

# Beyond the Valley of A Day in the Life

The Beatles, the Beach Boys & stepping outside history  
by Pacôme Thiellement

The relationship between the Beach Boys and the Beatles is at the heart of some key issues in pop culture, namely: can pop music function as a tool of knowledge? And if so, how? Author and essayist **Pacôme Thiellement** has published several articles on pop music, poetry, and black magic; here he offers an exegesis of Beach Boys' and Beatles' masterpieces in the same vein as his book on pop and gnosis, *Poppermost: Considérations sur la mort de Paul McCartney* (Paris: Musica Falsa, 2002), a theory of pop culture elaborated through a comparison of the Beatles and the Residents. Thiellement has also published an essay on Frank Zappa from an anthropological perspective ( *Economie Eskimo: Le rêve de Zappa* , Paris: Musica Falsa, 2005) and, most recently, a study of Nerval (*L'homme électrique: Nerval et la vie*, Paris: Musica Falsa).

*Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* was the Beatles' eighth album. It was recorded between December 6, 1966 and April 21, 1967 in Abbey Road Studios and released on June 1, 1967 by Capitol. The Beatles had stopped giving live concerts in August 1966. To be more precise, they stopped thinking of their music as something that *could* and *should* be played in concert – that is, they stopped thinking of their music as *lending itself to this dimension of space and time*. Fatigue is sometimes a good adviser, and it was in a state of mind close to exhaustion that they found the energy within themselves to produce what is, *a priori* , their masterpiece. *Sgt. Pepper* makes extensive use of re-recording and tries to create a site of coexistence where instruments that do not belong to the same space-time (double speed, backward tapes, multiples vocal re-recordings) nonetheless form an ensemble defying the laws of the universe. On this album, the Beatles also start from the principle that pop instrumentation is not a matter of adding outside instruments to rock orchestration, that these instruments (and the types of music to which they refer culturally) are essential to pop and are rightfully part of it. From that point on, the piano, the mellotron, the organ, horns, and the classical orchestra became key instruments in their music on an equal footing with the guitar, the bass and the drums. And so did the sitar, the tabla, the tamboura (on *Within Or Without You* ), the celesta (on *Lucy In The Sky With Diamonds* ), the harpsichord ( *Fixing A Hole* ), tapes mixed in random order (on *Being For The Benefit Of Mr. Kite* ), animal noises (on *Good Morning Good Morning* ) and applause from an imaginary audience (on *Sgt. Pepper* and its reprise). Pop is not a *genre* of music but rather a form of *tension* intrinsic to all forms. Pop is the way Ravi Shankar, John Sebastian Bach and Karlheinz Stockhausen become pop. This is what makes for the depth of the Beatles referential psychedelism, and the meaning of the presence of all the *heroes* from all different horizons on the cover, not only musicians but also Karl Marx, Carl Gustav Jung, Lewis Carroll, Aleister Crowley, Stan Laurel, Oliver Hardy, Oscar Wilde, Mae West, W.C. Fields. They become pop by the fact that elements from them are borrowed by the Beatles and incorporated into a new Whole. The Beatles then hold this new Whole out to the listener as a mirror.

One of their main influences when they were composing the album was the Beach Boys, and particularly the *Pet Sounds* album released in May 1966.

Paul McCartney: "It was *Pet Sounds* that blew me out of the water. I love the album so much. I've just bought my kids each a copy of it for their education in life ... I figure no one is educated musically 'til they've heard that album ... I love the orchestra, the arrangements ... it may be going overboard to say it's the classic of the century ... but to me, it certainly is a total, classic record that is unbeatable in many ways ... I've often played *Pet Sounds* and cried. I played it to John [Lennon] so much that it would be difficult for him to escape the influence ... it was the record of the time. The thing that really made me sit up and take notice was the bass lines ... and

also, putting melodies in the bass line. That I think was probably the big influence that set me thinking when we recorded Pepper.”

One should add that *Pet Sounds* was itself influenced by *Rubber Soul* and by the unity that Brian Wilson (already) felt emanated from the album. But behind this mutual admiration, a competitive relationship of sorts developed between McCartney and Brian Wilson, from which Wilson was to suffer quite a bit in the end. After *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, Brian Wilson failed to rise to the challenge with his great sick project *Smile* (finally completed in 2005) and, after having worked on several albums in mourning for this impossible album (and to begin with, the relatively disappointing *Smiley Smile*) he withdrew for a long time into a state of depression, donning that despondent look on his plump bearded face of a peopleless prophet, an imaginary Moses, a look very reminiscent of Philip K. Dick in the same period. One of the explanations for his state was the feeling that the Beatles had accomplished their poetic challenge with *Sgt. Pepper* and won the artistic match, that they had, in fact, put out an unbeatable album. There are numerous anecdotes to bear this out. And this is the hypothesis that the Residents posit in the way that they pick up the heritage of the Beatles (to fulfill it), an hypothesis that implies that the Americans never could stand being dethroned in the context of pop culture by an English group, as they had been temporarily in the context of rock by the Rolling Stones. The Beatles accomplished what the Americans had only sensed as a promise and virtuality. The great American declaration is that of the *pursuit of happiness*. The Beatles made it come true, without prior promise. They stepped out of history, if only for an instant. They gave meaning to life by producing a *new space of freedom*, detached in an intensive way from the form that it assumes. The record is *not only* a consumer product; it is also a *work of art*. And this *work of art* acts like a mirror to the listener's psyche. In it, the listener meets him/herself and recognizes the poetic quality of his/her existence.

What's so exceptional about *Sgt. Pepper*? Simply that *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* is the first album that presents itself as an end in itself, not the reminiscence of a past concert or the harbinger of one to come. It's the first album that's conceived as *sufficient in itself*. Everything contributes to this impression, from the care taken in the production and the design of the album to the presence of the lyrics on the back cover (another thing that the Beatles invented). When a group of jazz musicians enter the studio, for example, they play a concert, in one direction (replaying a past concert) or the other (rehearsing for one in the future). Elvis held to this recipe as did the early Beatles (and even the Beach Boys, if only in the sense that they didn't stop touring): they played the songs on the record eventually with a simplified orchestration or augmented by musicians specially hired for the concert, but it was indeed *possible* for the songs to be *replayed*. The record was not separate from the stage, neither as an origin or as an end. With *Sgt. Pepper*, however, the Beatles gave a record for what it was, an *album*. They conceived it materially and poetically *as an album* and no longer as a simple trace of a past performance (a concert given in their studio). Not only did their album no longer depend on its original execution as a moment in its *conception* (the system of *re-recordings* abundantly used on this record prevents the identification and dating of an original performance), but it exists as infinitely interpretable, having no *intrinsic identity*, no *explanation* that could be understood simply by *deciphering the lyrics* or *analyzing the music*. As Rimbaud would say, "Everything in it is true and in all senses."

In an interview to *Rolling Stone*, a year later, in answer to the insipid comment made by the journalist that people tend to read into his texts things that are not necessarily there, John Lennon replied, "They *are* there." Saying that there is no adequate interpretation is a pointless platitude (which refers to an origin that the interpreters do not yet know). Saying that there is no inadequate interpretation is proof of an affirmative force that only makes sense coming from a poet: it's a declaration of infinity. The truth comes *with each listening*: each time the album is heard is its birthday; when the listening comes to an end is the day of its death. The Beatles thereby transform the origin of the album in the very *heart* of the listener: it's as violent and revolutionary an operation as Marcel Duchamp's when he declared, "it's the viewer who makes the painting." It's the listener who makes the Beatles record. And the fact that the veritable conception

of the record shifts to the time of its reception gives rise to its unending birth, continually resumed. The significance of the recording placed on the groove completes the execution of the record. The sound engineer explained that John absolutely wanted to use this run-out groove, this unending circle where the needle would endlessly turn before record players with automatic returns were invented. In the history of EMI no one had ever thought of engraving sound there. Which explains all the interpretations – wild or not – of the Beatles albums: their music justifies all of them and leaves open the possibility of others. Pretentious artists will always say that any interpretation of their exploits is ultimately *inadequate*. Their works will always escape your understanding; they are always more complex than what you've just said, and at the same time much more *immediate*. This is the hyper-vain stance taken by Jacques Dutronc's character in Pialat's *Van Gogh* (not to be confused with Van Gogh himself!) when he aggressively tells an art critic that he'd do better to say nothing at all. It is also the very vain *Silencio* that closes David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*: "Silence, be quiet, don't interpret." This is when artists turn into priests and the guardians of their own temple. They impose an *orthodoxy*, a single right path, or a *Catholicism*, that is, the universality of their own experience. True poets, to the contrary, say that all interpretations are inevitably *adequate* in the end. The interpretation of a poem is *always true*. It comes in addition to others and offers another bifurcation, allowing what is interpreted to differ even more, *which is in conformity to its variegated essence*. Think of Borges on the posterity of Shakespeare, and the way that Hamlet has been *enriched* by the many readings he's generated: by Rousseau, Mallarmé, Joyce, and the many other interpretations by less well-known figures, which have built up the *figure of Hamlet* for us over the centuries. The poet's truth is the *journey in the minds*, the *journey in the head of others*.

For what purpose? To make each person even more alone in their absence of self. And *Sgt. Pepper* turns every listener into a *lonely person*, a *broken heart*. One must never forget that, from *Eleanor Rigby* (on *Revolver*) to *Dear Prudence* (on the *White Album*) or *Mean Mr. Mustard* (on *Abbey Road*), the main characters in most of the Beatles songs are not people in love or the singers themselves, but rather *lonely people*, all those *lonely hearts* to whom *Sgt. Pepper* is addressed in priority (this theme was later picked up by the Residents, who wrote songs that speak of nothing but lonely people, and do so *in their name*).

*Sgt. Pepper* contains the bones of a narrative, via the invention of a new group, "Sergeant Pepper's lonely hearts club band," purported to figure the group's metamorphosis, which appears in two songs that give their title to the album. Initially *Sgt. Pepper* was going to tell the story of a mythical group, one of whose members was called Billy Shears. But the rest of the album does not really stick to this theme, and so it makes of the project of a concept album (that the record invents or claims to) an eminently disappointing, yet to be accomplished enterprise. The concept album was immediately picked up by the Rolling Stones with *Their Satanic Majesties Request* and Jimi Hendrix with *Electric Ladyland*. Pink Floyd is a group entirely based on the concept album; Queen's *A Night At The Opera* and *A Day At The Circus* (and even more so, their masterpiece, *Jazz*) are concept albums; practically all of David Bowie's albums are concept albums, and, closer to us, Prince, Radiohead and even Nine Inch Nails – with *The Downward Spiral* – produced a few concept albums. What's a concept album? It's the idea that all of the fragmentary elements, all of the tracks, are *connected* and that it is the album that *turns them into a coherent whole that is lost when each song is taken separately*. It's the overall pattern formed by the fragments that makes the concept album, a bit like Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* and *Beyond Good and Evil*, which invent the concept book (or the *pop book*), or yet again such great compendiums of poetry as *The Flowers of Evil*, *Illuminations* or *Alcools*. We could say that the concept album lends itself to a variety of conceptual interpretations. As an album, it is not so much governed by a concept as a generator of concepts. It's a record whose aim is to *induce thought*, to prompt the listener to construct meaning. This is also what separates a concept album (by the Beatles, Queen or Bowie) from a rock opera, which, for its part, is based on a structured narrative, the most well known being *Tommy* by the Who. The rock opera tells a story; the concept album organizes fragments into a Whole, meant to surpass the sum of its parts. This sum is not in the songs but in the

pattern that the Whole takes in the heart of the listener. This Whole provides the key to the listener's face. There's a close relationship between the concept album and the search for identity, which is why artists most concerned with shifts in identity or the absence of self are the ones most apt to write concept albums: the Beatles, Bowie, Prince. This brings to mind the earlier mirror-song by the Beach Boys, *Hang On To Your Ego*, which shows the experience of absence of self (through drugs, Buddhism or the concept album) to be an imminent danger. *Franck Black* covered *Hang On To Your Ego* on the first eponymous album after the breakup of the Pixies: hang on to your ego when faced with the disintegration of the self that the force of becoming can cause. The concept album serves as a temporary mask to the absence of the self, not so much to cover it up as to turn this absence into a full positivity, into an affirmative statement: the absence of self enables Metamorphosis, accomplished by way of a series of masks, which, unlike the statement *itself*, engender truth. This is what the Beatles call the *tour*. Which brings to mind Oscar Wilde's profound statement: "Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth."

With *Sgt. Pepper* the Beatles invent this particular form that soon came to express a new image of identity in the *pop music* context. It was as politically important a gesture as *Finnegans Wake* in Joyce's body of work or Schreber's *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*: it's a declaration that concerns the question of identity and the separation of peoples and languages; and we can see that, to this today, it has not been realized collectively. With *Sgt. Pepper*, the Beatles invented this modern relationship of collective identity, the form of a psychedelic, multicolored, variegated mask *that presents itself as temporary* because it is governed by an awareness of the absence of self. It may very well have been this identity *game* that damaged Brian Wilson's health. Because if *Pet Sounds* already initiated the concept album, it was not yet conceived as a whole that surpasses the sum of its parts. Proof is that the Beach Boys managed to release a (magnificent) single, *God Only Knows*, from the album, whereas the Beatles refused to do so with *Sgt. Pepper*, unwilling to take the songs out of their context. They also refused the proposal to release an American version of the record with the earlier single (*Penny Lane / Strawberry Fields Forever*). They posited the album as an inextricable whole, composed of fragments, and as a *mask* that expresses more of the truth than the sincerest face.

The importance of *Sgt. Pepper* was recognized immediately and, more importantly, this recognition has never ceased. In 1967, *Times* critic Kenneth Tynan described the album's release as "a decisive moment in the history of Western civilization." And Geoffrey Stokes wrote that in "listening to the *Sgt. Pepper* album one thinks not simply of the history of popular music but the history of this century." A few days after it came out, Jimi Hendrix played the title song in concert and declared that it should replace the British national anthem. On an incalculable number of points, *Sgt. Pepper* marks a watershed in the status of popular culture. From that point on, popular culture, along with its musical expression, *pop music*, became an integral part of culture in the broad sense of the term – to such an extent that the album, like all great works of art, rises above sterile questions of taste. We *know* that it left its mark on the entire period and on the generations that followed, like it or not. Opinions on the matter simply do *not* matter. Stanley Kubrick compared his work on *2001 A Space Odyssey* to the conception of a Beatles album: at once very ambitious artistically and comprehensible to all. A truck driver, he said, "should be able to listen to a Beatles record on the same level of appreciation and perception as a young Cambridge intellectual [...] The common bond is their subconscious emotional reaction." *This* is what the Beatles invented in the 20th century with *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. *This* is what Kubrick invented with *2001, Clockwork Orange, Barry Lindon* and *The Shining*. I am deliberately citing the Beatles and Stanley Kubrick *together* because, in a certain way, their works and approaches are related. Each takes the exploration of the sacred content of popular culture *to the end*; each tries and temporarily succeeds in stepping outside history, both individual (each work is accomplished separately in each member of its public) and collective (the work is accomplished universally, across cultures).

But who are these "lonely hearts" to which their records are now addressed? Their reply in their

songs is meter maids, fairground performers, depressives, tramps, transsexuals, the queen... In other words *anyone and everyone* . From Eleanor Rigby to Mister Mustard, they all come from nowhere and are going nowhere. But all of them, because of this *wound* that is their *utter solitude* can take part in the divine Beatles game, the magical and mysterious *tour* . This is the *Grande Politique* of the Beatles: it cuts through *regional politics* , fights between races, classes, nations and parties, to start from the *lone person* as the unique site of transformation – the lonely person as the site of anamnesis. In the words of Dominic Monaghan, who plays the part of Charlie Pace in the series *Lost* : “I’m agnostic as far as my religious beliefs are concerned but things like the Beatles music make me believe in a divine power acting in human beings. I can’t rationally understand something as incredible as the great music that they managed to produce over a relatively long period of time.”

*A Day In The Life* is the conclusion of *Sgt. Pepper* – it’s the song that should fulfill the promise of the record: to turn *pop music* into an instrument of knowledge. With this track, as with *Strawberry Fields Forever* and *I Am The Walrus* , the Beatles no doubt rise to the level of high poetry. The song comes immediately after the replay of the album’s main theme – *Sgt. Pepper* . It is presented not only objectively but also narratively as the *Grand Final* and starts over the sound of applause. What is *A Day In The Life* about?

*I read the news today oh, boy  
About a lucky man who made the grade  
And though the news was rather sad  
Well, i just had to laugh  
I saw the photograph  
He blew his mind out in a car  
He didn’t notice that the lights had changed  
A crowd of people stood and stared  
They’d seen his face before  
Nobody was really sure if he was from the house of lords*

*I saw a film today oh, boy  
The english army had just won the war  
A crowd of people turned away  
But i just had to look  
Having read the book  
I love to turn you on.*

*Woke up, got out of bed  
Dragged a comb across my head  
Found my way downstairs and drank a cup  
And looking up, i noticed i was late  
Found my coat and grabbed my hat  
Made the bus in seconds flat  
Found my way upstairs and had a smoke  
Somebody spoke and i went into a dream  
Ah*

*I read the news today oh, boy  
Four thousand holes in blackburn, lancashire  
And though the holes were rather small  
They had to count them all  
Now they know how many holes it takes to fill the albert hall  
I’d love to turn you on*

A lot has been made of the influence of drugs on the Beatles – much of it negative or stated with the intent of diminishing the originality of their poetic contribution. As far as *Sgt. Pepper* is concerned, it's just as legitimate to read all of the tracks on the album as referring to drugs as none of them. Both analyses can be justifiably argued from beginning to end; these are two superimposed worlds of interpretation, each of which has a full positivity but exists only in the absence of the other. In one world, *Lucy In The Sky With Diamonds* is a metaphor for L.S.D., *Henry The Horse* refers to heroine, *Fixing A Hole* tells about a fix that Paul McCartney took and, on the upper deck of the bus in *A Day In The Life*, the narrator is rolling a joint. In the other, none of this exists and, as Paul McCartney pleasantly suggests, "turn you on" refers to turning us on to the truth and not to some inappropriate declaration by Timothy Leary. At bottom, it is of no particular interest to know if the Beatles songs speak of drugs or of Julian Lennon's classmate. But there is something more to the point in the importance that is given to drugs in the making of *Sgt. Pepper*, because drugs worked on their perception like a *switch*, momentarily shifting the center of their perception of reality and making the poetic reappropriation of everyday life possible. People mistakenly imagined that the Beatles' life, their everyday life, was more exciting than the lives of most of their audience – exciting in the socialite sense (they knew stars) or in the erotic sense (they could lay a lot of groupies) or in the monetary sense (they could buy whatever they wanted). *A Day In The Life* controverts this idea. It talks about actions that could be anybody's – reading the newspaper, taking the bus, looking at the time, going to the movies – using them as an anchor for the immediately poetic experience that the music plays out. Lennon's otherworldly voice at the beginning of the song, his stated indifference to the news he describes coupled with the incredible affect of its expression, Ringo Starr's drum rolls, and the hints of intoxication at the end of each verse call for this rise in intensity, this rise in adrenaline that swells up with the key phrase *I'd Love To Turn You On*, and the orchestra's chaotic progression. Then comes the part written by McCartney, which doubles Lennon's experience: he starts from scratch, from everyday life, and traces his own day (as a child or adult) up to the point described earlier, the *fall into a dream*, manifested by the duo between Lennon's voice and the orchestra (the second moment that sends shivers running through your body) that is the bridge to the initial melody and the last verse, and then the rise of adrenaline again until the final note. This rise of adrenaline is the *satori* of *pop music*, or its moment of anamnesis, the moment when the human and the divine switch places. It happens twice in *A Day In The Life*. It's a moment of complete novelty that has a character of eternity. Few songs manage to create such moments. The Beatles probably wrote three of them: *Strawberry Fields Forever*, *I Am The Walrus* and *A Day In The Life*. One might add that three is a lot more than most pop musicians. *Good Vibrations* by the Beach Boys (who were by no means run-of-the-mill musicians) may well be a masterpiece comparable in intensity to these three songs. (Note that this song was supposed to figure in the same position on *Smile* – the grand final – as *A Day In The Life* on *Sgt. Pepper*.) What is *Good Vibrations* about?

*I, I love the colorful clothes she wears  
And the way the sunlight plays upon her hair  
I hear the sound of a gentle word  
On the wind that lifts her perfume through the air*

*I'm pickin up good vibrations  
She's giving me excitations  
I'm pickin up good vibrations*

*Close my eyes  
She's somehow closer now  
Softly smile, I know she must be kind  
When I look in her eyes*

*She goes with me to a blossom world*

*I'm pickin up good vibrations*

*She's giving me excitations*

*I'm pickin up good vibrations*

*(ahhhhhhh)*

*(ah my my what elation)*

*I don't know where but she sends me there*

*(ah my my what a sensation)*

*(ah my my what elations)*

*(ah my my what)*

*Gotta keep those lovin good vibrations*

*A happenin with her*

*Gotta keep those lovin good vibrations*

*A happenin with her*

*Gotta keep those lovin good vibrations*

*A happenin*

What is clear is that the explicit content of the lyrics is much more traditional than the Beatles lyrics, and does not depart from the implicit imperative of *pop music*, namely the love song. What differs from the classical song is its ecstatic character, verging on troubadourism, and the musical intensity, its inexplicable emotional charge. What is it that essentially differentiates the Beatles and the Beach Boys? With the Beach Boys *pop music* is transformed into an instrument of ecstasy; it even goes through a state of prayer (*Our Prayer* is the opening track on *Smile*) and of reappropriation of American history (another project of *Smile*, one that the Residents were to pick up, obsessively). With the Beatles, to the contrary *pop music* is transformed into an *instrument of knowledge* – and it operates directly in the mind of the listener. Prayer is alien to the Beatles and they are indifferent to the history of England. For the Beatles as for the Beach Boys, this transformation is brought about by joy, or a smile; but the Beatles' joy is meant to be pursued in a personal search and to act as a mirror for the listener. The Beach Boys are masters of ecstasy; they transform an ordinary love experience into an illumination and even into a (temporary) step outside history, a sacred moment. But whereas their starting point is an illumination that comes from outside (the love relationship), the Beatles hold to the inner world (through the perpetual evocation of solitude) as the very site of transformational illumination. None of their three masterpieces contain elements of love or contacts with the outside that preside over the illumination; it is always from within an inner space that the lone person opens up to a transforming power. This is the big difference between the Beach Boys and the Beatles. We are not speaking here of a quibble about the meaning of the lyrics but about the full significance of their music. Both the music of the Beatles and of the Beach Boys express pure happiness, but the Beach Boys make it depend on an external event that spreads its light onto the perception of the subject, whereas the Beatles infer it from the inner transformation of the listener straining toward self-knowledge. With the Beach Boys it's a matter of rising (*elation*); with the Beatles, simply of turning. *Turn* and *tour* are the words that come back most often in the Beatles lyrics: not only "turn you on" in *A Day In The Life*, but also *Magical Mystery Tour*, "round and round" (on *Dear Prudence*), etc. The inner journey is the experience that allows us to reappropriate the divine character of our humanity. It's a heretical experience – in contradistinction to the Beach Boys' experience, which is mystical. To put it simply, mysticism addresses a God who shares our identity or intercedes in its transformation but who is situated outside of us (the magnificent troubadourism of the Beach Boys, for example, is indeed mystical: it is an immanent, erotic form of mysticism). The Gnostic, to the contrary, addresses a God residing within us who is the vehicle

of power and transformation. Gnosticism is anarcho-divine. There are no more gods, no more masters: we ourselves become our own god by turning within our absence of self. Mysticism finds its place on the fringes of religion; even as it opposes it as a political organization, it picks up its founding scheme of an external deity (which explains why love can be ill-fated or a form of subjugation). Gnosticism stands as an independent experience and even as an experience opposed to all these practices of power. John Lennon overtly assumed a Gnostic heritage. "It seems to me that the only true Christians were (are?) the Gnostics who believe in self-knowledge, i.e., becoming Christ themselves, reaching the Christ within," he wrote in *Skywriting by Word of Mouth*. There is, of course, an interplay between mysticism and Gnosticism, and some of the Beatles lyrics are mystical (rare after 1967, they become more common as they separate: Yoko Ono, for instance, becomes Lennon's god, master and muse, and Linda becomes Paul's). But on the whole one could say that mysticism and Gnosticism are two poles of an experiential divide that do not go in exactly the same direction and that, in the context of the most ambitious, successful popular music, are embodied pretty clearly by the Beach Boys and the Beatles.

The contemporary series *Lost* evidences the interplay behind the confrontation between the Beatles and the Beach Boys. What is this series about? The crash of *Oceanic Airlines 815* over a mysterious island. At first the survivors are waiting for help to come, but gradually they realize that not only will no one come to rescue them but that they cannot escape from this island because several magnetic anomalies separate them from the rest of the world as if they were in a *snow globe*. The island is full of secrets and mysteries, and another group already lives on it (the survivors call them *The Others*). This community seems to have been at war fifteen years earlier with a scientific and parapsychological group called Dharma Initiative and today it is presented as the objective enemies of the crash survivors. Each episode alternates events in the central storyline (attempts either to leave the island or to explore its mysteries) with flashbacks, generally of traumatic experiences in the lives of the main characters, informing us about the personal reasons behind the way they act. This was the order followed in over 66 episodes until the last double episode of the third season unexpectedly reversed the process in a *revolutionary* way. We think we're watching another series of flashbacks in the life of one of the main characters, Dr. Jack Sheppard, the leader by default of the crash survivors, when, in fact, we are seeing his flash forwards, experiences which are consequently situated in the future at a time when he has already left the island. And his future is so dark, sad and gloomy that it's hard not to feel sorry when he succeeds in the present storyline in finding a way to get reinforcements. He does so by sending another character, Charlie Pace (who boasts a tattoo on his arm that says, "Living is easy with eyes closed," in reference to *Strawberry Fields Forever*) to a submarine station called the Looking Glass, on the advice of a mysterious parachutist, Naomi. Charlie will attempt to unblock transmissions with the rest of the world (transmissions that were blocked by Ben Linus, the head of the "Others," who is himself a pretty poor leader). To unblock transmissions, Charlie has to enter a code that the dying guard tells him corresponds to the melody of *Good Vibrations*. Charlie, formerly an English pop star, finds the melody, enters it and unblocks transmissions. The season ends with the arrival of reinforcements who have come to take them back to the continent, and Ben, the leader of the "Others," warning Jack about leaving the island (basically saying, "Why do you want to go back? You'll be unhappy. Your life's worthless. Why don't you stay on the island? Let's stop this war, live each group to its side, but please don't unblock the transmissions, or it will be the beginning of the end"). The *flash forwards* show Jack's everyday life in the future. He's so hopelessly unhappy that he takes the plane again and again in the hope of crashing; on the verge of a *burnout* and a crisis of empathy with others, he lives through events that are at once completely ordinary and bursting with impressions of absurdity, sadness and horror. This part deliberately picks up elements from *A Day In The Life*, a day like any other, nothing exceptional: Jack reads the newspaper, witnesses a car accident, goes to work, takes drugs, hears that someone died ... But mainly it takes the form of a gigantic trick. By reversing the usual storyline direction in a way that is both brutal and subtle, the viewer is tricked and literally lost in time. Informed by the future, this part replicates the operation carried out by *A Day In The Life*,

whereas the other part, the Pyrrhic victory, is made possible by the melody of *Good Vibrations* – evidence once again of the connection between and conflicting character of the two songs and two experiences. The flashbacks in *Lost* and in the final episode, the flash forwards, are history, the continuation of civilization, devoid of magic and wonders, a predatory world of exploitation, deceit, despair, and pretense (close to the dark universe of Kubrick). The present in the storyline, the time on the island, is a time outside history; it's the pre- and post-civilization epic, with its dangers and its dramas, to be sure, but they are sustained by a truly intense vitality and energy as well as moments of happiness.

*Pop music*'s quest – both the Beatles and the Beach Boys – is to step outside history. "History is a nightmare from which I'm trying to wake," was Stephen Dedalus's comment in *Ulysses*. The Beach Boys undertook to do so by creating an island separated from the world – an island that, alas, one can always leave by reestablishing transmissions with the rest of the world, by force or by choice (and the way Jack looks with his long beard and his exhausted insomniac eyes calls to mind Brian Wilson after the collapse of the *Smile* project and his musical *burnout*). The Beatles, on the other hand, tried to draw out of everyday life the transforming energy that would enable us to *step out of history* starting from inside it. Like in Kubrick's *Lolita* (the movie of an American who turned into an Englishman), the very important English/American polarity is reversed in this episode of *Lost*, since it's an Englishman (Charlie) on the advice of an English woman (Naomi) who unblocks transmissions with an American tune, while it's an American (Jack) who lives out the consequences of the unblocking in a way that strangely resembles this English tune, despite the advice of another American (Ben). Finally, may I remind the reader that the two other models or polarities for *Lost* are two children's stories, *The Wizard of Oz* (American) and *Alice in Wonderland* (English), which give their titles to the next to the last and last episode of the third season: *The Man Behind the Curtain* and *Through the Looking Glass*. As we can see, the rivalry between English and American elements is a constituent element of pop culture and has never ceased in the course of its history. And what is pop culture, from the Beatles to *Lost*? It's the construction of a mirror to civilization, the construction of a mirror world where what is absurd and insignificant in life turns into comforting nonsense and beneficial meaninglessness. What lies "beyond the valley of a day in the life"? Anamnesis.

*Beyond The Valley Of A Day In The Life* by the Residents says precisely that. Starting where *A Day In The Life* ends, the Residents have the Beatles asking "Tell me what you see" coupled with Lennon's unfortunate comment, "I don't believe in the Beatles" and a looped clip of Paul McCartney repeating "Please everybody if we haven't done what we could have done, we've tried ..." Then Harrison repeating: "Now they've lost themselves," and a chaos of songs, a great many *samples*, notably a sitar (from *Love You To*) and the "Yeah Yeah Yeah Yeah" of *She Loves You*, and the bridge from *A Day In The Life*, then a conversation in which we hear the Beatles joking around. "Tell me what you see beyond the Beatles," the song seems to say. And it answers: "What I see is that the Beatles themselves don't believe in the Beatles and they've lost themselves as the Beatles in the very words of the Beatles."

The Residents is an American group that has continually worked with the Beatles lyrics, confronting them with American culture. *Cube-E*, one of their projects that comes the closest to the Beach Boys, is a rewriting of American popular music, a rock opera on the stages in the building of the American musical identity, which ends with Elvis assailed by English forces, dying under the shock produced by the Beatles songs. They are above all the only pop musicians to have gone *farther* than the Beatles in a Gnosticization of *pop music*, and farther in the *depersonalization* via masks, the creation of different vocal characters and an avowed strangeness through and through – at least in their first major period (from *Meet the Residents* to *The Big Bubble*). They didn't stop with loneliness, but drew from failure the main source of their inspiration. Their songs are songs of failure. That's why McCartney's statement is repeated in a loop in *Beyond The Valley Of A Day In The Life*. "We've tried," means we haven't *succeeded*. And the Residents *opus magnum*, accomplishing what remained to be accomplished by the Beatles in the field of failure, is probably *Duck Stab*, a concept album that has its source in an immeasurable

loathing for the *naïveté* of *pop music* and in the destruction of faith in the validity of love songs. With *Duck Stab*, the Residents (who are so close to the Beach Boys, even in musical interludes that call to mind those written for *Pet Sounds* or for *Smile*) “stab to death” what remains in them of the Beach Boys (of the naive duck) with the dagger that the Beatles supplied them with but which they did not dare to use to the end: namely, solitude. *Duck Stab* is a declaration of war. More precisely, it is a declaration in favor of the *interior war*, in favor of the *jihad*, in a world that is nothing more than a *cadaver*. Right in the first track, *Constantinople*, the singer clearly says so: “I’m not coming on my knees.” But it’s the voice in *Blue Rosebuds* that answers the pathetic crooner, revealing the hatred of sentimentality that holds together the whole album:

*Your words are empty*  
*hollow bleatings*  
*Of a mental crutch*  
*They’re open-festered indigestion*  
*With a velvet touch*  
*An ether-eating Eskimo*  
*Would gag upon your sight*  
*Convulsed into oblivion*  
*From laughter or from fright*  
*A coma with a sweet aroma*  
*Is your only dream*  
*Malignant with the misconception*  
*That a grunt can gleam*  
*Your lichen-covered corpuscles*  
*Are filthy to my fist*  
*Infection is your finest flower*  
*Mildewed in the mist*

Anticosmic, antisomatic, the record ends with the destruction of all of humanity by a new Sofia, *The Electrocutitioner*, who rids the Earth of its inhabitants to find herself alone and happy amongst her birds. It’s the gloomiest *happy ending* that *pop music* has allowed itself to compose: the joy of seeing a world of stupidity, suffering and misery finally fall to pieces. “Who has come to know the world has discovered a cadaver,” says the Gospel according to Thomas, “and whoever has discovered a cadaver, the world is not worthy of him.” If *Meet the Residents* starts with the violent, monstrously disarming cover of *These Boots Are Made For Walking*, it’s because, from the outset, we are given to understand that the Residents records are there to help us reinterpret the whole corpus of popular music, seen from the angle of an unsuccessful creation by a bad demiurge, himself engendered by a lascivious wisdom, the very existence of which he seems to ignore or to want to ignore ... *God Song* on *Fingerprince* is very clear about the primal failure, the Gnostic distinction between an original sin (on the part of the first human beings, the weight of which we continue to bear) and an antecedent sin (anterior to the world’s creation and from which man would be perfectly alien). *The Mole Trilogy* sharply opposes the two paths taken by humanity and manifested in music: the Moles, working in the shadows, and the *Chubs*, perpetual attractors of light. Finally, in *God In Three Persons*, the whole pathology of Creation is restated as God’s incestuous desire for the reversible male and female principles underpinning humanity, the desire of parents for their children: tainting innocence as the implacable Law of Humanity. What the Gnostics did first to Judaism and Hellenism and to Christianity thereafter, the Beatles did to rock with their *pop music* – full and light, complex as all European culture and simple as a dancing child – and the Residents, thereafter, did to the Beatles (with the complicity of the Beatles, through the intermediary of their voices). What the Gnostics understood is that extricating themselves from state fiction requires an accumulation of private fictions and the dissipation of fictions, infiltrated by the nothingness that founds them, the secret that it reveals

(God doesn't exist, neither do I, therefore I am God and everything is possible) and around which they revolve. John Cowper Powys coined the supreme adage for this: "Everybody is a Nobody and Nobody is God." This is even the only condition of freedom and the only atheism capable of laughter. Gnosis never created orders of the world unless it was to compel them subsequently to reveal themselves as grotesque, dreadful absurdities. Subdivided into many variations, it was established in violent opposition to the Christian Church and its power struggles. It took into account the necessary discontinuity of transmission, its dissipation and its individual complication, and this necessity made possible the free reappropriation of transmission, its constitution outside the confines of organized power. Persecuted by the Christians, practicing free love but condemning procreation, the Gnostics officially disappeared in the fifth century of our era. But that's without reckoning with the repeated reemergence of their spirit, most recently and importantly in the *underground* movement, which surfaced in San Francisco in 1967, shortly after the release of the *Strawberry Fields Forever* single, and for which the *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* album, addressed to all the lonely people and broken hearts, was to be the light side, the European counterpart to its secret American reality – and the Residents a continuation and a temporary radicalization. For a Gnostic, we were right to *eat the apple*, and our passions are the gate to new discoveries. For a Gnostic, what matters is neither where we come from nor where we're going but where we are. *Gnosis* is ceaselessly doomed to vanish and yet has never ceased to blossom again out of devastated lands, its practitioners never submitting to a central power and never taken in by their tutelary figures, but rather accepting the principles of reinterpretation and distortion from a patchwork of all the sacred texts. It is time today to give it back a political and philosophical application, not to be conflated with a new hermeneutical grid or mere disgust for the horror of the modern world. The thinkers and artists of our time would have much to gain from rereading their political and social categories by the yardstick of the reiterative provocation of Gnostic movements of subversion. And it is starting from this outlook, exceeding anything that we could hope for, that it is permissible for us to build the world that subsists at the end of civilizations, a world that we have not yet built but in which we are already living.

*Translated from the French by Gila Walker*