1971, despite his global fame as a star, he was buried almost anonymously. The grave was nothing more than a nondescript rectangle of sand bounded by stone curbs, to which a nameplate was affixed. However, with the rediscovery of *The Doors* in 1978, the interest in his person and significance received an enormous boost. The iconization and mystification of Morrison and *The Doors* assumed global dimensions [Hopkins and Sugerma 1980; Densmore 1990].

If, through the growing interest in Morrison's person, his grave was subject to a material change, in an immaterial and informal sense – that is to say, in terms of the visitors and the scene around it – the changes were all the more radical. The grave increasingly became the central physical reference point for fans and devotees from around the world. Now, with hundreds of thousands of visitors, it is the most visited site in the cemetery. The fact that visitor numbers continue to rise in itself points to the peculiar significance of Morrison's grave. It has a meaning that became much broader in the 1980s and 1990s, when, through the presence and activities of a broad range of deeply involved fans, this *espace Morrison* came into being. It turned into a socio-cultural space where identification with and imitation of Morrison's life took place [Söderholm 1990; Fournier and Jiménez 2004, 2005]. The social annexation of the space was visible from a considerable distance from the grave and physically marked primarily by the large number of graffiti and inscriptions in and on trees, graves, and mortuary chapels [Reed and Miller 2005: 34–37]. The collision between the Morrison cult and the order of the cemetery is most clearly visible at the material level. The cemetery was systematically being plundered of its funerary paraphernalia. Not only this massive theft, but also the large-scale graffiti damage to the historic grave monuments sharpened the discussion about tolerating the continued existence of the informal Morrison community in recent years.

In the case of Morrison's grave, it was the ritualesque performances, the indecent behavior, and the brotherhood-like activities on and around the grave that were the main cause for the restrictions. These restrictions involved more than placing an iron curtain on the site. Because the problems related to these performances were to a considerable extent induced and enhanced by strong individual and collective stimulation of the human senses, a ban was also enacted on “inappropriate” behavior [for a photographic representation, cf. Campbell 1994, 2001].

To evaluate the Morrison cult, it is important to be aware of all the sensory components and their meanings [cf. Bendix 2005]. In general, the senses contribute to the cultural experience and agency, and these are strongly involved in the cultural practices of the Morrison cult.

This paper deals with the question of how the senses are associated with the Morrison cult and to what extent they are taken by the fans as essential for idolizing Morrison or for

the social and ritual practices at the grave. First, however, I would like to determine what circles and discourses exist around the grave, and to determine if there are people among the great number of visitors that visit the place in a religious context and perhaps with religious expectations.

The grave attracts many visitors. If we speak in figures, hundreds of thousands of people from all over the world visit this cemetery in Paris. On the basis of my initial field work, I determined two major categories that can be roughly subdivided into different circles of visitors [cf. Margry 2007]:

- A. Tourists and cultural heritage visitors (tour groups, individuals, and families visiting Père-Lachaise on their own as a cultural or historical monument);
- B. Fans (whom I concentrate on this paper), divided into:
 1. Music lovers or fans of Morrison and The Doors, who visit Père-Lachaise especially for the grave. Many of them also go there for the *communitas* of fans that comes into being on his birth and death days. They mainly come to celebrate Morrison as a rock star, performer, and icon.
 2. Fans that come to the grave with a more than ordinary interest in Morrison as a person and his textual legacy; less solely for the musical and iconic dimensions, and more for the spiritual and shamanistic qualities that are connected with his person and poetic writings. They operate mainly individually and can also be described as pilgrims.

The visitors in these two categories are of a more-or-less heterogeneous international background, but the vast majority are white Europeans and North and South Americans; in particular, Americans, Canadians, Germans, Italians, Dutch, and Swiss.²

That the grave can be seen as a shrine has been affirmed by many fans. Carmelita (born 1979) from Oslo stated, for example, that: *It's a kind of a religious place; with a religious feeling to it*, and Cecilia from London says that she *can feel the power from it [the grave]*. Other fans oppose the idea of a holy place and a connection with religion, although they do often acknowledge the shamanistic gifts of Morrison: *Yes he does have those gifts for sure* remarked Jessy from Germany. However, another category of fans opposes all relations between shamanism, sacredness, or holiness and the person Jim Morrison. All of them agree on the importance of the sensation of the senses when present at Morrison's grave. However, the senses have different meanings for each group.

THE SENSES

The cult around the grave of Morrison as an idol and role model is connected to a broad repertoire of religious rituals and experiences. It is mainly the inner circle of fans that participate in the performance of these practices and rituals. Sensory perceptions play an

² Persons of all ages are found in these categories. The category of dedicated fans differs in the sense that it usually involves persons under 40.

important role in their performance and social interplay. These are generally strongly defined by a stimulation of the senses of the participants because this was what Morrison himself practiced during his life – namely, a life of making music, and singing, but also smoking and drug use. The same is true for the drinking parties that took place at and on the grave for years, until 2004. For this socially orientated group of fans, these were the necessary ingredients for fully experiencing Jim Morrison and for constituting the brotherhood-like bond between the fans. The shared sensory experience proved to be important, not to say essential, for their collective ritualesque experiences. As one fan stated, they wanted to *share that feeling; knowing that we understand each other*. A German fan wrote that he made his visits only on the commemoration days, in order to *celebrate this with the rest of 'the Doors family'*.³ In this specific way, Turner's concept of *communitas* seemed to come into being at this grave. The fans want to *live his life on the edge*, activities which they perform at the site as an *imitatio*, in order to attain the state of leaving oneself – a trance through a general stimulation of the senses. The fans imitate Morrison's lifestyle in order to acquire some of his shamanistic or trancelike state of performance.

The name of his band, The Doors, is also symbolically important in this context. It was taken from the title of Aldous Huxley's book *The Doors of Perception* [1954], which describes his experiences with mind-expanding drugs. Huxley explored the idea that the human mind filters reality, and he wrote down his thoughts and feelings. With psychedelic drugs he perceived reality in different ways and his perceptions seem to be enlarged. Thus many people smoked at the grave: cigarettes and, before the restrictions, also hashish as well as other drugs. The Dutch fan Marcel is obliged to smoke a joint before going to the grave, in order to have *my head in the clouds*. It was not only marijuana smoke that stimulated the mind and the nose. Burning incense and, to a lesser degree, candles contributed to an atmosphere in which the nose was primarily stimulated.

Another mind-expanding agent is alcohol. Because alcohol played an important role in Morrison's life, the taste of alcohol – especially whiskey, and the brand Jack Daniel's* in particular – is also important for the fans. Alcohol is seen as an important tool for freeing the mind, for activating and stimulating the celebration, and for achieving a shamanistic trance like Morrison's. This idea is very much symbolized in the (empty) bottles of Jack Daniel's* whiskey that are found on the grave. A characteristic picture by the American photographer Michelle Campbell shows perfectly how the tomb was used as an altar for drinking (Fig. 1).³

Because it is no longer permitted to sit or lean against gravestones or tombs, or to make music or use CD-players, singing, yelling, and dancing have stopped at the cemetery, reducing the sensory possibilities to mere simple gazing. However, before this the communal musical acts and reenactments were very important for fans' celebration of their idol.

Religiously related phenomena are often expressed in an embodied way. This also

³ For those that like parallels, an altar is also a tomb on which the priest drinks alcohol.

applies to the Morrison cult: the physical presence at the grave and the possibility of making full contact made the ritual of touching central. This ritual is the most important in relation to the sensory experience. Until Morrison's bust was stolen from his gravestone, almost all of the fans laid their hand on the head during their visit. It was touched, kissed, and "signed." Next to that, the gravestone itself was touched the most.

The shamanistic gifts attributed to Morrison were felt in direct bodily contact with the grave itself. This sometimes led to undressing to attain physical contact with materiality. Sometimes women even lay down completely naked at the grave. For a great part of the fans, Morrison also represents love and sexual freedom. Because of his libertine ideas and the explicit expression of them during performances, his social fan community has also adopted a libertine attitude towards love and sex.

Before the fences were put in place, sexual activity was regularly practiced above the grave and accepted inside the inner fan group.

The imitation of Morrison is also frequently practiced in dress and haircuts. If the fans cannot resemble Morrison, they wear clothes bearing texts by or images of Morrison. Fans that wish to give physical permanence to the identification process choose a tattoo of their hero on their bodies, mostly based on the "lion head" photograph taken early in his career. The painful process of reproducing Morrison's head as a tattoo on the body is confirmation of belonging to the informal "Morrison-tribe." Therefore clothes are often partially removed in public at the grave. The Morrison tattoos are then shown, compared, admired, touched, and photographed.

The period of intensive celebration and stimulation of the senses, right on top of and around the grave, stopped in 2004. Apart from the desecration of the cemetery, the Morrison cult kept other people and tourists at distance. As a major tourist attraction of Paris, the authorities felt that everyone should be able to visit the grave. The new regulations changed the site to a major extent. The fan community had to divide their celebrations in two: more reflective, restrained, and distant behavior at the site, and the full celebration of the senses just outside the cemetery, at the La Renaissance café, which is dedicated to Morrison and is

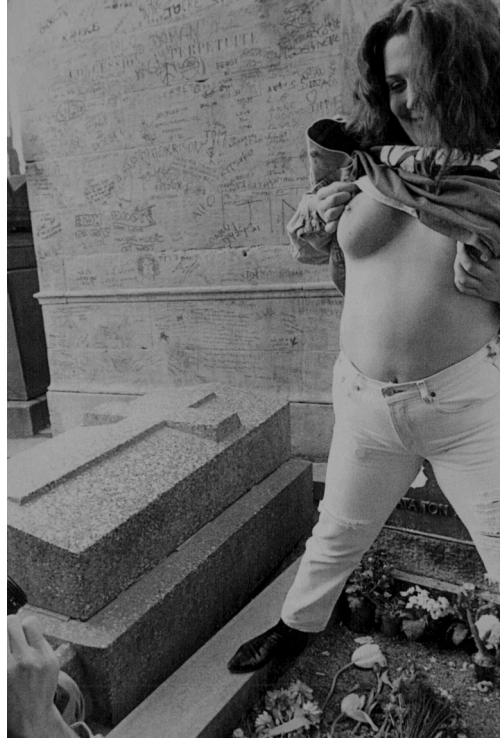


Fig. 1: Jim Morrison's grave, 1992 [Photo by Michelle Campbell].

a well-known meeting point for all Morrison fans. Here they can drink, smoke, sing along with The Doors music, yell, play around, and make new contacts.



Fig. 2: Morrison-tribe celebrating his dying day in the Café Renaissance, next to the cemetery of Père Lachaise, 3 July 2004 [Photo by Peter Jan Margry].

More contemplative and restrained experiences play a role for the second group (category B2), the more individual Morrison fans. For them, it appears that a sort of partial abstention of the senses is important. This implies, for example, that they wish to have their hearing functioning, while preferably hearing nothing. They cherish the sound of silence at the grave. These visitors prefer to stay at a distance from the mass of tourists and the noisy social in-group with their collective performances. They need to experience the quiet by the grave – or, as one young man put it, *Ruhe zum Nachdenken/peace for contemplation*. Silas, a fan from Switzerland, came in order to get more in touch with Morrison through a sort of *spiritual communication*. Dorothea, from Hamburg, who has felt a connection with Morrison's person and music since she was sixteen, has an experience with Morrison *as if the spirit of one person comes into the spirit of another, and thus I received a part of his aura*. She says, *Now and then his spirit visits me at this place and I can communicate with him*. However, these are experiences that relate more to the sixth sense, the ability to receive or send information beyond the realm of the five senses.

Thus, for most of the contemplative fans, a spiritual exchange with the cult object takes place. Jessy (born 1980) from Germany affirms: *Yes it's a holy place. I don't like it when people all around me are just talking the whole time. I prefer the silent moments*. However, for

them – as it was in another way for the social group – it is very important to be in physical contact with the grave: touching, holding, and possibly taking home sand from the grave. Since the arrival of the fences, they at least want to be in visible contact with the grave. With their discrete behavior, they are often still allowed to burn incense and light candles in order to improve the contemplative ambience.



Fig. 3: Morrison bodily inscribed, Père Lachaise cemetery, 3 July 2004 [Photo by Peter Jan Margry].



Fig. 4: Postcard of the grave of Jim Morrison as it was at the beginning of the 1980's, with the first headstone and the later stolen bust.



Fig. 5: Offering of roses to Jim Morrison, Père Lachaise cemetery, 10 July 2004 [Photo by Peter Jan Margry].



Fig. 6: Reading Jim Morrison's poetry near his grave, 3 July 2005 [Photo by Peter Jan Margry].



Fig. 7: Placing of candles near Morrisons grave, 3 July 2005 [Photo by Peter Jan Margry].



Fig.8: Grave of Jim Morrisons covered with offerings and gifts, Père Lachaise cemetery, 3 July 2005 [Photo by Peter Jan Margry].

CONCLUSION

On the basis of the limited field work performed to date, it has become clear that, apart from tourist groups, there are two distinct fan groups, both of whom perceive themselves as in-groups. For both groups, the active use of the senses or a stimulation of the senses and the effects of these practices on the human mind is important for their visit to the grave and in experiencing it at its best. The senses help to evoke and cultivate the transcendental and social experiences at the grave.

The social group is noisy and joyful, and tries to constitute a bond or community of inner core fans. They miss the physical contact with the grave, although it is still possible for them to talk with one another on the spot or softly recite Morrison poetry there. They

miss the Morrison celebration and reenactment in the *espace Morrison* even more. For them, the stimulating fusion of the senses as it existed before 2004 is necessary for them to pay proper tribute to Jim on the one hand and, on the other hand, to be able to participate in the collective celebration of the in-group. They have resolved this problem by splitting the cult between the cemetery and a nearby brasserie.

The other group – who, as a matter of convenience, I refer to as the “pilgrims” – are contemplative and prefer silence. They wish to stay at distance from the loud group, which is usually actively talking, singing, and yelling. The silent fans usually operate individually and are also in great need of physical contact so that they can make a successful visit. Today they can only reflectively gaze towards the shrine, read poetry, and burn and smell incense, possibly in order to reach for the sixth sense. In this way they seek to create transcendental contact with Morrison and to evoke a personal sense of freedom, the way it is represented by Morrison.

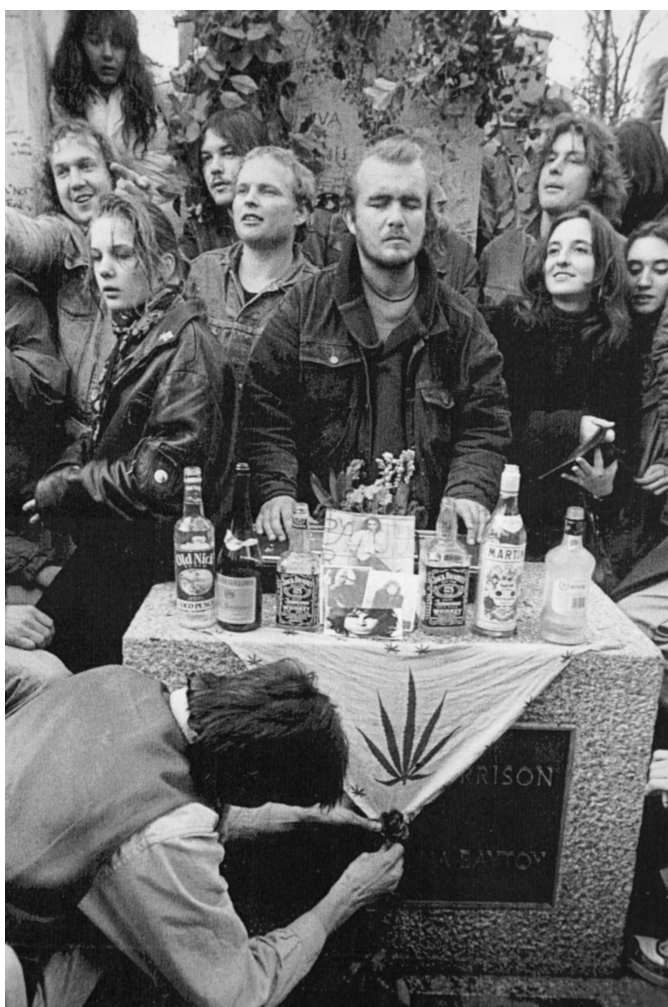


Fig. 9. The new gravestone on Jim Morrisons grave as an altar, with marijuana and liquors on top, 31 December 1990 [Photo Michelle Campbell].

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IZVEDBA KULTA ČUTOV.

PRAZNIK OBOŽEVALCEV NA GROBU JIMA MORRISONA V PARIZU

Avtor razpravlja o različnih načinih, na katere oboževalci žalujejo za in častijo ameriškega rokovega zvezdnika in pesnika Jima Morrisona (1943–1971) na njegovem grobu na pariškem pokopališču Père Lachaise. Pri tem imajo čuti zelo pomembno vlogo.

Na osnovi krajšega terenskega dela je postalo jasno, da sta poleg vodenih turističnih skupin na grobu navadno dve skupini oboževalcev, ki se dojemata kot skupina. Za obe so aktivna raba čutov ali stimulacija čutov in učinki teh praks na človeškega duha odločilni za njihov obisk in doživljanje na grobu. Čuti omogočajo priklicati in kultivirati transcendenčne in socialne izkušnje na grobu.

»Socialna« skupina je hrupna in živahna in skuša ustvariti zvezo ali skupnost najbolj gorečih oboževalcev. Odkar so leta 2004 Morrisonov grob ogradili, pogrešajo fizični stik z grobom, čeprav je še mogoče, da govorijo drug z drugim na mestu samem ali da tam mehko recitirajo Morrisonovo poezijo. Na eni strani je zanje stimulativna fuzija čutov, kakršna je bila pred letom 2004, pogoj za ustrezno počastitev Jima Morrisona, na drugi pa so lahko udeleženi v kolektivnem praznovanju same skupine. Problem so razrešili s tem, da zdaj praznujejo kult na dveh mestih, na pokopališču in v bližnji pivnici.

Druga skupina, iz preprostih razlogov jo imenujem »romarji«, je kontemplativna in daje prednost tišini. Navadno želijo ohraniti razdaljo z glasno skupino, ki je običajno zelo dejavna, praviloma glasno govori, poje ali kriči. Molčeči oboževalci delujejo individualno, vendar imajo veliko potrebo po fizičnem stiku, s katerim lahko uresničijo uspešen obisk. Danes lahko samo od daleč gledajo na grob, berejo poezijo in prižigajo ter vonjajo kadilo, vse to, da bi dosegli šesti čut. Na ta način želijo ustvariti transcendenčni stik z Morrisonom in priklicati osebni občutek svobode, kakršno je predstavljal sam Jim Morrison.

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