GRATEFUL DEAD STUDIES

Volume 6 2023/2024

ISSN 2572-7818 (Online) ISSN 2572-7702 (Print)

Rothermel, Dennis

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CITATION INFORMATION

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Grateful Dead Studies

Volume 6 (2023/2024)

Pages: 33–55

URL: https://gratefuldeadstudies.org/GDSv6_Rothermel.pdf

Jerry Garcia, Filmmaker: The Lost Project of *The Sirens of Titan*

Dennis Rothermel

Jerry Garcia first read Kurt Vonnegut's *The Sirens of Titan* in 1961. He loved the novel, an abiding affection that never dimmed, but what is most interesting is that it inspired him to think of the book visually, as a movie (Eisenhart 1998). With his first reading, and consistently afterward, he saw it cinematically: "It plays in my head—I see the blocking, I see the action, I see the camera moves … it just plays" (Eisenhart 1998) Not only did he have a complete sense of what the entire film adaptation would look like, the idea of making the movie stayed with him because of the "power and longevity … [and] freshness" the idea had, despite how "much time [had] passed" (Jackson 1999, 340).

Garcia honored that inspiration by paying for an option to make the film and renewing it for many years. He put significant time into cowriting a script with Tom Davis, commissioning storyboards and pursuing a production deal for several years. Although the project attracted some studio interest, it ultimately failed to land a contract, leaving unfinished what might have become a significant chapter in Garcia's artistic career. With Tom Davis's papers now open to researchers, the larger story of how

the project took shape can be traced; this essay provides a close look at the project, exploring the challenge the novel poses for cinematic adaptation and what Garcia's approach reveals about his larger understanding of film as an art form. Scholars have increasingly recognized Garcia's visual art as a significant aspect of his work; the *Sirens of Titan* project offers a vital yet critically neglected aspect of his oeuvre.

I.

Garcia's enthusiastic and artistic reaction is a tribute to his reading of the book. *The Sirens of Titan* uses humor and science fiction to leaven and mask far deeper elements and serious ideas, including philosophical precepts that reflect Vonnegut's reading of Nietzsche. The book ambles along with a non-linear plot rife with instantaneous space-travel around the solar system, ludicrously implausible mock-scientific physics, sudden jumps in context and fates, frivolously absurd motivations, and no clear villains or heroes—all in Vonnegut's succinct, noncommittal yet descriptive narrative, akin to an observing anthropologist (Klinkowitz 2004, 61). Vonnegut had studied anthropology at the University of Chicago, and that dry, detached voice translates as wry deadpan humor in the text, as if this were about a world only remotely familiar to the reader. Any sense of progress or good triumphing over bad is neither sanguine nor cynical, but simply nonjudgmentally observant. What is sometimes characterized as Vonnegut's "black humor" is better understood as *humanist* humor, one that embraces the object of the humor sympathetically, however outrageous the behavior described. The book cannot genuinely be called science fiction, since the science, such as it is, is not merely implausible but blatantly absurd (Klinkowitz 2010, 28–29, 32). This fits with Vonnegut's refusal to be labeled a science fiction writer, since being a serious writer does not prohibit humor (Vonnegut 2005, 20).

Malachi Constant is the central protagonist. He fritters away the enormous wealth accumulated by his father, who made profitable investments by following a random coding derived from the sequence of words in the Bible. Malachi becomes one of thousands kidnapped and transferred to colonies on Mars. Soldiers and workers there all have antennas implanted in the brain, which control their thoughts, memory,

and actions. The Martian colony was established by Winston Niles Rumfoord, who controls his pilgrims through the antennas. Rumfoord is caught in a "chrono-synclastic infundibula" time-space warp that regularly delivers him to different planets. Rumfoord is able to proliferate allegiance to his religion of the "Church of God the Utterly Indifferent," which stoically counsels that God does not care about us, and people should all carry weights attached at their wrists to underscore how no one is any better than anyone else.

There is much more; hundreds of significant narrative details inform the plot, few of which predominate and few of which are easily omitted for any coherent adaptation of the whole story. Even the meaning of the title derives from an incidental detail. There are distinct meta-narrative moments in the novel, where Vonnegut intrudes; he also adds a number of autobiographical details or personal connections, such as the story's end in Indianapolis, where he was born and raised, and his significant occupations prior to becoming a fiction writer. Soldiers on Mars, for example, were altered to make them perfect for "jobs in the military or industrial public relations" (Vonnegut 1959, 127), a jab at both Vonnegut's Army service in WWII, and his postwar work in public relations for General Electric. The conflict between "technology and humanity" inherent to the massive corporate entity provided the original inspiration for the thought that informed *The Sirens of Titan*. As Vonnegut explained, "There was no avoiding it, since the General Electric Company *was* science fiction" (Shields 2011, 103).

Vonnegut claims to have pointed whimsically to the night sky and named a distant planet "Tralfamadore" when he was about ten years old (Weide and Argott 2021, 0:37:15–55). Vonnegut's humor was ever youthful, and this silly name serves both to undercut the science-fiction seriousness that aficionados of the genre revere and also to leave open other ways in which the story can be serious. When Rumfoord first ran his spaceship into the chrono-synclastic infundibulum, he realized that "everything that ever has been always will be, and everything that ever will be always has been," a realm "where all the different kinds of [irreconcilable perspectival] truths fit together as nicely as the parts in a […] watch" (Vonnegut 1959, 9). As Rumfoord is dying, he assures

Constant that "in the timeless, in the chrono-synclastic infundibulated way of looking at things, I shall always be here. I shall always be where I've been" (301). Rumfoord comes to appreciate "a larger view of things" (278) and wonders what society is like on Tralfamadore, where everyone enjoys this larger perspective on time and things. Salo, another character, says it is "hypnotic anarchy," which, he insists, cannot be explained if you don't already understand it (274). Malachi travels from Titan to earth in a rocket ship powered by "the Universal Will to Become," (275) which "is what makes universes out of nothingness—that makes nothingness insist on becoming somethingness" (138).

Three philosophical lessons emerge from the book: understanding one's place in time by following a predicable sequence of moments and events and reflecting on their meaning; acquiescing to how fate has found a place for you in life, which lets life and the world function through you; and the only way to attain contentment is to employ one's will not to be a simple function of contingencies. In a 1999 letter, Vonnegut noted a lingering fascination with chrono-synclastic infundibulum, though not still by that nomenclature: "Stephen Hawking wonders why we can't remember the future, but that doesn't mean, for him or for me, that it isn't there. This amnesia is simply a human failing. And I see no reason why the future can't be as influential in our present as Darwin found our past to be" (Vonnegut Papers, Series 1).

The thinker whose work most connects with the philosophy in *Sirens* is Friedrich Nietzsche. Vonnegut commented on Nietzsche doctrine of eternal recurrence late in life, noting:

> I do believe time repeats itself. Our lives are somewhat like pendulums the way we start at birth and swing to death and back and forth throughout all eternity. And that would suit me if I got to cycle through my life through all eternity. I don't want to die and go away entirely. I'd like to come back and come back and come back on almost any terms. (Weide and Argott 2021, 2:03:25–50)

Nietzsche's Zarathustra tells a fable, a riddle, about a dwarf who leapt onto his shoulders while he was walking along a mountain trail (Nietzsche 1966, 268–269). The dwarf taunts Zarathustra: "All truth is crooked; time

itself is a circle" (Nietzsche 1966, 270). Zarathustra is frightened by these thoughts of eternally returning to the same life, all the same moments forever. Suppose a demon haunts you with this account of time and life: "This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it […]." Then the question you face is whether you would bemoan this bit of enlightenment or celebrate it (Nietzsche 1966, 101–102). Clearly, Vonnegut came to love it. Rumfoord would interject that knowing what the demon or dwarf tells you would encourage the "larger view of things" that "takes the glamour out of fortune-telling." All the mundane things that press right now upon one's soul are rendered remote rather than urgent. What the moments are that would lead one to call this revelation divine are to be discovered in a life. On Mercury, the character Unk "was at war with his environment," though the character Boaz "never felt better in his life" (Vonnegut 1959, 203). Once Unk discovers a way to escape the planet, Boaz won't go, having found "a place where I can do good without doing any harm, and I can see I'm doing good […]. I found me a home." Boaz *wills* meaning into the occupation for his existence that he has found there (217). Malachi and two others find a home for contentment, one that urges thinking divinely of a fate that one would happily repeat: foraging and reading, writing a book about *The Purpose of Life in the Solar System*, and living among the titanic blue birds of Titan (310–314).

These self-discovered fates worthy of infinite repetition are not the same, nor are they philosophically formulaic. In a broad way, how Voltaire has his protagonist urge this single mantra at the end of *Candide* suggests the same: "cultivate your garden." The garden, of course, is metaphorical (Voltaire 2009, 100–101). Similarly, Emerson imagines that "Whim" is engraved on the lintel in the gate leading to his house, though he wishes it something more ultimately than just whim (Emerson 2000, 135). The lintel, of course, is metaphorical. The advice is to find what arises for you as the engagement that creates challenge, transformation, and earnest fulfillment. In this broader meaning, it can be called Tralfamadorean hypnotic anarchism; it is thoroughly Nietzschean even without direct reference to Nietzsche.

Malachi Constant finds himself, without ever having suspected

it, of being the sum of conditioning causes in the world, "a victim of a series of accidents," and indeed, multiple times over he has been transformed and delivered to a different life entirely. From enjoyment of unencumbered leisure in youth he inherits the means for creating wealth by preposterously reliable random methods; loses it all; gets abducted and taken to Mars to become an automaton soldier; then goes to Mercury to wander its subterranean topography and back to earth, where he is first celebrated but then reviled as a Space Wanderer; and finally is deposited in pastoral paradise on Titan. Finally, he alone makes meaning of his fate.

Salo draws upon the Universal Will to Become in Constant's final transportation to Titan, which effectively wipes the slate clean of conditions that define him. The Universal Will to Become is what "makes nothingness insist on becoming somethingness." To Nietzsche, to be defined inexorably as the result of a series of accidents, where all that one is and does consists of forces moving and acting through you with your own complicitous contribution, "mistakes the essence of life, its *will to power*; in so doing one overlooks the essential pre-eminence of the spontaneous, attacking, infringing, reinterpreting, reordering, and formative forces" (Nietzsche 1998, 52). These spontaneous intellectual acts create 'somethingness' out of nothingness.

There is, thus, a palpable resonance between literary constructs in *The Sirens of Titan* and major concepts in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche. That resonance has been noted in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, a novel written ten years after *The Sirens of Titan* that amplifies the themes of Tralfamadore and time-traveling, though without the nomenclature of the chrono-synclastic infundibulum (Tally 2006, 70–75). Although Vonnegut in 1992 unequivocally stated he had read Nietzsche (Tally 2006, 70n), the point of tracing these links here is not to show Vonnegut as directly influenced by Nietzsche, but rather the utility of Nietzschean concepts for clarifying Vonnegut.

It is worth noting that scholars have found connections between Nietzsche and the music and experience of a Grateful Dead concert, particularly as associated with Nietzsche's exposition of the synthesis of Apollonian and Dionysian impulses in the rapture of tragedy and music (Spector 2010; Johnston 2007). A different connection has been made with

that experience and the themes of eternal recurrence and will to power, such as the experience of the concert confides to us as transcendently altered from everyday life (Spector 2013/14).

As Nietzsche scholarship has progressed, the reading of the doctrine of eternal return and the will to power have gravitated to what these concepts mean for living a life, and away from the literal cosmological and physicalist assumptions that can only lead to intractable conundrums such as cannot reasonably be what concerned Nietzsche (Nehamas 1987, 142–150). Nietzsche's dwarf prophet proclaims to Zarathustra while standing on his shoulders that "All truth is crooked; time itself is a circle" (Nietzsche 1966, 270), which mirrors how truth and time are linked in the realm of the chrono-synclastic infundibulum, where all irreconcilable perspectival "truths fit together as nicely as the parts" in a watch (Vonnegut 1959, 9). There is also the echo of the deliverance of such wisdom from an intelligent, wise source who is yet not friend, sibling, teacher, colleague but someone of a different sort of being. In Nietzsche, that is a demon or dwarf standing on Zarathustra's shoulders; in *The Sirens of Titan*, it is a four-and-a-half-foot tall, very odd machine from an astronomically distant planet. In either case, the wisdom imparted is thus not meant to be just another perspectival human thought.

The philosophical elements are central to the novel but complicate its translation to film. Francis Ford Coppola made that point when he was approached about directing *The Sirens of Titan*. "You can't make a movie of that, it's *philosophy*," Rock Scully remembers the director saying; Coppola was "astonished that anyone would even try" (Scully and Dalton 2001, 321). His words would prove to be prophetic.

II.

Garcia's first encounter with film was not promising. Watching *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948) frightened him so badly he couldn't look at the screen (McNally 2015, 38). By the time he saw Alain Resnais' *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), the same year he read *The Sirens of Titan*, his insights were those of a thoughtful critic, admiring its detailed, ornate imagery and dreamlike narrative (McNally 2015, 40). Garcia's appreciation of film never faltered: over the years he peppered

interviews and conversations with admiration for the work of John Landis, David Cronenberg, Georges Méliès, Federico Fellini, Alfred Hitchcock, Wojciech Has, Jean Cocteau, Richard Lester, David Lynch, Shirley Clark, and others.[1] He matched a sophisticated taste in films with sophisticated insights into those films, as Justin Kreutzmann noted (Budnick 2022).

Garcia augmented his understanding of the medium when the Dead had a brief scene in Richard Lester's *Petulia* (1968), which gave him a chance to see how the director worked (McNally 2002, 190). Garcia observed Lester actively interacting with only a few people—camera operator, actor, grips—even though the entire production involved a battalion of technicians, cast, assistants, and support staff (Jackson and McMahon 1985a, 11). That small group of creative artists in close collaboration intrigued Garcia, which he likened to playing in a band, where "everyone sees the thing and loves it enough that they'll let enough of themselves into it as possible" (Jackson and McMahon 1985a, 11–12).

Three years later, he jumped at the chance to work on one of Michelangelo Antonioni's films, *Zabriskie Point* (1970). The director was a favorite of Garcia's: "I like Antonioni's work so much. It's so modern—his sense of space and time and all that" (Jackson and McMahon 1985a, 10). Garcia composed soundtrack music by sitting in the recording studio and improvising melody to connect with what he saw; Antonioni was happy with the initial results, but Garcia felt that he was "satisfied way before me" (McNally 2002, 405–406). Garcia had wanted to study the film for a week, and he found Antonioni's expressed emotive needs—"sad" or "bright and cheerful" or "scary"—much too simplistic.

Four years later, Garcia saw the chance to do something more. He decided to have the band's five-show run at Winterland in October 1974 filmed, which formed the basis of *The Grateful Dead* movie (1977). Garcia oversaw post-production, which was time-consuming and laborious, but the smooth touch of his composition is omnipresent (Jackson 1999, 285–286). He organized it musically, modelled on a Grateful Dead concert; the result is "not a documentary," he explained: "There's a little more art to it than that" (Blackwood 1983). Although the project drained the band's resources and absorbed much of Garcia's time and energy from 1975 to 1977, the project ignited Garcia's interest in making films (Scully and Dalton 2001, 259).

Garcia imagined his filmmaking along the model of Jean Cocteau, who had a larger body of work in literature and art (Jackson 1999, 340). That appealed to Garcia, who had a larger body of work in music and art, and his film projects, both realized and conceptualized, encompass a range as wide as Cocteau's. To Cocteau, filmmaking was art, a kind of poetry in which "there is nothing more glorious than to write a poem with people, faces, hands, lights, objects, arranging them all as one likes" (Steegmuller 1986, 461). Garcia saw *The Grateful Dead* movie in those terms, using his editing to shape it as a work of art (Blackwood 1983; Rothermel 2015a). Even more, the experience gave him considerable experience and confidence in filmmaking (Jackson and McMahon 1985a, 10).

That expertise informed the next film project he worked on. *So Far* (1986), the Dead's second film, gave Garcia the opportunity to work on the post-production again, engaging him in film composition (Greenfield 1996, 234). He called it "a formal work," like a studio album, "a seamless work […] of music and potent imagery" (Eisenhart 1998; Pense 1987). But while he was working on that, he was also pursuing a much more ambitious project: bringing *The Sirens of Titan* to the screen.

III.

Taking on the time- and energy-consuming task of editing *The Grateful Dead* movie was not a task that Garcia *needed* to do, it was what he *wanted* to do as a creative endeavor (Jackson and McMahon 1985a, 12). Likewise, *So Far* offered that same sort of opportunity, which Garcia fashioned into an entirely different sort of film (Rothermel 2015b). He saw these efforts as providing experience in filmmaking, something to build upon (Jackson and McMahon 1985a, 10). His visual art, which showed a remarkable ability to learn from a significantly broad scope of artists, augured well for Garcia doing something stylistically interesting in fiction film. That forum for Garcia's restless creativity also took on new urgency in the 1980s. Starting in 1985, Garcia expanded his visual art practice in several ways. An inveterate doodler and sketcher, he had always carried a sketchbook, tucking one into his briefcase or guitar case when he went on tour (Hart 2005, x–xi); now he added watercolor, acrylic, gouache, etchings, and digital art to his portfolio, drawing deliberately on

influences as diverse as Robert Crumb, Claude Monet, George Herriman, Vincent Van Gogh, Paul Cézanne, Georgia O'Keefe, Frank Stella, and Paul Klee.[2]

Directing film represented that same urge writ large. Having seen how Antonioni and Lester worked, having developed an appreciation for film authorship and style, having thrown himself into the post-production creativity on *The Grateful Dead* movie and *So Far*, Garcia had gained enough confidence and experience to know something of what it would take to capture *The Sirens of Titan* in creative film style. Although Garcia loved Vonnegut, he did not see most of Vonnegut's novels as "movie material." An exception was *Mother Night*, which he believed "would be a wonderful movie"—and in 2000, Keith Gordon proved him right. But Garcia disagreed with Coppola's view that *The Sirens of Titan* was unfilmable. To Garcia, the issue was not the philosophy of the book so much as its structure, which he admitted was "tremendously convoluted," but for him, "that's the fun of it." As Garcia saw it, the task of the director and actors was for the characters to convey the humor of the book as well as its humanity. Its black comedy, existential predicament, and ironic twists were all elements he was "a sucker for" (Eisenhart 1998), but what most appealed was its tone. Garcia saw the novel as "one of the few Vonnegut books that's really *sweet*, in parts of it, and it has some really lovely stuff in it. It's the range of it that gets me off …" (Eisenhart 1998).

Capturing that was the challenge. Short of constant voice-over narration, preserving the subtleties of humor from a literary source is difficult. Garcia understood that problem; his solution was to "put style on the screen in place of it" (Eisenhart 1998). As a result, the science fiction elements of the story do not figure dominantly in Garcia's treatment, but character, story, and Vonnegut's wry understated humor are central. The emotional tone , sweetness, and the mixture of humor were foremost in Garcia's understanding of the project; they were the elements of the story that Garcia saw cinematically. His was a complete envisioning of the film, and the power and persistence of that vision prompted him to embark on what might have been his most ambitious work as a creative artist—one that he would devote considerable time, effort, and resources to bring to fruition.

The genesis of the project may have been in 1978, when the Dead performed on *Saturday Night Live.* At a gathering with the cast and writers, Garcia mentioned *The Sirens of Titan*, effusing how it would make a great movie (Scully and Dalton 2001, 321). His enthusiasm was shared: when Davis and Michael O'Donoghue had first met prior to their first season as writers for the show in 1973, *The Sirens of Titan* was one of the books that O'Donoghue had recommended to Davis (Davis 2009, 225). The pair began drafting an adaptation of the novel into a screenplay and cast member Dan Aykroyd talked about lining up funding.

Shortly after the Dead's appearance on the show, Garcia tapped John Kahn and Richard Loren to reach out to Lucy Kroll, a literary agent who was Kahn's godmother, to negotiate the film rights. She secured an exclusive option from Vonnegut: $60,000 for six years, which Garcia renewed repeatedly (Loren 2014, 227–229; Greenfield 1996, 214; Farber Papers, Box 8). After the deal was finalized in 1979, Kahn and Loren worked up "a scene-by-scene literal adaptation" that would serve as a foundation for the script (Loren 2014, 225). That marked the start of a long and laborious process. In 1983, Loren enlisted Warren Leight as scriptwriter; although Loren thought the screenplay Leight came up with was "spot-on," "superlative," and "a masterpiece," Garcia and Davis ignored it (Loren 2014, 239–240).

Davis and Garcia began work on their own screenplay in December 1983 (Davis 2009, 249, 251–255; Eisenhart 1998; Jackson 1999, 340). Work on the script progressed fitfully, with Davis and Garcia completing a first draft by January 1985 (Davis 2009, 256). Tom Davis' papers at Yale outline much of the work on the script, with ten copies documenting seven stages of development and revision from January 1985 to July 1987 (Davis Papers, Box 26, 27). Some are annotated in two different handwriting styles, likely Davis and Sheldon Schrager; all are marked as second drafts. There is a single page in Davis's handwriting of a "Sirens outline" in the Davis archive, which might be a remnant of a first draft (Davis Papers, Box 26, Folder 1) A copy of the July 1987 version, with additional notations by Davis, is in the band's archive at UC Santa Cruz. The succession of drafts reveals intermittent progress, accelerating in 1987. Garcia's health suggests why: after the initial scripts, he fell into a

diabetic coma in July 1986, with life-threatening complications. Recovery, including learning to walk and play guitar again, took months. The health scare gave him renewed impetus to complete the project (Jackson 1999, 345–352).

For Garcia, what mattered centrally was the development of the three main characters:

> It's like a triangle, a complex, convoluted love story. And it's really that simple. So our task has been to take the essential dramatic relationships, make it playable for actors, so that it's free from the Big Picture emphasis of the book. The book is all kind of long shots … (Eisenhart 1998)

The script accomplishes that by paring away much of the novel's complexities of events and characters, leaving a linear storyline. Mostly, what the script retains from the novel is dialogue, which is hardly dominant in Vonnegut's storytelling. Comparing the latest available version of the script to the novel, one sees how snippets of dialogue and some description are extracted, altogether a small fraction of the text. Yet the script manages to convey a reasonably representative rendition of the novel's story. An early version of the script in the Davis archive begins with a Carl Sagan-like scientist explaining for a television news broadcast the basic facts about Rumfoord's periodic materialization and de-materialization. The introduction of the role of Tralfamadorean interference with events on earth is moved from late in the novel to an opening scene. "Chrono-synclastic infundibulum" is mentioned twice in the script without explanation, but with enough context that viewers would surmise something vague about it. There is no mention of The Universal Will to Become, and numerous minor characters and details are omitted, typical for adaptations of literary sources for the screen.

Some of the most effective elements are the most challenging. Whereas Vonnegut's account of the disaster and slaughter of Martians invading earth is pithy and general, the script includes a succession of scenes depicting earth citizens gleefully shooting the invaders, who pose no real threat. When Davis asked Garcia how he would render the soundtrack music for these scenes, he wondered if it would it be somber, perhaps Gustav Holst's "Mars"? No, Garcia said with a chuckle, "Dixieland rag

with kazoos!" (Davis 2009, 255). The sequence of these quick scenes in the script correlates conceptually though not literally with Vonnegut's deadpan, black-humor summary of the slaughter: "Everywhere […] the Martians were butchered promptly, before they could even dig in. […] All around the globe there was the cheerful popping away of amateurs familiarizing themselves with small arms" (Vonnegut 1959, 168–174). A cavalier take on such events would be palatable, albeit indifferent, for a story about comically conceived armies from an impossibly absurd world.

It was important to Garcia to fashion a script with close correspondence to the source text. Garcia followed Vonnegut in his deprecation of the "Big Picture" science-fiction trappings of the novel, focusing on the three main characters. The script captures the love story between them as neither romantic nor sexual, as would be *de rigueur* for a typical Hollywood film. The very gradual development of the script shows how Garcia and Davis preserved what Garcia found sweet in the book. Malachi, Rumfoord, Beatrice, and Chrono are not at all ordinary characters—not for literature and not for films. Malachi, by the end of the story, knows that he has committed horrible crimes while his thoughts and behavior were not under his own control. He has no recollection of those deeds nor that whole period of his life, and yet he knows that somehow this same person who he is was once capable of doing things that now horrify him. It is an interesting characterization, with a unique predicament of existential anguish, somewhat similar to the existential anguish of Howard Campbell in *Mother Night*, who contributed to the endurance of the Third Reich and by extension to the holocaust, yet while serving nominally as a secret agent for the allied powers.

In collaboration with Robert Hunter, Garcia composed songs for lyrics that, among others, depicted a scoundrel ("Sugaree"), a man who cannot bear to bury his dead lover ("It Must Have Been the Roses"), a cocaine-crazed engineer on a runaway train ("Casey Jones"), a woman who dissipates her sparkle ("Truckin'"), an aging moonshiner ("Brown-Eyed Women"), and an alcoholic derelict ("Wharf Rat"). What is common to these tunes, which otherwise are diverse in both subject and music, is the refusal to be summarily judgmental. In each case, it is an empathetic treatment, that of a friend who feels the need to understand and doesn't

feel the need to pass judgment. "Wharf Rat" in particular stands as a paean to human grace.

If Vonnegut's depiction of Rumfoord, Malachi, Beatrice, and Chrono struck Garcia as sweet—the primary instigation for his wanting to make the movie—one would expect that what Garcia wanted to do was to give these odd, and even partly malicious, characters that same sort of nonjudgmental distanciation that his collaborations with Hunter had produced. Those sweet songs are easily likened to Vonnegut's humanist humor. This is a different kind of sweetness from Hollywood warm-heartedness, which is designed to make an audience identify with and wish for their lives, too. These are sweet characters in the sense of, "this, too, is how the vessel of human nature can be filled," even if those characters are people no one would ever want to be a part of their life. Garcia's sense of sweetness is more like what a John Cassavetes film presents than one by Frank Capra. Instead of creating music to go with the story of Hunter's lyrics, making *The Sirens of Titan* would be cinema that Garcia would compose in close collaboration with actors, cinematographer, and sound-person, drawing from a script rather than lyrics but for the same purpose of creating interesting characters.

While Garcia and Davis worked on the script, Gary Gutierrez, who did the psychedelic animation for the opening sequence of *The Grateful Dead* movie, was hired to create "richly detailed paintings" illustrating passages in the Vonnegut novel as a storyboard for the film (Jackson and McMahon 1985b, 27). Two complete copies of the three volumes of storyboards are preserved in the Davis papers, with approximately 120 drawings in each volume. The drawings reflect changes to the script from the "January 1985" to the "January 1986" drafts, with captions for most drawings along with sparse notations, likely by Davis. As storyboards, they tend to be blandly inexpressive but functional, providing a rough picture of what each planned shot in the screenplay would look like.

The project got an unexpected boost when Davis sent the novel to Bill Murray, who loved it. He committed to the project, wanting to play the central role of Malachi Constant (Davis 2009, 240). In 1984, Garcia and Davis had lunch in Manhattan with Murray and Sheldon Schrager, "an old-school chain-smoking Hollywood executive from

Columbia [Pictures],” to pitch the project. Schrager suggested that Davis ought to direct but he demurred, a move he later regretted (Davis 2009, 256), but he provided a close reading of the script and made a number of suggestions to improve its chances of getting funding. There are some notes in Schrager’s hand in the January 1985 draft but Schrager provided detailed and comprehensive notations for the January 1987 draft, from how particular shots or scenes would amplify production costs to comments about techniques, set construction, process shots, blue-screen, special effects, matte shots, animation, and stock footage. He offered critical remarks on dialogue and sequence, noting where props and music composition were needed and music rights had to be secured. He counted the number of shots (330), calculated the length of the film based on the script, and divided it to conform to the three-act dramatic structure typical of feature films.

Schrager encouraged Garcia and Davis to shorten the film and soften or tone down several elements, including eliminating or reducing instances of nudity, substituting milder profanity, eliminating reference to drugs, and so forth; subsequent versions of the script reflect those recommendations, though they only pared the script by seven of the ten pages Schrager suggested. Overall, Schrager’s recommendations made it more likely that the film would be able to secure funding and eventually get produced. Davis and Garcia mostly followed his suggestions, which shows their determination to get the film made. Schrager’s suggestions are not monumental, nor did they address contestable issues of creative discretion. The fact that the hand written remarks in the scripts are by Schrager and Davis tells us nothing about which author dominated. When two collaborators are working in a room, the conversation and decisions are shared, but only one person wields the pen or types. Both Davis and Garcia called the effort collaborative, and no trace of divergence or disagreements between them survives.

In June 1984, Loren, Garcia, Davis, Murray, and Gutierrez met with Michael Ovitz and a Universal Studio representative at Ovitz’s Creative Artists Agency offices in Los Angeles (McNally 2002, 551; Greenfield 1996, 214). Ovitz, who was Murray’s agent, was renowned for successfully packaging projects for Universal and other studios (Schoeller;

Cieply). He helped make the pitch, which was for a development contract at Universal with a $250,000 advance for "book rights, option renewal, drawings, paintings, incidentals, and Davis' draft of a screenplay" (Loren, 230; Davis, 256–257; Greenfield, 214).

Universal wanted extensive changes to the script. Garcia refused, insisting that he direct the film (Greenfield 1996, 214). Even if he had acquiesced to the script changes, his demand to be the director would have been enough to kill the studio's interest in the project. Although he and Davis were continuing to work on the script, Garcia also commented that he was hanging onto the screen rights in order to "protect it as much as anything else," so that it would not "fall into the hands of a hack" (Pense 1987; Eisenhart 1998).

That year, Loren sent the book and the latest version of their script to Jonathan Demme, also a Grateful Dead fan (Eisenhart 1998). Demme adored Vonnegut's books and had filmed an adaptation of a Vonnegut short story for the PBS American Playhouse television series in 1982 (Bliss and Banks 1996, 68; Kapsis 2009, 14–16). Garcia and Demme met in New York, which Garcia thought went well, but it didn't lead to anything more (Loren 2014, 234; Eisenhart 1998). Loren tried to help by enlisting an experienced writer and approaching an established film director, but Garcia continued to insist that "it's not a Grateful Dead project, it's a Me project," discussing his screenplay with Davis and emphasizing his eagerness to direct the film (Eisenhart 1998).

Loren persevered. In April 1988 he wrote to arrange a meeting with Stuart Gordon, including Davis, Garcia, and Gutierrez, at Gutierrez' Colossal Pictures studio in San Francisco (Davis Papers, Box 26, Folder 13; Wixon). Gorden was an established writer and director who had produced a stage version of *The Sirens of Titan* in 1977, which was revived in 2017 (Wixon). Gordon later mentioned the meeting but did not say anything about the conversation or its outcome (Wixon). Six months later, a representative of Yorktown Productions sent a letter to Davis with comments on the script, which was returned. A polite, boiler-plate rejection, the letter called the book inherently unfilmable and explained that Yorktown "prefers material that is more traditional" (Davis Papers, Box 26, Folder 13). The attached review and synopsis of the script is

uniformly pejorative. It is "bleak" because there is no happy ending, it is "moralizing" because it doesn't affirm the way things are in our world, and it fails to engender the "wonder" common to the sci-fi genre. It indulges confusion by lacking a simple story line and "meanders" with "unconnected subplots." It is not a thriller and the story is "unconvincing" because it abandons plausibility. It also lacks a concluding scene that wraps it all up. The implicit standpoint of the critique provides the exact template mainstream movie production manufactures for its target moviegoer, from expectations about a relatable hero to a plot that's not too complicated and ends where the film's pleasant, upbeat message is revealed. These correctives applied to any Robert Hunter lyrics—keep it happy, simple, unambiguous, plausible—would produce a song that The Carpenters or Perry Como would sing. The reviewer concedes that they have not read the novel and cannot judge whether the script was true to it, but tellingly, the central objection that it is not really science fiction is a charge better lodged against the novel. Indeed, all of the complaints apply to Vonnegut's book as well.

This is not to fault the script reader, whose job is to embody the perfect ersatz preview audience. They work for a production company that needs to identify a film project that could possibly get funding, complete production, gain distribution, win favorable critical and popular reception, and become profitable. It is the nature of the business to chart the safest route to a successful financial outcome. If that makes risk avoidance the defining mandate for a production, it results in the pressure to dumb products down. Studios respond by keeping movies simple, cute, and happy, not because that is what audiences always want, but because that is how the industry can best condition the movie-going public to like the same repackaged ideas over and over and over again.

Garcia made one more overture to solicit industry interest, giving Justin Kreutzmann a copy of the script and storyboards for him to forward to Francis Ford Coppola; his reaction was the same as it had been before, that it was not a viable project (Budnick 2022). Davis also wrote to Vonnegut in September 1989, introducing himself and mentioning Garcia's option on the novel and asking if Vonnegut would meet with them (Davis Papers, Box 46). If that happened, no record has surfaced. By

1995, Davis was resigned to the project's failure (Greenfield 1996, 215).

Yet the work for the project left traces that are both tantalizing and revealing. Davis and Garcia succeeded in creating a script reasonably representative of the book, and despite the pressures of Garcia's career, they were close to their final elaboration of the script by January 1985. Subsequent work on the script consisted mostly of refinements. Even more, the work to get it funded was arduous, involved, and extensive; it was a project that not only mattered a great deal to Garcia, it also attracted the attention and deep engagement of many others. The ultimate failure of the project does not obscure its merits, nor its very real achievements.

IV.

Garcia was the center of creative collaboration as the leader of the Grateful Dead, and he chose the central role as director for what he wanted to do in cinema. As it was with Cocteau, it was the *doing* of the project that offered creative fulfillment. That can transpire in post-production editing (*The Grateful Dead* and *So Far*), pre-production scriptwriting (*The Sirens of Titan*), or during shooting. The drawback in filmmaking—which is haltingly intermittent compared to music-making, which is fluid—is the pace and time involved; it means that, as Garcia put it, "ideas lose their sheen, lose their exterior, real fast" (Jackson and McMahon 1985a, 11). Significantly, Garcia framed the creative activity of shooting a film as a counterpart to performing improvisatory music. He admired Hitchcock's regular practice of thorough preparation: an exact idea carefully worked out in script and storyboarding before shooting, which then proceeded apace (Jackson and McMahon 1985a, 12). One is reminded of Bill Kreutzmann's observation that when Garcia brought a new song to the band, it was already completely worked out (Kreutzmann and Eisen 2015, 140). That same expectation of a complete composition is what Garcia had wanted for his contribution to the soundtrack for *Zabriskie Point*; though Antonioni did not see that as necessary, for *The Sirens of Titan* project it was critical.

This helps to explain Garcia's determination to see the project through. Although that didn't happen, it is perhaps less a reflection of him than it is of the book. Garcia's fears of Hollywood hackery

notwithstanding, Coppola's estimation has proven true. After Garcia died, Robert B. Weide approached Vonnegut about making another try, and Vonnegut got the rights back from the Garcia estate (Weide; Farber Papers, Box 8). Although Weide completed a script, he also foundered at the funding stage (Weide). Vonnegut then assigned the rights to James V. Hart in 2007, even assisting him with problems posed by the story, but that effort also fell through. In 2017, a project to adapt the book as a TV series was announced, though that, too, has failed to enter production (Ziegler).

That leaves open the chance that Garcia and Davis's script and Gutierrez's storyboards may yet produce a film of *The Sirens of Titan.* Yet, even though that would offer some solace and even vindication of Garcia's faith, it would still fail to fulfill his vision. What drove him to pursue the project was the *doing* of it, much as the impetus to performing was the *doing* of the music. Making a film involves multiple creative projects, not just the script adaptation but the post-production editing, which captivated Garcia in *The Grateful Dead* and *So Far*. What was important to Garcia in making *The Sirens of Titan* was the development and interaction of the characters, what he adored as *sweet* in Vonnegut's novel. Characters gain substance and development in a film from the performance of actors on camera, with the immediate input of the person credited as director. What Garcia saw in Richard Lester's interactions with the cinematographer and actors is the role he wanted for himself in *The Sirens of Titan*, and that is the aspect that his death foreclosed.

He held out for the opportunity to do that as long as he could. What remains represents a tantalizing creative project, even if it failed to produce the larger work that Garcia imagined. For scholars, *The Sirens of Titan* project is a fascinating story that offers vital, unique insights into Jerry Garcia's art, mind, and work.

Notes

1. See, for example, McNally 2015, 40, 42, 159, 162, 172; Garcia 1989; Jackson and McMahon 1985a; Graham 1999; and Budnick 2022.

2. See, for example, Higashi 2005, ii, 44, 52, 69, 70, 99, 101, 121, 131; and Rothermel 2019.

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Dennis Rothermel is Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at California State University, Chico. His research lies in the intersection of Continental philosophy and cinema studies. He coedited *Remembrance and Reconciliation* (2011) and *A Critique of Judgment in Film and Television* (2014) and he has published in the *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*; *ZWITSCHER-MASCHINE: Zeitschrift für Internationale Klee-Studien*, and numerous book chapters. He is a Charter Member of the Grateful Dead Studies Association and a frequent presenter at Grateful Dead Studies Association conference meetings.