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UWS-65A: Everyday Apocalypse

31 October 2022

Laugh It Off

We live in a time of constant crisis. Issues like systemic injustice, climate change, and a global pandemic are at the forefront of the news, entertainment, and social media. In the midst of all of this, comedian Bo Burnham wrote and produced his Netflix special, *Inside*. With satirical songs and monologues, Burnham reconciles his genuine desire to address the various ills of our society with navigating the emotional toll of mental illness. Similarly, in her book *Bad Environmentalism: Irony and Irreverence in the Ecological Age*, Nicole Seymour considers the emotional impact of contemporary environmentalism and how it interacts with social action—or the lack thereof. She advocates reframing approaches to environmentalism in ways that embrace humor and irony, an attitude that both complements and contrasts Burnham’s satire. In examining both *Inside* and *Bad Environmentalism*, a greater purpose for comedy within this struggle between mental health and modern activism emerges. If we apply Seymour’s book as a lens through which to view Burnham’s comedy, it becomes evident that Burnham not only demonstrates the power of humor as a response to the burdens of environmentalism and activism, but also as a means to cope with one’s internal issues against this backdrop of the world seemingly falling apart.

Seymour describes her concept of bad environmentalism as critically evaluating current environmental discourse through satirical methods that incorporate a sense of humor. This concept is a response to the inflammatory rhetoric of modern-day environmentalism, which perpetuates feelings of “gloom and doom,” leading to a sense of “emotional paralysis” (2, 4). Currently, environmentalism relies on inundating individuals with information on the perils of climate change, which, Seymour argues, only serves as a deterrent to action (2). No matter how terrifying the

climate crisis is to people, the avenues used to address the issue seem more demanding and daunting. According to Seymour, reframing environmentalists' approach to activism could assuage this shared paralysis. She proposes challenging "how the movement typically reacts to problems" by presenting environmentalism with all its ironies and absurdities (4). If individuals can humanize, and even poke fun at, commonly debilitating problems, it will be easier for them to break down their paralysis and move forward.

"Comedy," one of the first songs of *Inside*, introduces Burnham's role as a comedian within the context of an apocalyptic world. He begins the song by questioning what place comedy could possibly have within our current social climate. His confusion is quickly put to rest, however, by an ethereal voice telling him about the "indescribable power of [his] comedy" and how "the world needs direction" from a "white guy" like him (00:04:56-00:05:09). Following the advice of this god-like voice, any uncertainty or doubt Burnham has about his usefulness quickly dissipates. He launches into a series of punchy lyrics and visuals demonstrating how his sense of humor will save the world. This quick change in tone, from confusion and fear to unbridled confidence in his work, serves as a way for Burnham to mock comedians' endemic performativity and self-righteousness. To Burnham, comedians possess misplaced beliefs that comedy can have a significant impact on the world, which only serves to fuel their egos. This holier-than-thou perspective is not far off from the forms of environmentalism Seymour critiques in her book. She states that modern environmentalism has a reputation for being "sanctimonious, self-righteous, and sentimental," essentially meaning that "environmentalists feel good about themselves while disdain[ing] others" (16). The connection between modern environmentalists and Burnham's depiction of comedians highlights how both groups tend to adopt a moral high ground over their viewers. Through this song, Burnham complicates Seymour's stance on the place of humor in environmentalism by showing that comedy itself can share the same pitfalls as activist movements.

That being said, while Burnham highlights the potential downfalls of comedy, he is still trying to understand where he can be useful. Near the end of “Comedy,” he begins repeating, “If you wake up in a house that’s full of smoke / Don’t panic / Call me, and I’ll tell you a joke / If you see white men dressed in white cloaks / Don’t panic / Call me, and I’ll tell you a joke” (Burnham 00:07:35-00:07:46). Lyrically, Burnham is still emphasizing the futility of humor in the face of genuine crisis. However, at this moment, there is a visual departure from the satirical style of the earlier portion of the song. Burnham is no longer dramatically running around his room, pretending to form “groundbreaking” solutions to the world’s problems as pressing as “what if dogs could vape” (00:06:11). Instead, the lighting becomes warmer and more intimate. Burnham is sitting at a desk, slowly writing with his head in his hand. There is no longer the same degree of performativity to his presentation; rather, he is genuinely concerned that there may not be room for comedy in these present situations. He goes on to sing, “I wanna help to leave this world better than I found it / And I fear that comedy won’t help / And the fear is not unfounded” (Burnham 00:07:56-00:08:08). Though it is undeniable that this song, and the entire special, is self-serving, there seems to be an underlying attempt to understand his usefulness as a comedian. Burnham disputes Seymour’s notion that humor can help solve real issues. However, it is all Burnham has, so how can he use it?

While recognizing that comedy is by no means a solution to climate change and other global problems, Burnham mobilizes humor to draw attention to issues without overwhelming his audience, thus making forms of activism like environmentalism more approachable. This addresses Seymour’s point that inundating people with alarming facts about the climate crisis can be paralyzing—so that “in many cases, the *more* one knows about climate change, the *less* likely one is to act” (2). Environmentalists moralize the issue, guilt-tripping individuals into trying to find solutions with rhetoric that scares them into inactivity. Burnham offers a means of circumventing inflammatory rhetoric by sparking necessary conversations in more lighthearted, subtle ways.

During the song, “Comedy,” he has the letters “COMEDY” written on his whiteboard. Upon closer inspection, it is actually a sort of acrostic poem saying, “Could Open My Eyes Don’t Y’know” (Burnham 00:07:39). This detail points to the underlying power of comedy. It has the potential to open new avenues to conversations previously too overwhelming to have.

As the special continues, Burnham expands on the possibilities introduced in “Comedy” in ways that tie into Seymour’s approach. Through his song “How the World Works,” he draws attention to issues of systematic oppression and corruption. “Welcome to the Internet” highlights technology’s alarming hold on us as individuals. These and other songs and monologues break down barriers that inhibit people from facing difficult issues, demonstrating that the path to activism and action can bypass the initial paralyzing fear. This coincides with Seymour’s critique of bad environmentalism. She explains that “the works in my archive undercut public negativity toward activism while also questioning basic environmental assumptions: that reverence is required for ethical relations to the nonhuman, that knowledge is key to fighting problems like climate change” (5). According to Seymour, the issue is that current environmentalism focuses on glorifying nature to an absurd degree, presenting it as something untouchable or pure. Exposing the absurdity of this “reverence” makes the issues more human and approachable. Burnham also manipulates humor to serve as a new discursive frame. Rather than making cheap jokes in the belief that they will suddenly solve everything, he uses humor to break down the barrier between individuals and the issues surrounding them.

Burnham does not simply compliment Seymour’s argument on the necessity of humor; he deepens it. Seymour tackles inflammatory environmentalist rhetoric, but if we examine her theory in the context of *Inside*, the actual cause of people’s inactivity becomes more complex. Environmentalist discourse is no longer the root issue. As Burnham demonstrates in his pivotal song, “All Eyes on Me,” this issue of paralysis is just one manifestation of current generations’ struggle with mental illness. As such, our only solution cannot just be to “lighten the mood.”

Grappling with one's own mental issues can be an all-consuming process that leaves little energy for addressing complex societal problems. Throughout the special, there is a general trend of Burnham trying to reconcile his role as someone with a public platform in such tumultuous times with his rapidly declining mental health. Despite his numerous high-energy, catchy songs, we can see his animated, socially conscious persona waiver. As he attempts to discuss the "flattening of our human experience," he is lying on a pillow on the floor, wrapped in a blanket, stuttering through his monologue. Even his microphone is positioned so that he would not have to lift a finger (29:34-29:39). As the special progresses, his appearance grows disheveled, and his room descends into chaos. Near its end, he sits down with a microphone, only to say, "I am not . . . um, well," before sobbing. The focus then shifts to the video camera, ever present in the background (1:10:35-1:11:05). With his humor and platform as an entertainer, he keeps trying to combat the very emotional paralysis that Seymour discusses. However, in these moments, it is clear that his emotional bandwidth is wearing thin. In "All Eyes on Me," the battle between "moral duty" and depression comes to a sort of conclusion, and it seems that depression is the winner.

After reflecting on his long-term struggles with anxiety and depression, Burnham sings, "You say the Ocean's Rising / Like I give a shit" (1:15:12-1:15:16). At this moment, he abandons all efforts to seem socially conscious because he is more occupied with his internal struggles. He then proceeds to sing, "You're not gonna slow it / heaven knows you tried / Got it good now get inside" (1:15:22-1:15:29). Even if he were able to improve his mental health, as he did in the five years before the pandemic hit, any efforts at activism still feel futile. Burnham's deteriorating mental health, combined with seemingly trivial attempts to incite change, causes and perpetuates inactivity. This is reinforced by visual elements. Early in the song, the battery symbol of the camera appears in the top left corner. At first, it is fully charged. However, following his brief interlude to discuss his ongoing battle with anxiety and depression, the symbol becomes much more prominent on the screen and starts flashing until Burnham snaps at the camera to "get the fuck up" (1:15:53-

1:16:55). The metaphor of running out of charge signifies how Burnham's energy is spent. How can he possibly be equipped to approach issues as complex as the climate crisis when he cannot even physically care for himself? Seymour cites "emotional paralysis" as a byproduct of "information overload" and the negativity of environmentalists (2). However, the apathy Burnham depicts seems to exist independently of the world's issues. His performance during "All Eyes on Me" is a microcosm of what so many individuals are currently experiencing. It can feel nearly impossible to keep up with every new terrifying piece of information about the climate crisis, no matter how it is delivered, when dealing with one's own mental struggles.

However, following this emotional climax in "All Eyes on Me," Burnham wakes up and returns to work, marking a break in his depressive episode. This moment exemplifies how creating his entire special and using comedy to cope with his own confusion, desires, and anxieties was a means of catharsis that then transformed into basic action. As such, his satirical representation of reconciling mental health with environmentalism acknowledges society's current struggles with mental health, which Seymour neglects in her representation of the merits of humor. Seymour situates comedy as a means of counteracting emotional paralysis, but Burnham's humor goes beyond making conversations more approachable—it serves as a coping mechanism for him and his audience. This concept of using comedy to navigate daily existence is best seen in Burnham's brief casual monologues between the more produced songs. He talks candidly with the audience without theatrics, creating a sense of intimacy. At the start, he tells the audience, "I hope this special can maybe do for you what it's done for me these last couple months, which is, uh, to distract me from wanting to put a bullet into my head with a gun" (9:56-10:08). This awkward vulnerability allows the audience to see their own intrusive thoughts and experiences reflected in someone else. It creates a unity around multiple generations' experiences with depression, making our internal struggles a little less isolating. He even blends his satirical songs with this openness. When discussing his mental health, Burnham stutters, "my current mental health is . . . is . . . rapidly

approaching, um, an ATL, which is, um, that's an 'all-time low,' not . . . not Atlanta [. . .] but it's basically from the moment I wake up, I, uh, I just get this—feeling [. . .] A few things start to happen / My vision starts to flatten / My heart, it gets to tappin' / And I think I'm gonna die" (55:02-55:40). This combination of conversations about genuine struggle with a catchy tune, topped off with disco lights, demonstrates how Burnham turns comedy into a means of navigating and managing mental illness. He uses comedy and satire as an avenue for vulnerability, and vulnerability in front of an audience becomes an avenue towards solidarity in our shared emotional experiences. Like Seymour, Burnham warns against sanctimoniousness, but he also demonstrates how humor can help us manage daily life when it can feel impossible. Combining this shared solidarity with Seymour's unmasking of absurdities reveals possible steps forward for current generations. When faced with such complex, multifaceted issues, Burnham demonstrates how humor can be used to both help individuals cope with their internal turmoil and begin tackling the external struggles of the world.

Examining Burnham's *Inside* through the lens of Seymour's *Bad Environmentalism* confirms that humor can serve as an avenue towards action, even with issues such as climate change and mental health. Burnham helps mitigate the emotional paralysis Seymour discusses by reframing channels of learning and breaking down the internal isolation that comes with mental illness. Burnham extends Seymour's critique of absurdity, revealing a new way of removing emotional barriers and creating change. *Bad Environmentalism* scrapes the surface of a deeper issue that *Inside* confronts: we may never be able to truly help facilitate meaningful action if we do not acknowledge how our internal struggles complicate efforts of activism.

Works Cited

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