



Hilltopics



Don't Spit Out Beer: A Defense of Challenging Art

ANDREW SNEED

The first time I tasted beer I covered my shirt with it. I guessed out loud that it must have come from a bad batch, but was immediately assured that it was good beer. So I went online hoping to verify my distaste with negative reviews from snobby beer critics. Nevertheless, 11,000 ratings and 3,000 reviews on BeerAdvocate assured me that Sierra Nevada's Torpedo Extra IPA is "exceptional" beer.

I have no doubt that you've become familiar with a parallel sentiment when consuming art; you get a taste in your mouth that you're certain is disgusting, and you can't for the life of you figure out why critics sing its praises. You're convinced that your friends don't really like it, they're just shilling the critics. And the critics don't really like it either, they've just been paid to say they do ... or they're trying to advance the liberal agenda ... or they're trying to be edgy.

I still remember covering my ears at the age of 12 during the second half of Radiohead's "The National Anthem." The song transitions from a fairly inoffensive electronic rock rhythm to an atonal barrage that MTV described as "a brass band marching into a brick wall." After frantically shutting the song off, I embarked on the same internet hunt I performed after spitting out my first beer: I searched to validate my distaste with the distaste of others, all the while thinking to myself: "No one really thinks this is good, right?"

I'm sure my reaction was similar to that of Twin Peaks' massive fan base in 1990,

dropping like flies from fanhood as creator David Lynch dragged them from the inoffensive small town murder mystery of the first season into the barrage of metaphysical forces and the backwards-speaking little person that comprise the second season. Why didn't Lynch just let Twin Peaks remain "normal?" The show's ratings certainly would have stayed up had Twin Peaks followed the stereotypical arc of the small town murder mystery. But, had Lynch avoided the strange, Twin Peaks may not enjoy the cult-following it boasts today. I think that we can see from these examples a larger theme: That art is best, and often most dearly loved, when it challenges.

In this paper, I will argue that art that challenges is indeed the best for two overarching reasons. First, challenging art can teach us more about the world we live in because the world itself is challenging. Nevertheless, almost every mystery novel/show/movie would have us believe the opposite. Consider Jordan Peele's 2017 film "Get Out." While the movie may be challenging in some ways, its protagonist Chris Washington pursues clarity in an absurdly linear fashion. Through bits of clarity that arrive every few minutes, each adding perfectly to the last, Chris succinctly solves the mystery by the movie's end. As Chris drives away from his girlfriend's family's home, no question is left unanswered, and every puzzle piece has found a convenient place in the larger picture.

When has any real-life inquisition

worked this way? Anyone that's set out to answer any real life mystery knows that one question leads to five more unanswered. Life's mysteries are more akin to Oedipa Mass' experience in Thomas Pynchon's exceedingly confusing novel *The Crying of Lot 49*. To the frustration of both Oedipa and the reader, Pynchon crafts a mystery novel that grows more confusing as it progresses. A single unanswered question that sets the novel's plot in motion leads to hundreds more unanswered questions by the novel's end. Both the protagonist and reader are left searching for their minds, lost somewhere along the way. Stories like this frustrate us as readers because, for some reason, our default setting is to demand a level of transparency from art that would be ridiculous to demand from real life. It's for this reason that the moment a confusing movie ends we google "Inception ending explained," and feel a sense of unease until we read something that we think is the true and right explanation for the spinning top.

We're often content to pass over the mystery of life's most fundamental questions (like, "What exactly is a thought?" or "Where exactly does a thought come from?") without getting the same sense of unease that we got from *Inception's* spinning top. And, it's long been this way. In 1968, audiences walked out of Stanley Kubrick's 2001: *A Space Odyssey* en masse, frustrated that the film never explains the origin or purpose of the black monoliths featured throughout. But why couldn't audiences be satisfied with the same lack of understanding of a black

monolith that they have of a thought? Sure, we don't know precisely where it came from or what it is, but we know that it is beautiful and useful. And we can learn so much more by meditating on what we do know (about a monolith, a thought, or any piece of art) than we can by growing frustrated with what we can never know.

In this way, we seem to treat art in the same way A.W. Tozer describes our treatment of God. Tozer writes, "The philosopher and the scientist will admit that there is much that they do not know; but that is quite another thing from admitting that there is something which they can never know, which indeed they have no technique of discovering ... this requires a great deal of humility, more than most of us possess, so we save face by thinking God down to our level, or at least down to where we can manage Him." But if we're honest with ourselves, we know that an effective level of understanding doesn't require absolute knowledge. And we don't have to always think things down to our level to learn from them. We can understand enigmatic art the same way we understand life's fundamental truths, without even the possibility of knowing everything about them. And we can grow so much by pursuing art that demands to be pursued in the same manner we pursue life's mysteries.

At this point, you might interject that art's purpose isn't always to teach us more about the world we live in or to change us, it is merely a means of escape. After a hard day's work, you don't want to challenge yourself, you want to turn on Jimmy Buffet, relax, and waste away again in Margaritaville. In short, you might claim that art should be seen less as a means and more as an end; art is a vacation. I would counter this: Sure, there may be a place for this type of art consumption, and there are plenty of valuable pop songs, blockbusters, and unchallenging visual arts that can serve that end. But, people don't go on vacations for their entire lives, and few people even spend their entire vacation laying in the sun by the pool. At some point it's time to face the grittiness of life and challenge yourself; at some point it's time

to pursue growth through struggle. And challenging art can serve this end.

The second overarching reason challenging art is the best is that it often displays two qualities our society encourages: originality and proficiency—manifested in well-executed complexity. Humans are naturally inclined to enjoy things that resemble things they have enjoyed in the past. When beginning their first year of college, students often seek friends that resemble their high school friends. Whether they realize it or not, when people walk into museums, they often hope to see pieces of art similar to pieces they've enjoyed in the past. So, when people are confronted with a song that sounds different from any they've heard before, they'll likely be instantly turned off. Especially if they can't identify any aspect of the song that reminds them of a song they've liked in the past. But, considering how deeply our culture encourages creative originality, I believe that these off-putting songs deserve a second or third listen. Their soundscapes deserve to be understood before they are critiqued.

In a similar vein, if a song's progression, harmonies, and rhythms are relatively complex, then the song may not lend itself to easy enjoyment upon first listen. More complex knots require more time and effort to unravel. Yet well-executed complexity in art is valuable and praiseworthy; complexity demonstrates proficiency in a manner that simplicity often does not. A complex piece of art deserves multiple exposures before being discounted as dense, confusing, or merely strange.

Tangential to these overarching reasons, it is especially worth giving a piece an open mind and a repeat viewing when critics—who have dedicated their lives to studying a medium—praise it. Now, I'm certainly not saying that critical acclaim is directly proportional to greatness. I'm

merely suggesting that if you dislike a critically acclaimed piece, it is worth considering whether originality or complexity might be sources of this distaste. Further, it's worth exploring the critics' reasoning for why they enjoy the piece. When you notice that a movie you hate has a 98% on Rotten Tomatoes, don't settle for disagreeing with the number, read the reviews and understand why 98% of critics like the movie. When a friend recommends you a poem that you can't stand, ask your friend why they like the poem, and approach it again with an open mind. Perhaps we should be less confident in our own distastes and think more about how we can learn to appreciate the piece as others do.

And when you do end up enjoying a challenging piece, it will be easier to enjoy the next challenging piece you come across. I've since learned that a beer's bitterness is measured in International Bitterness Units, or, IBU. Budweiser, and other standard beers, have about 7 IBU. The beer that I spit on my shirt had 65 IBU. But, nobody (except me) starts with 65 IBU, they build to it over time. In a similar manner, every time we challenge ourselves to appreciate art, we develop our ability to appreciate more art in the future.

But, why should art that slaps you in the face be pursued? Surely a potential lover that slaps you in the face—and seems exceedingly complex and unique—might be quite easily forgotten. Nevertheless, unlike a romantic interest of this description, I believe challenging art should be pursued for a few reasons I'll mention, and for more that I won't. The first is obvious: If you challenge yourself to appreciate more art, then you'll be able to appreciate more things. Here's an inequality economists have devised which can be used to argue that it's best to have a non-zero amount of every good:

Whenever $x \geq y$ then

$$tx + (1 - t)y < y \quad \text{for all } t \in [0, 1]$$

Not convinced yet? Consider that you stand to learn much more about our complex and seemingly chaotic world from complex and seemingly chaotic art. I touched on this earlier, but consider how effectively E. E. Cummings's syntactically unconventional poetry might teach us about the bizarre world that surrounds us. While there is certainly virtue in creating order out of chaos, order adhered to too strictly can quickly turn to tyranny.

Finally, my favorite thing about challenging art is that it can be appreciated for a longer period of time. I'm sure you're familiar with the exhausting cycle of truly being touched the first time you hear hypothetical "Song A," and then listening to Song A so many times that you come to groan every time

you hear the first few obnoxious notes of that dreaded, overplayed Song A. On the contrary, consider coming across a hypothetical "Song B" that you don't take to at first. If you grow to like Song B through a pursuit of understanding, you will be able to enjoy it for many more listens than you could ever enjoy Song A. If you don't believe me, consider that you might be less prone to grow overly used to something that is unique and complex. If familiarity breeds contempt, then perhaps something which resists familiarity will also resist contempt.

And a quick disclaimer: I'm not attempting to posture myself in superiority. I'm not writing on the assumption that I consume more challenging art than you, and that your top 10 favorite movies are *The Fast and the Furious* 1-8, with *2 Fast 2 Furious* occupying all top three spots. And I'm not even claiming that having

that top 10 list would make you less of a person. I'm merely writing on the assumption that we could all allow art to challenge us more, and that doing so would be unspeakably valuable.

And if you don't think that art can challenge you any further, then I implore you to sample a few quintessential challenging pieces of art: read the aforementioned *Crying of Lot 49* by Thomas Pynchon, which *Time* included in its list of "100 Best English-language Novels from 1923-2005." Watch David Lynch's *Eraserhead*, which boasts a 91% on Rotten Tomatoes. Or, listen to Captain Beefheart's *Trout Mask Replica*, which *Pitchfork* gave a 10/10. If you hate them, spend some time trying to figure out why other people find them so valuable. If you've read, seen, and listened to all three of these and remain wholly unchallenged, then please write me an email at arsneed@smu.edu, I'd love to meet you.

We, the Melting Pot: SMU's Cultural Intelligence Initiative

COREY ROGAN

Racist. Misogynist. Bigot. Insert-something-o-phobe. These are all powerful words in our current cultural lexicon. He who publicly suffers such a label is ruined—his career is over, his friends become distant, and his life is forever altered. Negative labels like these often leave people utterly afraid to express their values to those of different backgrounds.

The political climate we live in suggests that offending someone different from ourselves—whether intentionally or not—is the purest measure by which we should be judged. For many years, this kind of non-traditionalist thought has been the focus of academia. The active celebration of minority cultures, better

known as "multiculturalism," has been synonymous with "inclusion" at virtually every educational institution in the nation. Given the amount of divisive, ethnocentric rhetoric that pervades American society today, however, many educators are considering a more reconcilable approach to inclusiveness.

One such educator is Dr. Maria Dixon Hall, the Senior Advisor to the Provost at Southern Methodist University. At SMU, Dr. Dixon Hall oversees the Campus Cultural Intelligence Initiative, a program which seeks to equip faculty and students with the "ability to strategically speak to anyone, anywhere" in "complex cultural

contexts." The Cultural Intelligence Initiative, or CIQ, takes a revolutionary approach to inclusiveness. Instead of focusing on multiculturalism, CIQ focuses on communication. Unlike multiculturalism, which can hypocritically champion certain values over others and chastise those who express the "wrong" opinions, a communicative approach encourages people of all backgrounds to develop a better understanding of the intricate cultural frameworks from which their peers see the world.

Dr. Dixon Hall's graduate assistant, Madie Arcemont, explained it this way: every human being represents a unique combination of different

“tribes,” or groups of people who share similar backgrounds, and often alters that list by choosing whether to associate with various cultural groups. CIQ encourages people to see past these particular tribes, whose sole uniting factors are often morally inconsequential (such as race or national origin), and instead focus on individuals as unique reflections of the many cultural frameworks that shape their worldviews. The whole person is always greater than the sum of his or her cultural parts.

Imagine pulling together a group of people united by one common “tribe.” Gather them around a dinner table, and they will be jovial as they celebrate their common background. Introduce an entirely different topic (such as politics, religion, or even sports), and they might be at each other’s throats! It is human nature to seek out peers with similar backgrounds, but every individual is ultimately unique. No two people see the world the exact same way or agree on everything. It is therefore wise to not seclude oneself in a particular “tribe,” but instead openly communicate and seek a mutual understanding with those whose cultural frameworks are different from one’s own.

Based on research conducted by Professor Geert Hofstede, the international go-to authority on intercultural studies, the Cultural Intelligence Initiative also provides educators with access to a huge pool of knowledge regarding the many social norms of different cultures. Measures of cultural characteristics such as “individualism” and “indulgence” vary between societies,

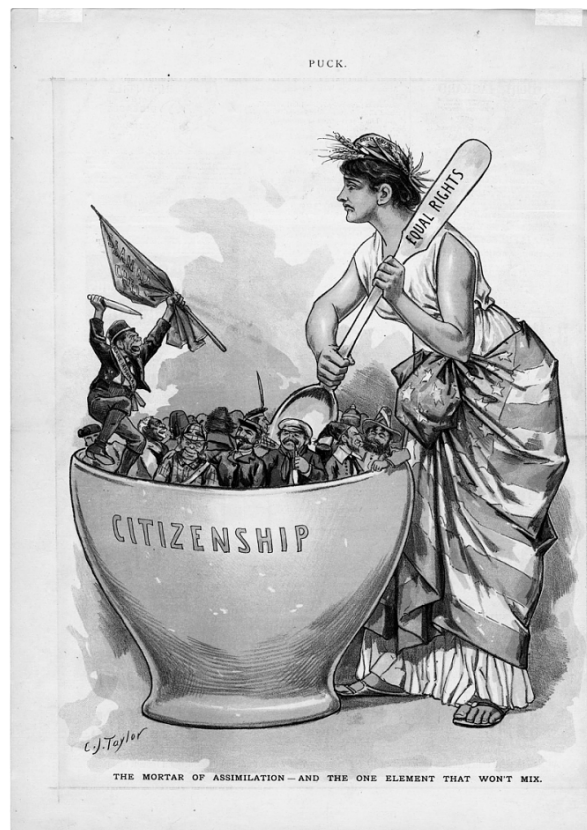
and a comprehensive understanding of these statistics proves an invaluable tool both in the classroom and the workplace. Comparing cultures not only aids the development of esprit de corps, but also helps institutions to reach out effectively to outside groups in ways not otherwise possible. The CIQ provides the knowledge base needed for people to come together in mutual understanding.

For educators, managers, students, or anybody else interested, the Cultural Intelligence Initiative is a great way to break intercultural ice. Those wishing to learn more can attend one of Dr. Dixon Hall’s seminars, entitled “Hidden Scripts,” which explore how various factors like geography, age, and group identities shape interactions in

an educational setting. Empowered with cultural intelligence, we, the SMU community, can pioneer a new era of inclusiveness, communication, and openness in these divisive times—we, the melting pot.

To learn more about the Cultural Intelligence Initiative at SMU, please visit <http://www.ciqatsmu.com/>. To access Professor Hofstede’s research, please see <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/>.

Image Source: <http://americanhistory.si.edu/democracy-exhibition/creating-citizens/how-diverse-should-citizenry-be>



9/11 is the New Normal

NICOLE KISER

When international flights first became common, hijackings happened all the time. During the Cold War, many hijackers sought political asylum; Cuba was a typical destination for commandeered American flights. Other hijackers were convicts looking for a deal or rogues looking for riches, the most famous being the mysterious (and still uncaught) D.B. Cooper. People rarely got hurt, and subsequently airport security was fairly lax. Even minimal airport security was not in place until the 1970s, and no one searched for explosives until after the Pan-Am explosion (Clark).

Like a Fire Nation attack, everything changed after 9/11. Cockpit doors were reinforced, tweezers became security risks, and security lines transformed into everything short of a cavity search. According to John Pistole, the former head of the TSA, we have likely gone overboard. During his speech at the Alpha Chi Honor Society Research Convention in 2018, Pistole discussed how the United States spends millions of dollars and hours in manpower confiscating small pocket knives from ordinary citizens. Yet when the TSA tried to allow these pocket knives back on board, the entire country went wild; it was a top headline for over a week. The TSA eventually had to retract the announcement.

Recently, we are discussing 9/11 differently. There is a sense that upcoming generations view terrorism with growing apathy (Bonin, Dastagir). It has been clear from the “Bush did 9/11” memes that my peer group does not impart the same gravitas to the event as our parents. And why would we? Many of us were toddlers when 9/11 occurred. It makes up part of our first memories; it was part of our lives before we even fully understood what it was. We do not impart the same panic to planes, instead viewing danger with a mounting sense of inevitability.

This is our norm.

Those just now entering college have even less connection to the event. Many were not even born when the planes hit the towers. They have never had a “before” 9/11; they have grown up in the age of terror. They understand that those older than them think it is important; they feel the atmosphere of grief and sadness, and they feel insincere for not feeling the same. But terrorism and violence are simply no longer earth-shattering for them. They form the foundations of their world, the background of their belief system. They grow up in a world where random terror attacks do happen, where high school shootings outnumber the months in the year. When Paige Curry, a student at Santa Fe High School, was asked if she was surprised a shooting happened at her school, she answered no. She told the New York Times reporter: “It’s been happening everywhere. I felt — I’ve always kind of felt like eventually it was going to happen here, too” (Fernandez). The generation born in the aftermath of 9/11 has no carefree before. They only have the heart-numbing after.

When I was in middle school, my school went into active shooter lockdown. Luckily, there was not an actual school shooter; the active shooter was an unrelated murderer who seemed to have quickly realized his mistake of killing someone within the area of several schools that each had rapid response units from the police, and he seemed to be running away from all school children as quickly as possible. That was exactly how it was phrased, too: “luckily.” “Luckily,” it was just a stray murderer. “Luckily,” only one family went without a father that day. “Luckily,” a gym full of students only had to let the intercom tell us how to “Live Like We’re Dying” when we

actually thought we might die without it actually becoming the soundtrack to our deaths. I tell that story to people with a smile, seeing the irony in the situation. Not everyone laughs.

I realize the rhetoric used to talk about violence says a lot about those using it. Those who remember 9/11 remain incredulous, unable to believe the destruction that surrounds them. They do not think Kris Allen blaring in a middle school’s hallway during an active shooter lockdown is funny. They do not think memes about Ted Cruz’s resemblance to the Zodiac Killer deserve a laugh. Those who grew up with the memorial more of a memory than the towers a treasure—born into the destruction of 9/11, living with the ash on their faces and the dust on their clothes—they have been numbed to the great tragedies of the world. They hear the story of a martyr, and they have a story to match. Learning Rachel Scott’s story does not make them kind; it makes them jaded, believing that the good will always die young, their messages continually twisted into political propaganda and conspiracy theories.

As a country we flinch at box cutters and tweezers, raising a new generation so full of fear and jaded pessimism that hearing a death toll under a hundred makes them sigh in relief. But the apathy that seems so impudent is more akin to the numbness of scar tissue. Discussing times of historical stress, Alexandra Bradford states: “[P]eople became accustomed to everyday violence. Life re-calibrated and a new normal was found” (Dastagir). Callousness is coping; morbid humor is pain management. The growing apathy to 9/11 is a growing resilience to an alarming world. It’s not disrespect; it’s a different perspective.

Works Cited

Bonin, Tyler. "The Challenge of Teaching War to Today's Students." The Atlantic, Atlantic Media Company, 9 Nov. 2017, www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2017/11/teaching-students-about-war/545351/.

Clark, Nicola. "Why Airline Hijackings Became Relatively Rare." The New York Times, The New York Times, 21 Dec. 2017, www.nytimes.com/2016/03/30/world/middleeast/airline-hijacking-history.html.

Dastagir, Alia E. "What Does It Mean If Terrorism No Longer Terrorizes Us?" USA Today, Gannett Satellite Information Network, 6 June 2017, www.usatoday.com/story/news/2017/06/05/

[london-terror-we-becoming-
apathetic-resilient/369387001/](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/22/nyregion/enduring-sphere-sculpture-to-return-to-world-trade-center-site.html).

Fernandez, Manny, et al. "In Texas School Shooting, 10 Dead, 10 Hurt and Many Unsurprised." The New York Times, The New York Times, 18 May 2018, [www.nytimes.com/2018/05/18/
us/school-shooting-santa-fe-texas.
html](http://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/18/us/school-shooting-santa-fe-texas.html).

Pistole, John. Alpha Chi Honor Society Research Convention, 7 April 2018, Hilton Portland Downtown, Portland, OR. Keynote Address.

New York Times, 21 July 2016, [https://
www.nytimes.com/2016/07/22/
nyregion/enduring-sphere-sculpture-
to-return-to-world-trade-center-site.
html](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/22/nyregion/enduring-sphere-sculpture-to-return-to-world-trade-center-site.html).

Image

Bengiveno, Nicole. "The sculpture has been in the Battery for 14 years." The



Forwardness

LORIEN MELNICK

Remember when I stayed up all night waiting for you to come home, when I went through your old childhood journals and photo albums for some clue about where we went wrong? Remember when you opened the garage and simply stood there, in the empty space where your car should go, smelling like sweat and rain because you walked miles and miles home from work?

What if, instead, you had come home smelling like another woman's perfume, like Janie's husband did last spring? What if, when we went to couples therapy, I could be the one who cried? What if we struggled with something simple, a flirty secretary or your parents not liking me or a pregnancy scare—something that my girlfriends at work would understand? What if we just had a name for it—vehophobia? hodophobia? amaxophobia? Who even understands these words? Senseless jumbles of letters, psychologist appointments, and disappointments? A fear of traveling, a fear of fastness? Who's afraid of cars, anyway?

And why won't you talk to me? Why do you cut those articles out of car magazines and hang them up on the walls, insisting that you don't have a problem even though the problem is physical, spatial? You do realize no one can read the tiny print of those articles, don't you? Is that the point? Are you comforted by that, being surrounded by the things that terrify you, but not really, not really because you cut around the actual pictures of the cars?

Listen. Do you ever think about how I feel? Asking your father for childhood stories that might explain this fear, this irrational out-of-nowhere fear of going somewhere, and calling your work all the time to tell them I'm sorry, he's sick, yes he's still sick, yes? No, listen—what's that story your father always tells? Didn't you take your coloring book with the trains in it, when you were five or six or seven, and hide it underneath the cat box because you were afraid of their wheels—afraid of moving forward so fast? When did it become cars, too? When did it become me?

Missed Connections

By Sydney Sagehorn

search missed connections

☆ Oct 1 Ashley (7-11 downtown) map

☆ Oct 1 Man in line at Denver Airport... (DEN) map

reply prohibited Posted about 4 hours ago

☆ **Man in line at Denver Airport – Blockbuster punch card**

I stood behind you in line at the Denver airport Auntie Anne's. When you reached into your wallet to pay, you dropped a Blockbuster punch card, which I handed back to you. When you put it back in your wallet, I also noticed a Disney on Ice ticket and an Austin Powers business card. It was such a bizarre set of items to see in someone's wallet. I'm dying to know you better. Email me.

- do NOT contact me with unsolicited services or offers

Blockbuster Punch Card

rappj@gmail.com

Blockbuster Punch Card

Jason,

I'm so so sorry to hear about your wife.

Under normal circumstances, I would feel weird asking a total stranger this, but I feel like we're already past that. Would you want to go for a ride in a hot air balloon? It usually helps my friends feel better when they're blue. I'm USHABA certified and I'm pretty good; as long as you're not scared of heights, I think it would be good to get you out of the house a little bit. Let me know if you're interested.

Best,

Garrett Kavinsky

Jason: I guess I have a couple questions.

Garrett: Don't worry. Most people do. Shoot.

Jason: If you like flying your balloon so much why don't you decorate it more?

Garrett: You won't like my answer.

Jason: I might.

Garrett: I don't paint it because its ironic. See that code? I gotta have it there. Government makes ya. But that's just their way of crossing their T's and dotting their I's so that just in case something goes wrong they can say they did everything they could. But in reality, they didn't do anything, because once we're in the air, it's just more air keepin' us up. It's not laws and regulations and training that do that. It's just air. So I guess I think it's funny, because I can see the whole world once I'm up here, and if the Earth looks back at me and sees just a government-issued code, then the Earth knows that we're both laughing at the fact that I'm not in control, and it won't try to kill me for playing God, like those self-centered morons who paint their balloons like they're the masterpieces.

Jason: Man, you got a weird sense of humor.

Garrett: Hey, you're the one that clicked the ad.

Blockbuster punch card

Subj: 66957553606@comm.craigslist.org

blockbuster punch card

hey,

I wanna start off by saying that I am not the man from the ad so if you wanna go ahead and delete this email now I understand. The reason I'm emailing you is because your ad is the first thing that's made me laugh since my wife Jackie died last week. for the last few days I've felt nothing but emptiness and I was just scrolling through craigslist because I couldn't sleep, and when I saw your ad I could just imagine seeing that man in the airport and laughing about it with Jackie. she has a great sense of humor, she would've found it really funny too. I guess I just took it as a sign and figured I should react out. sorry if this is weird

JASON RAPP

New Message

Subj: 66957553606@comm.craigslist.org

Subject

idk sorry im drunk

- ☆ Rapp, Jason (no subject) – idk sorry im drunk 3:21 a.m.
- ☆ Rapp, Jason blockbuster punch card – hey, I wanna start off by saying that I am not the man from the ad so if 3:20 a.m.

Jason: It's the kind of stuff Jackie would love, though. You two would really hit it off. But that's my next question. Why even post to Missed Connections? I thought only sad, lonely losers do that. You're weird, but you seem, like, cool.

Garrett: I don't really know. I always wanted to be a writer growing up. I loved creating all these wild characters and fictional worlds.

Jason: So the dude at the airport? The one you made the ad for? Was he a character you made?

Garrett: ...Yeah. Sorry. I didn't really wanna drop that ball on you so soon.

Jason: It's ok.

Garrett: I took this class in college though, some writing class, and I read a quote that said something like "your words will reach whomever needs them most if you keep writing." So I would just write little tidbits here and there to see if it led to anything.

Jason: Well, here I am!

Garrett: But that doesn't really answer your question. I guess I was on missed connections because there really was a connection that I missed.

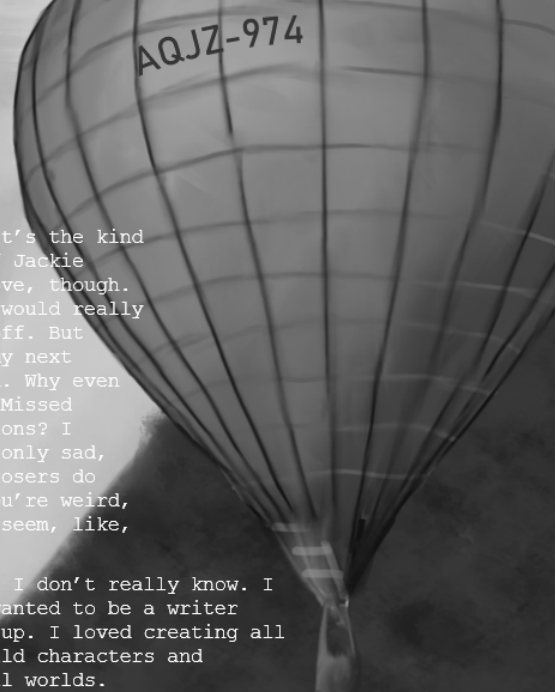
Jason: ???

Garrett: Your wife, Jackie. She sounds great.

Jason: She is. She was. God, she really was.

Garrett: To missed connections.

Jason: Cheers.



Narcissistic Altruism

ALEXANDER McNAMARA

There are some names which the American, no matter how hermetic, hears every week, if not every day. These names inundate the political and social consciousness of their epoch, like words so often repeated that they lose their meaning. To feel as I do about celebrities, say “eggshell” 47 times, no more no less. By number eight, you’ll get the effect and by fifteen, you’ll feel nauseous. By thirty-two, I will give up my charade and recognize that no one is going to say “eggshell” thirty-two times just because I told them to.

Kanye West is one such name. One cannot seem to escape the swirling censure of his politics, the ambivalent and uproarious mix of admiration/contempt for his family and its wealth, and the interminable theories about his mental health. Celebrity of this magnitude necessarily breeds weariness, a collective desire to “move on”. To be blunt, most of the time this impulse is correct; it normally is better to swim away from the vortex that is American fame (see MBDTF). But the fact of the matter is: Kanye is still making wonderful music.

“I Thought About Killing You” is the greatest song on the album *Ye*, the greatest song of the summer, the greatest song of 2018, and the greatest song of ALL TIME.

The see-saw, distorted chorus which kicks off the album will be comforting to those familiar with his discography. It only takes seconds for the artist to assure his fans that his penchant for the human voice remains. Whatever sense of ease that this continuity may provide is promptly disrupted, even shattered, by the plain, monotone bar which follows: “The

most beautiful thoughts are always besides the darkest”. It is telling that the lion’s share of the track is spoken word. Here, Kanye is not interested in maintaining a sense of traditional rhythm, nor does he attempt to sing his thoughts. These lyrics are simply not lyrical or, more precisely, only lyrical by means of their apposition to our *prima facie*. Indeed, the effect is so jarring that upon my showing the song to others many remarked that they hated it, another merely grimaced horribly, and another still claimed that it simply wasn’t music. But this deliberately abrasive language serves as a blunt, monotone articulation of a classic Kanye motif: darkness.

An overreliance on familiar motifs is anathema to interesting art, but Kanye dodges—or bites—this bullet by drawing our attention to the always contentious and deeply symbolic act of suicide. Contemporary music, and hip-hop in particular, has no shortage of commentary on the subject. It is the theme which looms like a specter behind the incessant chest-pounding, yet melancholic tone, of Drake’s *Scorpion*, behind the sonorous and sensuous cries of Frank Ocean’s *Channel Orange* and, perhaps most obviously, in the dolorous retrospection of Earl Sweatshirt’s *I Don’t Like Shit, I Don’t Go Outside*.

What distinguishes Kanye’s track from the embarrassment of riches on the subject is it extends beyond the self of the artist. When Drake tells you about divine providence, he is speaking of how that providence has shown its light on him. Frank’s meditation on the roof with the other super rich kids is presumably his own experience, and similarly Earl’s melancholic, graphic

familial experience is necessarily personal. And to an extent, “I Thought About Killing You” falls into this familiar “I” trap. However, a detailed look at the lyrics reveals much more, particularly:

“Today, I seriously thought about killing you

I Contemplated it, premeditated murder

And I think about killing myself

And I love myself way more than I love you, so...

Today, I thought about killing you, premeditated murder

You’d only care enough to kill somebody you love”

Despite the recursion and seeming banality of these lyrics, they contain a compelling argument. Rather than romanticize suicide, Kanye points instead to its inherent selfishness. He starts with the premise that he, and presumably the rest of us, are narcissistic, hence “I love myself way more than I love you”. This admission is shocking. It upsets. Indeed, a friend of mine upon hearing this insisted that we turn it off and clucked sharply “I do not like that”. The suicidal thoughts are then connected to this self-love by means of the cryptic “You’d only care enough to kill somebody you love”, such that by the death of those we most love, that is, the death of ourselves, we also murder the other objects of our love.

The results of this deceptively terse argument are numerous. Foremost,

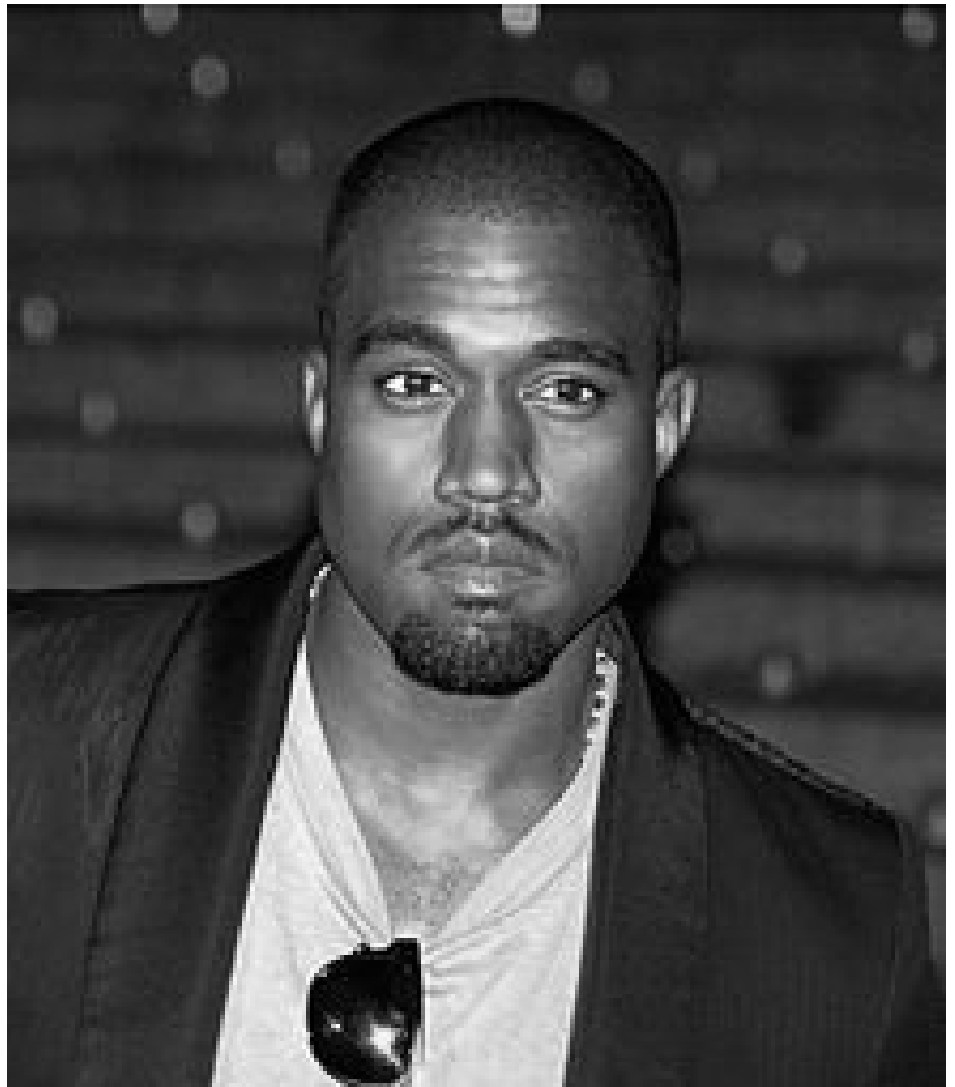
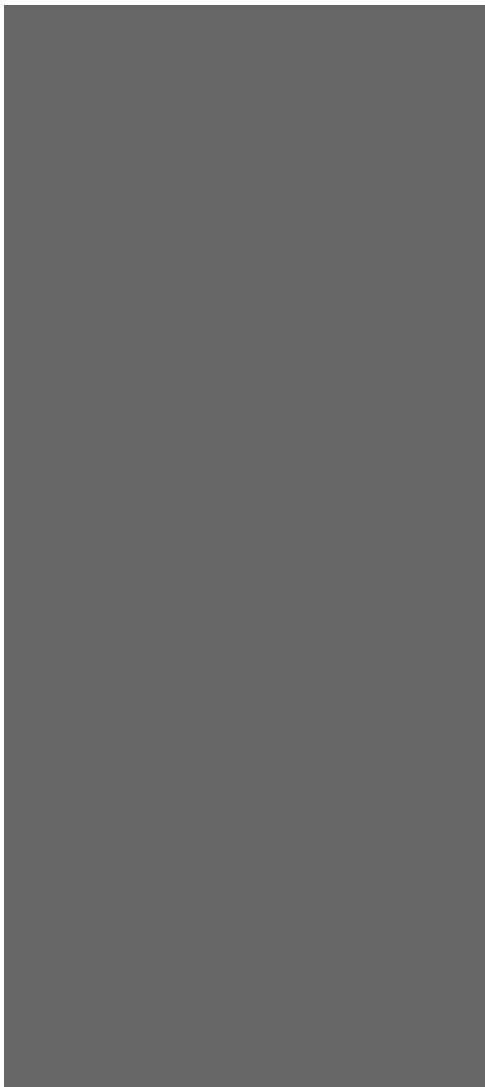
that even in the most selfish of acts we cannot escape the immeasurable damage it does to those around us. Secondly, that murder is itself a product of deep passion, so much so that what is often rightly thought of as a deeply dehumanizing action can also be deeply personal.

Finally, the dizzying circle above embodies what I shall call Narcissistic Altruism. It is imperative to the song's themes, and indeed those of the album, that the Kanye of the work does not end his own life. Indeed, the other tracks on the album build the larger arch of

redemption and perseverance. Observe the contrition of "Wouldn't Leave" or the defiance of "No Mistakes". Yet Narcissism remains the antecedent state. Without gratuitous self-love, suicide cannot be transformed into murder. But by means of that same narcissism we can become altruistic; by our love of ourselves we can forbear and not murder those whom we also love. Thus the surprising consequent state is altruism, and this rather upsetting train of thought repeats and repeats itself for nearly two minutes.

This is a nuanced unity of opposites, indeed it's Kanye at his very best, and we've only just covered the first half of the song, prior to the bifurcating beat-switch of bipolarity and all the other meanings I couldn't hope to cram in.

To be sure, this isn't a rosy picture of love. It's macabre, ambiguous, and proudly selfish. But "The most beautiful thoughts are always besides the darkest", and Kanye remains a name we can't ignore.





STAFF AND CONTRIBUTORS

Executives

EDITORS IN CHIEFALEX McNAMARA | DREW SNEED
TECH AND LAYOUT EDITOR..... STEJARA DINULESCU
COPY EDITORSALEX McNAMARA | DREW SNEED
ONLINE EDITOR..... ALEC MASON

Find us online at:

HILLTOPICSSMU.WORDPRESS.COM

Or on Facebook:

SMU HILLTOPICS

Contributors

DREW SNEED
NICOLE KISER
SYDNEY SAGEHORN

COREY ROCAN
LORIEN MELNICK
ALEX McNAMARA

Images

COVER ARTSTEJARA DINULESCU

Special thanks to :

DR. DAVID DOYLE AND SALLY SPANIOLA

