

Chapter 6

The Pilgrimage to Jim Morrison's Grave at Père Lachaise Cemetery: The Social Construction of Sacred Space

Peter Jan Margry

The paradox could hardly have been greater: Jim Morrison (1943-1971), the American rock star and poet who refused to be constrained or pushed around by anyone, has been thrust into a straightjacket more than thirty years after his death. The *espace Morrison*, the area around his grave at the Parisian cemetery of Père Lachaise, had gradually evolved into a kind of sanctuary where his fans brought him to life again, as it were, and where his musicality, his lifestyle, and his poetic and philosophical legacy were evoked and propagated. But on April 15, 2004, the authorities unconditionally put a stop to these informal, communal gatherings that annexed the grave and its immediate environs. The erection of a closed iron ring of anchored barriers marked the culmination of almost thirty years of confrontation between Morrison fans and the established order. By their actions, the authorities have somehow managed to invert the meanings and functions of his grave, confronting some visitors with a curious paradox. Dorothea, a single woman from Hamburg who was born in 1966, was painfully struck by this during her visit on July 3, 2004.¹ 'It hurt me most for Jim Morrison himself,' she said. 'For him, barriers were the worst thing there was. The things that Jim had always wanted to guard against have become reality thirty years after his death. They've finally managed to lock him up.'²

In this contribution I will analyze the way in which Jim Morrison fans transform his grave into a sacred place and how the cult surrounding this idol has acquired performative shape in the public space. At the same time I will seek to establish whether there are forms of religiosity involved in the fan culture and Morrison cult on and around his grave and whether it is possible to speak of a Morrison 'pilgrimage.'

Mythologizing

Notwithstanding his international fame, Morrison was buried almost anonymously five days after his death in Paris on July 3, 1971.³ In part to prevent hysterical scenes involving fans, an austere ceremony was decided on. Morrison was interred without fanfare – no rituals, poems, or prayers – in less than ten minutes and in the cheapest available coffin. The grave was little more than a nondescript, rectangular patch of sand, known as a *pleine-terre*, demarcated by bluestone blocks and with a plaque for the purposes of identification.⁴ The plaque was replaced in 1972 by a simple headstone, which was later replaced by a larger stone bearing an inscription.

It was not until the late 1970s, however, that interest in Morrison received a new impetus, a revival that occurred more or less in parallel with the rediscovery of 'his' band, the Doors. This was prompted by the posthumous release of a special LP containing nothing but recordings of Morrison reading his own poems, accompanied by music adapted by the three surviving band members. It also marked the beginning of a mythologizing process around the band and its front man, with Morrison increasingly being profiled as a writer. Added to that, 1979 saw the release of Francis Coppola's anti-war film *Apocalypse Now*, in which the mysterious, dramatic Doors' song 'The End' featured prominently. *No one here gets out alive* appeared one year later. This successful – and controversial – Morrison biography presented for the first time in print various speculations about the final year of Morrison's life in Paris and about how he met his end. Informal confirmation of this process and of the growing iconization of Morrison as a male sex symbol, dark-star musician and *poète maudit* came with the September 1981 edition of *Rolling Stone*, the pop music magazine with an international audience. A photo of Morrison was emblazoned on the cover, together with the words: 'He is Hot, He is Sexy, and He is Dead' (Fowlie 1994). While Morrison and the Doors were subject to a worldwide re-evaluation among older and successive younger generations, his friends, acquaintances and 'hangers-on' began publishing a string of insiders' books, all of which continued to create, maintain, unmask, or embellish new myths. Above all, it was the fact that Morrison's body had only been seen by his girlfriend and a Parisian doctor before being interred in a sealed coffin

that triggered considerable speculation that Morrison 'lived on' (Fowlie 1994: 94-96; Seymore 1991). This idea was given further credence by the fact that his 'official' biographers believed he was perfectly capable of such an 'escape' (Hopkins and Sugerman 1980: 373). Finally, the emergence of a new literary genre of Morrison fantasy biographies and novels, like those by Strete (1982), Farren (1999), Verheul (1999)⁵, Pierce (2003) and Meunié (2005), in which he continues to experience bizarre adventures on earth or in the afterlife, has only lent more weight to the idea that he is not dead, that he lives on or has been reincarnated, and that he has a supernatural status.⁶

This denial of death, the belief in the existence of a life after death, or the attribution of an eternal life has many parallels in world religions and could point to the presence of religious perceptions in relation to Morrison. Just as the day of a saint's death marks the birth of his heavenly life and the beginning of an intermediary function, so too do some Jim Morrison devotees believe that they can still communicate in some way with him and/or his spirit. Different stories – from fantasy novels and accounts from witnesses or visitors to Morrison's grave about Morrison continuing to live and experience things – have influenced and complemented one another.

Oliver Stone's successful 1991 film *The Doors* gave a whole new impetus to this mythologizing. The film was essentially a disguised biography of Morrison, based on Stone's own understanding of the central character. The film partly confirmed the existing image but added new, powerful iconographies and narratives. Stone's personal feelings and viewpoint were highly influential because he himself was a devoted fan who claimed that the Doors had completely turned his life around when he was young. For him, Jim Morrison symbolized the central preoccupations of the 1960s, particularly the search for new forms of heightened consciousness and freedom. Thanks to his physical resemblance to Morrison and his superb acting ability, actor Val Kilmer managed to more or less convey Morrison's reputed charisma in the film. The result was an international success that shaped Morrison's image, and to a lesser extent that of the Doors, for new generations of fans.

For our purposes, it is important to point out how the film uses manipulation to highlight Morrison's supposed shamanistic abilities. The film opens sig-

nificantly with a mystical representation, set to music, of how Morrison took on these qualities as a small child by means of 'spiritual transmission' from a dying Native American in the New Mexico desert. With references made in passing to the secularization – the 'loss of God' – of American society, the film continues with the words 'the ceremony is now to begin' and jumps ahead in time to the adult Morrison. His interest in the occult and his shamanistic trances and performances during concerts are shown at length. There is no doubt that these filmic narratives have exerted a powerful influence on his fans' perception of Morrison as someone with supernatural or transcendental qualities.

The media's continued inflation of Morrison in relation to the Doors met with a worldwide response, leading to a broad iconization of the Morrison phenomenon. An early Morrison photo, a 1967 portrait from Joel Brodsky's *Young Lion* series showing a bare torso and a head of abundant curly hair, became the canonized image of the idol par excellence (cf. Ortíz 1998: 63-64).⁷ Distributed internationally, this series has had such a powerful impact over



Postcard of a Morrison picture from Joel Brodsky's Young Lion series of 1967, with signature. Collection Meertens Institute.

the years that it has helped shape the way in which Morrison is perceived. In discussion forums on the Internet, it has triggered observations like: 'He looks so primal, ferrel [sic] -- like a wild cat (...) also the look in his eyes is so confrontational. (...) If man was made in the image of G(g?)od [sic], then this is the mirror' and 'Great photos, ... talk about looking like a god.'⁸ Not only did fans see him as someone divine, for many fans these photos functioned as images of the human ideal: for women, the man of their dreams and for men, the ideal masculine model. This is expressed in the frequent attempts by in-group fans to imitate and copy Morrison's lifestyle and outward appearance.

Fan Scene vs Heritage

The growing iconization also had an impact on Morrison's grave. The opportunity to de-anonymize his minimalist grave came in 1981, ten years after his death. Fans wanted some link with and attribution to their idol, as well as acknowledgement and recognition that this was indeed his final resting place. A larger headstone with his name was erected. Someone made a bust of Morrison (which was later stolen) and placed it on the headstone so that fans could picture him. In 1991, twenty years after his death, Morrison's parents arranged for a larger, more formal headstone with a bronze plaque.⁹

The grave underwent not only material changes. Because of the fan culture (the 'scene'), the immaterial changes were much more far-reaching. In the 1980s and 1990s, the growing presence of the fan scene had given rise to the *espace Morrison* – the physical, central reference point for fans and devotees from all around the world. This had evolved into a socio-cultural space where the identification with and the *imitatio* of the life of Morrison took shape. It was an informal annexation of the surrounding gravestones and crypts where fans drank excessively, smoked, took drugs, removed their clothes, had public sex, slept, and put into practice the non-conformist ideas and lifestyle championed by Morrison. But they also recited his poems or lyrics, played recordings of his music or played the music themselves. The headstone usually functioned as a table, or 'shrine' as it was increasingly referred to, where they revered and paid homage to Morrison. The shrine continued to be the central



Postcard showing the grave of Jim Morrison adorned with a bust and graffiti, approx. 1987. Collection Meertens Institute.

focus for visitors and the focal point of an ever-growing social and sacred space, at the same time underscoring the importance of *locality* in this context (Bennett 2000: 195–198). The literal appropriation of the space by gatherings of Morrison fans was so informal, chaotic and ‘anarchistic’ in nature – fully in keeping with the idol worshipped there – that the site became increasingly contested. This had already led to a temporary closure in 1988–1989 that failed to relocate or eliminate the cult; it would be effortlessly revived again later (Söderholm 1990: 303). Thus, the site continued to exert its power, becoming once again the subject of conflict and eventually being permanently and physically cordoned-off from the public.



Grave of Morrison with gifts from visitors, 8 December 2003.

Photo: M. Campbell.

The fans were active not only during the day; in the evenings and at night-time they would creep into the closed cemetery to gather at the grave. In 1991, to put an end to these gatherings and to the ‘profaning’ of the cemetery, solid, spiked railings were erected on top of the cemetery’s outer walls, a measure that sparked off fierce clashes with fans on the anniversary of his death later that year. After that, there were daily checks to ensure that fans did in fact leave the cemetery before closing time and were not locked in. This failed to prevent disturbances of the peace during the day, however. New confrontations were not long in coming, especially as the entire area around the grave was severely



An analogy of the church altar: fanscene has covered the new gravestone for Jim Morrison with drugs and alcohol, 1990. Photo: M. Campbell.

marked and damaged by graffiti and inscriptions in the thousands. This was the permanent confrontation of the informal Morrison cult with the order and sacrality of the cemetery. Also at that time, in response to the newly launched heritage policy and to burgeoning tourism, the cemetery was declared a historic monument, which meant that Père Lachaise – although still a functioning cemetery – became subject to a process of museumization. This served to heighten tensions with the Morrison scene, who were held partly responsible for stripping the cemetery of almost all of Morrison's funerary paraphernalia.

However, the introduction of tighter security measures did not altogether halt the alienation of objects. Visitors still tried to remove sand from the area around the grave, to take objects from the vicinity or to leave behind etched

proof of their visit. For that matter, treating the dead with respect and the meaning of 'property' are relative concepts for the fans. Because of the sacred significance of objects that have come into contact with the grave and the site as whole, objects or letters placed there by fans often hold an irresistible attraction. Personal gifts – like poems, drawings, photos, flags and packets of marijuana (cf. Thomas 2006: 17-22) – tend to disappear very quickly. The number of gifts has fallen since barriers were erected in 2004, but anything left behind is still usually removed.¹⁰ And when the Père Lachaise security guards are absent, there are always fans who will jump over the barriers to appropriate something.

Hence the decision by the cemetery management to cordon off the grave.¹¹ The primary reason was the damage to Père Lachaise – described as '*la plus spectaculaire profanation permanente de sépultures*' – as a cultural monument and as part of cultural heritage (De Langlade 1982/2002: 71). In 2004, the cemetery's historian inadvertently attracted worldwide notoriety after stating in a *Guardian* interview about Morrison: 'We'd like to kick him out, because we don't want him; he causes too many problems. If we could get rid of him, we'd do it straight away' (Henley 2004). This view, held by certain Parisians but never before articulated so brusquely, came to the attention of the world press. It shocked not only Morrison's followers but also the Paris authorities, who hastened to explain that the American rock star's grave was part of *French* cultural heritage and there would be no question of relocation. This announcement was quite unrelated to the fact that, like most graves at Père Lachaise, Morrison's grave was given in perpetuity to the family and for that reason could not possibly be relocated.

Nevertheless, the grave has remained Morrison's *lieu de mémoire* par excellence. Despite all of the problems, his final resting place has continued to work its way up the ranks at Père Lachaise. Today, it is the cemetery's most visited grave, and together with the Eiffel Tower, Notre Dame and the Louvre, it is one of the top tourist attractions in the French capital.¹² It was not only Morrison's grave that became a focal point; owing to the growing importance of the Morrison cult, any place that recalls his stay in Paris has acquired a significant, albeit subsidiary, role within the Morrison memorial tour. Fans can

take a route past all the sites that are somehow connected with Morrison's life in Paris in 1971, such as the Hotel George V, the apartment on the Rue Beautreillis 17, the Le Beautreillis restaurant in the same street, Café de Flore, and the L'Astroquet and La Palette bars.¹³

At Père Lachaise, 'hidden away' in an unsightly corner, Morrison fans will still find a simple grave that fails to correspond to prevailing esthetic norms or to what is usually deemed worthy of tourist attention. This monument occupies quite a different position from an attraction like Graceland, the grave and home of Elvis Presley, which in terms of design, management, and merchandising is entirely controlled and administered by Elvis Presley Enterprises and which has long since assumed Disney World proportions (Doss 1999). In comparison, Morrison's grave seems above all to emanate humility, simplicity and modesty, as if it were the material representation of a Catholic saint's classic virtues. How then should we classify Morrison?

Idol, Icon or Saint?

In his book *Heiligen, idolen, iconen* (1988), the Dutch historian Willem Frijhoff published a programmatic manifesto about the relationship, past and present, between conceptual terms like saint, idol and icon. Combining a cultural-historical perspective and an anthropologizing approach, he brought together his insights on the broad theme of personal sacrality. In so doing, he gave new direction to research evaluating the deeds, virtues and vices of the social elite, and he broadened the concept of sainthood in analytical terms. In this regard, Frijhoff stated that social groups could also ascribe sainthood to exemplary, non-church-related lives – including idols or icons – that are orientated to other than strictly material and individual values (Frijhoff 1988: 19-20; 39-51; 52-78).¹⁴ They can then perform specific functions, including in the sphere of spirituality and religiosity. The Morrison case is an example that ties in well with this model.¹⁵

This broadened analysis also permits us to establish the degree to which religiosity has a place within popular and pop music culture. The German sociologist Thomas Luckmann was the first to carry out systematic research