

The Only Magazine That Truly Understands You

CURRENT AFFAIRS

\$12.95

VOL. 7, ISSUE 6

NOV./DEC. 2022

BULL SHITTERS

Why are there so many of them?

ELVIS

*You think you know him?
You don't know him!*

NOISES

*Why are there so many annoying
ones around us all the time?*

MARS

*What will it be like to live there
under Muskian tyranny?*

TEACHERS

*Why replacing them with
"learning software" is the
worst idea ever*



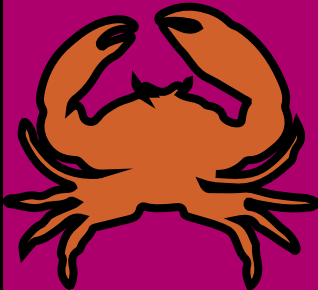
HELLO & WELCOME

CURRENT AFFAIRS (ISSN 2471-2647) is published bimonthly for \$69.99/year by CURRENT AFFAIRS INC., 631 ST. CHARLES AVE., NEW ORLEANS, LA 70130 Periodicals Postage paid at NEW ORLEANS, LA and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Current Affairs, 631 St. Charles Ave., New Orleans, LA 70130 PRINTED IN KANSAS BY ALLEN PRESS, INC.

6

IS THE MAGIC NUMBER
USE IT CAREFULLY

HAVE YOU CONSIDERED
THE CRAB?



IT'S PRETTY GREAT!
LOOK IT UP!

FIND TRUE LOVE
FOR ONLY
\$12.95
BY BUYING A
STRANGER THIS
MAGAZINE

ADULTS ONLY

One of this issue's
articles contains
numerous references
to (and euphemisms
for) onanism.
Parents be warned!

MANATEE MORATORIUM

Readers have complained, somewhat justly, that the quantity of manatee-related imagery, illustrations, and references in the pages of this magazine threatens to become excessive. A not atypical letter to the editor: "I had to unfollow Current Affairs because of the nonstop diarrheal discharge of a seemingly endless profusion of manatee material. I have no interest in manatees. I came here for sound political analysis. I don't understand what these are doing here. Please cancel my subscription immediately." We could respond to the reader by pointing out that at no point were they promised a manatee-free magazine, and then tapping the sign on the front of the Current Affairs building that reads "NO REFUNDS" or the other one that says "ALL SUBSCRIPTIONS ARE PERMANENT." But we would also like to issue a peace offering: We recognize that the abundance of manatees has grown tiresome, from our recurring "Ask a Manatee" advice column to our feature spread "Why Manatees Are Better Than Us." We think there are sound reasons to celebrate the humble sea cow—it is incapable of aggression and lives a life of ease. But we also know that there are other valuable species across our planet that also deserve honor and attention, such as the crab. (See our 2021 article on the social implications of biology, which contains, among other sentences, the observation: "crabs—popularly imagined as selfish creatures, whose "crab in a barrel" mentality makes them incapable of cooperative or self-sacrificing behaviors...work together to protect their soft-shelled, recently-molted comrades from predators [and] will collaborate for hours on end to flip other crabs that fell and got stuck on their backs." We are therefore declaring a temporary "manatee moratorium," or manatorium.



YOU'RE SCARED AND ANXIOUS

We get it. But we're on your side. We don't like any of this either. We're doing our best to put a stop to it. It's going to take a little while, but we'll get there. Just be careful. Angry, confused people can occasionally make unwise choices or join political movements that promise swift solutions and then deliver either nothing or, worse, fascism. Do not end up joining something silly! We must channel your anger at injustice toward productive ends. It can be done. Bear with us. Keep reading. Keep organizing. Stay strong!

BUILD YOUR OWN HOVERCRAFT

Cut out this picture then
reverse engineer the
hovercraft.



THOSE WHO SUBSCRIBE



QUESTIONS OF VALUE

For centuries, economists have debated the question of where "value" comes from. What makes a thing worth something? Is it the labor that goes into making it? Is it the price it fetches in a marketplace? Does unpaid labor have "value" despite not having a price? How do you value a sunset? Does the financial sector produce any value? (No.) Fortunately, the debate may at last be terminated. We have discovered the true source of value. *Value is whatever Current Affairs says it is.* Continue reading these pages and we will eventually declare the value of each individual thing in the universe, thereby resolving this tricky measurement problem once and for all.

sociopathy as a *LIFESTYLE BRAND*

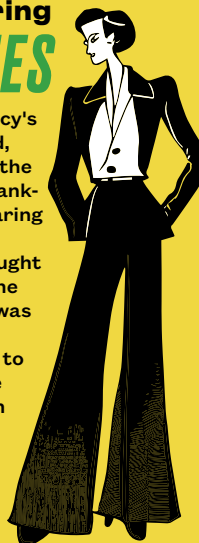
The New York Times tells us about the owner of internet cesspool 4chan, Hiroyuki Nishimura, who has become famous in Japan as an influencer, pushing a philosophy that sounds suspiciously like classic sociopathy:

"In some two dozen books and hundreds of magazine columns, he has encouraged his fans to be more selfish, to stop caring about what others think, to work less and to game the system by obeying the law's letter while flouting its spirit. Initially famous for his role in building two of Japan's most popular websites, he has since become a national antihero by raising a giant middle finger to mainstream society, expressing his many contrarian views as unapologetically and publicly as possible. In interviews, Mr. Nishimura has often taken pride in his lack of ethics and willingness to push society's limits. His near total invulnerability to shame is a kind of superpower in Japan...and it has been a major factor in his success. "I think about my current choices and about the future without reference to morals, then take action," he said. "Normal people have morals, so they'd probably say thinking like mine is strange."

This is, of course, perfectly horrible. But we must say it fits with the spirit of our times.

in defense of wearing *FANCY CLOTHES*

The downfall of cryptocurrency's boy king, Sam Bankman-Fried, should lead us at last toward the Great Sartorial Reckoning. Bankman-Fried was known for wearing soiled t-shirts and badly-tied shoes. People mistakenly thought he dressed this way because he was a Tech Genius. In fact, it was because he had contempt for those around him and wished to show it using his body. We are not saying that everyone in an evening gown can be trusted, but we are saying that if someone could be wearing stylish formalwear but isn't, you have to ask: **WHY?**



PROPAGANDA
is to a
democracy
what the
bludgeon is to
a totalitarian
state.

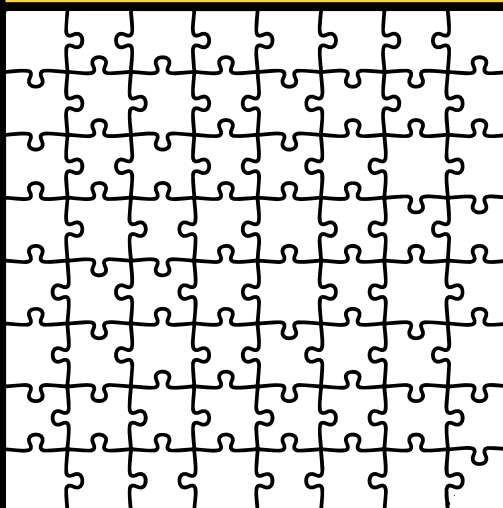
ACTIVITY FOR THE DAY
**Standing Wist-
fully By A Canal,
Contemplating
Eternity**

**SANTA IS
ALWAYS
WATCHING**



"There is a constant battle between people who refuse to accept domination and injustice, and those who are trying to force people to accept them. The history of the world is not just a bleak compendium of atrocities and oppression, but also the story of heroic popular resistance by those who refused to accept injustices as natural, normal, or inevitable."

MONTHLY JIGSAW
**Cut It Out, Take It Apart,
↓↓ then PUT IT BACK ↓↓**



WARNING

Reading magazines can drastically alter your worldview. Many people are not the same after perusing copies of Current Affairs. Consult your physician if you believe you are at severe risk of having your worldview compromised. Current Affairs is not responsible for sudden onsets of enthusiastic socialist politics or unexpected inclinations to celebrate Mardi Gras. Consume this magazine responsibly.

NO ASTROLOGY

Sometimes readers wonder why a regular horoscope feature is not printed in this magazine, like it is in inferior magazines like *The Economist* and *The New Yorker*. Admittedly, the public likes horoscopes, and it is all but certain we could treble the publication's circulation by including them. But reader, we have what we consider a good reason for refraining: Astrology, you see, just isn't true. It's all lies. None of it works. And as a magazine committed to telling everything to you straight, we are reluctant to try to trick you into believing falsehoods. Surely you can see our point of view?

WILL NEVER REGRET IT

TABLE OF



Bullshitters
p. 22

Plastic Crap
p. 58

Sounds
p. 44

Netflix
p. 38

CONTENTS



Medicine
p. 64

Elvis
p. 6

Masturbators
p. 28

Godard
p. 50

Teachers
p. 14



YOU THOUGHT YOU KNEW

ELVIS

by Ciara Moloney

ELVIS PRESLEY IS ONE OF THE MOST FAMOUS people who has ever lived. The iconography of his career is deeply embedded in both American and world culture, whether as tribute, such as One Direction recreating *Jailhouse Rock* in the music video for “Kiss You,” or as critique, such as The Clash borrowing the design of Elvis’s debut album for the *London Calling* artwork, with Paul Simonon smashing his bass in place of Elvis holding his guitar. Even if you’ve never sat down and listened to an Elvis record, you probably know tons of Elvis songs by osmosis. You can recognize his silhouette. There are a non-trivial number of people who work full-time as Elvis impersonators even today, nearly 50 years after his death. He’s a cultural icon, but, now more than ever, either a joke or a villain of history: a joke when he’s remembered as overweight and barely articulate in a Vegas hotel; a villain because, more than any other individual person, Elvis is synonymous with the long, painful history of white artists taking credit for Black music. “Elvis was a hero to most, but he / Never meant shit to me, you see, straight out / Racist—that sucker was simple and plain,” Chuck D rapped on Public Enemy’s “Fight the Power,” to which Flavor Flav adds, “Motherfuck him and John Wayne!”

But Baz Luhrmann’s *Elvis*—the best film of 2022—takes a story you think you know, a story of someone so famous you never needed to have it told to you, and turns it on its head.

Musical biopics have been somewhat *en vogue* ever since the Freddie Mercury biopic *Bohemian Rhapsody* grossed nearly \$1 billion in 2018, with mixed results. *Bohemian Rhapsody* took the formula perfected in the Johnny Cash biopic *Walk the Line* (2005)—and definitively pilloried in *Walk Hard* (2007)—and gave it a staid, rote execution, with some awful editing for flavor. A year later, the

Elton John biopic *Rocketman* breathed new life into the *Walk the Line* formula through the filmmakers’ genius masterstroke of creating a proper bursting-into-song musical while using John’s back catalogue like a jukebox. *Elvis* emerges from this trend in popular film, yet stands apart from it. If you can draw a straight line without stopping from *Ray* (2004) or *Walk the Line* to *Bohemian Rhapsody*—and believe me, you can—there are a hundred lines, all of them crooked, from all across culture spinning towards *Elvis*.

Elvis is *Faust*: the German legend of a man who makes a deal with the devil, trading his soul for unbounded knowledge and pleasure on Earth. The man, in this case, is Elvis Presley, who Austin Butler, previously best known for his small role as a member of the Manson family in Quentin Tarantino’s *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*, plays with just the right mix of charisma and vulnerability. Butler is so good that there are moments where you’re not sure if you’re looking at him or at archive footage of the man himself. Elvis was raised primarily by his mother while his father was in prison. They were poor, the only white family in a Black neighborhood in one of the poorest parts of Mississippi. Though we see Elvis’s childhood only briefly, it shapes the rest of the movie: it’s where he first fell in love with Black music, evoked in a scene where kid-Elvis and his neighborhood friends run between a blues performance and a gospel revival ministry, the two sounds blending together and thrumming through Elvis’s body. “He’s with the Spirit,” a minister says. But the environment that birthed him is also the place he longs to escape, both for his own good and for that of his saintly mother. He reads *Captain Marvel Jr.* comic books and dreams of one day buying her a pink Cadillac. And so he’s willing to make a deal with the devil: Colonel Tom Parker.

Elvis is *Amadeus*, the story of Mozart as told by Antonio Salieri,

a less talented but more successful composer played by F. Murray Abraham in the 1984 film. *Elvis* is narrated by Colonel Tom Parker (Tom Hanks), who isn't a Colonel, isn't a Tom, and isn't even a Parker. He speaks in an accent that's two parts *Goldfinger*, one part West Virginia, but insists he's a natural-born American citizen. Tom Hanks so rarely plays villains that his reputation is more or less exclusively one of unblemished wholesomeness. In 2020, he said that he was taking the role of Colonel Parker in part to "silence all your stupid questions about why will I never play a bad guy." And silence them he does: Hanks's Parker oozes malevolence. He's always calculating how he can manipulate a situation so that he comes out on top. In the film's framing device, he's dying in 1997, dressed in a hospital gown, wandering through a casino. Where Salieri spends *Amadeus* confessing to destroying Mozart's life and career and eventually killing him, the Colonel spends *Elvis* presenting his own defense. In this case, that means unwittingly confessing to destroying Elvis's life and career and eventually killing him. Even though this is Parker's story, we can see beyond him, see through his lies and into the sweet, soft boy he made a fortune exploiting.

"I am the man who gave the world Elvis Presley. Without me, there would be no Elvis Presley," he tells us, "And yet, there are some who'd make me out to be the villain of this here story." The Colonel first hears Elvis singing "That's All Right, Mama," already a hit locally, and upon learning that Elvis is white, he sees dollar signs. When he sees him perform on the Louisiana Hayride show, he's sure. He becomes Elvis's manager, taking him on tour across the country. Salieri is the only character in *Amadeus* who hears and envies the genius in Mozart's music, in contrast to those in the royal court who nonsensically complain there are "too many notes." But the Colonel recognizes Elvis's genius only in how others react: how teenage girls, full of feelings they aren't sure they should enjoy, scream when he wiggles his hips. In a film that has music in every pore, that carries itself like one big two-and-a-half-hour pop song montage, the Colonel is deaf to the music. He wonders why Elvis liked to hang out on Beale Street in Memphis. He never figures it out, but the answer saturates the air, as obvious as breathing: the blues.

Elvis is #FreeBritney: a phenomenally popular singer is trapped in a byzantine vice, under the clandestine control of a man supposedly taking care of them when they're unable to do it themselves. After her breakdown in 2008, Britney Spears was put in a conservatorship administered by her father. When Spears spoke about it publicly at a hearing to end the conservatorship in 2021, she said she was abused and traumatized: medicated against her will, prevented from marrying or having more children, and forced to perform shows under threat of lawsuit or lifestyle restrictions. "It makes no sense whatsoever for the State of California to sit back and ... watch me ... make a living for so many people, and pay so many people, trucks and buses [on tour] on the road with me and be told, I'm not good enough," she told the judge. "But I'm great at what I do, and I allow these people to control what I do, ma'am, and it's enough. It makes no sense at all." It's a story not dissimilar to that of Brian Wilson of the Beach Boys, whose entire life and career were controlled by abusive psychiatrist Eugene Landy for years following Wilson's mental breakdown.

Elvis positions Elvis's relationship to the Colonel in the same tradition. Elvis and Britney even both end up playing Vegas for years on end. In his deal with the devil, Elvis yields more and more power to the Colonel, with varying degrees of intentionality, until he has no means of escape—other than getting high on the drugs proffered by the Colonel's quack doctor. Elvis always wanted to tour abroad, but the Colonel prevents it at all costs. (He insists it's not safe, but it's really because Parker is an undocumented immigrant to the U.S., and Elvis going on tour without him is a nonstarter.) At one point, Elvis attempts to assert himself, to leave the Colonel and go out on his own, and the Colonel presents him with an itemized bill for everything he has ever spent on Elvis. If Elvis paid it all back, he'd be broke. Meanwhile, Parker somehow seems to have infinite money to pour into Vegas slot machines.

Elvis is a wild alchemy of at least a hundred years of popular culture, overlaying stories we know onto the Elvis Presley story to make us realize we don't know *this* story at all. All this is in the key of queer fantasia, relentlessly committed to tacky, bad-taste too-much. It's glitzy and kinetic, unerringly taking the big swings in a way that's thrillingly disorientating. (There is split-screen in this movie that would make Brian De Palma throw up.) James Franco once described himself as "gay in my art and straight in my life," and that's gross and offensive and absurd, but it might actually be true about Baz Luhrmann, whose films—from *Moulin Rouge!* (2001) to *Romeo + Juliet* (1996)—invariably have a distinct gay sensibility. Part of this is his maximalist camp aesthetic; part of it is his films' attention to the female and queer gazes. In between montages of gaudy excess, *Elvis* keenly observes how young women and occasionally young gay men—including a segregationist senator's son—experience Elvis as an object of sexual desire. His androgyny, all pink suits and black eyeliner, is a key part of this, which disrupts the assumed hierarchy of masculinity. This, the film suggests, is part of why the establishment viewed him as dangerous.

THE MAIN REASON THEY SEE ELVIS AS dangerous, though, is his racial transgression. He's a white man making Black music. He dances the way that, as he says himself, "colored singers" have been dancing for years.

Contemporary conversations about Elvis Presley and race generally take their cue from Public Enemy—*motherfuck him and John Wayne!*—and apply some variant of the cultural appropriation rubric to position Presley as stealing rock 'n' roll from the Black artists who created it. There's merit in this, of course: Elvis's success, like Eminem's decades later, is inseparable from the whiteness that made him a saleable commodity in the white suburbs in a way the Black artists who created the genre would never be. Elvis's success, unlike Eminem's, essentially led to a total white takeover of a Black-created genre.

The film's soundtrack exploits precisely the gap between rock 'n' roll's whitewashed legacy and hip hop's: *Elvis* is full of modern music, particularly hip hop, alongside period-appropriate blues and rock 'n' roll, juxtaposing Black-created genres that were totally taken over by white artists with a Black-created genre in which, to

some extent, Black artists are still the predominant creators. When Elvis walks through Beale Street, we hear Big Mama Thornton sing “Hound Dog,” which she originated and Elvis recorded much more famously. But Thornton’s “Hound Dog” builds into Doja Cat’s “Vegas,” which samples Thornton in a fizzily hooky rap song. It’s a reassertion of “Hound Dog” as Black in origin, and underlines it by tying it forward to today’s Black music genres. (Doja Cat is biracial; her mother is Ashkenazi Jewish, her father is Zulu.)

Elvis turns Presley’s reputation as a thief of Black music around by presenting us with another group of people outraged that a white man would make Black music: white segregationists. Southern Democrat Mississippi Senator James Eastland leads a charge to have him boycotted, banned, jailed—anything to stop his wiggling hips and African beats from corrupting the purity of white children. “Surely hip-hop was never a problem in Harlem, only in Boston,” Eminem once rapped, “After it bothered the fathers of daughters startin’ to blossom.” The same applies to rock ‘n’ roll. Though Elvis—certainly in this early part of his career—doesn’t do or say anything political, his very existence flouts the basic tenets of white supremacy and segregation. Even though he performs to segregated crowds, even though he never bridges the gap between the Black and white worlds even as he moves with ease between them, his music belies the idea that it is possible or desirable to truly segregate culture. And white authorities would lock him up before they’d sit back and let that take hold.

After failed attempts at rebranding his client as the “new Elvis” in a tuxedo, the Colonel persuades the senator to enlist Elvis in the army instead. Elvis is shipped off to Germany, leaving his mother to die of a broken heart (and alcoholism). In Germany Elvis meets Priscilla, the daughter of his commanding officer, and falls in love. After Elvis’s mother dies, Priscilla becomes the only meaningful opposition to the Colonel in Elvis’s life, the only force tugging him out of the Colonel’s orbit. Trouble is, the Colonel’s gravitational pull is too strong, too all-encompassing. She’ll never succeed.

ON HIS RETURN TO THE STATES, ELVIS launches a movie career, each film cheaper and more slapdash than the one before. By 1968, his career is “in the toilet.” The Colonel has arranged for him to make a TV Christmas special: he has gone from being threatened with arrest for the way he moved his hips to making the kind of thing where he’d wear a Christmas jumper and sing “Here Comes Santa Claus” by the fire. The world around him is alight with revolution—social movements for civil rights and against war, radical changes in how Americans understand themselves and their place in the world—while Elvis hasn’t just stood still but has gone backwards. He’s a relic of a bygone age.

Elvis, impressed with his work with James Brown and the Rolling Stones, recruits Steve Binder to direct the special. It’s a simultaneous effort to return to a golden past and Elvis’s first real foray into the present. So much of what is happening in the world—all the changes that have left him behind—are things he should have been intimately a part of. Didn’t he inspire every British Invasion band to pick up a guitar? Didn’t he threaten the segregationist South way back when?



The Colonel tells us that Elvis had been “brainwashed” by “hippies,” who convinced Elvis he was one of them. The film suggests the opposite is true: that, despite his political instincts towards lefty liberalism, Elvis was pushed by the industry and the Colonel into a conservative box the confines of which he always chafed against. He is devastated by the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr.—who Elvis says “always spoke the truth”—just five miles from Graceland, and, while they’re preparing the special, Robert F. Kennedy. “A tragedy,” the Colonel says, “But it has nothing to do with us.”

“It has *everything* to do with us!” Elvis counters. He wants to speak out, to make a statement, to do something, anything, but the Colonel is having none of it. Elvis Presley does not make statements. He sings “Here Comes Santa Claus” and advertises Singer sewing machines.

Binder takes creative control of the special, which involves in no small part allowing Elvis a measure of creative control for the first time in years. Binder wants to take him back to Beale Street, to dress him in leathers, to have him perform to a live audience for the first time in years. There’s nothing Christmassy about it. The sponsors and TV executives are furious and threaten litigation. The Colonel assures them that Elvis *will* sing “Here Comes Santa Claus” in a snow scene. He berates and belittles Elvis, telling him that the crowd cheered only because there was a bright sign flashing “Applause.” That grunting incoherently in a leather outfit does not impress anyone. That his precious Martin Luther King, Jr. thought rock ‘n’ roll contributed to juvenile delinquency. That he will sing “Here Comes Santa Claus,” and that’s that.

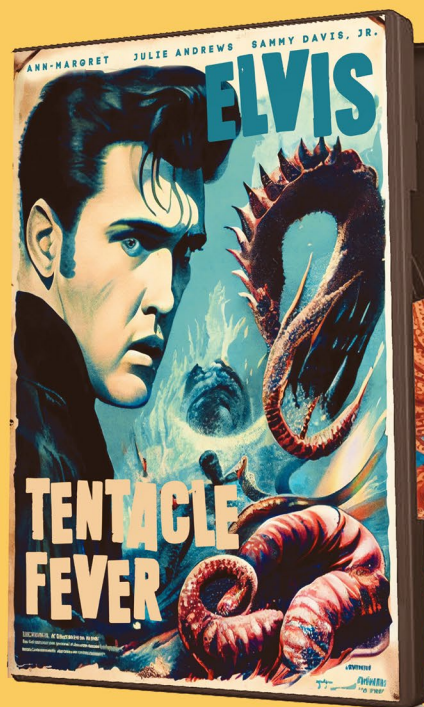
The next day, everything is set. A snow scene, complete with snowmen and dancers in winter knits. The Colonel watches on with the pleased execs and sponsors, happy to see something Christmassy

THE GREAT LOST ELVIS MOVIE

Tentacle Fever

IS FINALLY ON 

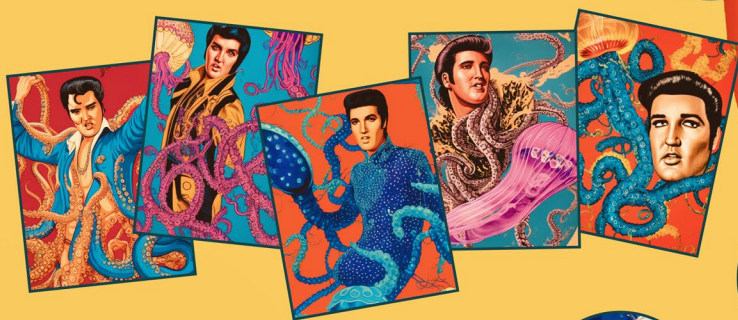
THE ROLICKING 1966
SEASIDE MUSICAL
THAT NEARLY FINISHED
OFF HIS CAREER FOR GOOD!



"This is the
worst goddamn
script I've read
in my life."

— ELVIS PRESLEY

A FULL 180 MINUTES OF PREVIOUSLY
UNRELEASED BONUS FOOTAGE



Comes with five collectible
TENTACLE FEVER Trading cards!

See
ELVIS
fight an
OCTOPUS
and WIN



afoot. Then, right as Binder calls action, the camera spins around to reveal Elvis standing in front of a giant sign lit up with his name. He sings “If I Can Dream,” a tribute to Martin Luther King, Jr. It’s an incredibly powerful moment: the little boy who felt the music move through him in a gospel revival, the young man with Beale Street stars in his eyes, part of whom died along with his mother, gets to say the things he believes in with the gifts God has given him. It’s like getting a glimpse of a world where Elvis has control over himself and his art, free from the confines the Colonel wraps him in—a world where he has the chance to grow and develop and *speak*. His arm swings back and forth, a big, unconscious movement, because, like the minister said when he danced as a boy, he’s with the spirit.

Elvis’s connection to Black culture in the movie is authentic, the inevitable product of a childhood steeped in it, surrounded by it. But there’s always a gap, a danger his whiteness insulates him from, a privilege it affords him, a thoughtlessness only possible when the dominant culture is made up of people who look like you. Elvis counts Black artists—B.B. King in particular—as dear friends, but the “Memphis mafia” he surrounds himself with is all white. He corrects white journalists who dub him the King of Rock ‘n’ Roll by bringing out the real king, Fats Domino, but as the film’s text epilogue tells us, it’s Elvis who becomes the best-selling individual artist of all time. King is killed five miles from Graceland, but Elvis Presley does not make statements. He sings “Here Comes Santa Claus.”

Elvis’s proximity to blackness made him dangerous, so the Colonel has spent all these years steering him away from it. While his whiteness meant he didn’t have to join the fight for Black people’s civil rights, the fact that his roots are in Black culture means that he *should* join the Black civil rights movement. By paying tribute to Martin Luther King, Jr., Elvis reasserts his proximity to Black culture and makes that proximity politically potent. It’s not that singing a song is some grand political act, but in a show that pays tribute to his roots, Elvis shucks off feigned neutrality. When he sings “If I Can Dream,” he’s staking out his position. He’s joining the fight.

Or he tried to. The special is a huge success—it quickly becomes known as the Comeback Special—and the Colonel, naturally, takes credit: it was *his* idea, after all. Offers are pouring in, and for the first time in a long time, it looks like Elvis has the upper hand in his relationship with the Colonel. He can go anywhere, or do anything. He wants a world tour. He has never been outside the United States, other than when he was in the military.

The Colonel presents him with a proposal. He’ll play a series of shows at the International Hotel in Las Vegas. The hotel will pay for everything. It can be as big and expensive as it needs to be. The money he makes can be used to fund the world tour. There’s no risk. You pray for Elvis to see through him, to see it as another of the Colonel’s manipulations, to run away while he still has legs to carry him. But he doesn’t. “Snowman strikes again,” he says, flashing a toothy grin, locking himself in.

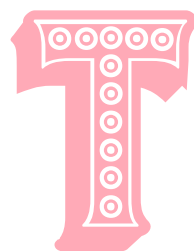
The Vegas shows are both the film’s ultimate representation of Elvis’s talent and, in the end, its most skin-crawling horror. Initially, Elvis is excited to be putting the show together. He recruits musicians and vocal groups he admires, and carefully instructs them in a

way that shows that Elvis’s involvement with his music went much further than just singing the song, no matter what the writing credits have to say. “This ain’t no nostalgia show,” he says, transforming his first hit—“That’s All Right, Mama”—from a straightforward guitar ditty into a sprawling epic. He didn’t write it, but it feels like it’s being composed before your eyes. He can’t wait for the whole world to see this show.

But the Colonel negotiates for Elvis to come back and do this show at the International every year. Part of the deal is that all the Colonel’s gambling debts are written off, of course. What started as a thrilling creative outlet for Elvis becomes, as he tells his father, a “mausoleum.” No world tour. Nothing but this, here, forever. He sings “Suspicious Minds,” and it’s hard to miss the resonance: he’s caught in a trap, can’t get out.

He yells on stage that Colonel Parker is an alien—meaning he’s an undocumented immigrant—and it’s easily written off as drunken rambling, as if the Colonel is going to fly off in his spaceship.

Priscilla leaves him, citing his addiction to painkillers and that he’s barely there anymore. “When you’re 40 and I’m 50,” Elvis tells her sadly, “We’ll be back together, you’ll see.” He never makes it to 50.



THE COLONEL’S ABUSE OF ELVIS—financial, psychological, professional—is devastating to behold. He’s trapped Elvis, exploited him, isolated him, and made him believe he needs the Colonel as much as the Colonel needs him. But the Colonel’s abuse is also just a particularly flagrant example of the abuse systemic in the music industry, ranging from Taylor Swift being denied ownership of the master recordings of her first six albums to the boyband Why Don’t We’s management holding them hostage in their home and restricting their food. TLC went bankrupt at the height of their fame: “I will never forget the day we were millionaires for literally five minutes,” T-Boz told *The Guardian* two decades later, “Because the cheque was written to us and we had to sign it over, back to [Pebbles, their former manager]. But we won’t get into that since we’re still in a lawsuit.” Kesha was emotionally, financially and sexually abused by producer Dr. Luke for years, and lost her lawsuit to be let out of their contract. Almost half of female members of the Musicians Union in the U.K. have experienced workplace sexual harassment. There are significant racial disparities in music royalty payouts, with artists of color being given unfavorable contracts. Britney Spears. Brian Wilson. Untold thousands of anonymous others. Ones we might know someday—the Colonel’s financial abuse of Elvis only came to light after Elvis’s death, after all—and ones we’ll never know.

And everyone knows this. It’s a trope core to the music biopic. In *Elvis*, Baz Luhrmann makes the abuse that drives the music industry feel hellish again—it’s not a point to hit in a formula, it’s visceral and shocking. It’s one of the myriad ways he elevates the biopic formula to fresh heights: a glittering mirror ball of a film that takes hold and pulls you through the fizziest joys and heart-breaking sorrow.

The Colonel dies impoverished and alone. Elvis lives forever. ✦

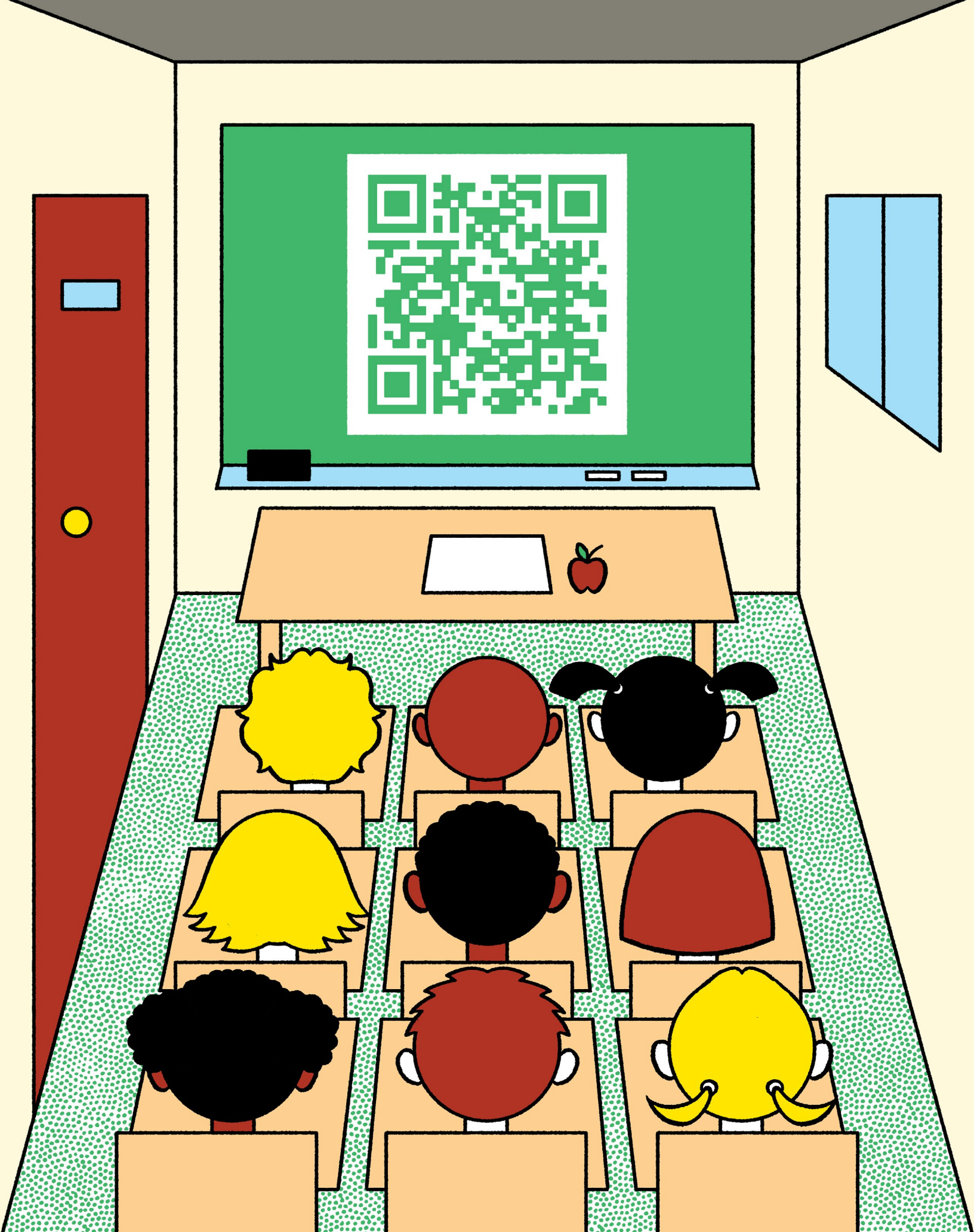
DREAM OF THE DOOMED BIRD

Yes, turkeys dream, too. They just don't have the standard human dreams that we have (naked in class, teeth falling out, giving birth to Trump). No, what turkeys dream of is revenge, and justly so. The bird will not be spared its fate, to be sure. It is only the luckiest of turkeys that receives a presidential reprieve each year, and this is not that bird. But the turkey will dream its sweet dreams while it can. But we don't display this image to encourage your sympathies with the bird. No, this is a "find the objects activity." We are here to work, not contemplate the nature of the animal mind.

CAN YOU FIND SIX FOOTBALLS HIDDEN IN THE IMAGE?







the uber-ification of teaching

BY RUBEN ABRAHAMS BROSBÉ

AS THE 2022-2023 SCHOOL YEAR got underway, there was a flood of coverage about a teacher shortage crisis. According to the dominant narrative, school districts were hemorrhaging teachers and struggling to find replacements. But the recent coverage of the teacher shortage crisis often missed two vital points. Firstly, the problem called the “teacher shortage crisis” is not even a shortage problem at all. The fact is, nationally, there *should* be more than enough certified teachers. There are roughly 150,000 people completing teacher certification programs a year. But a growing number of teachers are quitting, and a growing number of college graduates are choosing to avoid the profession altogether. This indicates a fundamental problem with the working conditions of the profession, and if something isn’t done about it, the United States will have to rely more and more on contract remote teachers. And secondly, this problem, whatever we call it, is not a new one. Our public school system’s inability (or unwillingness) to recruit, retain, and fairly remunerate high-quality teachers for all schoolchildren constitutes a serious problem. Not only are public school children being failed, but teaching as a profession is becoming gig-ified and exposing teachers to even greater labor precarity than they already face.

In 2019, the Education Policy Institute released a report called “The Perfect Storm in the Teacher Labor Market.” At the time, EPI called the shortage crisis a “perfect storm” and wrote, “The teacher shortage is real, large and growing, and worse than we thought.” Unsurprisingly, three years of a pandemic and the growing politicization of schooling have failed to reverse that trend. One recent study estimates the number of nationwide teacher vacancies at 36,000 with another 163,000 positions filled by “underqualified” teachers. And it looks likely to get

worse. According to a survey by the National Education Association, 55 percent of its members are ready to leave teaching earlier than planned. That number is up from 37 percent the previous year. As attrition continues to rise and as the number of newly credentialed teachers declines, the profession is indeed headed for trouble.

Teacher vacancies have always been more concentrated in hard-to-staff districts and content areas. High-poverty schools in rural and urban districts, for example, have a hard time attracting and retaining teachers. Special education, foreign language, English as a Second Language, and secondary math and science are also difficult subjects to staff. Since the pandemic, these challenges have persisted and also started to seep into a wider range of schools.

Dr. Bridget Weiss, the superintendent of the Juneau School District in Alaska, explained via email how the number and nature of teacher vacancies have changed. “We have for several years had trouble filling special education teaching positions. That has gotten more difficult, and now the problem has spilled over into regular education teaching positions as well.” She added, “No longer are we looking to hire the best teacher for our students. We are hiring the available teacher, whether they would be competitive in a different ‘market’ or not.”

A survey conducted by the AASA, the School Superintendents Association, found that nearly a third of respondents were facing greater vacancies at the start of the 2022-2023 school year compared to last year. In the past, schools and districts have tried to fill vacancies in a number of ways, including hiring international teachers, lowering requirements for who can teach, or relying on long-term substitutes. None of these are ideal in terms of providing high-quality instruction to the neediest students, and in the case of international teachers and substitute teachers, the practice can be highly exploitative. Substitute teachers make

The general consensus among teachers and families is that remote learning totally sucks.

as little as \$20 a day in some places and are at-will employees. Meanwhile, some have called the use of international teachers a form of trafficking.

This year, after COVID prompted a widespread unplanned experiment in remote learning, more schools and districts are considering a new approach to filling vacancies. They can now hire remote teachers. A growing number of education technology or edtech companies are eager to help struggling schools and districts fill their vacancies. Elevate K-12, Stride Learning, and iTutor are just a few examples of such for-profit companies. Some of these companies have provided virtual teachers before COVID, while others were online learning platforms that began providing virtual teachers in response to growing vacancies.

The model varies somewhat from company to company, but generally, it relies on an educational support staff person to monitor a classroom of students while a certified teacher provides virtual instruction on a contract basis. Unlike with a full-time teacher, districts do not have to pay the cost of a full-time salary or benefits. Some of the companies which hire virtual teachers as full-time employees offer benefits, but many of them like Elevate and iTutor hire teachers as contract employees. Meanwhile, the districts only have to pay for the hours that the teacher is online with students. So if a school only needs one period of Spanish a day, they can hire one through a company like iTutor, rather than a full-time teacher. That teacher may teach Spanish to several classes across different schools, five days a week, or they may only teach a few hours a week. Meanwhile, the educational support staff, who are key to making this model viable, often make poverty wages. Support staff titles and roles vary from district to district, but according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics,

the median wage for teaching assistants in 2021 was just over \$29,000 a year. Support staff are, like teachers, around 80 percent women but are more likely to be non-white than teachers (40 percent versus 20 percent).

Randi Weingarten, President of the American Federation of Teachers, is not surprised by the trend. “Any time there’s an issue in education, the tech companies decide it can be solved by more tech and less teachers,” Weingarten said via phone.

Elevate K-12 is one of the edtech companies eager to help. Like the teacher vacancy problem that Elevate offers to solve, Elevate pre-dates the pandemic. However, demand for their service has exploded recently. CEO Shaily Baranwal told me that Elevate doubled the number of schools they served this year compared to the 2021-2022 school year. “We could have done more,” Baranwal said, “but we really wanted to make sure that as we scale the company, we maintain quality.” But there are many debates in education about how to measure “quality” and who gets to decide on that measure. For now, quality is generally measured by the state based on standardized test scores. In the case of Elevate, public data on learning outcomes from Elevate teachers is not available. Elevate recently raised \$40 million in its Series C round of funding.

In past years, Elevate exclusively served high-poverty rural and urban schools, but according to Baranwal, “[the vacancy crisis] is all over this year. We have districts in the past that we have reached out to them, and they said we don’t have vacancies, and this year we have massive contracts with them because they finally came around and said if we don’t start using a tool like Elevate right now there’s no end to the problem.”

But while edtech companies can provide schools with certified teachers, there is limited research supporting the effectiveness of remote teaching on student learning. Recent national and state test scores show that the pandemic severely disrupted learning for students, but there is not a clear link between remote learning and the declines in test scores. The more likely cause of the findings was the catastrophic loss of life and disruption to students’ social, emotional, and physical well-being. Hundreds of thousands of children lost a parent or caregiver. Young people were isolated from friends and their communities. Many young people’s parents and caregivers lost their jobs or were forced to work in unsafe environments. All of these stressors undoubtedly impacted student learning.

Still, the general consensus among teachers and families is that remote learning totally sucks. As Boston teacher Mariel Norris summed it up, “Teachers and administrators ... exerted themselves to an extreme degree for such little gain on students’ end.” In spite of those heroic efforts, students were “deprived of an actual education by any honest measure.”

Baranwal is (unsurprisingly) critical of that perspective. Ac-

cording to Baranwal, Elevate's platform is designed specifically for teaching. Unlike video conferencing platforms like Zoom, Google Meet, and Teams, Elevate has certain teaching tools built in. In contrast to pandemic remote learning, Elevate teachers are teaching to a class of students sitting in one room together, allowing for better participation and interaction between students. On top of that, Baranwal says that Elevate's teachers are highly trained and effective at using Elevate's specific curriculum. Baranwal argues these factors combine to provide a better-than-average remote learning experience.

But teaching and learning are about much more than academic progress. Teachers are more than deliverers of instruction. They are role models, mentors, advocates, mediators, and more. The myriad ways teachers support the social-emotional learning of students are more important now than ever. Providing that support virtually is difficult.

In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks, the scholar and activist, wrote, "As a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another's voices, in recognizing one another's presence." In other words, teaching is about cultivating relationships. This happens through a teacher's warm yet demanding presence during a lesson, but also through the countless interactions that happen outside of instructional time.

I SPENT 12 YEARS AS A PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHER in New York City myself. The last year and a half of that time, I taught remotely. While I eventually found ways to adapt my pedagogy to virtual teaching, I never found a way to replicate the social-emotional component of my job. Finding ways to truly hear each other's voices and to recognize one another's presences *virtually* was an enduring challenge. At the end of the year, I know my students felt that I cared, but we still felt like strangers to each other compared to my relationships with my in-person students.

Relying on remote contract teachers is unlikely to provide students with the stability they need academically or social-emotionally. And some parents are understandably concerned. "Instead of locking down and getting teachers in these schools, it's like 'OK, we'll just put them on a computer screen,'" Torrane Richmond, a parent in Burlington, North Carolina told her local news station.

Weiss does not currently rely on remote teachers in Juneau, but the district does contract out some teaching positions. According to Weiss, "These teachers are not invested in our community and seldom are used or stay more than one year, so there is constant turnover." This lowers the teaching quality because with constant churn, "understanding student needs and rela-

tionships with families" is difficult.

Weingarten echoed Weiss's concern about contract teachers: "You just don't have the same nesting; you don't have the same connectivity. We need to create real long-standing relationships that people can rely on. That's what kids need."

Akua Ducard is a veteran teacher based in Atlanta, Georgia. In 2019, a student stole from her, and this led her to question her desire to work with students. She decided to work as a contract remote teacher for a company called iTutor. During the 2021 school year, she co-taught a classroom at a charter school in Brooklyn, New York, and then continued the following school year at a Bronx charter school within the same network.

Ducard's experience can tell us a lot about why teachers are leaving the brick-and-mortar classroom for the digital one, as well as the limitations of this model. Ducard sees remote teaching positions as "places where teachers are finding ways to reinvigorate their teaching and to just find that passion again because they could be more in control of the situation again."

But Ducard raised several concerns about the viability of remote teaching as a replacement for in-person teachers. "There's so much that you're removed from when you're not in the physical room," she said.

On top of that, not all learners have the same needs. While some students can thrive using remote learning, there are others for whom it fails. Some students with special needs, as well as students learning English as a new language, need the best instruction possible. In many cases, remote learning is woefully inadequate.

Ducard's ability to provide special education services to her students relies on their willingness to participate. As much as Ducard tries to do her job well, sometimes students are still left out of instruction if her in-person colleague is unable to manage them effectively. "I feel like I could be a lot more effective in person than just being a head on a computer that they can basically close [the laptop on] or just not respond to." As a result, Ducard says, "Not all of the students who should get services are."

So while edtech companies promise to bring high-quality instruction to the students with the greatest needs, it's not clear that they can. And while the number of schools and types of schools facing shortages is expanding, it's hard to imagine wealthy suburban schools are among them. At this time, for example, according to Baranwal, all of the school districts Elevate serves have a high percentage of low-income students.

Ducard believes that remote teaching models can be effective but worries that some schools "are actually not putting enough thought and not putting enough support and structures in place to make it work." In other words, contract remote teachers may be logging on to teach in environments just as dysfunctional as

the ones they left. Lack of administrative support and problems with school culture are among the top school-level factors cited by teachers for leaving.

But what happens to the teachers who stay? According to Jeffrey Katzman, CEO of Core Learning Exchange, a company that aims to bring virtual Career and Technical Education instructors to schools, “There’s a little bit of resentment that might pop up if one teacher’s a remote teacher and getting paid an equivalent amount of money or maybe a little more.” In Ducard’s case, while she does not have benefits, she makes more teaching virtually than she would as a teacher in Georgia.

Meanwhile, at the school and district level, the arrival of gig teachers threatens the bargaining power of full-time, in-person teachers. If schools and districts can find a certified teacher from outside the district or state to fill a vacancy and not pay them a full-time salary or benefits, what is the likelihood these schools are going to invest in systemic changes to attract and retain teachers, let alone respond to complaints about low pay, overcrowded classrooms, or lack of air conditioning?

The growth of contract remote teaching gigs could ultimately create more vacancies in the same districts these companies are proposing to help. A look at job postings for other companies like Edmentum and Stride Learning is a Who’s Who of red states with low teacher pay. These companies are hiring for special education, Spanish, and science teaching positions in Alabama, Kansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Utah.

Baranwal wants the story of Elevate to be one of an innovator helping to solve a persistent problem in K-12 education. “The faster we grow, the faster we can solve the teacher shortage problem,” Baranwal told me. But it’s just as likely that companies like Elevate are serving as a Band-Aid to systemic problems, if not exacerbating them, and profiting in the process. This is a continuation of a long pattern in education. Public schools are under-funded and fail to meet the needs of all their students. Rather than addressing the lack of resources, neoliberalism offers solutions such as charter schools, Teach for America, and for-profit edtech interventions. In many cases, these “solutions” enrich a few, and none of these ultimately address the structural inequities plaguing public education.

MOST EXPERTS AGREE THAT training, attracting, and retaining a highly-qualified teaching workforce, particularly in hard-to-staff subject areas and schools, will require a meaningful investment. There are a lot of different ways that money could be spent, but the most obvious starting point would be with teacher salaries, particularly

for hard-to-staff subject areas.

One success story in this area comes from Hawai‘i. When faced with a dire shortage of special education teachers, the state began offering a \$10,000 yearly bonus to special education teachers. As a result, they cut their shortage in half.

Fort Stockton is a school district in rural Texas that has historically struggled with teacher vacancies. They recently raised their salaries far above the state-wide average and offered heavily subsidized housing. This year, as more districts struggled to hire enough teachers, Fort Stockton did not.

Teachers surveyed by the NEA also listed salary increases as their highest priority solution for addressing educator burnout. But they also overwhelmingly supported increasing mental health support for students, hiring more teachers, hiring more support staff, and decreasing the paperwork load. These policies mirror proposals from the American Federation of Teachers’ July 2022 report on the teacher shortage crisis, which also included lowering class sizes and ending the over-emphasis on standardized testing.

In other words, the solutions to the teacher vacancy crisis are pretty straightforward. Pay teachers more, and make the workload more manageable.

As Ducard told me, “I do think that [remote teaching] is going to continue to grow because I think a lot of teachers are fed up with the environments that they work in.”

A recent survey conducted by the think tank RAND Corporation affirms that working conditions in schools are driving burnout. The survey gathered data from public school teachers and principals and compared them to answers from other working adults. Researchers found that educators were twice as likely as other workers to experience “frequent job-related stress.”

But improving working conditions will also require us to address the ongoing bipartisan divestment from public education. Democrats pay more lip service to the value of public schools and teachers, but the commitment to charter schools, standardized testing, and even vouchers has enjoyed support from both parties. There are some signs of shifts within the Democratic Party, but the right-wing attack on public schools and teachers has ramped up.

COVID has strained an already stressed workforce. Then the politicization began. Educators in RAND’s survey were more likely than workers in other professions to say that politicized issues such as COVID-19 safety measures were sources of stress in their jobs. Educators also experienced backlash to teaching about race or racism.

For the Right, mobilizing white resentment against public schools serves a dual purpose. It can drive voter turnout, but it can also increase support for divestment from public

schools. As one of the largest and most valued public investments in the United States, public education has long been a target of conservatives. The obsession with vouchers has been a reliable way to divert funds away from them.

At the same time, the Right has had a long-standing vendetta against public school teachers as a largely unionized workforce. More recently, Republicans have tried to undermine the power of teachers by taking away their ability to collectively bargain. Forcing more teachers out of the profession may not be an explicit intention of the Right's current CRT and gender ideology obsession, but it certainly serves their goals. As teacher vacancies rise, it's easy to see Republican-led states relaxing requirements for certification tests or degrees in order to support the growth of a contract remote teaching workforce.

Baranwal reiterated several times that Elevate is not seeking to replace qualified, certified teachers. Elevate teachers are a much better alternative, according to Baranwal, than long-

country. But policymakers have had numerous opportunities to invest properly in public teachers and schools. Instead they have opted repeatedly for cheap fixes that often exacerbate educational inequity.

Can we change course before it's too late? It will take common sense and political willpower, two things in short supply. But it's possible. The 2022 PDK Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools found that respondents' support of their community school was at a 48-year high. But the number who expressed interest in having their child work as a public school teacher was an all-time low. Americans believe in the importance of high-quality public schools, and they know we're not doing enough to support those responsible for realizing this promise. While there is a partisan split, Americans agree that teachers deserve higher salaries.

In addition to these common-sense strategies that target

We don't need more for-profit fixes for education.

term substitutes or other uncertified options. But if schools don't address the root causes of the teacher vacancy crisis, the number of certified teachers leaving the classroom will continue to grow, making edtech companies an increasingly vital option. If more districts rely on remote contract teachers, we'll have teachers who are more disconnected from their students and less equipped to bargain for their needs and the needs of their students.

But Baranwal and others see this as an inevitable future. "We don't go back from finding taxis," Baranwal told me. "Nobody says, 'Oh, I don't like Uber now. I'm going to find a taxi.' We just evolve our thinking. That's what [a] growth mindset is about. It's time for districts and schools to open their thinking." For Baranwal, the concept of trying to find an in-person teacher for every student is obsolete. But what is the cost to kids and the teaching profession of just giving up on in-person teachers for all?

As a former public school teacher, I find the Uber-ification of teaching to be a disturbing—but apt—analogy. Rather than investing in public transportation or walkable cities, we've created a massive gig workforce to get people around. Uber hasn't truly solved the problem of affordable, accessible transportation, but it has created new problems in the process. Similarly, we claim to value education for every child in this

teachers specifically, a broader left agenda would make the profession more sustainable. Cutting the military budget and properly taxing the wealthy could provide more than enough money for public schools and the social welfare system. If students were growing up in healthy, well-resourced communities, there wouldn't be such a great strain on schools to counter the effects of poverty and social dysfunction. Teachers wouldn't be burning out at such an astonishing rate.

In this way, the fight to save teaching from the gig economy is no different than the fight for workers' rights more broadly. While the gap between our nation's rhetoric surrounding public education and actual investment is especially glaring, all work is vital. Teachers—as well as warehouse workers, nurses, taxi and other ride service drivers, and fruit pickers—deserve proper compensation and good working conditions.

Our society doesn't need teaching to join the gig economy. We don't need more for-profit fixes for education. These are not paths to an excellent and equitable education system. Instead, if we really want to ensure a high-quality, in-person teacher for every student, we should make teaching a sustainable career. We can start by paying educators (including childcare workers and paraprofessionals) what they're worth and giving schools and their communities the resources they need. ✦



AI ART GALLERY

AMAZON PAIN FOREST

APPLE ORCHARD
DATA COLLECTION

CHECK YOUR PHONE

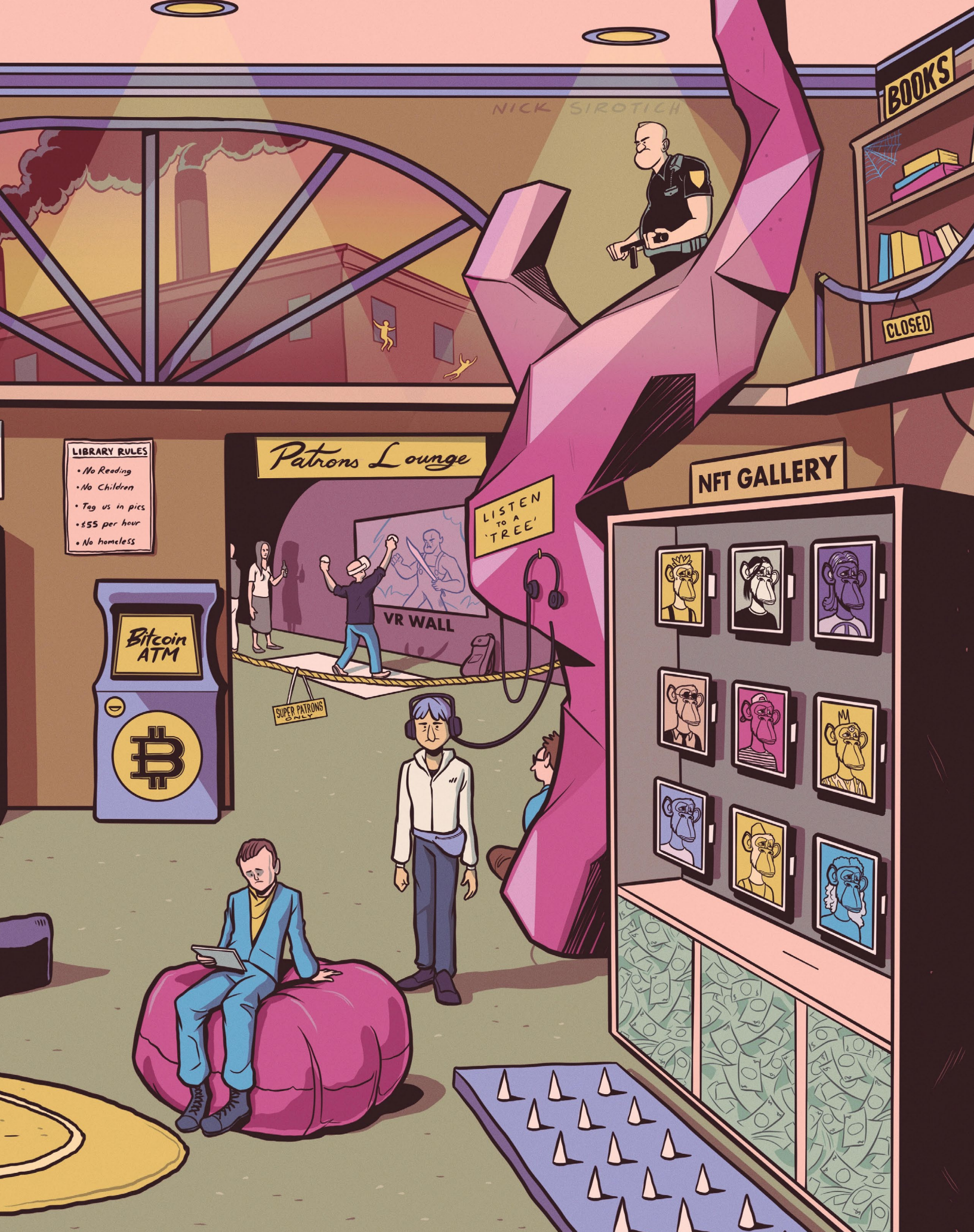
BANNED BOOKS

JUST DO IT

JORDAN B PETERSON 12 RULES FOR LIFE	JORDAN B PETERSON 12 RULES FOR LIFE	JORDAN B PETERSON 12 RULES FOR LIFE	JORDAN B PETERSON 12 RULES FOR LIFE	JORDAN B PETERSON 12 RULES FOR LIFE	JORDAN B PETERSON 12 RULES FOR LIFE
JORDAN B PETERSON 12 RULES FOR LIFE	JORDAN B PETERSON 12 RULES FOR LIFE	JORDAN B PETERSON 12 RULES FOR LIFE	JORDAN B PETERSON 12 RULES FOR LIFE	JORDAN B PETERSON 12 RULES FOR LIFE	JORDAN B PETERSON 12 RULES FOR LIFE
JORDAN B PETERSON 12 RULES FOR LIFE	JORDAN B PETERSON 12 RULES FOR LIFE	JORDAN B PETERSON 12 RULES FOR LIFE	JORDAN B PETERSON 12 RULES FOR LIFE	JORDAN B PETERSON 12 RULES FOR LIFE	JORDAN B PETERSON 12 RULES FOR LIFE

THE LIBRARY OF TOMORROW
We are proud to showcase this cutting-edge new design for the neoliberal library of the future! Probably coming soon to YOUR community.

PUBLIC-PRIVATE LIBRARY
Open: M W F
12p-3p



BOOKS

CLOSED

NFT GALLERY

Patrons Lounge

LISTEN TO A 'TREE'

VR WALL

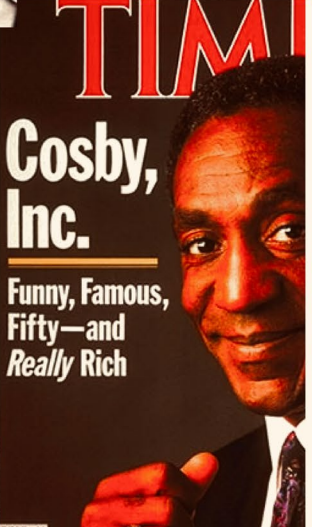
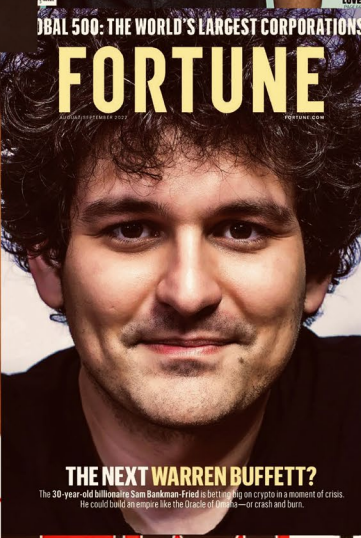
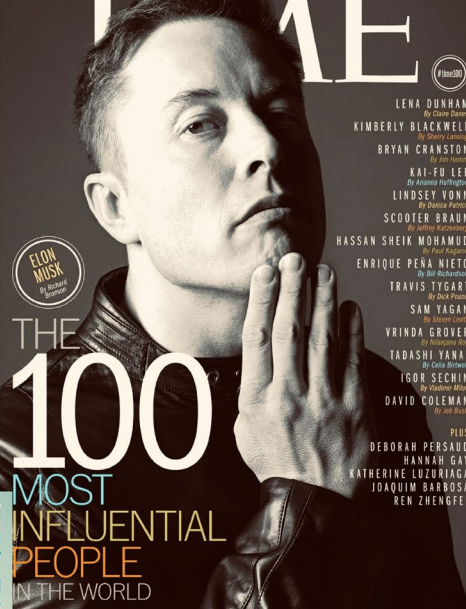
SUPER PATRONS ONLY

LIBRARY RULES

- No Reading
- No Children
- Tag us in pics
- \$55 per hour
- No homeless

Bitcoin ATM





the age of the BULLSHITTER

BY NATHAN J. ROBINSON

"A little hyperbole never hurts. ... People want to believe that something is the biggest and the greatest and the most spectacular. I call it truthful hyperbole. It's an innocent form of exaggeration—and a very effective form of promotion."

—DONALD J. TRUMP, *THE ART OF THE DEAL*

“GIVE THEM THE OLD Trump bullshit,” Donald Trump reportedly once told his architect. “Tell them it is going to be a million square feet, sixty-eight stories.” (“I don’t lie, Donald,” replied the architect.) From his earliest days, Trump has rarely cared much about whether what he was saying at any given moment was *true*. Frequently it isn’t.

Elon Musk is the richest man on planet Earth. He is also a complete bullshitter. He makes false claims about the cars he makes. He constantly promises that he is going to accomplish things that he never, in fact, accomplishes. In March 2020, he made the confident COVID-19 prediction that “based on current trends, probably close to zero new cases in US too by end of April.” After convincing cities around the country that his “Boring Company” was going to build tunnels that would alleviate traffic congestion for low, low prices, Musk’s company simply went silent after municipal governments asked it to follow through on its promises.

Sam Bankman-Fried was cryptocurrency’s most respectable figure, a wunderkind billionaire who was sympathetically profiled across the press. Bankman-Fried was supposedly a

deeply moral person who lived like an ascetic and had committed himself to the “Effective Altruism” movement, which aims to achieve maximal moral goodness through benevolent acts and philanthropy. But it turned out that Bankman-Fried had essentially gambled away customers’ deposits at his company, leaving the customers in the lurch and destroying Bankman-Fried’s fortune virtually overnight. He is now under criminal investigation. Bankman-Fried admitted to *Vox* that when he had talked about ethical commitments he had been basically uttering “shibboleths” that he didn’t really believe in. “Man all the dumb shit I said,” he told the reporter, referring to his high-minded talk about the importance of integrity in business. Many of our era’s “most beloved people,” he said, “are basically shams.” Bankman-Fried’s selflessness was certainly a sham; it turned out that the supposedly self-denying ascetic lived in a \$40 million Bahamian penthouse.

I AM CONSISTENTLY AGHAST AT THE NUMBER of people who manage to be very successful in our society despite extreme levels of ignorance and/or dishonesty. Those who have read this magazine for a few years will know that I have ended up becoming a specialist in “debunking” bad arguments and exposing the mendaciousness of prominent public intellectuals, pundits, and politicians. This has proven a wearying task, because there is a seemingly inexhaustible supply of individuals who have both large platforms and ill-informed opinions.

Joe Rogan, the world’s most popular podcaster, who has accumulated a vast fortune and has a major deal with Spotify, limits his research to casual Googling, even though he speaks to

millions of people on some of the most important topics facing humanity. As a result, listeners can come away with the impression that Atlantis was real, ivermectin can cure COVID-19, and aliens live among us. Ben Shapiro, who speaks confidently and quickly on subjects he has clearly never read a book on, was nevertheless dubbed “the cool kid’s philosopher” by the *New York Times* in 2018. Jordan Peterson, who writes impenetrable prose concealing fallacious arguments, sells millions of books and publishes in major newspapers.

It’s not just conservatives. In 2019 I was depressed to see Pete Buttigieg and Beto O’Rourke becoming the subject of affection among liberal Democrats, given that both men were plainly self-promoting strivers who had little real commitment to improving the lives of their fellow human beings. One only had to read Buttigieg’s memoir or the sympathetic media profile of O’Rourke in *Vanity Fair* to see that both were “empty suit” politicians who took politician positions out of expedience rather than commitment.

EVERYWHERE I LOOK, I SEE bullshitters. Dr. Oz, a television doctor who recommends dubious treatments in flagrant violation of basic medical ethics, is one of the country’s most recognized health authorities, and 46 percent of Pennsylvania voters thought he should be their U.S. senator. Yuval Noah Harari, a bestselling historian and favorite author of Barack Obama, predicted an end to pandemics in 2017 and makes unsupported claims about scientific fields he doesn’t understand. Heck, Obama himself is a bullshitter, a man who manipulated people’s emotions with stirring messianic rhetoric about how his election would mean the oceans would stop rising and change would come to the land, then delivered eight years of milquetoast centrism. Obama not only continued the Bush administration’s foreign policy, but even his signature legislative accomplishment, the “Affordable Care Act,” was a giant lie that forced Americans to buy crappy financial products (aka health insurance). It didn’t actually have anything to do with health-care. Is healthcare affordable now? It sure isn’t.

Even self-described “rationalists” who pride themselves on being able to cut through bad arguments and think logically, such as Sam Harris and Steven Pinker, are themselves just as bad as those they critique. Pinker, for instance, denounces mainstream environmentalists with the kind of hysterical hyperbole that he would condemn as emotional rhetoric if used by others, and Harris has boosted the racist pseudoscience of Charles Murray. Often those who critique left-wing

“wokeness” do so in the name of reason and science, but are just as unfair and sloppy in their thinking as the “social justice warriors” supposedly are.

You can’t even trust that the “gold standard” of education will give you information of reliable accuracy. The online conservative video platform “PragerU” is not a real university, but Harvard is supposed to be, and yet Harvard PhDs can be just as confident in ignorant opinions as any other blowhard. The *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* op-ed pages are regularly filled with poorly-reasoned rubbish, and I seem to spend half my time trying to expose the faulty logic of some of our most highly-credentialed and trusted sources.

WHEN I SAY THAT “BULLSHITTERS” abound, what do I mean exactly? What quality unites Steven Pinker, Jordan Peterson, Sam Bankman-Fried, Elon Musk, Donald Trump, Dr. Oz, and Barack Obama? What does it mean to be a bullshitter?

The clearest philosophical exposition of a Theory of Bullshit was put forth by Harry Frankfurt in his short classic *On Bullshit*. Frankfurt argued that bullshit was different than *lying*, and in some ways worse. A liar knows what they are saying is false. A bullshitter doesn’t *care* whether it is true or false. The liar has not abandoned all understanding of truth, but they are deliberately trying to manipulate people into thinking things are otherwise than they actually are, whereas the bullshitter has simply stopped checking whether the statements they are making have any resemblance to reality:

“When an honest man speaks, he says only what he believes to be true; and for the liar, it is correspondingly indispensable that he considers his statements to be false. For the bullshitter, however, all these bets are off: he is neither on the side of the true nor on the side of the false. His eye is not on the facts at all, as the eyes of the honest man and of the liar are, except insofar as they may be pertinent to his interest in getting away with what he says. He does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly. He just picks them out, or makes them up, to suit his purpose.”

One reason we have so much bullshit, Frankfurt said, is that in public life, people find themselves in circumstances where they are called to express opinions on topics they don’t understand, and feel the need to muddle along by just coming up with some bullshit:

“Bullshit is unavoidable whenever circumstances require someone to talk without knowing what he is talking about. Thus the production of bullshit is stimulated whenever a person’s obligations or opportunities to speak about some topic exceed his knowledge of the facts that are relevant to that topic. This dis-

crepancy is common in public life, where people are frequently impelled—whether by their own propensities or by the demands of others—to speak extensively about matters of which they are to some degree ignorant. Closely related instances arise from the widespread conviction that it is the responsibility of a citizen in a democracy to have opinions about everything, or at least everything that pertains to the conduct of his country's affairs."

Frankfurt's work is amusing and useful, but I think it gets a few things wrong. For one, having read the works of many hundreds of bullshitters, I don't actually think the distinction between the "honest man" and the "bullshitter" that Frankfurt makes quite holds up. One thing I've concluded is that, on the whole, people truly *believe their own bullshit*. That is, they *do* care about "reality"; they just think their beliefs are an accurate description of it. Steven Pinker, for example, has the utmost concern with rationality (his latest book is *Rationality: What It Is, Why It Seems Scarce, Why It Matters*). Professing reasonableness and actually being reasonable are totally different things, but many people I would place in the category of "bullshitters" are convinced that their every word is God's own truth. They just haven't checked whether that's the case.

Trump is an interesting case. Many people call Donald Trump a serial liar, and it's beyond dispute that much of what he says is factually false. (Trump himself admitted to the intentional use of "truthful hyperbole," an oxymoron.) Frankfurt's theory would tell us that it's better to call Trump a bullshitter, since he simply doesn't seem to care about truth or falsity one way or the other. He's not a *liar* because he's not even aware of the facts; he just says whatever he expects will get the desired response from his audience.

I think it's absolutely the case that Trump doesn't check whether what he's saying is true, and thus is a classic case of the Frankfurter bullshitter. But after many years of Trump-watching (and having written an entire book on Trump), I've become convinced that at any given moment, Trump completely believes the words that are coming out of his mouth to be true. He might contradict himself in five minutes. But at any given moment, Trump is certain he's right. Nothing would get him to admit the slightest mistake. John Kelly, Trump's former chief of staff, has said that Trump "does not ever, ever, ever want to appear weak ... or that he might have been wrong," and won't admit mistakes because "his manhood is at issue."

The bullshitter is not just marked by a failure to test their opinions against the facts of the world. They are also characterized by having extreme confidence that they are right. The figures I have classified as bullshitters present themselves as authorities, and sometimes as sages or prophets. They is-



Murals of Beto O'Rourke in Texas. The one at the top was subsequently defaced with the words "EL PASO GENTRIFIER, SUPPORTS ISRAEL, NO HERO."

sue predictions and consider themselves the embodiment of right-thinking reasonableness. The bullshitter's arrogance is just as important as their relationship with the truth.

Here we can start to see hints of an explanation for why there is so much bullshit circulating around us. I think many of us are far too easily swayed by confident people who pose as experts, especially on subjects where we don't have the knowledge ourselves to evaluate the claims being made. I suspect that the careers of Shapiro and Peterson have been made possible in large part by these men's astonishing levels of confidence

in themselves. Peterson's word salad magnum opus *Maps of Meaning* declares at the outset that it will speak truths that have never been previously discovered by humankind. It offers mostly mumbo jumbo instead (along with some comically convoluted diagrams), but Peterson speaks with such authority that confused readers may find themselves thinking that, given they can't understand a word, they must simply be incapable of grasping the deep thoughts of the great Genius.

We must add to this the fact that many of these men (and it is usually men, although Elizabeth Holmes certainly belongs on the list) are extremely rich, and it's easy to assume that a rich person must be a smart person, if we are not ourselves rich. After all, they knew *something* we don't know, i.e., how to make a large sum of money. And if intelligence is some single quality (IQ) then their wealth is proof of their ability to reason.

Intelligence is not, of course, a single quality, and plenty of people who know how to do one thing well (such as trade cryptocurrencies or develop real estate) know precious little else. In fact, if someone has devoted their entire life to the pathological pursuit of riches, they are likely to be very *ignorant* of a lot of the world's knowledge, because much of it simply won't have been relevant to their area of interest. When I read the memoirs of various billionaires, I was struck by how little they seemed to know about anything outside of the world of business, though they also seemed confident that there was nothing else they ought to know.

Another problem is that we do not have media and educational institutions that successfully expose bullshit. Peterson's *Maps of Meaning* was praised by the chair of the Harvard psychology department, Sam Bankman-Fried made the covers of *Forbes* and *Fortune*, and Elizabeth Holmes was given a long sympathetic profile in the *New Yorker*. (The writer did not comment on the fact that when she was asked how her magic blood testing technology worked, she gave the worryingly imprecise answer "a chemistry is performed so that a chemical reaction occurs." Her board members, among them multiple former U.S. cabinet officials, did not seem to notice this either, or were unconcerned.) We do not have, in this country, a mainstream press that is devoted to exposing bullshit. Even Matt Levine of *Bloomberg*, probably the country's best financial journalist, said *after* the collapse of Bankman-Fried's FTX empire that he thought Bankman-Fried was "likable, smart, thoughtful, well-intentioned, and candid." In fact, Bankman-Fried was a sociopath who lied to everyone he knew. (Astonishingly, Bankman-Fried had admitted to Levine's face that he was "in the Ponzi business" but Levine apparently saw no red flags.) Men like this never fool *Current Affairs* (we described Bankman-Fried as having a fraud-based business model before his company's collapse),

but it would be nice if the mainstream financial press would be a little more cynical toward obvious bullshitters. There are actual serious harms done by bullshitters, who swindle and exploit the people who trust them.

One of the problems is that for-profit media has a very bad set of incentives. For instance, every time Elon Musk makes some confident prediction about how he is going to implant chips in human brains or build a Mars colony or tunnel under Miami or whatever, tech websites are faced with a choice. They can print a story with the headline "MUSK SAYS BRAIN CHIPS COMING IN SIX MONTHS" or they can ignore Musk's bluster until he offers proof that he has actually invented one of the things he keeps promising to invent. To ignore Musk is to sacrifice the precious clicks that a new Musk prediction will inevitably garner. Thus a for-profit tech journalism website faces a conflict between its financial self-interest and its integrity. In a time when it's tough for media outlets to survive, it's hard to turn down the clicks.

WE SIMPLY DON'T HAVE ENOUGH public bullshit-catchers. Twitter, a pit of bullshit, is now run by the king bullshitter himself. (Shortly after acquiring Twitter, Musk promoted a deranged conspiracy theory that Nancy Pelosi's husband had been attacked by a gay lover.) We have got to have more people who help others see through the confident wrong assertions of the noisy and successful. Bullshit is often dangerous—over the course of the pandemic, plenty of people have listened to the terrible medical advice of people who don't know what they're talking about, and some who avoided vaccination or thought ivermectin was better than a mask have ended up dead.

The amount of "fake news" on social media has been endlessly commented on. But the problem is far deeper than the algorithms of Twitter and Facebook feeds. We also have a culture in which arrogance is rewarded rather than kept in check, and people can see that with enough shameless bluster you might become the richest person in the world or the president of the United States. There is no quick fix for the problem—if I offered one, I would be the very kind of bullshitter I strive to avoid being—but we at the very least need to recognize what it is we are trying to change. We are trying to create a culture of thoughtfulness and insight, where people check carefully to see whether what they're saying is true, and excessively egotistical people are looked upon with deep suspicion. With time and patient effort, perhaps we can create a world in which the people who rise to the highest offices and reap the greatest rewards are not also the ones who are most full of shit. ✚

NOT ALL CANADIAN GEESE

Not all geese bite. Some just nip. Others merely hiss. Most geese—ok, some geese—leave you alone, and they do deserve credit. Canadian geese are unfairly regarded as pests simply because they consistently cause major problems. But not all geese. Plenty of good geese have never once flown into a jet engine.



Geese this, geese that. Let's not paint with a broad brush!

A few overly territorial geese are ruining it for the rest of us, who politely beg for potato chips, and only bite when rudely rejected. When geese puff out their wings like that, they are just doing what geese do. Do not assume they will bite simply because they are readying themselves to attack. There are many good geese out there. Way, way out there. Most have flown south for the winter.

A message from the



ESTD 2019

GOOSE
COUNCIL OF NORTH AMERICA



NO. 69



NO FAP-MAN

TIMES UP,
FAPSTER!! HANDS
OFF YOUR JOYSTICK!!

CURSE YOU,
NO FAP-MAN!!

FAP!

JERKINS

HANDS OFF!

BY DAVID S. SMITH

H EY READER, RECKON YOU COULD GO three months without masturbating? This is what the “nofap” challenge is all about. It’s a growing online pledge in which participants, aka fapstronauts, try their hands at “rebooting” their brains from porn and “fapping” in order to improve their mental and physical health. The term “fapping” comes from manga, where it’s meant as an onomatopoeic representation of the sounds someone makes when they’re rubbing one out (like a crude version of when Adam West’s *Batman* would “whack” and “boff” baddies during fight scenes). Thus far, most people I’ve asked give the same dismissive reaction: “Is that *all*?” Would they try? “Hell no!”

I’m not a nofapper—a weird thing to share on the pages of a magazine my mom will read—but I find them fascinating. The challenge and its official website, owned by NoFap LLC, were founded in 2011 by Alexander Rhodes, a 20-something tech professional who worried that his pornography habit (up to 14 times a day) had negatively impacted his sexual performance and his life in general. Since then, it has grown into a thriving global community with a million members, mostly men. NoFap LLC is far from the only site—there are several unaffiliated outlets with less public visibility. Others include Your Brain on Porn, Reboot Nation, and Mr Mind Blowing. Across the platform, reboots are generally discussed in terms of easy, normal, and hard modes. Each site has its own character, and the specifics vary. For example, Porn Help wants to help people be porn-free but views masturbation positively. However, the aim is largely the same: promoting less reliance on pornography. Or, as NoFap LLC puts it, helping people “get a new grip on life.”

Masturbation abstinence is nothing new. Immanuel Kant famously said spanking the monkey debased humans to mere animals, making it a practice worse than suicide. John Harvey Kellogg, the inventor of the cereal Corn Flakes, supposedly saw simple, plain, bland foods as a route to suppress sexual thoughts. He called masturbation “one of the vilest, the basest, and the most degrading acts that a human being can commit,” an act not even fit for a “loathsome reptile, rolling in the slush and slime of its stagnant pool.” Then there is the long line of religious arguments against it. For instance, the Catholic Church still considers “celebrating palm Sunday” a sin. And Indian culture, Hindu, Islam, Buddhist, and Christianity traditions have all been used to promote “semen retention” to avoid Dhat syndrome, a condition marked by physical weakness, tiredness, anxiety, appetite loss, and guilt. Heck, even the *Seinfeld* gang tried to be masters of their domain when they held a contest to see who could hold out the longest from doing “that.”

Technology and sexuality have long been interlinked, whether through porn, fetish sites, dating apps, or forums. So, if anything, it ought to be surprising that a viral version only gained momentum recently. What makes this generation of abstinence communities different from past incantations is that they are, in general, less puritanical. For example, NoFap LLC positions itself as sex-positive, seeing porn as healthy in small doses, so it isn’t making an ethical argument. Instead, like other parts of the self-help industry, nofap websites want to empower people—in this case by supporting them to overcome porn addiction. Other sites such as Fight The New Drug and Porn Help are similar in saying they want to help users lead their most fulfilling lives, though will sometimes add the extra claim that, by not fapping, men can temporarily boost their testosterone.

There’s mixed opinion in the medical and scientific community as to whether pornography is addictive. There’s also little evidence for the proposition that not masturbating has significant effects on testosterone levels—though it is worth mentioning that stress from prolonged guilt, depression and anxiety can reduce the hormone. In contrast, several studies point to physical and psychological benefits from masturbation such as stress relief. There’s even speculation that charming the snake works out the pelvic floor muscles and reduces the likelihood of erectile dysfunction and incontinence. But we’re not here for too much of that; I’m a social scientist rather than a real one. So I will focus on the mindset that the nofap challenge may inspire or that is already present among those who call themselves nofappers.

FIRST, A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY. NoFap LLC is a private company, though other porn-abstinence sites and coaches use the term generically in videos, articles, and blogs, as do researchers. Hence, when I write “nofappers”/“rebooters,” I’m using it as a blanket term for people posting on “rebooting” sites and forums. However, this does not imply it represents the organization’s views. NoFap LLC, in their own words, “is not a movement” but a website, so I only refer to them specifically when using their full name. NoFap LLC claims not to be about improving the world, but enabling users to “improve themselves,” with the only belief that unites its diverse membership being that this can be achieved by not fapping. Moreover, to the extent users on a message board internalize its code of conduct, among other things NoFap LLC forbids overtly discriminatory statements, such as hate speech. In my research, I have come across scores of people complaining about being banned

or having their posts removed for violating community standards, suggesting that they enforce their rules. However, this is not to imply that forum members do not still share regressive views, a point I return to later when addressing research into some of their Reddit community attitudes towards gender.

THE EXPRESSION AND UNDERSTANDING OF sexuality are inherently political topics, particularly if people wish to restrict these practices or use them as the basis to ascribe personal or moral value to others. While reboot communities typically identify as politically neutral, there are still political implications to the ways in which they tend to characterize porn or masturbation. Regardless of their intentions, I argue that reboot sites may be especially appealing to ideologues who are opposed to pornography in general or have specific interpretations of masculinity and femininity. Research shows that these communities tend to appeal to conservatives and to reinforce conservative values such as individualism and meritocracy. I also discuss whether they ought to be considered part of the manosphere. But first, and of relevance to all of these, we shall look at how reboot communities relate porn use to human nature and gender politics.

The Missing Kink: This is Your Brain on Porn

TO UNDERSTAND THE RATIONALE FOR QUITTING PORN, we need a basic review of the tenets of evolutionary psychology. In this framework, the purpose of the species is to propagate itself. Men increase their viable offspring by doing the deed with as many women as possible. Therefore, from this perspective it makes adaptive sense for them to have i) a high sex drive and ii) a preference for sexual diversity. Naturally, with a wealth of naked men and women literally at their fingertips via laptops, tablets, and smartphones, the average man would, understandably, want to sneak a peek wherever and whenever they could. While a virtual sexual experience could not, of course, result in a pregnancy, the drive to *engage* would be there. But nofappers think there's danger in having such easy access to sexual material, similar to the theory that the widespread availability of junk foods may be behind an obesity epidemic in an age when we don't hunt or forage but buy from a store. Porn gives its viewers too much of a good thing. Where once there was scarcity, there's abundance, and people apparently don't know how to handle it.

A core tenet of reboot communities is that our stone-age brain is ill-equipped to handle the modern world. It can't distinguish between a climax achieved through "natural" means and one reached by playing pocket pinball to pixels on a screen. Once we finish the deed, whether alone or with a partner, the brain thinks "job done" and reaches for a metaphysical cigarette. In both cases, our reward system triggers the release of the neurotransmitter dopamine, resulting in a feeling of euphoria that encourages us to repeat the same behavior.

Rebooters say pornography-masturbation is harmful because it severs the link between effort and orgasm, subverting the natural economy of sex. In other circumstances, people can't get their rocks off whenever they want: they need to work for it by wooing, competing, and courting. Online, they don't need to do any of that and so reduce themselves to passive consumers. To quote the late anti-porn activist Gary Wilson, when browsing these sites the brain thinks it has "hit the evolutionary jackpot" without having to do

anything more than turn off family settings. Thus, while men could be bettering themselves to attract women, instead they're lazily "fertilizing the screen."

While evolutionary psychology can offer useful insights, the logical conclusion of the nofappers is, ultimately, a reductive application of these ideas. The underlying principle is that people, particularly men, pursue partners solely for sex. While sex is important, an undo focus on sex ignores the extent to which people engage in committed relationships and work hard to support their partners and offspring. There is vast evolutionary psychology literature looking at long-term relationships and love as adaptations. In other words, humans engage in long-term relationships and love because these activities help them and their offspring to survive. Sexual activity is but one part of the way people relate to one another.

The adaptive benefits of social living seem to indicate that more than sex motivates us to pair up with another person (or people—no judgment here). After all, humans didn't become the dominant species by having the best natural defenses: our teeth are short, and our claws are lacking. Instead, it's because we work darn well together hunting, foraging, and sharing resources. Of course, this isn't to say we're naturally benevolent, acting out the goodness of our hearts. Our genes could calibrate us to survive in groups since these groups help us live and therefore replicate our genes, i.e., the survival of the friendliest. As David Buss, the grandpappy of evolutionary psychology, observes, "other humans are the 'vehicles' on which our survival and genetic legacy critically depend." And some of them are so important to us that we "bestow them with our psychological, emotional, and material investments."

Evolutionary psychology can seem a bit daft, and often gets dismissed as astrology for men. That's understandable—especially when you see its most public figures rave about lipstick, lobsters, and high heels. But researchers in this area know memes spread faster than genes, and core to the premise of evolutionary psychology is a complex interaction between biology and the environment. To borrow a metaphor from Gary Marcus, nature and nurture are not in competition. Instead, they work together, sharing the relationship of a writer and editor: nature provides a messy first draft, and it is meticulously revised by experience. A reductionist approach that says that our hardwiring makes us hopelessly preoccupied with orgasm thus misses part of the story.

Addicted to Self-Love?

LET'S RETURN TO OUR HYPOTHETICAL MAN WHO HAS outsourced his sex life with porn and masturbation, effectively cuckolding himself. Complacent, sluggish, and unproductive, he could be said to resemble the humans of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, complacently popping soma all day. Analogies to drugs are common among anti-porn and reboot communities. For example, one popular organization calls itself Fight The New Drug, and one contributor on Your Brain On Porn has advised people struggling to watch *Requiem For A Dream* so that "every time you have the urge to unblock porn, think of yourself as a drug addict reaching for a drug." Alexander Rhodes prefers the less extreme comparison to smoking. Regardless of the specific vice referenced, reboot communities tend to discuss a recurring motif, which is that porn is harmful to consumers because once they start, they can't stop. The urge preoccupies them, stopping them from doing other, more productive things.

It is worth mentioning that neither the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, the bible of psychiatry, nor The International Classification of Disorders sees porn as addictive, though the latter views high use as a less serious impulse control disorder. While this may seem a distinction without a difference, the key point is that addiction implies long-term physical changes in how the brain functions such that the addict is unable to feel pleasure without their substance (i.e., reward deficiency syndrome). High porn use does not appear to alter the brain in this way, though, and the temporary reward a porn user experiences appears to be less intense than what an addicted person might experience. Granted, the brain's dopamine pathways are implicated in how addiction works, with the hyperstimulation derived from a drug and its cues dulling the reward circuits' sensitivity to pleasure from other sources: everything else seems banal in comparison. Though crucially these pathways are also how preferences and motivated behavior in general work, porn isn't doing anything unexpected. You can raise your dopamine levels right now by putting on your favorite music.

So unlike feminist anti-porn critiques that focus on the working conditions and objectification of women who perform in porn, as well as the well-being of women in general, rebooters typically believe that men only engage in a system of exploitation to the extent they're victims of porn sites and the addictive cycle of Porn, Masturbation, Orgasm (aka PMO—see sidebox). They argue that porn plays on men's weakness and robs them of their sexual energy, leaving them a lifeless shell of their former self—an idea most pronounced by the subsection of anti-porn campaigners promoting the absurd alchemist idea of sexual transmutation, which is the idea that, by not ejaculating, men can redirect sexual energies into other areas, such as intelligence or creativity. Like other parts of the self-help industry, porn abstinence community members hope that by rebooting their brains, they will gain new skills and capacities that porn otherwise leaves dormant. There is a long and diverse list of these so-called “superpowers.” Currently, the website Porn Addiction Test includes heightened attractiveness, more confidence and, pushing the testosterone angle, a deeper voice, and even faster-growing hair.

Taking Matters into Their Own Hands

YOU MAY HAVE NOTICED MY FOCUS ON MEN THUS FAR. Indeed, the demographic research to date reveals rebooters to be mostly a boy's club. Women make up roughly 5 percent of fapstro-nauts. Beyond demographics, Auckland-based psychologists Kris Taylor and Sue Jackson argue that the overall culture of rebooters is one of heterosexual masculinity. Their 2018 analysis of the R/NoFap forum on Reddit found that many of the men felt that not beating their meat reconnected them with authentic masculinity, something they'd apparently been taught to suppress by a mainstream feminist society that vilifies them. The authors highlight a paradox at the heart of the forum. Collectively, they claim to celebrate genuine masculinity. However, they mutually argue i) men need to be truer to themselves and ii) this will resemble a specific archetype. Masculinity is who they are but is also something that needs to be reclaimed, embraced, and even performed. A guy is “king of the jungle” if he can have “real” sex or a “beta bitch” if he can't discipline himself enough not to have hand shandies. The latter refers to a less masculine, and therefore apparently inferior, man.

Reboot ideas about masturbation and sex reveal some counter-

intuitive ideas about masculinity and gender. Intuitively, you may think finishing the first draft by hand would be seen as masculine since it would suggest that a guy has a high (and therefore manly) sex drive. However, historically masturbation has been framed as feminine, with men who abstain arguing that the act reflects a lack of regulation. “Real” masculinity, in contrast, means to exert control of one's body. To reboot communities, this usually means demonstrating resolve, self-management, and everything else a burgeoning entrepreneur needs to succeed in the cutthroat world of business and mate selection. Taylor and Jackson noted that this last part led some nofappers to argue men and women have different roles in human sexuality, though they note that other members contested these posters. While men are pleasure seekers, women are pleasure suppliers and, by extension, gatekeepers to men's masculinity and maturity.

This misogyny is perhaps the most concerning trend among some reboot communities. Since community members often equate manliness with sexual prowess, they see women as codes to be broken rather than active decision-makers in the sexual act. Marlene Hartmann, a sociologist from the picturesque German city of Chemnitz, found this idea pushed by videos from various content

The Keep Your Hands Off Your Dictionary

Like most digital communities, outlets for quitting masturbation and/or porn have their own lexicon. Here are a few key terms:

Chaser effect: A period of intense urges to look at porn following a failed attempt.

Coomer: A loser who masturbates excessively.

Cumbrain: Like a coomer but worse. Cumbrains have a zombie-like addiction to porn and are unable to function without watching it.

Death Grip: A tight-fisted grip that men give their penis when masturbating. Is thought to be overstimulating and to make sex with a partner less arousing.

Death Schlick: Women's version of the death grip. Is thought to happen after stimulating the clitoris more vigorously than would happen during sex.

Flatline: Temporary periods of reduced sexual interest and mood during reboot.

PIED: Porn Induced Erectile Dysfunction

PMO: Porn, Masturbation, Orgasm. The feedback loop people are abstaining from.

Rebooting: Successfully abstaining from PMO for a fixed period.

Surge: A temporary boost in physical energy a rebooter gets after beginning the reboot challenge.

YMMV: Your Mileage May Vary. Every reboot is different.

creators. The notches on a man's bedpost are framed as fundamentally meritocratic, with women responding to the guys who can best regulate themselves; nothing turns them on like male agency. This means their inevitable sexual interest signals how manly a man is. So even if rebooters don't consider masturbation a sin, the community can still reinforce the notion that masturbation represents a fundamental failure to live up to conventional standards of manliness.

As per the evolutionary framework reboot communities adopt, in hunter-gatherer times the most prolific men in the mating department were the best hunters or the most gifted leaders. If the virtual economy of porn rewards anyone with a smartphone, the natural economy of sexual intercourse rewards effort. Thus, reboot communities normalize a neoliberal approach to orgasms: through determination and resolve, men can climb social hierarchies and take their position at the top. The more they put into controlling themselves, the more pleasure they are rewarded with.

The parallels between subjecthood under nofap and capitalism are illustrated by the Lifeforce Program reboot kit, which claims to help people achieve the same mindset as Elon Musk. The lifecoach Alexander Graves, who cites "self-conquering" as key to being an alpha male, also evokes the Tesla and (at time of writing) Twitter Titan with an unorthodox thought experiment: "Just imagine Elon Musk rubbing one out at home. Or the late Steve Jobs. You really think they did that? No. They had other things to do." Masculine Development, a lifestyle site, also says men gain "God-like confidence" and an "Alpha male vibe" through rebooting. Its owner, the dating coach Jon Anthony, goes on to link his decision to quit to "starting multiple businesses, sleeping with 100+ women." Likewise, Order of Man, a website about "what it takes to become more of the man you were meant to be," states that "men who abuse pornography usually struggle in their finances, relationships and careers." A consistent idea emerges: whether it is entrepreneurial success or having access to the most and/or best women, men only go as far as their lack of handiwork will take them. The post-masturbatory man, who has "real" sex with "real" women, instead of watching "reel women," is fully autonomous. Where others fail, he has taken control of his body and self-control portends success.

THERE'S BEEN NO BETTER TEST OF NOFAP self-control than lockdown. In a recent study, some colleagues and I analyzed posts on a Reddit group to see how the community had taken to social distancing. Wherever and whenever measures were implemented, the general population masturbated more. It's not hard to see why: millions of people were sad, bored, and stuck at home glued to their electronic devices. In New York and Ireland, officials even recommended auditioning a hand puppet in the name of public health. The NYC Health Department reminded people they are their own safest sexual partner. But, in a refreshingly non-judgemental way, they also recommended that people "be creative with sexual positions and physical barriers that allow sexual contact while preventing close face-to-face contact." And while many took the time to pick up the books they'd always intended to read, record the podcast they always wanted to start, or make loaf after loaf of banana bread (master baking), idle hands are the devil's workshop. Sensing an opportunity, Pornhub, one of the most popular porn sites, offered free premium membership (the usual services plus perks like zero ads) to quarantined people the world over, leading

to a significant increase in their traffic across some regions. Google Trends also showed a worldwide increase in people searching out porn in general, too.

Predictably, most rebooters we looked at reported lockdown had been tough for them, with many citing feelings of depression and shame. Some said they cried, and in extreme cases engaged in self-harm behaviors such as striking their own genitals. These responses showed just how seriously they took relapsing. Members recommended workarounds: long walks, cold showers, learning to code, and speaking to their families. However, most commonly, people turned their bedrooms into weight-training areas or gyms. This trend stands to reason since men often cite developing muscle mass and upper body definition among the main reasons they exercise—it's another avenue into the masculine ideal.

Yet a subset saw lockdown as an opportunity: "the ultimate test of self-discipline." It was a proving ground. While most men were jerking their gherkins, they demonstrated their resolve. Some framed themselves as an elite 1 percent of humans with the discipline and will power to control themselves. They claimed they would reap the benefits of their sacrifice: afterward, every day would become easy mode. Some fairweather nofappers asked if they could renegotiate the rules a little, such as having phone sex or just masturbating *less*, and asked existential questions like if they needed to abstain when most couldn't meet a partner anyway. They were invariably told there was no free pass and were reminded that avoidance of orgasm was not the sole purpose of the reboot challenge. The ultimate goal was to attain more comprehensive physical and mental health benefits: high performance, self-mastery, and self-confidence. Hence the pandemic separated "the men from the boys."

It wasn't all testosterone and chivalry. Something unexpectedly touching—pun partially intended—was how effectively the members created a safe space for themselves. Predominantly male outlets tend not to be big on vulnerability and exposure, but their conversations were surprisingly open, including difficult topics like anxiety, self-loathing, and sadness. Perhaps it is the idea that excessive porn use constitutes a kind of medical condition that makes vulnerability so readily accepted in reboot forums: users tend to see each other and themselves as the victims of something external. Likewise for the popular narratives surrounding exploitation. This brings us to whether these nofappers are a part of the manosphere.

Members in Good Standing?

SOME OF THE BELIEFS AND ATTITUDES ASSOCIATED WITH reboot communities, particularly their gender politics, may remind you of the manosphere. For the unfamiliar, I'll save you a dark digital rabbit hole. The manosphere is a loosely defined ecosystem where (mostly) men share and affirm patriarchal and/or antifeminist ideas. The following groups are generally considered canon:

Pick Up Artists (PUAs): teach "game" techniques to help men attract women.

Incels (involuntary celibates): define themselves by an inability to attract women they also feel sexually entitled to.

Men's Rights Activists (MRAs): argue that institutions and legal structures systematically discriminate against men.

Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW): a separatist group of straight men who reject relationships with women because women are "not worth it."

There's no official list of outlets since it's not a formal alliance,

WITH YOU FOR LIFE

*A CURRENT AFFAIRS
subscription doesn't have to
be a lifetime commitment.
But once you find the ideal
companion, why would you
ever let them go?*



currentaffairs.org

and member groups don't always see each other as allies. For example, Pick Up Artists mock incels, and incels mutually envy and pity them for being handsome but dim. However, all manosphere narratives essentially have the following foundational belief: that a gynocentric, man-hating, liberal consensus has shamed masculinity out of men (and each group has come up with its own theory about how to respond to such emasculation). Accepting this is called taking the red pill, named after the pill Neo picks in *The Matrix* which allows him to see the world for how it really is.

There are similarities between reboot communities and the manosphere. As Taylor and Jackson pointed out, rebooters' emphasis on biological essentialism depersonalizes women into markers of male success; there is necessarily a competitive dynamic to the story. Such thinking is reminiscent of PUAs, who qualify their "game" by how many women they can get with and incels their inferiority by how many turn them down. Rebooters also endorse the idea of a natural hierarchy of men, ranging from "pussy" and "beta" to "alpha" based on how well they manage their urges. Finally, the research cited above suggests that reboot communities and gurus can be prone to misogyny, a resentment of feminism changing men, and a conspiratorial mindset akin to the red pill (we can call this subsection QAnon).



There are three widely recognized ways to do the reboot Challenge. Note that none of them have fixed intervals. Some do them for a week while others go for the rest of their lives.

Easy Mode: Masturbating is still allowed, but you are not allowed to watch porn when you're doing it. Often people start here and then move on to...

Normal Mode: Abstaining from the cycle of porn, masturbation, and orgasms. However, people can still have sexual intercourse.

Hard Mode: Complete abstinence from all sexual activities. Masturbation, porn, sex—the lot!

Monk Mode: Another variant that's not officially canonized but gets mentioned on reboot forums. This is hard mode minus any artificial stimulation: no games, no TV, no YouTube, no social media, no reading *Current Affairs* online. Those who commit to it aren't even allowed to go on the message boards to share their progress! (If a tree falls in the woods....)

Narratives built upon ideas about a hidden agenda or population control, such as the red pill, promote irrational and in some instances extremist thinking. For example, fringe rebooters promote the sissy-hypno theory. According to this conspiracy theory, some porn has been specifically designed with the intention of making men more feminine, or turning them gay, through subliminal messaging. It is not clear what the ultimate aim is other than to trick otherwise heterosexual men. More worryingly, an analysis of reboot posts on Twitter by Swedish researcher Scott Burnett found alt-righters citing the porn industry as part of a "Jewish plot," a conspiracy recently alluded to by the artist formerly known as Kanye West, who has also reported abstaining from pornography. Hence research by Abeer Khan and Lukasz Golab, from Waterloo, Canada, found crossover between members of reddit pages pertaining to rebooting and The Red Pill, with users tending to post on discussions across similar subreddits. Xiaoting Han and Chenjun Yin, researchers from Beijing, also observed thematic overlap between reboot communities' masculinist discourses and PUAs, MGTOW and incels. These include the idea that a gynocentric society has reconditioned weak men to take an inclusive approach to gender relations and caused them to deny who they really are.

Popular names in the manosphere, including some right-wing personalities from the so-called Intellectual Dark Web, also endorse teachings from various reboot communities. For example, Jordan Peterson, often cited on forums, told Dave Rubin that pornography is "an easy out" representing pleasure without responsibility. Likewise, as a fresh-faced graduate, Ben Shapiro released an anti-porn book and still argues it "destroys society." His *Daily Wire* colleague Matt Walsh argues that "every single person who claims to 'enjoy porn' is lying" and that watching it is "dirty and wrong" (more of a moral argument than reboot sites tend to make). Next, lifestyle guru Tim Ferriss includes saying no to a *serving of beef strokenoff* as part of a 30-day transformation. Moving further rightward, Alex Jones' former right-hand man Paul Joseph Watson says it "disincentivizes you from attracting real women," and counters pro-porn arguments with "ok coomer." Finally, the self-professed "Western chauvinist" Proud Boys have their own version, "no wanks," prohibiting "heterosexual brothers of the Fraternity" from masturbating more than once a month.

Despite these connections, rebooting communities probably aren't part of the manosphere. Rather, I think it's more accurate to say that there exists a spectrum of individuals and subgroups varying in how manospheric they are. The boundaries between reboot communities and the manosphere might be fluid, too, with forums and vloggers acting as a kind of pipeline that leads those looking to abstain into manosphere beliefs. For instance, those who interpret quitting porn as a step toward a masculine ideal may, if they repeatedly relapse, start to see self-improvement as futile and become vulnerable to incelism. Likewise for those who last three months but fail to see dramatic lifestyle changes (while their sexually active friends enjoy the occasional frig): if only they had an easy way to handle their frustration.

Unlike MGTOW, incels, PUAs and MRAs, reboot websites are not always built around concrete aims beyond not jacking it. Some, particularly coaches, openly position abstinence as a step toward achieving alpha masculinity. But others, such as NoFap LLC or Brain Buddy App, present themselves more neutrally. Research into the phenomena is still young, but at the moment, we don't know how many reboot users actually share the manosphere views; studies have tended to look at individual figures or employ specific search terms

that influence the conversations included. We also don't know how many in these communities support or celebrate violence and trolling behaviors such as doxing, brigading, and harassment. And while there's evidence that some rebooters share a worldview with parts of the manosphere, it isn't clear whether their particular reboot outlet actively promotes this worldview or if these websites—by appealing to traditionally masculine ideals, stoicism, and personal sovereignty—appeal to fellow travelers already in the manosphere. Having people with manosphere attitudes in reboot communities is a problem and needs addressing, but it may not always be by design.

There are also numerous ways into the challenge and, by extension, reboot communities, many of which are not manospheric. Roland Imhoff and Felix Zimmer, psychologists based in Germany, surveyed 1,000 men from an unrelated forum about if/why they'd consider not fapping. They were most likely to do so if they were worried that wanking would ruin aspects of their social lives, like their connection with their partner. Others who said they'd do it tended to identify as more religious.

This second point lines up with the diversity of reboot communities. NoFap LLC, the biggest outlet, is a secular site. However, anyone can use it, including religious people. A browse of their message boards and affiliated YouTube videos with “nofap” in their title shows participants spanning the globe, citing their faith as an inspiration. For instance, Taoist “semen retention” is more spiritual than plain old abstinence since it links ejaculating to losing “life force” rather than motivation. Despite their focus on self-control alongside rebooters, semen retainers often won't even have sex unless they can train themselves in the art of reaching orgasm without cumming. However, they still share online spaces with those only trying to remove porn from their life. Scott Burnett also found numerous believers responding to the hashtag #NoFap. And while pious viewpoints can be compatible with the gender politics commonplace in reboot communities, they are not the same flavor of conservatism as the manosphere. Unequivocally equating them arguably promotes a Western-centric perspective of sexuality.

Other rebooters could have gotten involved because they are, if you can believe it, the kind of people who give up pleasuring themselves for fun: not masturbating is the new masturbating! The internet meme of No Nut November has also raised the public profile of rebooting. As with other self-help initiatives, such as Sober October, Movember (grow facial hair for men's health) or Veganuary, nofap's cultural significance transcends the individual company that created it. Moreover, the internet is almost overflowing with weird places people can confer over whatever niche topic they want (google Cute Dead Guys at your peril). However, there isn't a plethora of spaces to talk about not doing the five-finger shuffle. Thus, maybe for people with this aim, no matter the reason, reboot communities represent the only game in town. It seems less plausible to me that men become MRAs without supporting their political ambitions or join MGTOW without rejecting women since these causes are front and center of their message boards.

Likewise, many men abstain because they are worried about erectile dysfunction, which isn't necessarily indicative of any belief in male supremacy, antifeminism, or the red pill. NoFap LLC does not state that porn causes erectile dysfunction, but other reboot sites do, so people may approach the challenge with this in mind. A potential problem is that if men worry fapping will leave them in Lake Flaccid, it may result in a self-fulfilling prophecy; those who watch it may work themselves into a state of panic. This can then have a knock-on effect if *not*

rising to the occasion makes them even more nervous next time, and so on until the fear of impotency has left them impotent. Recent research by the American neuroscientist Nicole Prause supports this feedback loop. The idea is that that anxiety, rather than the frequency of porn viewing, predicts the likelihood of erectile dysfunction.

THERE IS ALSO THE QUESTION OF PORN ADDICTION itself. Regardless of its legitimacy as a medical condition, this is the context in which most people seem to join reboot forums and is how NoFap LLC frames itself. These efforts may be useful if they help make the small number of people who'd otherwise sack the quarterback all day, every day less likely to do so. However, it's potentially problematic to see porn as addictive if the label leads to individuals feeling helpless, distressed, or guilty because they think their behavior is abnormal. The controversial diagnosis of sex addiction pathologized the socially taboo but common desire to have sex with multiple partners. Similarly, seeing porn as an addiction risks stigmatizing healthy behaviors and plays to the hands of Christian conservatism. Moreover, an all-or-nothing approach could lead people to spend a lot of money on treatments they do not really need. Like other types of self-help, rebooting communities thrive because people want to change something about themselves. NoFap LLC appears to run entirely from donations and makes its resources available free of charge—same with Reboot Nation. However, other sites also sell some of their “secrets.” With a wealth of books, coaches, courses and apps available, a man's wallet can take a pounding to make sure his penis doesn't.

Still, guys worried about having sex on the brain 24/7 can be agnostic to the reasons behind it. Rightly or wrongly, they are there because they want help, and these feelings are valid. However, perhaps part of why they feel this way is the awkward, often embarrassed way we as a society discuss pornography—and sex in general. If people think it is inherently bad, or something to be ashamed of, then this can make porn habits seem problematic. Joshua B. Grubbs and colleagues suggest it isn't the amount of time spent using porn that predicts people's perceptions of whether or not they are addicted. Instead it's the significance viewers give it, as measured by their moral disapproval. Rather than honoring their urges, they are ashamed of them.

To be clear, there are problems with porn. It can create unrealistic expectations of sexual behavior among young people, and researchers Alessia Tranchese and Lisa Sugiura of the University of Portsmouth note that some porn videos normalize misogyny. The poor pay and conditions workers face need to be addressed, too—not that reboot sites focus on these issues much. But if the industry is taboo to the point of talking about it openly, no matter how many people watch it behind closed doors, reforms like this become hard to imagine.

Porn also has some good points: it potentially offers people a safe, judgment-free arena in which they can explore their sexuality and learn what they like (as per the legendary Internet Rule 34, if something exists then there's porn of it). The cornucopia of barely imaginable videos can be dark or unpleasant, but it can also empower viewers to explore their every fantasy and kink, making them more comfortable with their sexual identity. By being more willing to talk about pornography—and even educate people about it—we can have more informed conversations about what healthy consumption looks like. In that respect, I don't think it ought to be thought of as something to be avoided, but something to be addressed. Perhaps we even need to become more ProFap. ♣

REAL COMMUNISM

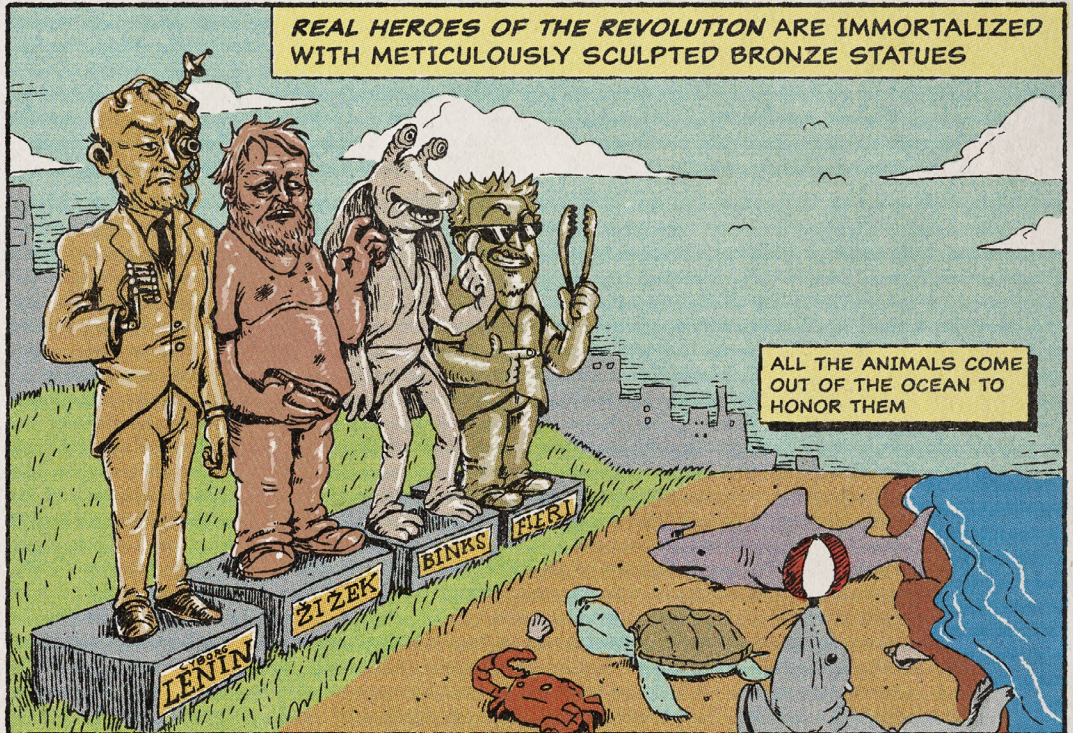
THE REAL SHIT... ACCEPT NO SUBSTITUTES!!

THE SECRETS OF **REAL COMMUNISM** HAVE REMAINED A MYSTERY FOR GENERATIONS -- WITH EVERY VAGABOND, ROGUE, AND AMATEUR TREASURE HUNTER TRYING TO GET THEIR HANDS ON IT.

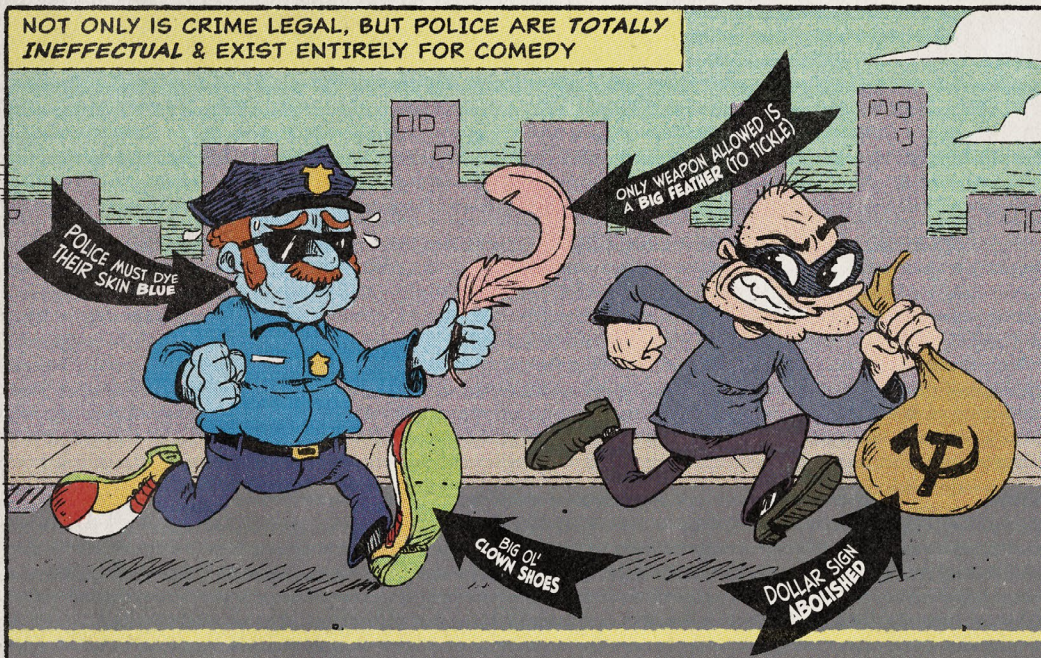
STREET HUSTLERS AND TRAVELLING SALESMEN HAVE TRIED TO SELL COMMUNISM'S SWEET SECRETS, RIPPING OFF LITTLE OLD GRANNIES WITH TRICKS & DECEPTIONS.

HOWEVER, THANKS TO TIRELESS RESEARCH AND OUR TEAM OF 10,000 PROLETARIAN ORACLES, WE'RE FINALLY ABLE TO ENVISION THE **UTOPIA** THAT IS **REAL & TRUE COMMUNISM!**

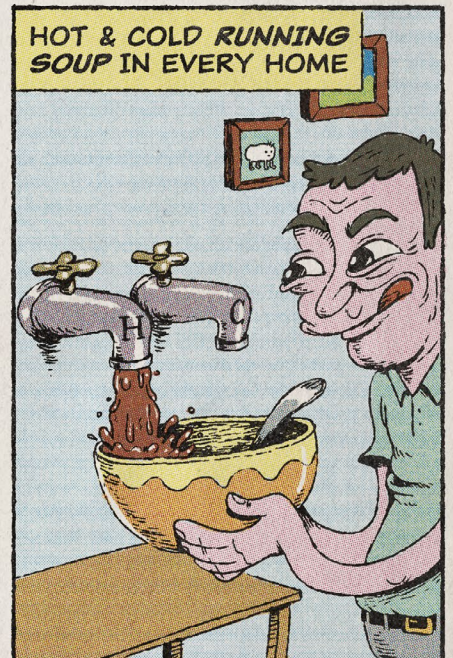
REAL HEROES OF THE REVOLUTION ARE IMMORTALIZED WITH METICULOUSLY SCULPTED BRONZE STATUES

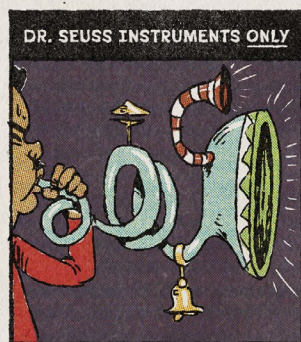
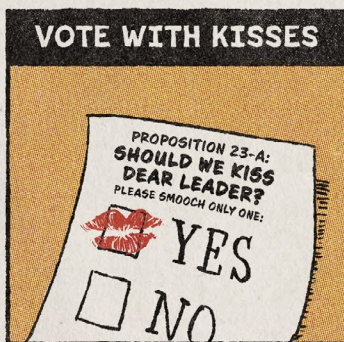
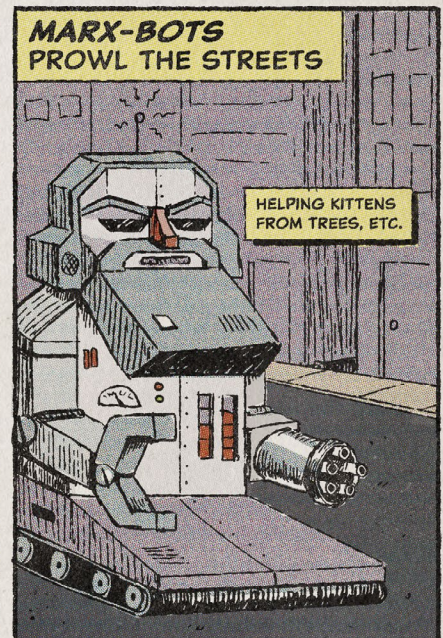
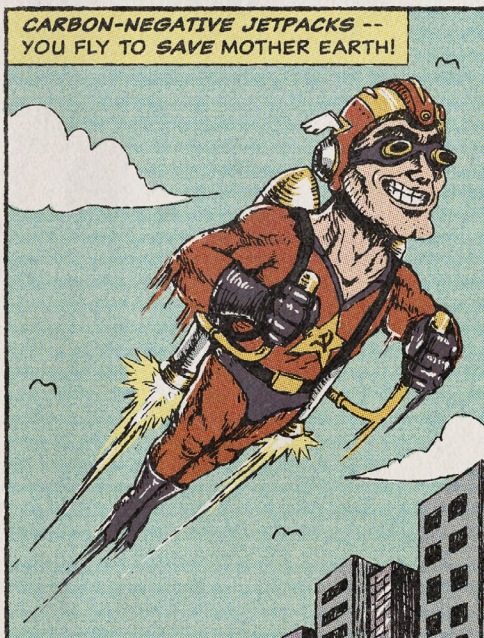
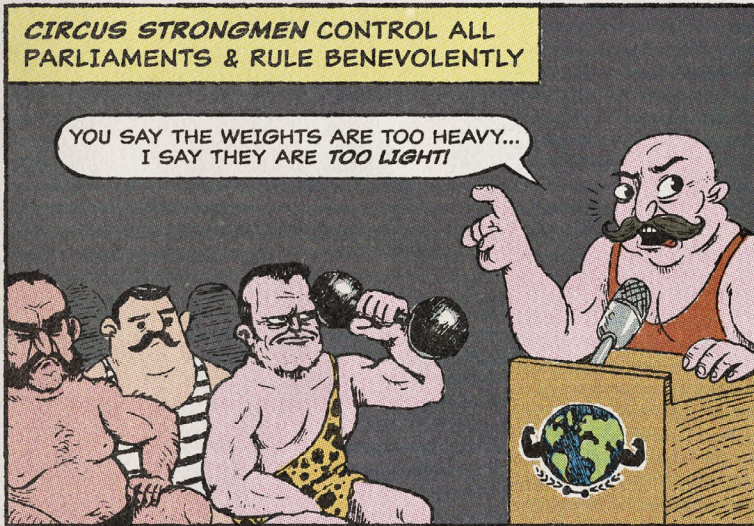
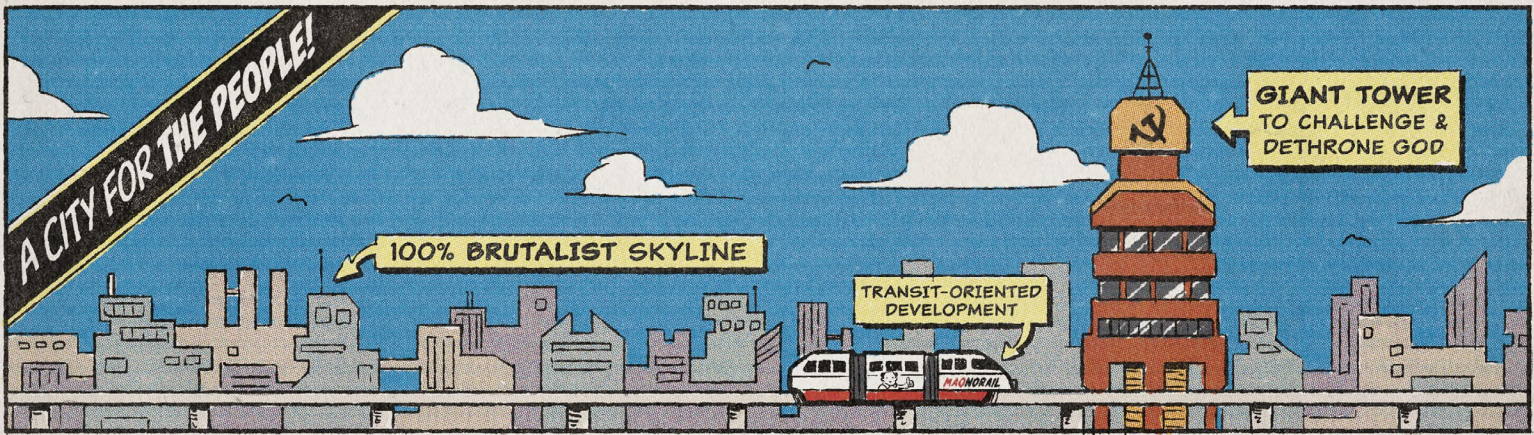


NOT ONLY IS CRIME LEGAL, BUT POLICE ARE **TOTALLY INEFFECTUAL** & EXIST ENTIRELY FOR COMEDY



HOT & COLD **RUNNING SOUP** IN EVERY HOME





IS NETFLIX DOOMED?

BY RACHEL ASHCROFT

IN 1983, SOMETHING UNEXPECTED OCCURRED: the video game industry collapsed.

Only a few years earlier, the market had been booming. In 1980, Namco's Pac-Man was released in North America to widespread critical acclaim. The "little yellow chomper who's as popular as Santa Claus," as one enthusiastic newscaster described him, raked in \$1 billion from arcade game sales alone. That same year, industry leader Atari developed Battlezone, the first arcade game to feature a 3D environment. Atari went on to gross \$415 million that year. By the end of 1981, the arcade game industry had generated roughly \$5 billion in revenue, while the home video game market was set to reach \$2 billion in 1982.

But by December 1982, things had turned sour. The market was overrun with poor-quality games. Consumers regularly complained about low-budget titles with poor-quality graphics or stories that were too easy to complete. There was also an overabundance of video game consoles (the Intellivision, the ColecoVision, and so on) plus the rising threat of home computer systems such as the Apple II, which could play video games *and* help with homework. Atari revealed that its annual year-over-year sales increase had only been 10 percent, far less than the 50 percent it originally estimated. Wall Street investors panicked, and in 1983 Atari saw nearly half a billion dollars wiped from its value. Demand for video games plummeted. Toy manufacturer Mattel, once the third-largest video game maker, left the market entirely. Many smaller companies went bust and industry-wide losses totalled approximately \$1.5 billion. The boom years of the early 1980s were officially over.

What does this retro tale of industry-wide economic bust have to do with modern-day entertainment? We can identify growing similarities with another medium which is still in its infancy: streaming video on demand (SVOD). Right now, SVOD is one of the most popular ways to fill our leisure time. According to Nielsen, the average weekly time spent streaming video content in the U.S. increased from 143 billion minutes in February 2021 to 169 billion minutes in February 2022. This means that Americans consume roughly

320,000 years' worth of on-demand video content a week! Some 21 percent of customers spend \$20-\$29.99 a month on services, while 15 percent pay \$50 or more for multiple subscriptions. Over half of U.S. households pay for at least three streaming platforms a month. Considering the amount of time and money we hand over to SVOD services, it's fair to expect a reasonable amount of value in return. In 1982, working families spent wages on poor-quality games and the various consoles needed to play them, only for the industry to collapse due to mismanagement, market saturation, and competition from other forms of technology. The SVOD market has not experienced a bust yet. But as the bubble continues to expand, cracks are beginning to show.

SUBSCRIPTION VIDEO ON DEMAND HAS SHOT to prominence over the last decade. Market leader Netflix paved the way, successfully transitioning from a DVD rental mail-order service to a fully-fledged online streaming platform with a current net worth of \$100 billion. Apple TV+ launched in 2019; Morgan Stanley analysts predicted it would become a \$9 billion a year business by 2025. Today people around the world watch television across multiple streaming services, many of which are now valued in the billions of dollars. Disney+ is currently valued at \$110 billion, while Warner Bros. Discovery (owner of both HBO Max and Discovery+) has a market cap of \$30 billion. Amazon Prime alone has a global membership base of 200 million. This year Prime increased its annual subscription cost from \$119 to \$139. And because COVID has caused many people to stay at home, streaming adoption spiked. For most of the big name platforms such as Disney+, Prime and Netflix, subscriber numbers increased and company share prices shot up throughout the 2020-2021 period. This year, the amount of time people spent watching streaming on demand continued to overtake traditional broadcast programming.

It's little wonder then that commentators have heralded SVOD as the future of television. But despite this outward success, signs are appearing that all is not as well as it seems. Netflix lost subscribers

this year for the first time in a decade. Investor nerves are jangling. Repercussions from Netflix' poor performance are already being felt in the financial markets: shares in major media companies like Paramount (which owns Paramount+) and Warner Bros. Discovery (owner of HBO Max and Discovery+) are tumbling. Since the start of 2022, Netflix and Disney+ have seen \$300 billion wiped from their joint market value. Meanwhile Apple TV+ and other big hitters are spending billions to create original content, but they don't have enough subscribers to make a profit. Furthermore, there is too much video on demand content and the quality is arguably declining. Amazon is spending big in its attempts to dominate the SVOD content landscape (just last year it acquired MGM studios for \$8.45 billion). Yet the market is also crowded out with smaller platforms. More than 200 streaming services are currently competing for customers worldwide, leading consumers in North America and Europe to report 'subscription fatigue' due to the overwhelming choice of streaming platforms.

An industry awash with poor-quality content. An overcrowded market. Consumer fatigue. Sound familiar? On top of all this, a global recession is looming. In an industry that hasn't really been tested yet, we may be about to witness a crash on a similar scale to the video game collapse of the early '80s. With this in mind, we need to take a closer look at what this industry is offering us now. Spending hard-earned money and precious free time on streaming video should make us more critical of the industry. We need to be more wary of an industry that turns art into content and that offers too much choice along with a financial burden for families juggling multiple subscriptions—especially if these factors are simply going to contribute to yet another major market bust that sees huge financial losses and devastating job cuts. The streaming video on demand industry can adapt before this happens. In fact it *must* adapt, because right now the system isn't working for its balance sheets. More importantly, it isn't working for its customers.

DURING THE EARLY '80s, MOST successful titles were produced by large companies (Atari, Intellivision, Mattel) who possessed the financial resources to make fun and entertaining games. Donkey Kong appeared in 1981 to near-universal praise from gamers for its excellent graphics and challenging gameplay. But despite the arrival of innovative games from industry big hitters, a steady stream of low-quality titles simultaneously invaded store shelves. Smaller companies wanted to profit from the video game craze. Until 1979, Atari was the only company creating games for its Atari VCS console. This changed with the arrival of Activision, a company founded in 1979 by a group of embittered ex-Atari employees who wanted to focus solely on developing new games without having to build their own consoles. The outcome of a legal battle between Atari and Activision gave any independent game developer permission to create games for any console as long as they paid royalties to the console manufacturer. Between 1981 and 1982, 158 companies developed games for the Atari VCS. But many of these

developers had low financial resources and struggled to attract talented programmers in a market where coders were scarce.

The result? The market was flooded with low-quality games containing crude graphics and poor sound effects as well as boring, predictable stories. Companies such as Quaker Oats entered the market and added to the overall drop in quality by producing games that resembled thinly-disguised ads rather than pieces of entertainment. Kool-Aid Man featured the titular character running around trying to ensure a pack of "Thirsties" were captured. In some cases, developers having more freedom, combined with a lack of industry regulation, led not only to rubbish games but also downright sexist and racist material. One notorious example was *Custer's Revenge*, an X-rated title by a tiny (and now defunct) company named American Multiple Industries. *Custer's Revenge* drew protests upon its release. The storyline involved a pixelated General Custer overcoming various obstacles to rape a Native American woman.

Unsurprisingly, people grew tired of paying for junk products. Video games came to be seen as a passing fad, rather than a serious and permanent fixture in the entertainment landscape. Major companies like Atari arguably hastened the industry's demise. To compete with all this new content, larger enterprises panicked and began making erratic business decisions. Instead of giving coders adequate time to develop video games, companies slashed deadlines and released games without due quality control measures. Atari's 1982 *Pac-Man* for home console (since voted one of the worst games of all time) sold over 7 million copies that year but came under fire for its poor-quality visuals and grating sound effects. The final mistake in a long line of blunders was Atari's *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* game. Atari rushed *E.T.* out in time for the 1982 Christmas shopping season. The result was a bizarre gameplay experience in which the protagonist spends most of his time falling into a giant cave. *E.T.* was so badly received that of the 5 million copies produced, stores returned roughly 3.5 million unsold cartridges to Atari.

We can find similar parallels running through the story of streaming video to date. Netflix revolutionized streaming video when it released *House of Cards*, its first original series, in 2013. (The company wisely started creating original content once it realized that channels like HBO were planning to create their own streaming platforms and wouldn't allow Netflix to keep licensing their programs.) *House of Cards* helped the service gain a reputation for high-quality programming. The show, a political drama about a scheming couple plotting to cement their own power, earned 56 Emmy nominations and 7 wins during its six-season run. The show's writers were given a vast amount of creative freedom compared to their colleagues in cable TV, mainly because Netflix executives didn't have to worry about reactions to their content from worried ad sponsors. Netflix didn't host ads, and if anyone was offended by a *House of Cards* episode then they could simply switch over to one of the other thousands of TV shows hosted on the platform. Netflix executives also gave their writers a two-season deal upfront: they could plot storylines and develop characters far more easily compared to network TV deals (which typically award 6 or 12 episodes). Within the industry, this was a new and innovative way of storytelling that earned the series widespread critical praise.

However, since the mid-2010s, Netflix's content strategy has fo-

CURRENT AFFAIRS LOW-RISK NOOTROPICS

You may be surprised to learn that left-wing print media is not the most lucrative industry to be in. So we are excited to announce that we are now branching into pharmaceuticals! We have synthesized the wisdom of our periodical into a powerful stimulant guaranteed to make you appear more intelligent and attractive...

because

YOUR BRAIN NEEDS DRUGS



CURRENT
AFFAIRS

A Magazine of Unproven Medical Products

cused on quantity over quality. *Time* labeled 2018 as, for Netflix, “The Year of Too Much Content.” Critic Judy Berman described the new Netflix approach as one that prioritizes growth above all else. She argues this has turned the platform from a “prestige haven into volume business.” In other words, Netflix prefers creating quick and easy-to-make content over the kinds of cinematic, serious, and more expensive programs associated with ‘prestige’ television, such as *Breaking Bad* or *The Sopranos*.

Since 2018, Netflix and other major streaming services have only increased the amount of programming on their platforms. There are now 817,000 unique titles (and counting) available on streaming services. This content-heavy approach means that programming quality has inevitably declined. On Netflix, critically-acclaimed original hits like *Orange Is the New Black* now exist alongside reams of niche reality programming and game shows. *How to Build a Sex Room* features designer Melanie Rose advising couples on sex dungeon decor. “Don’t give it a pussy tap, give it some welly!” Melanie cheerily tells one of her clients, who is practicing spanking his wife’s hand with a riding crop. *Is It Cake?* is a game show in which contestants try to replicate everyday objects as cakes in an effort to trick celebrity judges. Programs such as these tend to be unscripted, making them faster and cheaper to create than a *House of Cards*-style prestige drama. Netflix refuses to publish detailed viewership figures, so analyzing the true popularity of these shows is tricky at best. Review sites like Rotten Tomatoes provide a barometer (*Is It Cake?* currently has an average audience score of 40 percent). What we do know is that the content-heavy approach is doing nothing to stop Netflix from losing subscribers.

Netflix isn’t the only culprit, of course. Even companies who own healthy back catalogs of popular TV hits are producing an overabundance of new, mediocre programming. What’s easier and quicker than creating entirely new characters and stories? Rebooting older, failsafe franchises. Disney+ plans to release at least 20 new Marvel and *Star Wars* projects over the next 18 months. All of these TV programs and films are spin-offs or reboots of tired franchises. Anyone for *The Guardians of the Galaxy Holiday Special*? What about *Spider-Man: Freshman Year*? Some pop culture characters such as Marvel’s Daredevil, the crime-fighting lawyer/superhero, have received separate adaptations by multiple major streaming services within the last 10 years. SVOD platforms now resemble content mills, creating prequel after sequel after spin-off without necessarily attracting rave reviews from viewers. Legacy characters from previous projects are brought in for nostalgia purposes to satisfy existing fan bases (e.g., Bruce Banner’s appearance in the new *She-Hulk: Attorney at Law* series). Franchises like Marvel tease the *next* film they’re making with much-hyped end credit scenes. But after a while, such devices can leave viewers feeling as though they’re simply watching another piece of content within a wider universe of content that is constantly producing new programming. As critic A.A. Dowd puts it: “What hope do these movies have to feel fresh or exciting when they’re arriving at a pace to rival the clockwork release of their comic-book source material?”

For viewers, the impact of too much mediocre content is clear. First, we simply don’t have enough time to watch all of these shows.

According to one report, it would take the average U.K. citizen roughly 86 years to watch all of the video content currently on offer across the 9 major British and U.S. streaming services. And that’s only if each person devoted at least 3 hours a day solely to watching video streaming on demand. Second, it’s starting to look as though we’re no longer willing to keep paying for a content-heavy approach. So-called content fatigue has already been widely reported on by TV critics and marketing executives alike. It’s happening in the U.K., where Netflix is losing thousands of subscribers amid a cost of living crisis combined with Europe’s energy crisis. According to Kantar Worldpanel research, the number of U.K. households with at least one streaming subscription fell by 937,000 between January and September this year. Program quality becomes an important factor when people need to sit down and justify the direct debits leaving their bank accounts.

INDEED, ‘CHURNING’ HAS BECOME AN important indicator that customers are trying to find ways around balancing multiple subscriptions. Churning occurs when users either cancel or cancel then re-add a particular SVOD service. Overall, the churn rate in the U.S. is around 37 percent across all streaming services. And rising numbers of consumers, particularly Gen Zers and Millennials, are churning. In a desperate bid to counteract this phenomenon, platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime have been engaged in an unprofitable content war. Amazon’s *Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power* is now the most expensive TV program ever made, costing over \$1 billion. Disney+ is reportedly spending \$33 billion on content this year alone. Admittedly, Netflix originals *Stranger Things* (season four) and the first season of *Squid Game* generated billions of viewing hours, garnered widespread critical acclaim and were rare examples of SVOD programs creating a cultural buzz akin to TV hits such as *Breaking Bad* and *Game of Thrones*. But their popularity did nothing to increase year-on-year Netflix subscriber growth. *Squid Game* (a South Korean series) helped attract 1 million new customers in the Asia region, but the platform leaked subscriptions everywhere else, including 600,000 cancellations in the U.S. and Canada. In fact, in North America the main SVOD services are still experiencing stagnant subscriber growth, despite investing millions of dollars in original programming like *Stranger Things*. Ironically, in order to keep their balance sheets looking healthy and fund this content creation, services such as Amazon Prime are increasing their subscription costs. This will likely force low-income customers to churn even more in future. (Amazon Prime memberships may have already reached a saturation point in the U.S., anyway.)

The content-churn cycle must surely reach a critical point. Just as Atari panicked at market competition and began rushing out games before the bust hit the video game industry, SVOD services are trying to drown out their competitors by plowing money into programming despite struggling to make a profit. Interestingly, Netflix has just begun implementing a new strategy which may provide an antidote to this situation. The platform is staggering the release of its biggest hits, such as *Ozark* and *Stranger Things*, by

dropping episodes every week (rather than all at once) or releasing seasons in two distinct halves, with a gap of several months between each half. This gives people more time to watch a series and builds anticipation for new episodes. The platform will also be reducing its enormous content budget, which reached \$13.6 billion in 2021. Is this a sign that industry executives are starting to realize that ‘more content quicker’ is wearing out customers? Let’s hope so.

THE MARKET IS ALSO SATURATED BY THE sheer number of SVOD platforms available. Back in the early 1980s, gamers faced a similar situation. Along with poor-quality games, they had a dizzying array of competing consoles to choose from. The Atari VCS, the ColecoVision, the Intellivision, the SEGA SG-1000. In 1982, at least seven major consoles entered the market. Only six months before the crash, a May 1982 *Business Week* article predicted that by 1985 “nearly half of all U.S. homes with television sets will own a video game machine.” But the sheer amount of consoles available created fierce competition. Video games appeared to be thriving, but an overabundance of choice destabilized the industry. People were unwilling to spend money on new video games *and* new consoles. By 1984, the industry had crashed so severely that only one new system—Rick Dyer’s Halcyon model—appeared on the market. It was a financial failure.

At the same time, the ‘80s marked the rise of home computers. Steve Wozniak and Steve Jobs released the Apple II: “The home computer that’s ready to work, play and grow with you!” In the U.K., Sinclair Research developed the highly popular ZX Spectrum. Entertainment mediums are always competing for our spare time. The marketing departments of home computer companies knew this and had the perfect angle to play on. As one ad for the Commodore 64 computer helpfully reminded parents: “Kids can do more with a Commodore 64”. Rather than investing in multiple video game consoles, why not buy a single machine that can do everything: spreadsheets, word processing and video games, too? The message worked. In 1982, approximately 1.4 million personal computers shipped around the world. Their sales continued to grow through the mid-’80s as consumers ceased to buy video game consoles.

Since Netflix first shot to fame, it’s been hard to ignore the increasing number of SVOD platforms on the market. Disney+, Apple TV+, Amazon Prime Video and Paramount+ are just a few examples of the industry’s major players. In general there is very little difference between how these services operate and what their interface looks like. People sign up to a subscription plan, scroll through the platform’s available content, and binge-watch whatever they choose. What really sets each platform apart is the programming it offers. Some platforms have successfully marketed themselves as leaders in particular TV genres. Disney+ is arguably the biggest ‘family oriented’ platform and features a huge array of kids programming. Sports subscriptions such as ESPN+ and DAZN are another popular niche streaming genre. This can help streaming platforms to set themselves apart in a crowded marketplace. Yet most SVOD services will still offer a range of genres, even if they happen to specialize in a particular

form of entertainment. And with all these available platforms comes a great deal of consumer frustration.

Licensing poses one of the most annoying issues. When a new platform appears, it removes all of its licensed content from existing platforms then adds that content to its own new service. This means that you’ll need to take out a new subscription if you want to keep watching said content. For example, if you were recently binge-watching *Parks and Recreation* or *30 Rock* on Netflix U.K., you might have noticed that both programs suddenly disappeared in August. No matter. NBC has now uploaded them to its Peacock streaming service. You’ll just need to take out a subscription to finish watching them.

According to a Deloitte survey, around half of U.S. consumers say they’re frustrated by the growing number of subscriptions and services required to watch what they want. Yet more and more SVOD platforms keep appearing and the licensing cycle continues. Keeping track of the sheer number of platforms is impossible. Content from many smaller free or ad-supported services tends to also appear on the larger SVOD services: a typical example is CuriosityStream, which has its own website but also appears as a channel on Amazon Prime. Platforms regularly merge with one another, too: in 2021, NBC Universal merged its WWE Network with Peacock, while Disney is set to buy out Hulu.

This overabundance is leading to so-called ‘subscription fatigue,’ a phenomenon noted in 2019, when *Variety* reported that consumers were becoming irritated when content suddenly vanished from their existing streaming subscriptions. Nielsen has also reported that in 2022, nearly half of viewers are finding it hard to access the content they want to watch due to the volume of SVOD services. These frustrations have only continued to grow as the number of streaming platforms on the market keeps increasing. During COVID lockdowns, when many people (essential workers not included, of course) stayed at home in front of screens all day, the threat of consumer fatigue was delayed and major SVOD services saw healthy increases in their subscription numbers. Now *Forbes*, *The Guardian* and other major outlets are once again reporting on subscription fatigue, which is leading to more cancellations and those aforementioned churn rates.

ONE COULD ARGUE THAT MANY PEOPLE ARE still willing to pay for SVOD subscriptions. Indeed, market data from earlier this year shows that many families were happy to retain their subscriptions, with some even thinking about buying more. But the last few months have put a sudden and dramatic strain on personal finances. The global economy is wrestling with the effects of the war in Ukraine and a looming recession. Netflix is already shedding subscribers in countries like the U.K. where inflation and energy prices are set to skyrocket this winter. If poorer families are forced to adjust their household budgets to balance paying for rent, food, and other essentials, multiple streaming service subscriptions quickly become surplus to requirement. Platforms must respond to growing demands for more flexibility so that customers feel less overwhelmed and more in control of their monthly subscription costs.

‘Bundling’ is the most obvious solution. A bundled video streaming

service would allow consumers to pick and choose the services they want (e.g., ESPN+, Paramount+, HBO Max) at a less expensive rate rather than paying for all of these services separately. Some bundles are already starting to appear, with options generally offered by companies putting together the various platforms they already own (e.g., Disney has a Hulu/ESPN+/Disney+ bundle). But collaborations between the major streaming services, such as a hypothetical Netflix/Paramount bundle, for example, are unlikely to appear any time soon.

Flexible solutions such as bundling will have to become options eventually if platforms want to retain users who are more aware than ever of multiple subscription costs and the frustrations that come with too many platforms. After all, streaming video on demand isn't the only entertainment medium vying for people's time. Video games are emerging as a growing threat to streaming platforms. Data from market analysts shows that younger generations are as happy playing video games as they are watching TV on demand. One Deloitte survey found that Gen Z respondents from the U.S., U.K., Germany, Brazil, and Japan all cited gaming as their favorite medium of entertainment. Streaming subscription churn rates already tend to be higher among Millennials and Gen Z consumers. If younger generations aren't as loyal to their streaming services, and many seem to prefer playing video games anyway, there's a chance that gaming could overtake SVOD to become the main hobby among adults in the next decade or so. After all, it's not just young people who are embracing gaming: boomers and Gen X respondents in Deloitte's survey reported spending an average of 6-10 hours per week playing games. Gone is the gaming stereotype of the teenager playing for hours on a console in their parents' basement. Video games now incorporate everything from *Animal Crossing*-style mobile phone time fillers to online Esports tournaments. And these options are attracting a more diverse audience in the process.

BY THE TIME E.T. ARRIVED IN DECEMBER 1982, the video game bubble was already bursting. For a few short years, the 'Golden Age of Video Games' was a time of great excitement. But gamers rode a rollercoaster of instability, poor business decisions, and rubbish games. By 1983, most gamers were tired of investing resources in an erratic entertainment industry. One E.T. reviewer from April 1983 captures this frustration with stark advice to gamers: "Save your time and money." Some observers suggested that video game technology had reached its full potential with classics such as *Defender* and *Tempest*, and that young people would soon move on to the next big thing.

With hindsight, we can observe that the industry's bust benefited consumers in the long term. The video game industry clearly recovered from the dramatic financial losses of 1983 to 1985 (global video game consumer spending is set to top \$200 billion this year). When Japanese conglomerate Nintendo 'rescued' the North American market in the mid-'80s, it introduced some much-needed regulation into the industry. For example, Nintendo subjected all games by third-party developers for its Nintendo Entertainment Console to a rigorous quality control process. Games which passed this process then received an "Official Nintendo" seal on their packaging to

The sector is
producing an
**overabundance of
content**, much of it
average to low-quality,
across more platforms
than anyone can
possibly subscribe to.

help boost consumer confidence in the product. A *Washington Post* article from 1987 described Nintendo as "single-handedly reviving the industry" with such measures. (The industry is far from perfect, of course. Video games have a long history of self-regulation away from government interference. But addictive video games, sneaky monetization practices, and mandatory employee overtime are all problems that gaming companies need to address.) The company-led regulations led by the likes of Nintendo were game changers and continue to influence industry practice today, at least when it comes to the amount of games released and their overall quality.

Booms and busts are a common feature of capitalist economies. But when a sector crashes, businesses go under and working people lose their jobs. Plus the money that the average person has invested in a streaming service leaves them with nothing to show for their monthly payments in the event of an industry crash. Similar to how software licensing works, we don't own any of the programs we watch online; we're paying repeatedly to license them for our own personal use. If a streaming service goes bust, all we'll have left to comfort us are distant memories of tuning in to watch the latest Netflix original or HBO prestige drama. So what is it all for? Millions of people are currently putting time and money into a sector that is producing an overabundance of content, much of it average to low-quality, across more platforms than anyone can possibly subscribe to. If 2018 was the Year of Too Much Content, 2023 might become the Year of OK, We Need To Rethink This Business Model. Given the vast array of content currently available, we deserve to see more thoughtful and original programming in the future, even if there is less of it being produced. Money-saving solutions such as subscription 'bundling' packages should become an option as soon as possible. Whatever form these innovations take, nobody wants to witness another E.T. saga. Or a Custer's Revenge, for that matter. After all, we're already bracing ourselves for Disney's 10,000,000th *Star Wars* spin-off. Enough is enough. +



beautifying the soundscape

BY SOPHIE ELLIOTT

*"Let us have the luxury of silence."
JANE AUSTEN, MANSFIELD PARK*

On my last visit to New York City, I walked from Midtown to Central Park. Strolling along Seventh Avenue, I was subjected to ceaseless cacophony: the drilling of construction, the wailing sirens of emergency vehicles, the babble of crowds. Even on the outside paths of the park, I could hear the eternal din of traffic—engines revving and horns blaring and buses screeching as they came to a stop. Anything remotely pleasant—whizzing bicycles, the pitter-patter of rain, rustling leaves, chirping birds—was overwhelmed by urban cacophony.

We don't often think about noise or the sounds that make up our environment—what's known as the soundscape. Even stressful and near-constant noise can seem a mild nuisance when compared to more pressing concerns, whether political or personal. Nonetheless, the soundscape demands attention, for noise levels have pervasive and insidious effects, both on our health and our communities. Scientific reports show that noise pollution is associated with many health issues including high blood pressure, heart disease, and low birth weight. And appraising the sonic landscape is not a trivial question of independent tastes and preference, but of importance to the collective as well. Our cultures are determined by the spaces we have access to. Do we want our public places to promote well-being and human connection, or should we allow them to be noisy, nuisance-filled, and isolating places that we have to endure rather than enjoy?

PEOPLE LIVING IN URBAN DWELLINGS ARE continually subjected to deafening noise. In most densely-populated cities, noise levels are higher than is considered safe for human health. A 2014 study of three major U.S. cities—Atlanta, Los Angeles, and New York City—found that noise levels correlated highly with traffic levels, and according to the European Environment Agency, traffic volume is a health threat to at least 20 percent of the population living within the EU, a number that is predicted to increase with the future of urban growth. Even areas that are typically conceived of as places of tranquility are too noisy. Take, for example, the aural bombardment of most public parks and plazas: a throbbing bass that obliterates the serenity of natural spheres. One study measuring the sound of urban parks in Brazil found that all of the 15 evaluated points at Passeio Público were noted to have sound levels above 55 decibels (dB), which is technically considered grounds for "serious annoyance" by the WHO Guidelines for Community Noise, and exceeds the Curitiba Municipal Law's established

noise limit for green areas. At Barigüi, another park in the city, around 57 percent of surveyed individuals identified anthropogenic noise, including car and air traffic, human activity, machines, and music, while only 40 percent discerned natural sounds.

Indeed, urban environments are significantly louder than they used to be. In the last century, thinning populations in the countryside and suburbs have been lost to the city, where industrial developments have to accommodate high-density habitation. For example, the democratization of the automobile industry led to a substantial increase in the number of cars on the road and concomitant construction of transportation infrastructure has contributed strongly to the growth in ambient noise.

The increasing noisiness of our cities is deeply concerning, considering how dangerous constant sound is to health. A study by Bruitparif, a nonprofit environmental organization, concluded that a person living in the loudest areas of the Île-de-France (a region in France surrounding Paris) loses "more than three healthy life-years" because of noise. Loud noise triggers the autonomic nervous and endocrine systems and can induce spikes in blood pressure or disrupt homeostasis, with severe detriment to an individual's metabolism and cardiovascular system. In fact, another study assessed a 7 to 17 percent increased rate of cardiovascular disease for every 10 decibel sound increase.

One's hearing is likewise impacted by city racket. Firecrackers, which average around 140-150 dB, can cause immediate hearing loss. Sustained sound has similarly deleterious effects as singular sharp noises. Five minutes of exposure to 105-110 dB of music at a loud entertainment venue can lead to the development of permanent conditions. And, even in the sanctuary of your own apartment, there is no respite from the sounds outside: the brain processes sounds continuously, even during sleep. The encroachment of human noise pollution is practically limitless. Even undisturbed sleep, a basic bodily function necessary for optimized performance while awake, is nearly impossible to achieve.

The popularity of noise-canceling headphones is unsurprising, then, given the growing volume of the soundscape. And a habit of escapism is understandable in the context of the digital age, in which individuals seek gratification and self-stimulation within the faux-intimacy of cyberspace. But such technology, unless used for the purpose of blocking background noise, merely replaces urban noise pollution with more sound. The effect is a mutually-reinforced dynamic: modern conditions create a lack of community, and so we turn to substitutes found in the technology from which social atomism originates.

In a 1995 lecture at the Harvard Kennedy School, sociologist Robert Putnam, author of *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, ascribes the decline in community engagement in part to the development of technology, noting how listening to music was once considered a social activity. Putnam argued that technology was "privatizing our leisure time" and that even though "the average

number of hours that the average American spends listening to music each week is rising, [...] the number of hours spent listening to music in the company of another person is declining.” He bemoaned that, instead of attending philharmonic concerts, people now listened to music on CDs or Walkmans; he no doubt would have been horrified that modern gadgets such as the iPod have allowed people to turn public spaces into venues of private and isolated experiences.

And though strolling with AirPods in our ears may seem a pen- sive activity, the act is in fact a rejection of outward engagement and betrays an assumption that our surroundings are undeserving of aural attention. To detach yourself from the physical world around you is to miss things like the hushed sounds of crickets or the sound made by a gentle breeze. Eliminating background noise can be useful when passing loud areas, and many suburbs are devoid of nature, anyway—the relative quietude of a habitat is often an indicator of socio-economic status—not to mention the fact that such noise-canceling technology itself is exclusive to those who can afford the luxury of silence. However, even suburban places that are highly developed may have natural features worth noticing if one pays close attention. At the very least, emptying aural input can leave you susceptible to other random encounters and sights, or help generate thoughts spontaneously. Within the literary tradition, walking has long been regarded as a useful activity to inspire creativity. In fact, Charles Dickens once remarked that he obtained pleasure from walking “of two kinds: one, straight on end to a definite goal at a round pace; one, objectless, loitering, and purely vagabond.” Recreational walking for the novelists of the 19th century was contingent on aural sensitivity, displacing the mind of worldly obligations for random thoughts to emerge. That being said, neither were such environments silent, and the obtrusive sounds of industrial life carried novelty worthy of literary documentation; Dickens, for instance, wrote extensively about the filth and pollution of Victorian England. However, unpleasant noise did not reach the preponderance it has today, thereby preserving the sanctity of the outdoor walk. The modern city operates at sound levels which can measurably hurt human health and dwarfs the sound levels of the early periods of industrialization.

Our jadedness to city noise has still deeper implications. Ignoring your auditory environment removes you from aspects of political truth: a journey on the London Tube, for example, exposes the reality of insufficient funding in public services, evinced by the consistent screeching and clamor of the trains as they scrape against the tracks. In fact, a 2018 study led by Joseph Sollini of the University College London’s Ear Institute found that the city’s loudest Tube journey, from Kentish Town to Tufnell Park, averaged 97 dB. Some—most notably the Transport for London (TfL)—argue that the dangerous volumes (sometimes reaching nearly 110 dB) are not sustained for long enough to inflict lasting damage on passengers. But even brief exposure to loud blasts of sound can be harmful. Luis Gomez-Agustina, lecturer in acoustics at London South Bank University, says the Tube’s noise problems can be alleviated by

“reducing [the] speed of trains, smoothing out or grinding the contact surfaces between wheels and track, rail lubrication, [...] improving vibration isolation from wheel and track to the carriage, [...] improving sound insulation of windows [and] carriage walls, damping vibration of radiating panels of the carriage, and even installing active noise canceling to eliminate loud difficult to remove squeals or hums.”

Investment in public transport is necessary to reduce the risk of health problems from noise exposure. Even after receiving nearly \$1.5 billion in funding settlement earlier this year, the TfL remains severely underfunded, which has forced a rise in fares and cuts to bus services. But greater investment in the London Underground yields noticeable improvements. The Elizabeth line, which opened earlier this year during Jubilee weekend, offers improved facilities: airy platforms, lifts that run horizontally, a rooftop garden at the Canary Wharf station, wider carriages with WiFi, and tunnels lined with concrete and perforated with small holes that ensure the system operates silently, replacing the rowdy hassle of the metro with architectural refinement and proficiency. The project, completed four years late and \$5 billion over budget—costing \$23 billion in total—has been widely praised for the line’s reduced noise, cleanliness, comfort, and efficiency.

AND YET, ATTENTION TO SOUNDS IS NOT JUST a question of communal awareness. To have an interest in, and personal reaction to, your surroundings—noticing the aesthetically or ecologically important features of your neighborhood, such as a swallow in the park or declining population thereof—is a central feature of an individual consciousness. Consider the flâneur, a literary archetype popularized by the 19th century novel. The flâneur, an individual who wanders idly while observing society, typically amidst the backdrop of urban industrialization, is not presented as a moral hero in 19th century fiction. Yet, the assumption underpinning the flâneur’s behavior is that the world around you is worthy of interest and that paying attention can be intellectually or spiritually rewarding. Practicing flâneur-type behaviour today is essentially prohibited by the invention of the crime of “loitering” (which is often subject to discriminatory enforcement). Nevertheless, the presumption today when embarking on such aimless excursions is that you will either listen to music or to a podcast—a habit that rejects the worth of organic observation, a practice which itself is devalued by the modern cultural mania for constant productivity (who among us doesn’t derive gratification from multitasking?). Podcasts, for instance, offer intellectual stimuli in a way that can be passively absorbed; a 2019 study by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism revealed that 25 percent of listeners were motivated by a desire to “fill empty time.”

In his new collection of essays *The End of Solitude*, William Der-esiewicz argues that the post-modern individual has “lost the ability to be still, our capacity for idleness. [...] If boredom is the great emotion of the TV generation, loneliness is the great emotion of the generation of the web.” It is because of the nature of communication in the digital age, in which online correspondence is always accessible, that the skill of seclusion does not have to be learned, and the negative experience of loneliness has developed. In order to embody the sensibility of the flâneur in the contemporary age, mental solitude, which is best accomplished in the context of blankness, free of the constant occupation of our aural senses, is essential.

Cafes—which may surpass 70 dB during their downtime hours—are a useful example in exploring the dynamics of public spaces. Not only is it difficult to find cafes without amplified music, but there’s the constant grinding of espresso machines, clatter of coffee cups against wooden countertops, sound of the news on television, and clicking of MacBook keyboards. Indeed, researchers speculate that

prolonged exposure to the cafe's ambient noise may inflict auditory injury on baristas. Restaurants are known to exploit sound levels to drive profit by playing loud music to increase and expedite consumption, despite the fact that dining out is designed to be a social activity. If one's dinner companion is unintelligible due to noise, the restaurant has effectively undermined any efforts at fostering rapport. Likewise, the commercial explanations for music in cafes directly undermine the interests of many cafe-goers, as what is supposed to be a relaxed environment is now occupied by an inescapable distraction that inevitably disrupts personal serenity and thought. The modern cafe milieu thus impedes interpersonal engagement.

Historically, cafes have had a social and intellectually interactive function. In the Ottoman Empire, where they originated, coffeehouses were radical because of their accessibility and egalitarianism, serving as a location for citizens of various socio-economic backgrounds to discuss political and social events. Though these places often reverberated with noisy chatter (which is starkly different from the cool ambiance of synthetic sound), the willingness to engage in conversation reflected a culture dedicated to deep social intercourse and intellectual mobility. The key ingredient to the inspiration and artistry of the cafes of the 17th to 19th centuries was the propensity of cafe patrons to engage in genuine interaction. Habitues of the European cafe scene included academics from a variety of fields, from mathematicians like Isaac Newton to philosophers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The European cafe and the spontaneous happenings that could occur in it acted as a breeding ground for the intellectual exchange and ingenuity that brought about the ideas of the Enlightenment. The ambience of that era's cafes was entirely different to the one we have today. Today's socio-sonic detachment exposes a culture of solipsism which rejects the type of spontaneous happenings that would be beneficial to society. A truly literate and democratic public sphere requires spaces that enable inwardness, where people have the ability to muse independently—either without disturbance, or with organic interruption.

WHEN I GO HOME TO SINGAPORE, I LIKE TO escape from the city din at the Botanic Gardens. After I pass the Botany Centre at the southern entrance of the garden, the raucous sound of traffic fades away, replaced by rustling leaves and chirping grasshoppers. The absence of typical urban noise allows me to notice things I otherwise would not: I can smell the aroma of ylang-ylang flowers when visiting the 'fragrant garden'; in the 'rainforest' I often spot monkeys swinging through the forest canopy. Outside the park, other urban aesthetic experiences arise on quiet streets: the sun setting over a red brick townhouse, or birds gliding above the Clarke Quay river's surface.

Photographs of vacated public beaches, plazas, diners, and auditoriums in 2020 are striking visual representations of silence. While these images may remind us of the beauty of quietness, apocalyptic emptiness should not be the only means of accomplishing tolerable sound levels. The COVID pandemic, by literalizing the isolation of human communities, helped illustrate the loss of spontaneity in society. Socializing with intention tends to deepen bonds that already exist, but socializing with spontaneity—which, within the codes of the digital forum, is contingent upon anonymity—allows us to interact with people we do not have obvious ties to, people of different socioeconomic or racial backgrounds who we may only encounter serendipitously.

Beyond its effects on human physical health, the soundscape determines what kind of socializing is possible. Cafes used to allow people to immerse themselves in solitude or to spontaneously engage with each other. We should aim to restore cafes for both of these purposes. As societies are deeply affected by their public spaces, the type of cultures we nurture and interactions we promote depend upon the sound in our communal spaces. As for the individual, the soundscape affects a fundamental question of intellectual and spiritual health. In order to build an enlightened and rational society, we must have public places where philosophical meditative aloofness and engagement are supported. ✿

CURRENT AFFAIRS

EDITORIAL STAFF

Publisher & Chairperson
S. CHAPIN DOMINO

Editor in Chief
NATHAN J. ROBINSON

Managing Editor
LILY SÁNCHEZ

Subscriber Relations
ANN HUBBARD

Editor at Large
YASMIN NAIR

House Economist
ROB LARSON

Social Media
SARAH GRATHWOHL

Board of Directors
JESSICA ELLIOTT
NATHAN J. ROBINSON
PAUL WATERS-SMITH

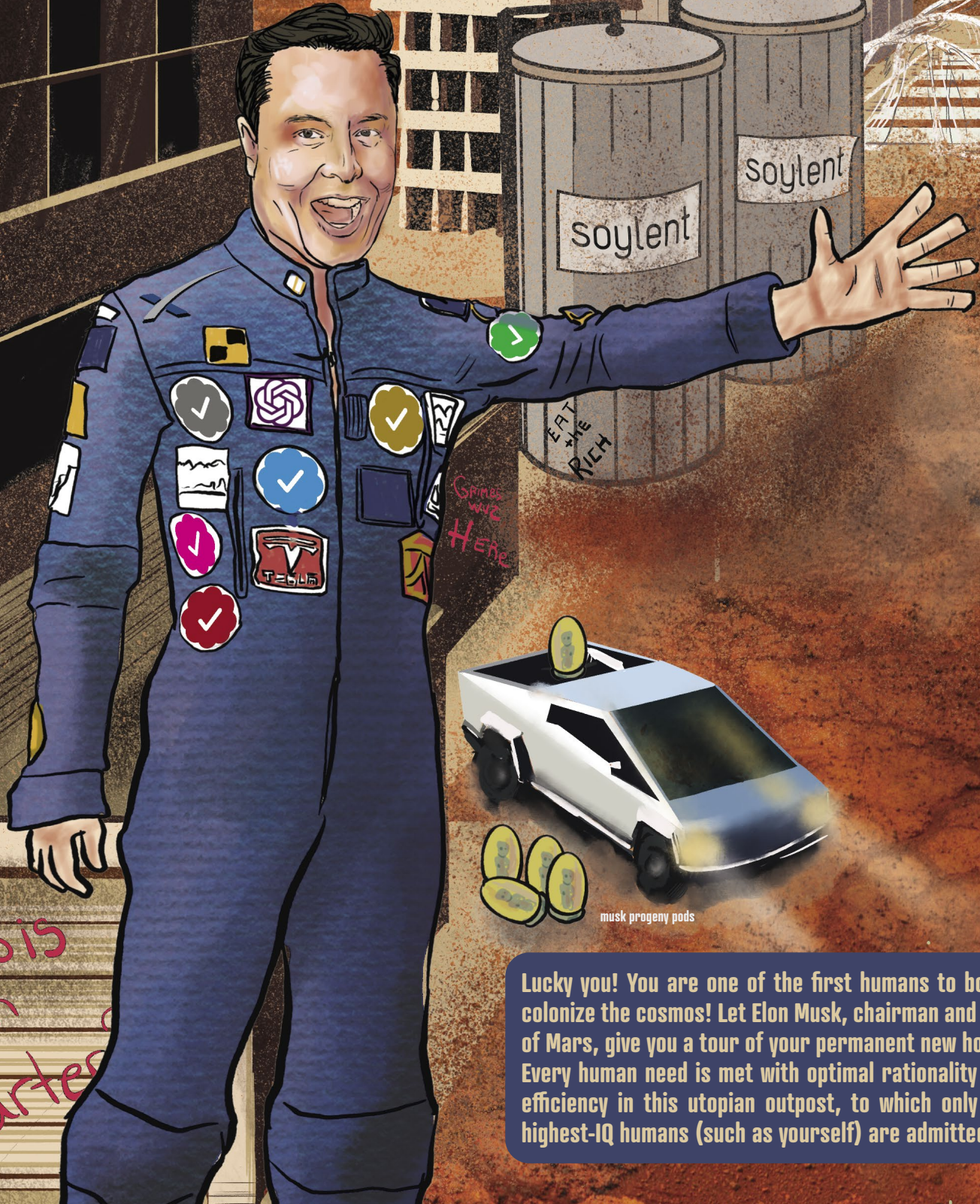
Contributing Editor
BRIAHNA JOY GRAY

Podcast & Video Editor
TIM GRAY

WELCOME HOME TO MARS

MUSK NEONATAL UNIT

SPACEX



musk progeny pods

Lucky you! You are one of the first humans to boldly colonize the cosmos! Let Elon Musk, chairman and CEO of Mars, give you a tour of your permanent new home. Every human need is met with optimal rationality and efficiency in this utopian outpost, to which only the highest-IQ humans (such as yourself) are admitted.

Who is John Carter



THE
BORING
COMPANY

**BRAIN CHIP
IMPLANTATION
STATION**



ELON SUX
EAT THE REICH



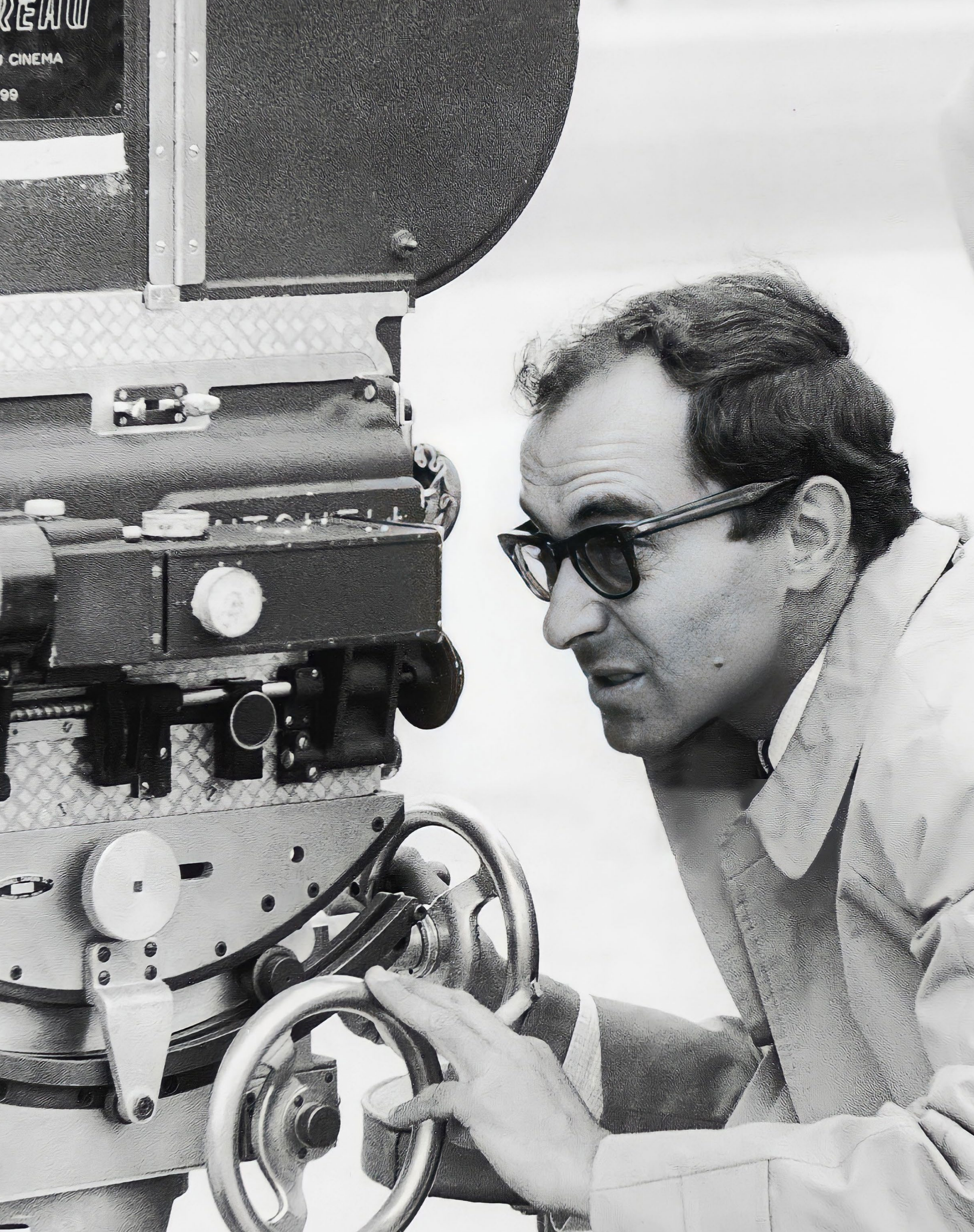
HYPERLO
**CLOSED DUE TO
COLLISION**



BLUE VERIFICATION BADGE AREA ➡
GOLD VERIFICATION BADGE AREA ⬆
GREY VERIFICATION BADGE AREA ➡
PINK VERIFICATION BADGE AREA ⬇
RED VERIFICATION BADGE AREA ⬅

**AT LEAST
WE OWNED
THE LIBS!**

MUSK SUX



GODARD *without the* POLITICS

BY RYAN BEDSAUL

SINCE THE NEWS OF JEAN-LUC GODARD'S death in September, there have been many remembrances published about the tremendous influence he had on the art of filmmaking. As the filmmaker Kelly Reichardt observed in a collection of tributes for *The Guardian*, "I know what [the late art critic] Dave Hickey means when he says there's the way the world looked before Andy Warhol and the way it looked after. Isn't it the same with Godard?"

Film critic Richard Brody, in his 2009 biography *Everything is Cinema: The Working Life of Jean-Luc Godard*, writes that Godard influenced modern filmmakers in two major ways: his innovative cinematic techniques and his unconventional *approach* to filmmaking. In terms of the former, one can see the enormity of Godard's innovations in *Vivre sa vie* (1962) alone. As Brody observes, in that film, Godard invented the "staging of lengthy dialogue scenes in artful framings," a tactic that can be seen in the "flowing dialogue shots" of Abbas Kiarostami's 2010 film *Certified Copy* or the tracking shots of Jesse and Céline in Richard Linklater's 2013 film *Before Midnight*. Furthermore, Brody writes, Godard's use of dialogue as a channel for the director's thoughts became an essential feature in the work of many American directors, from Woody Allen's direct-to-camera monologues in *Annie Hall* (1975) to Quentin Tarantino's deconstruction of Madonna's "Like a Virgin" at the beginning of *Reservoir Dogs* (1992).

With both of these innovations, Godard liberated the medium from the stuffy theatricality of classic Hollywood and French cinema, in which dialogue served a purely dramatic function—that is, it operated for reasons internal to the narrative. Today these techniques have become a trademark of virtually "all of the modern verbal American cinema."

In terms of Godard's *approach* to cinema, his influence was more about an attitude towards the conventional way of doing things. As Quentin Tarantino once said, Godard taught him, "the fun and the freedom and the joy of breaking rules ... and just fucking around with the entire medium." That rule-breaking approach is most prominent in Godard's debut film *Breathless* (1960). With its mid-dialogue jump cuts, disorienting camera angles, and jazzy editing rhythms, the film was an affront to conventional style that encouraged the next generation of filmmakers to find their voices through their own personal engagements with cinema. In fact, the mere act of calling back to film history (seen in Jean-Paul Belmondo's Bogart impressions throughout *Breathless*) or reworking famous images to one's own artistic ends are Godardian touches that show up in nearly every filmmaker's work today. (Take the Alka-Seltzer tablet dissolving in Travis Bickle's glass in 1976's *Taxi Driver*, which Martin Scorsese uses as an allusion to an image from Godard's 1967 *2 or 3 Things I Know About Her*.)

The early phase of Godard's career is the most celebrated phase for these aesthetic reasons. Accordingly, remembrances of his

work are hopelessly romantic about this phase—from *Breathless* and *Vivre sa vie* to *Contempt* (1963) (about a screenwriter whose relationship starts falling apart when he is commissioned to work on a Hollywood film) and *Bande à part* (1964) (about a group of English students who plan a small-time robbery). As Mike Leigh said of *Breathless*, “Here was a feast of revelatory challenges to one’s ideas about cinema: pure anarchic bliss!” But appreciations of Godard’s artistry (while welcome) tend to downplay the striking political aspects of his work and the impact they continue to have on many young filmmakers today. As the Canadian actor Kevin McDonald said in the same article Reichardt contributed to, “Those early films still have a daring that takes my breath away. But the later films I have seen are mostly a chore: highly political, highly confrontational—even if sometimes formally inventive.”

In “Not a History Lesson: The Erasure of Politics in American Cinema,” UCLA anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner defines “political” films as those that are “overt” in their political views and primarily concerned with the “dynamics of systems of power.” In this regard, it’s difficult to imagine a more politically charged venture than Godard’s *La Chinoise* (1967), a film that follows a group of student radicals who spend their summer vacation reading passages from Mao’s *Little Red Book* and presenting lectures on U.S. imperialism to one another. This film, along with many other Godard films, shows its politics with characters expressing critical perspectives on political issues (as the students of *La Chinoise* often do, directly to the camera) or in simply foregrounding a topic of political consequence by linking it to the stakes of a narrative (as in *La Chinoise* when one of the student radicals debates a prominent intellectual on the use of terrorism for political gain).

Godard’s work became more overtly political from 1968–1972, mostly in response to the events of May ’68, a seven-week period of civil unrest that included student occupations and worker demonstrations against the French government and police repression. Brody refers to this time as Godard’s “revolutionary” period, and the wording seems apt considering the projects Godard undertook. *A Film Like Any Other* (1968) offered some reflections on the worker and student demonstrations of May ’68, while the unfinished *Until Victory* attempted to cover the Palestinian struggle for independence. *Vladimir and Rosa* (1971)—whose title is a reference to the Marxist revolutionaries Vladimir Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg—presented a cinematic reconstruction of the trial of the Chicago Eight, the anti-Vietnam War protestors charged with conspiracy and inciting a riot during the 1968 Democratic National Convention.

Certainly, there were many problems with the way Godard handled his political subjects, from his ignorant embrace of Maoism in *La Chinoise* to his elusive style of communication in *Histoire(s) du Cinéma* (1989–1999)—a film that at times is so layered in cinematic reference points that it’s basically unintelligible without a film degree. But there is also something to admire in a filmmaker who takes on political issues rather than ignoring them altogether. It’s an attitude that grounds one’s work in the present and acknowledges its stake in the future of cinema and society. For me, Godard’s “revolutionary” period is the most interesting phase in his filmography, for it exhibits a pivotal deconstruction of his values as a filmmaker. But even Bro-

dy, a Godard fanatic, characterizes this “revolutionary” period with some melancholy, as if an artist’s political commitments eclipsing their artistic concerns were necessarily an unfortunate thing:

“With any perspective, the undesirability of the utopia that French Maoists dreamed of seems self-evident; but, unlike other intellectuals, Godard suffered deeply for his engagement on its behalf ... had profoundly, even recklessly and enduringly, altered his way of working ... having risked and to some extent lost his art for his political commitment.”

Brody’s reduction of Godard’s revolutionary period to artistic misstep is emblematic of a broader tendency in American cinema, namely, a respect for the art that overshadows the relationship of filmmaking to real world political issues. This was an issue Godard himself struggled with as part of the French New Wave, the major film movement of which he was a leading voice and whose political concerns have been similarly overlooked due to its early prioritization of aesthetics merit over everything else.

Emilie Bickerton’s *A Short History of the Cahiers du Cinéma* catalogs both the aesthetic and political elements of the French New Wave through a history of the magazine that laid its intellectual foundations: *Cahiers du Cinéma*. *Cahiers* first gained some notoriety in the 1950s thanks to the contributions of its youngest recruits, which included, in addition to Godard, François Truffaut, Jacques Rivette, and Claude Chabrol (or, as they were more commonly called, the “young Turks”). Their major contribution to film criticism was the *politique des auteurs*, or “auteur theory,” which elevated the creative status of directors to the central role of filmmaking through careful study of the *mise-en-scène*—or the deliberate arrangement of actors and objects within a film frame—of several major filmmakers. This focus was radical because of the attention it drew to the style of certain Hollywood filmmakers (notably Howard Hawks, Alfred Hitchcock, and Nicholas Ray) at a time when American films were widely opposed by the old guard of French culture. However, as Bickerton’s history reveals, the association between auteur theory and the New Wave is a bit overblown since it only represents the attitude of the movement in its early years and leaves out the many other intellectual threads that came to define *Cahiers* and its filmmaker offspring.

In fact, despite auteur theory’s persistence in cinema cultures beyond the New Wave, it did not take long for it to become the subject of much criticism in France. On the one hand, the anti-colonial film journal *Positif* was especially critical of the young Turks’ fixation on compositional analyses of cinema, believing this aesthetic focus was reflective of the group’s failure to take a stance on pressing political issues, like the wars in Indochina and Algeria. Additionally, *Cahiers* only seemed interested in Hollywood and B-movie cinema, to the exclusion of many groundbreaking surrealist and experimental cinemas around the world—an oversight



ALPHAVILLE (1965)

that gave the whole movement a decidedly conservative bent. Even *Cahiers* editor-in-chief André Bazin took issue with the central focus of auteur theory and worried that an obsession with specific directors could lead to a dangerous “aesthetic cult of personality” that hindered one’s artistic judgments.

At first, the young Turks were defensive of their theory and stood by its apoliticism, believing that political readings undermined an appreciation of a film’s aesthetic accomplishments. Auteur theory was, after all, concerned less with the subject of a film than with how a subject was handled by a filmmaker in terms of *mise-en-scène*. Yet it did not take long for the magazine to respond to some of this early criticism. By 1963, under the editorship of Jacques Rivette, the magazine had broadened its focus to include more European filmmakers (e.g., Buñuel, Pasolini, Bertolucci) and “new cinemas” from around the world, like *cinema novo* in Brazil. Then, a couple years later, under the editorship of two Algerian medical students, Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni, the magazine increased its engagement with new cinema, moving further and further into explicitly political territory. As Bickerton says:

“[N]ew cinema represented an active resistance to the dominant ideology from its conception, production and reception. ... [F]aced with these films, the role of the spectator was elevated to that of an active subject and the film was imbued with the power to provoke social change.”

The adoption of this attitude by New Wave filmmakers was nowhere more prevalent than in the work of Jean-Luc Godard who, after being accused of demonstrating right-wing sympathies in *Breathless*, took up increasingly political subjects in his work, addressing everything from the Vietnam War to the rise of American cultural hegemony. Thus, very much in rhythm with *Cahiers*’ editorial shifts, Godard’s work became more and more responsive to the political controversies of the day.

To see how this attitude manifested beyond his films, one need look no further than the Cannes Film Festival of May ’68 where, in an archival video of the festival, one can see Godard delivering an impassioned political speech in support of the festival’s cancellation:

“There isn’t one film showing the problems going on today among workers and students. Not one, whether by Forman, myself, Polanski, or François... We’re behind the times. Our student comrades set an example by getting their heads bashed in last week. The issue isn’t whether or not to see films right now. ... The issue is to demonstrate, even if ten days after the fact, the film industry’s solidarity with the student and worker movements taking place in France.”

For Godard, solidarity meant more than this simple verbal endorsement; it meant stealing cameras to lend to protestors to



LA CHINOISE (1967)

document their demonstrations and taking to the streets of Paris alongside them. It also meant screening his works to student audiences in the U.S., as he did with *La Chinoise* in Berkeley, and relishing in the impact of his films on the political fervor of those communities.

It's difficult to imagine an American director today using terms like "comrade" or "solidarity" in an interview or calling for the cancellation of a major media event in light of an ongoing political situation, let alone stealing film equipment to aid political activists. But this kind of act, beyond his aesthetic innovations, is what made Godard significant to so many.

A MERICAN CINEMA TODAY HAS embraced all the aesthetic contributions of Godard, and the New Wave in general, while overlooking all of the ways in which *Cahiers*, its filmmakers, and its critics responded to the political events of their time. In fact, the more one examines the filmography of the major auteurs working in American cinema today, the more apparent this discrepancy becomes. "Major Auteurs" refers to the elite strata of writer-directors who, despite having the freedom to pursue passion projects within the comforts of the studio system, have been primarily concerned with aesthetic accomplishments and unconcerned with the political relevance of their work. This was certainly true of the first generation of American filmmakers inspired by Godard and the New Wave, which included, among many others, Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, Steven Spielberg, and George Lucas. As Bickerton writes of this group:

"[A]t film school they were 'taught' cinephilia in the lecture hall and received a broader cinematic culture from re-runs on televisions. ... [E]n masse this generation accepted the terms of the game: earn more with each new film, and tailor the work almost exclusively to please the youth market."

In other words, while the pivotal generation for modern American cinema embraced the artistic influences of the French New Wave, it also dispensed with the radicalism of its politics by prioritizing market-oriented concerns that enabled their artistic freedom so long as their films continued providing a return at the box office. This apolitical attitude still underlies auteur cinema today and continues to reinforce the assumption that great art is about appeals to universal values via tried-and-true storytelling approaches and the avoidance of politically charged subjects or any renderings of history that reveal how the politics of the past play out in the world today. As Ortner observes, this maxim of the American film industry often manifests in the persistent wisdom that a story is "not a history lesson," and that there should be a distinction made between what qualifies as "entertainment" and what qualifies as "everything else," meaning, "not only politics but also educational, informational, and factual materials."

Look no further than the films of Quentin Tarantino to see this binary at work. Nowhere is the gap between Godard's cinematic influence and his political influence more apparent. After all, his production company, A Band Apart, is a direct reference to the Godard film of the same name, which makes sense since the film's influence is all over *Pulp Fiction* (1994), from Uma Thurman's Anna Karina bangs (Karina was in several of Godard's

films) to the dance sequence with John Travolta in the restaurant Jack Rabbit Slims. There's also the especially Godardian touch of innumerable pop culture references, and the bookend story of two lovers holding up a restaurant is reminiscent of *Pierrot le Fou* (1965). This was Tarantino "fucking around" with the medium.

The remarkable part of this quote comes later though when he asserts, "I consider Godard to be to cinema what Bob Dylan was to music. ... I haven't outgrown Dylan. I've outgrown Godard." The use of the word "outgrown" implies that Godard's work is somehow less mature than Tarantino's, which strikes me as rather absurd. Godard's view of cinema evolved throughout his career, especially as he grew increasingly hostile towards the notion of "entertainment" and ever more conscious of the tradeoffs involved in financing films that he felt a serious political investment in. Tarantino, on the other hand, has yet to "outgrow" the early *Cahiers* notion of aesthetic mastery over "everything else." This might explain why his work is more representative of the early Godard than of the later, more militant Godard.

Like the generation of American filmmakers before him, Tarantino accepts the idea that the goal of filmmaking is to entertain. The apparent result of this belief is a politically complacent view of cinema that leads to the valuation of history as escapism in which world-historic atrocities and tragedies become fodder for popcorn revenge fantasies, as in his films *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), *Django Unchained* (2012), and *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* (2019). In each of these cases, Tarantino uses the period piece genre to take cinematic Revenge on the undisputed evildoers of history (which is hardly deserving of a standing ovation). Yet, none of these films attempts to tie their revenge plots to present day political realities, nor are any of them bold enough to examine the historical conditions that produced, say, in the case of *Django Unchained*, chattel slavery (or reveal that slavery is still legal today in our prisons' forced labor regimes). Rather, Tarantino's solution to all of these evils is the same: a good guy with a gun.

The same apolitical and ahistorical bent can be found in the work of his peers, Paul Thomas Anderson and Sofia Coppola. In each of these filmmakers' oeuvres, universal values—love, family, cultural identity, and so forth—are prioritized over political concerns and historical accuracy. Anderson's 2012 film *The Master* is an illustrative example. Set against the backdrop of post-war America, the film is a fictionalization of the founding of Scientology (only referred to here as "The Cause") that explores the relationship between the church's charismatic leader, Lancaster Dodd, and a misanthropic veteran, Freddie Quell, who becomes increasingly involved in the church despite his initial reservations about it. Unfortunately, Anderson's obsession with their relationship, and the chemistry between his leads—communicated through gorgeous and extensive close-ups of Joaquin Phoenix and Philip Seymour Hoffman—comes at the expense of any direct critique of Scientology, or the power dynamics at play between Dodd (the Master) and Quell (his follower). More so, the film romanticizes their relationship despite the abuses it entails without any acknowledgment of the ways in which those same

dynamics result in misery for followers of the church today. (A similar fondness for the toxic male patriarch and his love interest can also be seen in the 2017 film *Phantom Thread*.)

SOFIA COPPOLA'S LACK OF CONCERN FOR historical accuracy is apparent in *The Beguiled*, her 2017 adaptation of a Civil War plantation novel in which a women's schoolhouse takes in a wounded soldier whose motives seem questionable. The film received a lot of criticism upon its release for whitewashing its Southern setting not only through the absence of enslaved characters, but also in its replacement of the novel's one mixed-race character with white actress Kirsten Dunst. This deliberate exclusion is in line with the tendency Ortner points to—focusing on the plausible interpersonal drama between the women in the schoolhouse and the wounded soldier who seeks refuge there, over the more historically significant fact of slavery, which does not seem to exist, even peripherally, in the schoolhouse. The Southern plantation, like Anderson's 1950s backdrop, is just a cinematic device, a gothic skin laid over the drama that betrays the filmmaker's lack of interest in the political context of the time period. Thus, both films fit a pattern Ortner observes across American cinema: a focus on "interpersonal relationships" that exist in a "social and historical vacuum" and therefore evoke minimal political stakes or consequences in the character's actions and belief systems.

This trend is not confined to a handpicked selection of auteurs; the pattern extends to the American film industry at large, since politics are as remarkably absent from "auteur filmmaking" as they are from live-action fairy tale remakes, *Star Wars* prequels, and *Minions* movies. On the other hand, even when American films do take on politically charged subject matter, they often do so only to affirm existing systems of power. Enter Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012).

In his essay "Super Position" the late anthropologist David Graeber—while also revealing how "profoundly, deeply conservative" the superhero genre is—reveals how *Rises'* depiction of a constituent attack on the Gotham stock exchange essentially aligns the Occupy Wall Street movement with the film's villain, Bain. Graeber underlines the propagandistic takeaway here:

"Any attempt to address structural problems, even through non-violent civil disobedience [like the Occupy movement], really is a form of violence, because that's all it could possibly be... and therefore there's nothing inappropriate if police respond by smashing protestors' heads repeatedly against the concrete."

Thus, sometimes American films aren't just apolitical; they're aggressively conservative and disinterested in any perspective that poses a challenge to conditions of the status quo such as income inequality or political corruption. Without a strong corrective from progressive filmmakers who aren't afraid of bringing politi-

GODARD WITHOUT THE POLITICS

cal stakes to the fore of their films, social, political, and economic injustices (and their root causes) will remain unchallenged in our collective imagination. As the graphic novelist Alan Moore recently forewarned, the public's fondness of the superhero genre could be a "precursor to fascism."

Fortunately, there are a few progressive American filmmakers out there who aren't afraid to tie their films to present day political issues. Take the more complicated example of Spike Lee and his recent film *BlacKkKlansman* (2018). The movie is based on the memoir of a Black police officer, Ron Stallworth, who poses as a white man on phone calls with the Ku Klux Klan in order to infiltrate the organization. In his adaptation of this story, unlike Tarantino, Anderson, and Coppola, Lee chooses to remain in the historical markers of his era by drawing attention to the real historical figures and movements of the time, from Kwame Ture and the Black Panthers to David Duke and the KKK. That's because for Lee, history is not merely a texture. The film feels consequential, grounded not only in the time period, but also in the history of filmmaking and the weight of that history on present day realities. This proclivity is most apparent in a scene in which the Klansmen gather for a screening of D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), the racist epic that has been taught in American film schools for decades due to its influence on film form. Lee uses this scene to remind viewers of the film industry's grounding in white supremacy, connecting one of the most aesthetically influential (and popular) films of all time with present-day racial inequality and white supremacy. He makes this tie explicit with a rather shocking maneuver at the end of the film as he cuts to footage of the Unite the Right rally that took place in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017. It's a jarring transition—from composed big-budget cinematography to shaky news footage of white supremacists marching through Charlottesville—but it's exactly this contrast that wakes one up as a viewer. And yet, even with the historical and present-day political implications of Lee's work, there are some notable shortcomings that take root in the film's prioritization of dramatic concerns over historical accuracy.

As the filmmaker, musician, and activist Boots Riley pointed out, the real Ron Stallworth was involved in sabotaging Black radical organizations for years and worked with white supremacist groups to do so more effectively. Thus, the filmmaker's choice to frame Stallworth as a hero in this story masks the real Stallworth and sacrifices historical accuracy for dramatization. As Riley says,

"Without the made-up stuff and with what we know of the actual history of police infiltration into radical groups, and how they infiltrated and directed White Supremacist organizations to attack those groups, Ron Stallworth is [actually] the villain."

Given Riley's critique, I think it's fair to say that, for all its strengths, *BlacKkKlansman* does not offer a satisfying critique of white supremacy due to the ways that its dramatization rewrites the relationship between white supremacy and state violence. The root of this problem, again, lies in a focus on dramatic values over political ones. The perceived need to create a more likable protagonist results in the taking of fictional liberties, which obscures the otherwise strong political elements of the work. Still, *BlacKkKlansman* brings the political stakes of its narrative to the fore and ties them to the present day, which is more commendable than simply relegating unsavory truths about race relations to some fictional past for fear of offending its audience with a political point of view. Perhaps this has something to do with the big influence Lee says "My Cinema Hero" Godard had on him.

WITH THE EXCEPTION OF LEE'S work, and that of a few other politically engaged filmmakers, like Boots Riley (*Sorry to Bother You*), Ava DuVernay (*Selma*), or Adam McKay (*The Big Short*), American cinema is remarkably unresponsive to current political issues. It is strange that so many filmmakers who have significant autonomy within the studio system still prioritize filmmaking in which the stakes of the drama are located in interpersonal relationships and historical settings that have little to no grounding in political realities. Godard, on the other hand, always found a way to work with or around the studio system to get financing for films that challenged the status quo. He described this radical approach best when he said, "The problem is not to make *political* films but to make films *politically*."

The final film of his revolutionary period, *Tout va bien* (1972), is a film that deliberately draws attention to this problem of making films politically as it opens with the rather anti-cinematic image of a hand cutting checks to various film departments (script, cinematographer, music, extras, and so on). In this way, Jean-Luc Godard and his collaborator Jean-Pierre Gorin draw attention to the crude facts of film financing, especially as a voice





TOUT VA BIEN (1972)

(offscreen) suggests the filmmakers hire celebrities to get more financial backing, to which the hand responds by cutting another check with the memo, “vedette internationale” (international star). Then the voice asks, “What’ll you tell Yves Montand and Jane Fonda? Actors want to see a story before they agree to anything... usually a love story.” Suddenly, as if it were being pieced together before our eyes, the film cuts to Fonda and Montand walking through a field while affectionately listing off the parts of each other’s bodies—“I love your eyes ... your lips ... your hands ... your knees...” and so on. The whole sequence continues in this manner as the voice continues prompting other story elements into existence: the country, the time period, the characters, their professions, the political landscape, and so on, until the two stars are fully embedded in the central drama of the film: a strike at a sausage factory.

It would have made sense to just start there, centering the audience’s attention on a dramatic conflict as most feature films are wont to do in their opening minutes. Just imagine: Yves Montand and Jane Fonda arrive at a sausage factory to report on a strike, but are immediately detained by the workers, pushed upstairs, and locked up in a second-floor office along with the factory manager. That’s a hook. But instead of grabbing the viewer right away by putting our lovely movie stars in jeopardy, Godard and Gorin opt to foreground their pragmatic reasons for placing movie stars at the center of their examination of a working-class power struggle: money and eyeballs. In a sense, Godard and Gorin are stating their artistic compromise upfront so the audience understands

what is politically at stake in their work; to make a film centering the working class struggle, they must manipulate the boundaries of the system of power they work within (i.e., the film industry) to their advantage. The result is a multifaceted view of political action, featuring direct reports from the strikers and union representatives and the factory manager, Fonda, and Montand. How many films today can claim this level of overt political consciousness either in terms of content or with an overt critique of the power structures that shape how all films are produced today?

As we reflect on Jean-Luc Godard’s legacy, we must not forget his uncompromising commitment to political action. As filmmakers of the next generation continue developing their voices in the face of unprecedented political challenges—from climate catastrophe to the undermining of American democracy to the rise of fascism around the world to the pernicious influence of surveillance capitalism—we ought to encourage them to adopt more than just the aesthetic innovations of Godard’s work. They should embrace his political consciousness as well. Furthermore, as Godard has demonstrated with films like *La Chinoise* and *Tout va bien*, “political” films aren’t categorically devoid of artistry. Politics can shape one’s art just as much as art can shape one’s politics. Filmmakers who infuse political viewpoints into their work have an opportunity to situate themselves in an ongoing narrative of progress and to challenge systems of power in order to make the world and cinema better than the last generation left it. What could be more artistically gratifying than that? ♣

why we keep on
buying it

a conversation with
WENDY WOLOSON
AUTHOR OF "CRAP: A HISTORY OF
CHEAP STUFF IN AMERICA"

Prof. Wendy Woloson is the author of *Crap: A History of Cheap Stuff in America*, which chronicles how the United States became a country awash in inexpensive (and often poorly-made) consumer goods. She joined editor-in-chief Nathan J. Robinson recently on an episode of the Current Affairs podcast to discuss the history of “crap.” The following transcript has been lightly edited for grammar and clarity.

I want to start with trying to understand what you mean by “crap” as a category. Clearly, “crap” is a subcategory of consumer goods and commodities. When you use this term, you’re referring to many, many different kinds of things. How do we differentiate “crap” from “non-crap”?

First, a disclaimer: crap is subjective. So what I might consider crap is maybe not what you would consider crap. I wrote this book not to be super-judgy about these things,

Exact Size.

This is a silver-finished fac-simile of our sterling silver Rhode Island Spoon. We send it free to show that the quality of the work and finish of our goods is exactly the same as pictured in our catalogue.

To every
one
sending 1
cent in
stamps to
cover
mailing

Wonder Sauna Hot Pants

**Health Watchers of America
Look Better-Feel Better-Wake Up Your Body**

FOR MEN AND WOMEN

SLENDERIZE EXACTLY WHERE YOU WANT

ONE SIZE FITS ALL — EASY TO INFLATE

Approved by
A&P

A&P

Waist Trainers

Waist Trainers: The Best Trick in the Trickiest Business

[illegible]

LAUGH RIOT!
SENSATIONAL
READY-MADE ELECTRIC
BOW-LITE Tie
NEW WOMEN
NEW FRIENDS!
BEAUTIFUL TIE!
AMAZING TRICK!
IDEAL GIFT!



Surprises them All!
FLASHES ON!
or Touch of
CONCEALED
Magic Lever
in Your
Pocket!
Hours
FOR ONLY
\$1.98

Yes, here's a weekly, ready-made bow tie that'll win you friends everywhere you go! The BOW-LITE Tie is new invention—equipped with 2 miniature bulbs, cord and a silent battery. Flashes on at the touch of a lever hidden in your pocket! Smart-looking, light-patterned bow tie wear with pride everywhere! Think of the fun you can get at your next club meeting, or evening out. You'll be the star of the party—can't imagine how the ladies' Gossip Your LITE Tie today—another reason for girls to wear BOW-LITE.

FOR BOW-LITE Today!
GET ON APPROVAL

Get the complete set and outfit. There you go—BOW-LITE Tie with cord and design on tie. The BOW-LITE Tie is your ready-made, all-around, ready-to-go BOW-LITE Tie. It's the only tie you'll ever need. It's the only tie you'll ever need. It's the only tie you'll ever need.

SEND NO MONEY!

Write for FREE BROCHURE
Name _____
Address _____
City _____ State _____ Zip _____
Daytime Phone _____
Evening Phone _____
Business Phone _____
Home Phone _____

Healthier Stress Relief. Enter a State of Euphoria.

Disconnect from the world you know. Release stress and tension from your every-day life. Euphoria is only moments away. Slip on our state of the art, scientifically designed **Somawave Helmet**

Exact Size.

This is a silver-finished fac-simile of our sterling silver Rhode Island Spoon. We send it free to show that the quality of the work and finish of our goods is exactly the same as pictured in our catalogue.

To every
one
sending
cents in
stamps to
cover
mailing

Wonder Sauna Hot Pants

**Health Watchers of America
Look Better—Feel Better—Wake Up Your Body**

FOR MEN AND WOMEN

SLENDERIZE EXACTLY WHERE YOU WANT

ONE SIZE FITS ALL — EASY TO INFLATE

Approved by
A&P

A&P

Waist Trainers

Waist Trainers: The Best Trick in the Trickiest Business



but just to interrogate them more. These are the kinds of goods that we are surrounded with in our lives in often very intimate ways.

But I do think that there are certain kinds of defining characteristics of crap: Things that are cynically made, things that aren't made very well or made to fall apart. Things that create more problems than they purport to solve. Things that are dishonest objects that don't live up to the expectations that the marketers have put forth for them.

I have several examples of those things in my book. Maybe one of the clearest is mass-produced collectibles. I think mass-produce-collectibles are crappy, because over time they have promised to be investment objects that would appreciate in value. And a lot of people spent a lot of money on things like Precious Moments figurines, thinking that they would be able to resell them in the future for loads of money. Those promises were never true. So that's the "crappy" part. But by the same token, if you have a mass-produced figurine that, say, your grandmother gave you, and it reminds you of spending time with her, then for you, that's a sincere, sentimental object that carries another kind of valence of meaning that elevates it beyond the crappiness.

ROBINSON

So a thing can be both "crap" and "non-crap" simultaneously. For example, a Beanie Baby (which you discuss in the book). I have a couple of leftover Beanie Babies from the '90s that I treasure and love. I have a little lobster. It's very cute. Reminds me of my childhood. There was a period of time when the promise of Beanie Babies was that they were valuable in the marketplace. It was even said to be a safe way to invest your money. Beanie Babies were going to retain their value. But most Beanie Babies became crap and many went into landfills.

WOLOSON

People cannot give them away. Actually, I often buy Beanie Babies to give away when I'm talking about my book, if I'm talking about the nature of value. I sometimes feel like I'm the only one who's buying Beanie Babies anymore.



ROBINSON

One of the things your book makes clear is that in the United States, when you actually start to look at the number of objects that fall into the category you're talking about, we really are surrounded by crap and have been for a long time. There are things on infomercials and everything in the Oriental Trading Company catalog. On Amazon, I once discovered that there were 13 different kinds of poop emoji pool floats for sale.

WOLOSON

I'm surprised there aren't more.

ROBINSON

These are things you can imagine people buying. At the moment of purchase, it seems like it might be fun. But at the moment of acquisition and use, there is a comedown.

WOLOSON

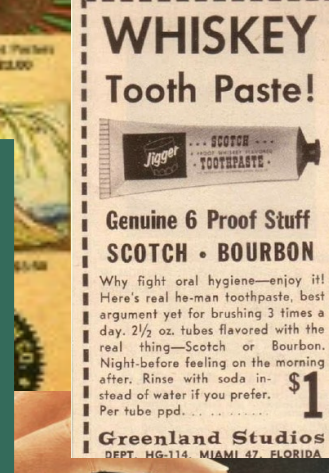
Exactly. And there are a lot of crappy things that are very ephemeral. They have very short lifespans. Either the novelty wears off or the thing falls apart with use. But we keep buying them because most of the stuff is very cheap. So there's a very low barrier to entry and a very low economic risk to buying these things.

ROBINSON

It's not just that they're cheap. You discuss the element of presentation. You talk about infomercials, and the way that there is this theatrical flair to how things are displayed. There's so much more effort put into the build up of the product than the making of the product.

WOLOSON

Yes. That's another thing that I'm getting more and more interested in, this idea of performance and marketing and the role of pitchmen in selling not just consumer products themselves, but the idea of consumption. But I'd like to return to an earlier point that you were making about the longer history. We think of this condition as a new condition, one of the contemporary capitalist, or late capitalist, world, because it is a degraded and impoverished material world. But what I talk about in my book is how this has a much longer history. It goes back





to the late 18th century and develops over the 19th century. One example is the dollar store, which we really see as the epitome of the cruddiness and crappiness of late capitalism. But there were dollar stores and cent stores—like the five cent store, the 10 cent store, and of course Woolworth’s “five and dime”—much earlier, in the mid-19th century. And to your other point about the performative nature of these things: peddlers fulfill the role of the infomercial back in the 19th century, well before there was television or even radio. These guys would go on the road with their pack of treasures. They would pull them out and sometimes do demonstrations to entice people and really seduce them into buying these petty novelties, or what were at the time called “Yankee notions.”

ROBINSON

Does crap have an origin point? Can we identify a “pre-crap era”? And who invented crap?

WOLOSON

Very good questions. The first kind of crappy stuff that I see in American history comes with, interestingly enough, the cheap jewelry trades, or the costume jewelry trade, which starts gearing up in the 1780s and 1790s. That only makes a cameo appearance in my book because I didn’t have time to talk about it a lot. But it really begins with people becoming interested in buying ersatz jewelry made of gold-plated

metal, fake gemstones, and things like that. And of course, people of middling means who couldn’t afford finely-made jewelry really loved this kind of stuff.

But then very soon after that, in the 1820s and 1830s, with the lifting of the trade embargo between the United States and Great Britain, there’s a tsunami of consumer goods coming, especially from Great Britain, to American markets. They’re sold fairly cheaply. Often, they had been set aside in British storehouses for years. And there’s this pent-up consumer demand in American markets along with the rise of what were called “variety” stores. These were stores that sold just lists of all sorts of different things, from gold-plated pens to nutmeg graters to pieces of fabric to magnifying glasses, birdcages, and so forth. And a lot of those stores advertised their wares as “cheap,” meaning low-priced, and coupled that with variety. There was a kind of alchemy in which the combination of *variety* and *cheapness* had a hypnotic power over consumers, who wanted to be able to participate in the American market as consumers. There’s a long history of American citizenship being linked specifically to consumption. My ownership in American society is tied to my ability to buy things.

ROBINSON

If we are trying to identify “crap” versus “non-crap,” as you say, there is the quality of cheapness and cheapness being part of the pitch. We discussed the fact that a lot of the things we would identify as crap have an element of disappointment, or they’re not used for very long. But just because a thing is cheap, doesn’t mean it’s crap. I buy cheap pairs of underwear at Walmart, and they’re pretty great. But you mentioned variety here, and it seems like part of what you’re saying is that, with crap, the experience of consumption, the experience of purchase, is so much more important than the use. Once you get the object out of the store, and away from this incredible display of variety—with all these colors and big numbers and things that say “buy one, get one free”—the object becomes not necessarily useless but simply not what it was when that special alchemy was at work in the store.

WOLOSON

Right. And that was true back in the 19th

century as well as today. In the 19th century, Americans were living with far fewer possessions, and so even these petty luxuries carried much more meaning for them. It was about novelty. It was about having nice things, pretty little trinkets and things that really brightened their days. We can’t understand this because we’re overstimulated nowadays. But we still have this search for novelty. Consumer psychology works by creating desire for things, by turning wants into needs. Then we make that purchase. And then the purchase does not live up to the promise. It cannot live up to the fantasies that we’ve built up in our minds. But rather than saying, “Okay, I’ve learned my lesson, I’m not going to buy anything else,” or “I’m going to cut back,” in fact, we do the opposite. We are driven to turn our attention to the next new thing. Maybe that next new thing is going to fulfill me in a way that I thought that other thing was going to fulfill me.

ROBINSON

You note in the book that there is an element of manipulation. The selling of crap often straddles the line between legitimate salesmanship and outright fraud. You discuss some of the tricks that were used and have been perfected over the course of a century and a half or more in order to get people to think that they are getting more with the purchase than they really are.

WOLOSON

There are many examples of that in the book. We talked a little bit about the collectibles market and the artificial creation of value. There was a Beanie Baby bubble at one time. There was also a rage for collectible plates. I have a chapter on the Franklin Mint, and how their selling of old coins and replica scale models and dolls and things like that created this kind of collectibles market that was really artificial. And once the bubble burst, people who had invested their retirement savings in these things realized that they were worthless.

There’s an anecdote in the book, which is a really sad story of a man who invested tens of thousands of dollars in coins from the Franklin Mint. He believed their sales pitches, which were really tailored to the specific customer and their buying habits. He really believed what they said about val-

ue. They would use terms like, Oh, this is the rarest coin on the market, or the most spectacular coin on the market, or the most historically important coin ever issued. These superlative words could make somebody who wasn't really knowledgeable think Oh, this is a really special thing with a lot of value. But it was really hot air. So there are some really tragic stories. Another example that is maybe not so nefarious, but more an enjoyable anecdote, is the case of gadgets. We love gadgets. People in the 19th century loved gadgets as well. And



in that case, I wouldn't call those pitches outright fraud, but there was a lot of exaggeration in how well these things would work and what kind of work they would do. A lot of these gadgets promised quick solutions to difficult problems. They would often create these problems artificially. And often gadgets would fall apart or they wouldn't work as promised. They would create more work for the users. And so they would often be cast aside.

ROBINSON

This is from your chapter "Gadget Mania." It's about your own grandfather. You write: *"The Rembrandt Automatic Potato Peeler was one of many devices he ordered, often without my grandmother's knowledge and never with her approval. ... Ever the optimist, his much-anticipated test drive of the Rembrandt did not go as he'd hoped. His raw po-*

tatoes transformed magically not into delicate oven-ready morsels but instead into a starchy, macerated spray that stuck stubbornly to the kitchen walls. And to the ceiling. And to the floor. It took hours for him, abetted by his son-in-law, to scrape away the evidence of his trial before my grandmother came home. Certainly, the device did blow the lid off potato peeling, but not in the way he had expected. Also hewing to the nature of gadgets, the offending device was banished to a remote part of the garage and discovered only decades later."

This was probably a common experience among Americans who bought the Rembrandt automatic potato peeler.

WOLOSIN

Yes. I still love watching infomercials. There's the Garden Weasel that will hoe your garden really easily. There's the brownie pan that will give you edges on all the brownies. There's the nonstick skillet where they throw cheese on there. I really love those demonstrations because they make work look easy and they make work look fun. There's an element of mesmerism and magic in those pitches. They're incredibly sophisticated and really, really seductive.

ROBINSON

When I first saw the infomercial for the "Slap Chop," I couldn't help but think, "I do want to slap that thing." I want to slap and chop!

WOLOSIN

You want to do it!

ROBINSON

Sometimes there is real trickery involved, but also sometimes you get the thing and it's not crap. I remember watching Billy Mays pitching OxiClean. Being a cynic, I thought "I bet it doesn't work." Well, I have to say OxiClean is quite a good product and actually gets stains out really well.

WOLOSIN

For sure. That's the thing with gadgets: some of them do work really well. But don't we all have a "junk drawer" where all of our crap goes—the egg steamer or the weird garlic press or whatever it is—that we use once or twice and think, "Oh, it didn't do what I thought it was going to do." It's more trouble than it's worth. So it's just gonna

get stuck in this drawer.

ROBINSON

You point out some of the other ways that companies have gotten people to want crap, such as "collect the whole series." And you note the ways that children are made to really, really want the toy on the cereal box—which is inevitably a terrible piece of crap.

WOLOSIN

There was a really interesting survey done in the mid-20th century of children and their responses to these free giveaways. What I found was that they were actually incredibly knowledgeable and picky consumers. Children had been waiting for six weeks to receive this thing in the mail after sending in their box tops, and they would complain about the quality. The wallet wasn't what I thought it would be, or the ray gun didn't work like it was supposed to. But again, it didn't put them off the pursuit of these things. It just helped turn their attention to the next thing that might fulfill their desires.

ROBINSON

When I went to New York the last time, I was quite surprised—although I suppose I shouldn't have been, because this is America—that there is a gift shop at the 9/11 memorial. There is also a gift shop at the World War Two Museum—no sorry, revise that, there are *four* gift shops at the World





War Two Museum. You can buy rubber ducks shaped like Rosie the Riveter or Winston Churchill. You can buy thermoses in the shape of a bullet. You can buy a chess game where the two kings are FDR and Hitler. Help me understand where the gift shop fits into the history of crap.

WOLOSIN

This I would call part of the “crap-ification” of our culture. We need to have souvenirs to mark our experiences and possibly serve as memory objects. Those objects validate our experiences in a way. Art museums are no different. They just have classier forms of crap. You go to see an exhibit, and the experience of the exhibition items themselves is one thing. But it’s as if your experience isn’t validated unless you can concretize it with something you can take away as a souvenir, as a relic, as a memory object. It also records the experience. It’s the material form of, “pics or it didn’t happen.”

ROBINSON

As we know, so much of this ends up tucked away in the back of closets. Some people display all of their souvenirs from different places, but for some people, these things that we amassed turn out to be massive inconveniences. Then we watch Marie Kondo, who asks, “Does it spark joy?” “Well, no, I don’t even know why I have all this crap.”

WOLOSIN

One of the ironies of things like souvenirs is that they’re usually not made in the place where you have purchased it. So if you collect magnets, they might be made in China, or I might get Mardi Gras beads in New Orleans, but they’re not made there by locals. They’re made in China.

ROBINSON

This brings us to the dark side of crap. It’s so much fun looking through these old novelty catalogs—you have all these amazing examples in the book of crap you’ve found throughout history. It’s a delightful book partly because of the pictures. You’ve got Hummel figurines and plastic vomit. So many things. I don’t want to spoil it for people. But the dark side: the issue of labor. As you point out, there’s a cost to having things that are cheaply and quickly made.

WOLOSIN

There’s a constant churn of objects that are cheaply made or that don’t carry our attention for very long before we turn to the next thing. Fast fashion, fast furniture, and so forth. I’m going to sound like an old fogey here, but things aren’t made to last anymore. And our relationship with objects is much different now than it was in the past. We’re not really careful caretakers of our possessions anymore. We have become materialistic to the point where we want constant turnover. We want novelty all the time. And that comes at a cost, even if these things are cheap for us to buy. The cost of those things to manufacture is just devastating. It means exploited labor. It means wrecking the environment, both in terms of the natural resources required to make these things and the fact that so much crap ends up in landfills. It’s just really hard to see where it’s going to end. As much as I celebrate crap (and I have my issues with Marie Kondo, which we can talk about or not), we have to face the real world implications of all of this rapid consumption which is pointless. A lot of the crap that we’re buying doesn’t really have a purpose. Why are we buying things that we don’t need, we often don’t even want, and that become burdens?

ROBINSON

As someone who is surrounded by tiny

objects, I am repulsed by the idea of minimalism.

WOLOSIN

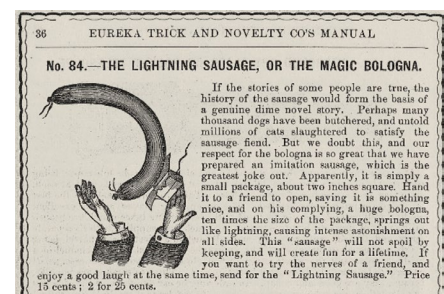
We are very object-driven people. I am, too. I collect many things. I really love objects and appreciate them. And I think a lot of us do. Objects are really meaningful to us, and they have a really important place in our lives both functionally and symbolically. We need things around us to help us define who we are, help us feel comfortable in our place, and to mark where we are in time and in our relationships. So objects are really important in anchoring us to not just our physical world, but our psychological world as well. But I think we should be more thoughtful about the things that we are buying and interrogate ourselves. Why are we buying things, and what are the costs (even if the price is cheap)?

ROBINSON

One of the things I like about your book is that it takes something familiar and makes it strange again. And in fact at one point, you echo what Karl Marx does at the beginning of *Capital*, where he says “the commodity appears, at first to be a trivial thing,” but then once you actually start thinking about commodities—where they come from, how they’re produced, what they mean to us—the commodity becomes a very strange thing. And in your chapter about “curios,” you say that curios seem, at first, to be trivial things. They masquerade as harmless objects. But they carry subtle and not-so-subtle messages. What are “curios,” and how do they carry messages?

WOLOSIN

I unpack tchotchkes, knickknacks, and what I call “giftware”—these things that aren’t quite collectibles, but things that we put on our shelves and mantelpieces.



That's a great question. Plastic vomit? I find it really fascinating. Something I've been noodling over for a long time is: when did we go from being a culture that did not need plastic vomit to a culture that did? The hey-day of plastic vomit is over, which makes me a little sad, for reasons I can't quite articulate. Plastic vomit is the perfect example of an object that's really confounding. It's funny, and it's kind of cool, and it's this "trompe l'œil" puddle of plastic vomit. But what purpose does it serve? Why do we need that? Why did we ever need that? It's an uncanny and confounding object that is also incredibly clever. I do take joy in looking at a lot of this crap because it's incredibly clever and innovative in a lot of ways. In some respects, it shows a lot of inventiveness and an expansiveness of imagination. ♣

Great Party Fun!

FAKE BARF!

A Totally Disgusting Laugh Riot!

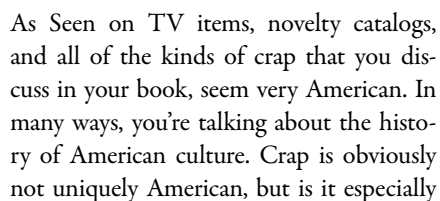


WARNING:
CHOKING HAZARD - Small parts.
15-00371 - 16x6x6 in.

15-00371 (Litho International 15-00371) Made in China. Distributed by Litho International, 544 Lake City, UT 84111 USA.

DISGUST YOUR FRIENDS IN THE:

- Refrigerator
- Bathroom
- Car, Truck, RV
- Sidewalk
- Computer Desk
- Bedroom
- etc., etc., etc.



THE FOLKLORE *of for-profit* HEALTHCARE

BY LAUREN FADIMAN

A CLASSIC OF THE MEDICAL HORROR GENRE, *Coma* (1978) begins with an unfortunate but seemingly random tragedy: a young woman is left braindead after a routine dilation and curettage. Her good friend, Dr. Susan Wheeler, is bereft—and increasingly suspicious of her supervisor and fellow doctors after a second healthy young patient succumbs to a coma in the hospital following a minor knee surgery. The comatose patients are being transferred to a remote long-term care facility known as the Jefferson Institute, which Susan secretly investigates after sneaking away from an official tour of the site. She discovers—to the sound of a swelling string accompaniment—that the Institute is, in fact, a front for the international organ black market. Turns out the fictional Boston Memorial Hospital has been using carbon monoxide to induce comas in patients whose tissue matches potential buyers, then harvesting their organs for the highest bidders. Susan manages to thwart the sick plot, but loses her appendix along the way—luckily, that’s one of the few organs you can live without.

Organ theft is perhaps the most pronouncedly global motif in medical folklore, appearing in rumors and legends from Lima to Las Vegas, New York to New Delhi.¹ Rumors of babies “adopted” from Latin America actually winding up as organ donors became front-page news in the international press during the late 1980s, and were paralleled across the globe in the 1990s, as Bulgarian parents yielding their babies to foreign adoption agencies asked prospective parents to sign a contract promising, “I will not permit my child to be an organ donor nor allow the child to give organs or be a part of any medical experiment.” Meanwhile, on the other side of the Iron Curtain, rumormongers warned travelers to avoid seduc-

tive women in far-off lands, lest they wake up the next morning short a kidney with professional surgical incisions in their backs—a laughable tale that caused a entirely serious rumor panic in Germany, and led to the issuance of official travel guidance warning jetsetters to leave their blood type cards at home.

These stories, just some of the many organ theft tales collected by the French folklorist Véronique Campion-Vincent, are compelling at first glance, but on second thought simply too good to be true. Certain details (seductive women, neatly stitched surgical cuts) stand out in stark relief, while those that one might use for factual verification (timestamps, the identities of perpetrators and victims) are overshadowed by sex and drugs and rock and roll. Urban legends (or, rather, *contemporary* legends) are odd and coincidental—yet just specific enough, and told with such vehemence, that you might be inclined to suspend your disbelief. After all, the essence of urban legends is that they legitimize our anxieties. Organ theft stories take many different forms, but all employ shock value to make a similar point: that the maleficent coexists with the mundane, that peril goes hand in hand with progress. Contemporary legends invite voyeurism, the folkloric equivalent of the car accident you can’t help but ogle on the interstate.

But while contemporary legends keep pace with modern technology and abreast of modern concerns, they often seem to seriously misattribute the threats of the world they reflect. After all, organ theft functionally does not exist, but illicit organ *sale* certainly does—to the tune of \$1.7 billion per year—because it represents a quick source of cash throughout the Global South: the bogeyman is not some sexy blonde with sedatives and a scalpel, but a cutthroat global capitalism that compels people to sell their organs (in addition to their labor) in order to survive.

But empirical accuracy is not the quality that matters most in folklore: stories about organ theft are “truer than truth,” writes Campion-Vincent. They draw out what we might call, in Internet parlance, the *emotional truths* in, with, and through which we

1. By medical folklore, I don't mean a particular genre of folklore, but rather the broad canon of folkloric material wherein medicine is a motif. This includes a medley of jokes, mis- and disinformation, old wives' tales, conspiracy theories, rumors, personal experience narratives, and urban legends—all of which compound, build upon, and reinforce one another in the production of a culture of medical skepticism.



COMA (1978)

live our lives. Sure, we enjoy the convenience, comfort, and care of modern life, but we cannot shake the fear that every advancement must come with new consequences, unknown and unknowable until we are living them. Organ theft stories gesture at their core toward an existential tension that haunts our interactions with modern medicine—namely, says Campion-Vincent, that “we want lives to be saved by miraculous technical performances, but at the same time ... [harbor] deep fears about the intrusion of medical experts on the integrity of the individual.” They are stories that allow us to articulate “anxieties that ... cannot be expressed openly in societies in which science is touted as a positive force improving human lives.” In these stories, modern medicine appears a kind of Faustian bargain: you can be cured, but at what cost?

Of course, the encroachment of the medic on the man is not the only intrusion illustrated in organ theft stories, or even the most obvious intrusion. Just as the clinic encroaches on the individual—with medical practice consigning some bodies to life and others to death—capitalism has encroached on the clinic, necessitating that all care ultimately cater to the bottom line. The bloody businessman’s world evoked in organ theft stories is not so different from the reality: where well-being comes at such a high cost that it is essentially reserved for the wealthy, and average people are forced to question exactly how much money their bodies and lives are worth to them. In this world, death may well be more attractive than debt—and even those with the money to pay their medical bills might find themselves wondering if their PCP is a friend or foe.

Taking Shots at Getting Shots

FOR MOST AMERICANS, THE RUMOR PANIC AROUND organ theft has gone the way of the Satanic Panic—which is to say, the same way as car door ashtrays, waterbeds, and the Atari 2600. The medical landscape of today is far more sophisticated, both technologically and financially, than that of the 1980s. And the malevolence alleged in contemporary legends has grown more sophisticated as well. In the present, a different strain of biopolitics runs through medical folklore, on the loose ever since Jenny McCarthy released it from Pandora’s Box live on *Oprah* in 2007: the accusation that routine childhood vaccinations, such as MMR (measles, mumps, rubella), are responsible for autism. Organ theft stories imply that a system meant to care for you might turn on you if the price is right; anti-vax stories allege that mainstream medical institutions are not really about care at all.

McCarthy was referring to the claim of anti-vaccine activist Andrew Wakefield, a British physician who lost his medical license after publishing a fraudulent paper claiming a link between the MMR vaccine, autism, and childhood colitis in a 1998 edition of the prominent medical journal *The Lancet*.² The fact that the paper

2. A subsequent investigation by journalist Brian Deer revealed that Wakefield had bogus data, no ethical approval, and a \$43 million conflict of interest, leading *The Lancet* to retract the study in 2010. But it was twelve years too late, and Wakefield’s claims had by then taken on a life of their own, seemingly unhindered by the many early-aughts studies that failed to find any causal link between the MMR vaccine and autism.

has been discredited has, perversely, seemingly only *encouraged* anti-vaxxers looking for evidence that Big Pharma has something to hide—and the money to do so. A hysteria once limited to MMR has since grown to encompass a wide range of routine vaccines—from hepatitis B to HPV to the standard vitamin K shot meant to prevent lethal bleeding in newborns—and most recently absorbed COVID-19 vaccines into the fold of fear. Those resisting “the jab” claim that it is responsible for infertility, impotence, AIDS, genetic mutations, cancer, and the COVID-19 pandemic itself. Others allege that the vaccines contain fetal tissue, microchips, and/or microscopic tracking devices. An estimated 1 in 6 American adults continue to hold out against the COVID vaccine, despite the fact that the unvaccinated have been killed by the disease at a rate up to 17 times that of the unvaccinated. Of the unvaccinated, 42 percent say they just don’t trust the vaccine.

Why were so many Americans so easily persuaded that their doctors were in on a plot to kill them?

Where there are vaccine-skeptical adults, there must be unvaccinated children. Low rates of juvenile COVID-19 vaccination have been accompanied by a simultaneous decline in childhood vaccination rates overall. This is a problem with diseases like measles, which is so contagious that it requires around 95 percent herd immunity to avoid vicious outbreaks—such as that which ripped through Orthodox Jewish communities across the Tri-State area in 2019, the worst case since 1992, and a current outbreak of 73 cases in Ohio.

Until his death in 1995, Jonas Salk, the inventor of the polio vaccine, was regularly swarmed by grateful crowds, but in the contemporary medical landscape, people seem less likely to bring down the house for vaccines than to burn down the clinic. More than two-thirds of emergency room doctors reported being assaulted at work in 2022 alone—and two-thirds attributed that violence to the COVID-19 pandemic—while a recent *New York Times* article featured pediatricians nationwide who report being accused by their vaccine-resistant patients of shilling for Big Pharma or worse. At the center of the issue are parents who, despite actively putting the lives of their children at risk, seem to think they are saving them from something worse.

Medical misinformation and the reinvigorated anti-vax movement have triggered a multi-year whodunnit in liberal media. And while there is certainly some truth to the accusations levied at individuals like Tucker Carlson—whose *Tucker Carlson Tonight*, the highest-rated cable show during much of the pandemic, peddled an

astounding amount of medical misinformation, including a baseless comparison between vaccine mandates and “what the imperial Japanese army and the Nazis did in their medical experiments”—the blame game conveniently obscures what ought to be a key question: *Why were so many Americans so easily persuaded that their doctors were in on a plot to kill them?* Many stories in circulation go far beyond mere medical misinformation: they are allegations of outright medical malice.

Well, Richard Hofstadter didn’t make a career out of the paranoid style in American politics for nothing. To some degree, American scientific and medical history *warrant* paranoia: concerns around healthcare and vaccines, particularly in Black communities, rightly evoke a long history of scientific misguidance, malpractice, abuse, and coverups, from the brutal origins of modern gynecology to the infamous Tuskegee Syphilis Study.³ However, folkloric allegations go far beyond even these documented ills—something the folklorist Elissa Henken identifies as a pattern of “escalating danger” in contemporary legends, not only in response to modern technology, but also “changed demands of narrative, comparable to the bigger, better thrills of sex and violence required in movies and television.” Could it be that for the first time in human history, mainstream media is *more* transgressive than its folkloric counterpart, leaving contemporary legends to up the ante? Henken seems to think so: “In order to catch the attention of a quickly bored and blasé audience, the narrative must be heightened. Moreover, the increased penalty acts as a booster shot, re-shocking people into paying attention to the legend’s implicit warning.”

But as much as the media has transformed in the past 50 years, the material circumstances of our world have, too, and hospitals have been one of the notable beneficiaries of ongoing financialization. That makes them particularly ripe for antagonism in folklore. According to the Marxist sociologist (and sometimes-folklorist) Gary Alan Fine, using the fast food chain Kentucky Fried Chicken—notorious for the “Kentucky fried rat” that everyone’s friend’s cousin’s girlfriend has supposedly been served—as an example, folklore about businesses tends to grow only darker and more pervasive as those businesses expand. And healthcare in America has grown to be one of the country’s biggest businesses, employing more than 20 million people, representing nearly 20 percent of the GDP, and raking in billions annually.

The problem is not—or at least not entirely—that there is money to be made in misinformation. The problem is that misinformation evidences something that many Americans correctly perceive in the healthcare industry: that it, too, is about making money.

Private Equity Does Its Thing— Surprise!

IN A DECADE OVERWROUGHT WITH TALES OF HIV-INFECTED needles in movie theater seats, Satanists at prom, and pedophiles at daycare, the actual evil was, as is so often the case, already inside the house—or, rather, hospital. The process that would make healthcare into one of the biggest industries in the United States, with earnings totaling \$558 billion in 2021, was already underway in

3. Black people continue to face discrimination in the mainstream medical system, from doctors refusing to prescribe appropriate painkillers to doctors failing to identify life-threatening conditions. Given all the good reasons for distrust, it should come as no surprise COVID-19 vaccination rates in the Black community have lagged behind other demographic groups.

years when organ theft tales raised hackles worldwide. It heralded an ideological shift in the very notion of what healthcare is: while the first half of the 20th century was dominated by a perception of healthcare as a community issue—and many medical services were provided by religious and charitable institutions—the 1960s introduced the notion of healthcare as a commodity. The financialization of American healthcare was characterized by two simultaneous trends in care, write Eileen Appelbaum and Rosemary Batt in a working paper for the Center for Economic Policy and Research: on the one hand, the gradual adoption in healthcare settings of financial strategies meant to maximize revenues, and on the other hand, the growing presence and power of bona fide financial actors in the healthcare sector.

Financialization was set in motion, somewhat ironically, by the establishment of Medicare and Medicaid, which were accompanied by generous government subsidies in 1965. But the government was especially kind to for-profit hospitals with their reimbursements—and what was 9 percent of hospitals in the early 1980s would become 24 percent by 2019, including more than 50 percent of hospitals in Nevada and Texas. The effects of financialization played out not just in broad strokes, but on the level of the individual hospital, shaping the care received by individual patients. The “prospective payment” system, introduced in 1983, incentivized hospitals to cut costs and pocket the difference by reducing the length of patient stays, outsourcing long-term care to other facilities, and reducing nurse-to-patient ratios. Meanwhile, the administrative demands of Medicare resulted in an influx of officials with business degrees into hospitals, where they eventually ascended into leadership roles previously held by physicians. Such administrators “have *financial* expertise, not *healthcare* expertise,” write Appelbaum and Batt. “They are not bound by the Hippocratic Oath that doctors take.”

As the well of Medicare money dried up in the 1990s, both for-profit and nonprofit hospitals turned, with the full blessing of the IRS, toward venture capital. Private equity firms swooped in to buy up ever greater numbers of hospitals and nursing homes, reaching peak feeding frenzy in 2010 as they anticipated high revenues under the Affordable Care Act. But when the revenues didn’t materialize, the firms began to sell their hospitals, and buy discrete specialty clinics instead, which splintered local healthcare networks along the way.

Conspiracy theories about vaccines and other medical procedures are perhaps the inevitable output of a for-profit healthcare system where people perceive themselves not as patients, but as cash cows. High (and ever-higher) medical costs drive questions about the intentions of healthcare providers, which then spiral outward into full-blown conspiracy theories, a process that Marxist theorist Fredric Jameson describes as logical “slippage” born of the difficulty of articulating the inner workings of the complex systems that characterize late capitalism. And the intricacies of the for-profit healthcare system provide a site ripe for that slippage, in part because the profits of that system are partly contingent on people *not understanding* its intricacies, so that they can be charged the highest rates for the largest possible number of procedures. (Appelbaum and Batt note that for-profit hospitals have been forced to pay out millions in settlements for unnecessary procedures.)

Digital Debtlore

PERHAPS YOU’VE HEARD THIS ONE: *A man with a pair of crooked glasses wants to get them adjusted so they sit correctly on his nose. However, to be seen by the local ophthalmology clinic, he must first be referred there by the general clinic, and for that to happen, he must first undergo a complete physical examination. Unfortunately, during the rectal portion of the examination, the examining intern comes across a strange mass and subsequently refers the man to the general surgery clinic for a proctoscopy, during which a benign polyp is removed. The removal is successful, but a protoscope-wielding gastroenterology intern accidentally punctures the man’s colon in the process, and the man ultimately finds himself in intensive care for several weeks with a nasty case of peritonitis.* What was supposed to be a totally routine examination ends with a long hospital stay and a hefty bill—and I hear the man never did manage to get his crooked glasses fixed.

This story was collected by the folklorist Jan Harold Brunvand from an Arizonan doctor in 1986, one of a canon of stories featuring the rapid accrual of hospital bills while a patient tries desperately to extricate himself from the web of hospital bureaucracy. That something as banal as medical debt—far less exciting than black markets and biopolitics—should have made its way into folklore ought to come as no surprise: folklore is, after all, inextricably derivative of the world from which it derives—and the average American is carting around about \$90,460 worth of debt, an average of \$2,424 medical. That debt explicitly figures into the thought process of many Americans evaluating their medical care options—often as the deciding factor. A 2022 study found that about 2 in 5 Americans had passed on medical care in the last year because of the cost, and that 1 in 4 had skipped a dose of medication, resorted to cutting pills in half, or else passed on refills altogether—an experience shared disproportionately by women, Black and Hispanic adults, low-income people, and the uninsured.

BUT THE INSURED STRUGGLE, TOO. IN 2020, the average monthly cost of health insurance was \$456 for individuals and \$1,152 for families—and even *with* insurance, an accident can still come with a price tag in the thousands, because the average annual deductible in 2020 was \$4,364 for individuals and \$8,439 for families. In 2022, nearly half of insured Americans were worried about their ability to afford that yearly deductible. Hence, it should come as no surprise that Americans commonly skip out on ambulance rides and specialized treatments to cut costs.

Even with the scrimping and saving, an estimated 41 percent of American adults have medical and dental debt, whether owed to the provider, a collections agency, a bank, a line of credit, a family member, or a friend—and 25 percent of American adults say that they are overdue on payments or just can’t pay. Those with large debt burdens report elevated levels of stress—and with elevated levels of stress come physical issues like ulcers, insomnia, back pain, migraines, digestive tract problems, and heightened diastolic blood pressure. These conditions, in turn, require ever more medical intervention, with mounting costs, theoretically until death, at which point your estate takes over. It is understandably hard to trust that such a system has your best interests at heart.

Of course, there is a vast world of cheaper alternatives, though, ironically, their greatest acolytes tend to be Gwyneth Paltrow-types (read: wealthy) among us: herbal tinctures, raw milk, bone broth, essential oils, and a wide array of supposedly “traditional” practices like coffee enemas, colloidal silver supplements, activated charcoal cleanses, and vaginal steaming—all for far less per session than a visit with a medical specialist would cost you. A quick Google search for “chiropractors near me” turned up appointments for as little as \$30. A kit for at-home colonic irrigation costs a mere \$19.99 on Amazon. And trusting that the body will simply heal itself is free.

But there are real physical dangers to these choices. Much of alternative medicine is poorly regulated. In some states, the extent of regulation is basically that practitioners must inform their clients that they are not licensed physicians before setting about their work, whatever that may be. And alternative practitioners are certainly no less interested in profits than their mainstream counterparts. But the real danger lies not in this positive freedom—that is, freedom of choice—but in the associated negative freedom: the right to refuse care (although for many, the refusal of care is not a political statement but purely an economic decision.) On Reddit, posters in r/ShitMomGroupsSay traffic in some of the saddest circulating examples of parents cutting costs: seeking essential oils that can quell a psychotic break, or tips for the unassisted home birth of a breech baby (a complication of delivery in which the baby is not coming out headfirst as expected).

“I really need advice,” writes one mother in a screenshot from a Facebook group for mothers. “My almost 10 month old is sitting on her own but not using protective reactions to catch herself if she starts to fall over. ... We’re not [vaccinating] and also couldn’t afford to keep paying insurance that was never being used so I just figured we’d be fine without. ... I’m scared to take her [to the pediatrician] since we haven’t been and I’d be paying out of pocket.”

When the issue of cost isn’t mentioned explicitly, it is often implied indirectly, through critiques of medical practice that resemble the story of the man with the crooked glasses—a figure who is harmed by the experience of routine examination, his health actually made *worse* by the hospital, and his original complaint left all-the-while unaddressed. “I’d love feedback from anyone with experience of a newborn with rapid breath rate that lasted over one week,” writes one recent homebirther. “We don’t see a pediatrician, and [baby girl] seems to be normal and healthy. I fear that if I bring her in, they’d send me to emergency and admit [her] to the hospital for days for a million unnecessary tests and medications.”

Follow-up posts to Reddit indicate that some mothers in these Facebook groups lose their children: child protection services come, or the babies die.

Holistic Healthcare as Protest

WHETHER OVERT OR UNACKNOWLEDGED, THE FINANCIALIZATION of healthcare is a force that drives countless people into risky treatments such as these. From a thousand feet up, the dynamic seems lifted straight from Foucault’s writings on biopolitics: the state’s refusal to guarantee healthcare functionally disallows life for the poorest among us, forcing dependency on contrived medical traditions to cure diseases for which medication is abundantly available, if unaffordable.⁴

So, what of those who can afford mainstream medical care but eschew it nonetheless? When mom group posters don’t confess to or imply a lack of insurance or an inability to take on debt, they often reference other dehumanizing aspects of the examination and treatment experience that are exacerbated by the financialization of the healthcare system. The for-profit nature of healthcare has seemingly impeded the affective quality of care, as hospitals continue to downsize and cut corners to maximize profits, and doctors rush to attend to huge amounts of patients. Our very language reflects our growing alienation: commercial terms like “provider” have arisen to rival the traditional notion of the “physician,” while “patient” has been displaced by “consumer.”

The notion of holistic medicine emerged in the 1980s, right around the same time that the financialization of healthcare was beginning to really heat up. For James Gordon, a major proponent of holistic approaches, the crux is the restoration of relationships between patients and physicians, and the reconstitution of patients as “active partners in health care rather than passive recipients.” Crucially, holistic practitioners take their time with patients. Gordon explains that holistic healers “want to know how the people who come to them live and feel, what they eat and smoke and how much they exercise, what kind of stress they have at work and at home, whether they are satisfied with their achievements and their relationships to other people.”

Of course, not all proponents of holistic approaches are Harvard Medical School-educated doctors like Gordon and his co-editors—just as many are, surely, quacks, and certainly *all* of them, as in mainstream medicine, are interested in money.⁵ The political economist Robert Crawford, an early chronicler of holism, describes the individualized care touted by holistic medicine as itself an extension of the widespread “privatization of the struggle for generalized well-being” which runs as contrary to the ideals of community health as corporate healthcare.

What emerges is a peculiar tension: the holistic is at once an alternative to mainstream medicine and a product of the same ideology that has produced contemporary mainstream medicine—namely, a sense of health as a commodity for which an individual consumer must pay. At the same time, many of these consumers are clearly seeking in alternative therapies something that they are *not* getting from massive health conglomerates: namely, the “patient” experience. Care administered humanely, with an effort made to reduce the traumatic experiences that so often go hand in hand with routine medical procedures.⁶

4. The plight of diabetic Americans is a classic example: at least 1 million Americans every year are forced to ration lifesaving insulin, and an estimated one-third of diabetics rely on herbs, dietary supplements, and mind-body therapies in addition to, or in lieu of, mainstream treatment. Such a figure is roughly in keeping with the 20 percent of American adults who, in 2017, reported replacing some mainstream medical treatment with an alternative therapy (though surely not all of them are turning to alternative medicine because of financial concerns).

5. At least 26 deaths have been connected to chiropractic adjustments, mainly due to torn arteries—acquired during aggressive neck adjustments—causing strokes. (One study found that as many as 707 strokes were related to chiropractic care between 2001 and 2011.)

6. Even a routine examination may be, in an immediate, visceral sense, unpleasant and upsetting, leading some individuals, ultimately, to the medical fetish community, where the performance of helplessness and submission allows individuals to reclaim agency from real medical institutions. As described by folklorist London Brickley, individuals engaged in medical fetishism “invoke the inequality of power and agency for patients’ bodies, which are only able to reclaim power in a medical scenario when it is transformed through medical play.” This play constitutes just one mode of experiential interpretation. Individuals may seek to make sense of the perplexing experience of the examination—seemingly banal, yet potentially deeply unnerving—in any number of ways.

THE BODY YOU WANT

You want to bulge. You want to ooze. But how?

FOR THE FIRST TIME, LEARN THE FITNESS SECRETS THAT TOXIC SLIME MOLDS USE TO KEEP THEMSELVES BULBOUS AND BUFF. GET THAT SLIME MOLD BEACH LOOK!



Grotesque George,
CERTIFIED TRAINER

THESE
COULD
BE
YOU

100
LBS

You will look...



BIG!



WEIRD!



HARD!

Misinformation is Material

FOR THREE ILLUSTRIOUS WEEKS IN THE SPRING, the so-called Disinformation Governance Board, helmed by Biden-appointee Nina Jankowicz, embarked on the project of advising the Department of Homeland Security about misinformation. However, the bungled rollout of the advisory board made it an easy target for misinformation in its own right—much of which rather viciously targeted Jankowicz—and the DHS was ultimately forced to close shop in August after a prolonged “pause” pending review. While the Board was to be mostly preoccupied with things like providing “best practice” guidance, the Right quickly proclaimed it an “Orwellian” agent of censorship and surveillance wielded against free-thinking American citizens. The real problem, however, was its sheer technocratic mundanity: its positioning of the government as the end-all-be-all “arbiter of

because of its monopoly on truth, a select segment of the alt-right dreams of an arguably even worse future, wherein the practice of medicine evolves past the need for people. An offshoot of the QAnon crew is devoted to the promise of sci-fi-inspired “Med Beds” that can supposedly cure terminal diseases and will render the price-gouging pharmaceuticals industry obsolete.⁷ In this fantasy, “care” as a billable item is eradicated altogether—as though individual physicians were the least trustworthy part of modern medicine. Ironically, doctors are one of the few actors in the healthcare industry that people say they trust.

If MedBed technology ever did arrive, it would undoubtedly be received with the same skepticism that the COVID vaccine has encountered. Whether “we” are true-blue QAnon loyalists or true-blue ActBlue Democrats, we might hope that further technological progress will fix the problems of our troubled present, but progress is so often a pharmakon: at once the problem,

Truth is not the issue; *trust* is.

truth”—what *Intelligencer’s* Benjamin Hart aptly called “doomed from the get-go”—and even the bald premise that truth can be quantified and enforced in some way.

Truth is not the issue; *trust* is. Too much liberal hand-wringing has been expended on the thought that people have renounced truth, and far too little discourse devoted to the lived experiences that shape how people evaluate what is true and not true, real and not real. A series of Deloitte focus groups—forgive me—found that in communities of color, 36 percent of respondents reported skipping or avoiding care because they did not like how they were treated by their healthcare providers. NORC at the University of Chicago found that about the same percentage of *doctors* don’t trust the people in charge of their healthcare organizations, people who, as discussed earlier, tend to have financial, not clinical, backgrounds. And among people who express a lack of trust in their doctors, nearly 75 percent of them express grievances that are clearly bound up with the time burdens financialization has created among doctors: too little time with care providers, a sense that doctors don’t know them as people, a sense that physicians are too financially motivated, and so on.

Liberal “solutions” targeting medical misinformation—like our ill-fated friend the Disinformation Governance Board—are bound to fail because eradicating misinformation does little to mitigate the social factors that make it so appealing in the first place. A true solution for misinformation must strike at the *material* source driving conspiracy theories. In many medical conspiracy theories, the original sin is the corporatization of American healthcare into a system wherein some level of dehumanization and a subsequent massive debt burden are par for the course.

While liberals fondly imagine a future wherein humans evolve past their emotions into beings willing to accept the status quo

cure, and scapegoat. Med Beds will not restore trust in science, just as Twitter censorship ex post facto won’t restore trust in the COVID-19 vaccine.

But what *might* restore trust—and perhaps even a shared sense of truth—is a return to something like the healthcare ideology of yore: the notion of health as communal, an effort we are all in together—and the creation of a system that, in tangible ways, actually reflects that ideology. It was not enough during the pandemic to speak of communal responsibility in a country that regularly fails, in so many ways, so many of its citizens. It was not enough to speak of “herd immunity” in the thick of a healthcare ideology that asks—with only rare exceptions—each person to foot the bill for their own well-being. Care must be either communal or consumer; it cannot be both. And the one inevitably comes at the expense of the other.

As early as 1980, Crawford knew this, and though he was pointing a finger at the burgeoning self-care and holistic sectors, mainstream medicine is guilty of the same sin: treating health and healthcare as a consumer good, which creates “a non-political, and therefore, ultimately ineffective conception and strategy of health promotion.” Healthcare-as-commodity has proven ineffective at keeping people healthy. The U.S. spends more on healthcare per capita than any other major industrialized nation, but only about 12 percent of Americans are metabolically healthy. A broken system cannot cure its sick citizenry; and medical misinformation is a symptom, not the source, of the problem. ♣

7. The rise of the QAnon conspiracy was, interestingly, accompanied by a resurgent surety that the National Economic Security and Recovery Act, better known as NESARA—a failed ‘90s-era Congressional proposal to, among other things, replace the income tax with a national sales tax and to reinstate bimetallic currency—has either been passed in secret or is soon to pass. Interestingly, in the conspiracy version of NESARA, all personal debts—including medical—are to be canceled as well.

NEWS CUTIES

100%
ADHESIVE

You're tired of reading about climate catastrophe, war, and pandemics. You just want the news that matters: what cute things did cute animals do today? That's why you need NEWS CUTIES™. These stickers can be placed over all of the useless depressing news in your daily paper. Instead, you'll get all the animal news that's fit to print!

Never be unhappy again!

Everything is good!

Everything is cute!



FEATURING:

BABY BEARS!
KITTENS!
CAPYBARAS!

BUNNIES!
HEDGEHOGS!
AXOLOTLIS!

The Illustrators



JOHN BIGGS

COVER BY:

John Biggs

JOHNBIGGS.ART