Comedy, Contagion, and Confinement in Bo Burnham's Inside

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Comedy, Contagion, and Confinement in Bo Burnham’s *Inside*

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Abstract

Bo Burnham’s *Inside* was filmed by the former YouTube star, stand-up comedian, and director entirely alone in his guest house during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and released on Netflix. The comedy special is a mixture of skits, songs, and monologues loosely stitched together that question the role of comedy, provide a critique of the current socio-cultural moment, and give the viewer a glimpse into Burnham’s mind. *Inside* and *The Inside Outtakes* both engage with the themes associated with outbreak narratives and explore current social questions regarding privilege, accountability, consumption, and capitalism. Like other works of comedy, *Inside* takes a snapshot of the cultural climate while extending the traditions of outbreak narratives into new media forms. *Inside* spans many genres and media categories, a fulfills multiple roles for both Burnham and the viewer. It is a manifestation of the restlessness of quarantine, a critique of capitalism and the creator economy, a commentary on political and social issues, a realization of privilege, a warning about the power of technology and media, and an exploration of the existential crisis born from these conditions. *Inside* and *The Inside Outtakes* exist within a very specific temporal moment, and the interior space Burnham creates allows for an analysis of how cultural changes to comedy, societal movements, the digital age, and the individual are all intertwined. The consideration of how each of these elements relates to each other then allows for an exploration of the potential way forward from the current moment.
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Sarcastic, sincere, cynical, and hysterical, Bo Burnham’s acclaimed comedy special, *Inside*, was released on Netflix on May 30, 2021, and followed by *The Inside Outtakes* a year later. Written and filmed entirely by Burnham throughout the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021, *Inside* and *The Inside Outtakes* encapsulate the cultural moment of the pandemic. Coming back from a five-year hiatus, the release of *Inside* quickly catapulted Burnham back into the spotlight, the very place that first drove him into hiding. *Inside* builds off the personal and cultural anxieties Burnham has shared with his audiences through previous works but shows how the circumstances of the pandemic have warped them into a new monster. The year 2020 was a time to stay inside and contemplate the greater societal implications of the COVID-19 pandemic while simultaneously confronting the larger existential threats born out of humanity’s unending quest for progress.

Bo Burnham is a comedian and filmmaker who got his start performing musical comedy after he went viral on YouTube in 2006. Burnham rose quickly to mainstream fame due to his virality on the Internet and went on to record four comedy albums, release three comedy specials, publish a poetry book, and direct the film, *Eighth Grade*. He also produced and acted in the TV series *Zach Stone is Gonna Be Famous*, acted in the film *Promising Young Woman*, and went on to direct specials for other comedians. Much of Burnham’s work deals with the impact of the Internet on culture as Burnham himself was made by the Internet. He was one of the first Internet personalities to truly go viral, and he did so at a very young age. This early rise to fame enabled by the Internet means Burnham is intimately aware of the impact of the Internet on the individual and society. As a result, questions and concerns about this impact are apparent throughout his work.
By 2020, amidst the pandemic, after the murder of George Floyd, the resulting revival of the Black Lives Matter Movement, economic hardship, and the growing threat of the climate crisis, and with social media spreading it all, despair began to set in online. Internet users agonized over the current state of the world and reeled in shock at the gross inequalities revealed by the material circumstances of the pandemic. There was a call for change, and for action, yet no one could seem to agree on what the first steps should be. It was during this moment of chaos that Inside was created. It is a piece that fed the lost and anxious pandemic feelings of the viewer, rather than trying to evoke empty laughter.

Defined by a moment in time that is entirely unfunny, Inside is situated within the growing genre of post-comedy. This is a term that has only recently come into usage to describe comedy without the primary goal of “creating laughter” and “instead focusing on tone, emotional impact, storytelling, and formal experimentation,” (VanArendonk 2). Inside fulfills the typical tropes of post-comedy by being self-referential, reversing expectations, and being overlaid with a layer of existential dread. Typically, post-comedies are films with some level of plot, but here Inside straddles genres as it remains with one foot firmly planted in the traditions of stand-up comedy. The special is still made up of only loosely connected bits, monologues, and songs, with no clear plot or message. The post-comedic genre is necessitated by our post-humanist age, the influence of tech corporations, and the rise of “cancel culture”. Inside, which is existential, technologically savvy, and “woke” was well received by audiences within our current digital era.

To understand how Inside is both a product and a critique of the current culture, the digital landscape of our culture must first be assessed.

There is much discussion online about what “cancel culture” and “wokeness” are doing to all forms of media, not just comedy. The word “woke” originally was used by African
Americans to describe waking up to political activism but is now used more generally to refer to individuals and groups who are “aware of and actively attentive to important societal facts and issues,” (Merriam-Webster). The term was taken from the civil rights movement and Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and applied more broadly to social movements in the 2010s. From there, the meaning of “woke” again began to shift into a criticism of people who express leftist or liberal ideas in a way that is perceived as false or performative (Rhodes 2).

Wokeness or lack thereof is currently measured by Internet performance of politically correct opinions, and it is another source of conflict online. Rather than referring to an awareness of societal problems, wokeness now more often refers to the performance of leftist or liberal ideals. It has become “merely an ethical fashion statement” (Rhodes 2). But despite the discussion of wokeness and its impact, it is also quite clear no one can truly define “woke”. Both liberals and leftists hold their own definitions, whilst conservatives toss around “woke” as an accusation. “Woke” is so overused and underdefined that it is practically meaningless, its four letters existing to label whatever the user dictates.

Similarly, the word “cancel” which is also used frequently online, has become overused and hollow. So-called “cancel culture” first emerged in the 2010s and initially referred to the movement to hold individuals accountable for sexual abuse, racism, misogyny, and other legitimate wrongdoings. Since then, the usage of the term has expanded and thus lost some of its meaning. Instead, the term is used whenever Twitter users happen upon another Twitter user they don’t agree with. The overuse of the word “cancel” has then exacerbated the pushback from those on the Internet that consider themselves “anti-woke.” Online debates have devolved into throwing the word “woke” at anyone left-leaning to attack their authenticity and using the word “cancel” for any expressed disagreement or disapproval. The overuse and broad application of
“cancel” makes it difficult to define examples of true cancellation, but generally, online cancellation takes the form of Twitter hashtags, hateful comments, the suspension of the “canceled” individual’s social media accounts, loss of income, and sometimes total de-platforming. The goal of “canceling” is to take away a person’s audience due to their real or perceived unjust actions. It is a way a viewer can punish an entertainer or creator².

Social media creates a space in which every person’s opinion can be given a platform, negative or positive, which contributed to the rise of cancel culture. As former stand-up comic and historian, Kliph Nesteroff explains “[s]ocial media creates the illusion that hostility is greater because you’re scrolling all day… in the old days, we would read the newspaper once a day and then throw [it] out. Today [with] the social media equivalent, we’re never throwing out the newspaper,” (qtd in Kelley). Because of constant media consumption, users surround themselves with others’ opinions all the time. Constant consumption leads to engagement with the outrage of a few loud voices. People have always had opinions - positive, negative, or insane - but it is the Internet that gives each person a platform to voice them; the Internet amplified controversy (Kelley). The entirety of online virtual spaces becomes Speakers Corner, where users can stand their ground and speak their opinions about anything to the masses and be exposed to public ridicule and shaming.

Additionally, comedy serves the purpose of reinforcing social values. Audiences look to comedians expecting to see their current beliefs reflected (Mintz 71). In hyper-personalized online spaces, some users are no longer capable of accepting comedy or other media that does not fulfill this purpose. Even if there is no inherent harmfulness associated with the media, chronically online Internet users may find it problematic, offensive, or outrageous that the piece is not tailored to their specific experiences or beliefs. These users struggle to differentiate their
personal dislike of a piece of media from something that is genuinely harmful or in need of cultural re-evaluation. Internet users used to tailored online content, claim certain media is “problematic” or does not uphold “good” societal values because it does not reflect their individual experience exactly. Some viewers will not accept media that does not mirror back their lived experience directly to them and their outrage becomes engagement. This blurring within the discussion of comedy, content, and cultural values only fuels the panic over cancel culture.

Comedy is dependent on culture, but it must be recognized that there is no singular homogeneous culture from which mutually agreed-upon comedy can emerge. Comedy is dependent on taste, which varies between time periods, social groups, individuals, and environments. No singular work will be found tasteful and funny to all, and there will always be humor that falls flat and is not received well by audiences. There are of course larger cultural trends that make their way into all cultural products. Comedy is also shaped by generally shifting cultural norms and there are specific topics like the pandemic and The Internet that appear in many comedy current specials. For example, language has become more vulgar while simultaneously more policed. What is said is more policed than how it is said. This shift contributed to the rise of post-comedy, where the content matters more than delivery.

Burnham is not alone in his hyper-self-conscious, purposefully woke, and existential post-comedy. Other creators during the pandemic and in the year following have also registered these shifting preferences. One such creator and comedian that is drawn in comparison to Burnham throughout this analysis is Dan Howell. Like Burnham, Howell gained virality online in the late 2000s and early 2010s. Unlike Burnham, he stayed primarily a YouTube content creator for most of his career, though Howell did venture into radio shows and live shows with
co-creator, Phil Lester. But then, like Burnham, Howell also had an existential breakdown due to his audience, their expectations, and his role as a creator. Howell also took an extended break from the public eye before returning in 2022 with the live comedy show *We’re All Doomed*. This show embodies a similar “post-comedy” approach to Burnham’s. Howell’s commentary on similar social issues and the climate of the pandemic parallels the content of *Inside*. Both creators, through their work, try to make sense of their role, both in the public eye and as individuals, in the face of greater societal threats. Consequently, Howell’s work analyzed in comparison to Burnham’s, to illustrate how *Inside* though unique, also reflects a larger cultural shift in comedy to a style necessitated by the current global circumstances. *Inside*, engages with the shifting cultural landscape, as well as the ongoing conversation in comedy regarding that shift. More gracefully than other older comedians, Burnham tackles the emerging era of post-comedy and dives into a exploration of the hyperreality created by the Internet. In doing so, Burnham also engages with themes of contagion more common in novels or films regarding disease outbreaks.

*Inside*’s attempt to not only critique culture but emulate it has resulted in the special not only following themes of contagion through its discussion of cultural problems but replicating them in its cinematography. As he performs the crisis of the pandemic and the Internet, Burnham incorporates a similar duplicating and fracturing into the lyrics, visuals, and sounds of the special. He repeats lines, layers versions of himself, creates pairings between the absurd, and acts out a living death. This fragmenting reflects the uncertainty of the pandemic and reflects the chaos of the digital landscape. He constructs for the audience a visual representation of the secondary outbreak accompanying the spread of COVID-19—the plague that is attacking the human mind, robbing our attention, and dissolving our reality. Doing so further stretches *Inside*
across genre boundaries. The special is a hybrid – it is a musical comedy, it is a story of disease outbreak without a literary plot, it is a stand-up special without an audience, it is art, and it is content. *Inside*’s engagement with comedic traditions and themes of outbreak make it art, a creative work encapsulating Burnham’s skill as a comic and director. But this is coupled with Burnham’s awareness that all online media, even his own, will be reduced down to its engagement and ability to be consumed, i.e., reduced to content.

Within the single room where *Inside* is filmed, Burnham explores the hybridity of the special and pushes boundaries while confined to a singular physical space. Being inside allows for everything – every concern, anxiety, personal problem, and societal issue – to interact all at once. Burnham’s performance attempts to make sense of these entanglements. The space constructed by Burnham forces the audience to face all at once, the danger of the pandemic, the Internet’s virality, uncontrolled habits of consumption, and the implications of humanity’s unending quest for progress.

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Fig 1. *Inside*, Directed by Bo Burnham, performance by Bo Burnham, Netflix, 30 May 2021, https://www.netflix.com/watch/81289483?source=35
Is comedy over? This is the question many comics have asked in the face of the changing comedic environment. To some who view “cancel culture” as the ultimate threat, it may seem so. Are audiences too sensitive? Is there a place for the jester in a world beyond comedic imagination? With the shifting social, political, and cultural environment the question of comedy—what it is and what it will be—has been brought to the forefront. The changing role of comedy in relation to modern societal concerns is one of the primary relationships explored within Bo Burnham’s *Inside*.

Through his reflective style of comedy, Burnham explores the question of comedy by proposing multiple potential purposes, criticizing the responses of other comedians to sociocultural changes, and analyzing his own work. Burnham’s comedy typically revolves around a few major ideas and purposes. First, his comedy often aims to criticize power structures and societal norms. Which involves voicing Burnham’s concerns regarding the death and/or commodification of art and cultures. Secondly, Burnham’s comedy often serves to reinforce liberal/leftist political and social views held by his intended viewers. The viewpoint he offers as a comedian relies on a shared understanding with an audience that holds left-leaning political and social values.

Additionally, Burnham’s comedy often aims to make him “the fool” or an object upon which the audience can direct their laughter (Mintz 75). Burnham’s performance of the fool persona explores his relationship with the audience, and his anxiety as a performer becomes part of the act. The fool persona can act as a shield in this way. The fool Burnham embodies is also not unlike the Shakespearean fool, a commoner using wit to best those of a higher status. Within
Inside Burnham plays the role of an average person quarantined during the pandemic, and through this role criticizes the ultrawealthy and large corporations who thrive while the common man suffers. His embodiment of the fool is not only a shield for himself but the mode through which he can present his own criticism. More than this, the figure of the fool that Burnham embodies is in opposition to the larger despair felt by many during the pandemic, emphasizing to the audience the reality of those feelings. The contrast of the comic with the tragic helps the audience understand the performance as a reflection of the real. By becoming the fool, Burnham attempts to recreate a believable reality while simultaneously performing a critique and shielding himself. Beyond this embodiment of the fool, Burnham’s work explores what it means to do comedy and be a performer. Through his pseudo-narcissism and self-referentiality, he satirizes himself. In his examination of his position as a performer, Burnham’s comedy often deals with concepts of privilege and identity which then allows for his commentary regarding issues of privilege.

Burnham’s comedy now, more than ever, constantly collapses back in upon itself to pick apart each question, worry, and cultural concern often reaching questions regarding the nature of comedy itself and the purpose of the comedian. Inside, as Burnham’s most recent special, deals extensively with the changing environment for comedy, as even in the five years of Burnham’s hiatus the expectations of audiences have changed. The digital age has allowed for mass viewership which changes how audiences are able to interact with a comedian.

The reduction of art and culture to objects of creation and consumption has also extended into the realm of comedy. All media within the digital realm becomes part of value exchange—content for engagement. Value becomes centered on the ability to generate views, likes, retweets, and shares, regardless of the nature of the object. Comedy too risks becoming just more noise,
more pieces of “content” in a digital feeding ground that connects, divides, and most importantly, engages consumers with social media platforms. Moreover, mass viewershhip and the cycle of consumption and production have contributed to the devaluing of art, including comedy. If comedy is to end, it will not be because of cancel culture or a war on comedy, but because the absurdity of reality will eclipse any humor that could be performed by a comic. Alternatively, the cycle of consumption and production could entirely replace the need for art and culture with content.

The interconnectedness of the modern age enabled by the Internet has created a society fueled by outrage and shaped by constant performance. Online disclosure is expected of every individual, and privacy has been willingly sacrificed. As a result, Internet fame or infamy is no longer assigned to a few (un)lucky individuals of celebrity status. Instead, the virality of memes, TikToks, and Tweets cause individuals to gain mass viewershhip in pieces. Fragments of a person become (in)famous online while the creator is nearly anonymous. Within a society dominated by social media, there is a decreased need for designated performers and drivers of culture as every individual becomes a producer or consumer feeding into the content farms of social media and online spaces.

Comedy is threatened by the changing role of the performer in addition to the changing expectations of audiences and the increasing absurdity of reality. Humor is not over, humor takes new forms, but comedy, as an art form, could be in threat of losing its former position in society. Humor is alive and well and jokes about current circumstances are plentiful. Maybe it is just that, the primary source of humor has shifted from one of person-to-person interaction, stage performance, and traditional media to the image, the online space, and the humor untethered to rationality and reality.
The Jester’s Out of a Job

Those who claim the modern era will be the end of comedy, often have their piece to say about cancel culture and the woke mob. They claim there is a war on comedy perpetuated by audiences that do not understand humor. According to some comedians, audiences in the current day just cannot take a joke but in actuality, there is no singular collective audience policing humor. Instead, what is being observed is first, a shift in the cultural values expected to be upheld by comedians, and second, a product of the enhanced exposure, interaction, and communication of the digital age. Then beyond the cultural shift, what is observed is the political division, hyper-social awareness, and dissolution of previously understood norms of social behavior – all exacerbated by the physical isolation and digital interconnectedness associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

So-called cancel culture punishes comedians when they fail to uphold the cultural values of their audiences, as humor itself is a manifestation of values and serves the function of reinforcing the social ideas and viewpoints of an audience (Mintz 71). While reinforcing values has always been a function of comedians, what is different about the digital age, is that an audience no longer consists only of those who chose to sit down in a theater seat at a show. An audience for a comedian is no longer primarily made-up of those prepared and willing to have their viewpoints reinforced by the comedian. It is now anyone with access to Netflix. It is anyone who sees a compilation on YouTube or views a clip on Twitter. Comedy can now be widely circulated and viewed. With the content produced by a comedian more widely accessible, the chance of it being consumed by someone that does not align with the cultural values it is reinforcing goes up.
The creation of a space in which every voice has a chance to be platformed also means the viewer’s reactions to a piece of comedy are more visible. Just as the comedian’s content has become more widely accessible, so has the audience’s response to it. One social issue that highlighted the ability of viewers to provide more feedback and hold entertainers accountable was the issue of racism. In 2020, many comedians, online creators, and other influencers experienced the result of their audience’s ability to give feedback during the renewed vigor of the Black Lives Matter movement after the murder of George Floyd. Through the vehicle of social media, many smaller creators aimed to increase awareness of how language and social norms reinforced inequalities which resulted in an increased awareness of how humor could be used as a weapon.

Because humor upholds values, the values a comic chooses to reinforce have an impact on the audience beyond whether they laugh. Humor reinforces ideology; it reinforces behaviors and beliefs. Depictions of people of color meant to mock and belittle contribute to systemic oppression. Humor, along with language, shapes our perceptions. This impact was given renewed attention during the wave of online activism in 2020, which led to racially insensitive media from the past being brought back to the forefront of discussion and reevaluated by audiences. Many entertainers, celebrities, and creators were called out or “canceled” for their past use of slurs and participation in blackface. In 2020, there was a recognition of how humor could be used as a vehicle to perpetuate stereotypes and reinforce harmful cultural beliefs. There was a greater recognition by many that humor that “punches down” at a minority was no longer acceptable. The position of a comedian in society and their identity affords them certain power, and therefore responsibility when it comes to shaping culture.
Identity and Laughter

To better understand how comedy functions, we must recognize the triangular relationship between the person telling the joke, the subject of the joke, and those listening to the joke. This model of understanding humor was established by Margaret Atwood, who employs the use of laughter in her novels to construct humor with purpose. Specifically, the novel *Oryx and Crake* which, like *Inside*, explores the dangers of technology, digital interconnectedness, and uses humor as a vehicle for critique. The three subjects of Atwood’s triangular relationship are the “laugher,” or the one making the joke. Second is the “laughee,” or the one being laughed at; and the audience, the ones laughing (“What’s So Funny?” 175). Within this triangular model, the identity of the laugher, laughee, and audience affect the impact of the humor attempted by the laugher, i.e., the comedian.

Identity and how it is presented can create spaces for societal critique and comedy can create “a platform where various perspectives can be expressed, imagined, played with, and criticized,” (Keisalo 117). Burnham’s position as a straight white male is repeatedly identified in *Inside* and his previous work. All these identity factors shape the perspective Burnham is able to present to his audience through his comedy. Self-identification is not unique to Burnham but is important to understand within the context of *Inside*. Burnham delivers a routine dependent on his specific social perspective, and he draws attention to the nature of this perspective to provide context and validity to his commentary. He is best able to criticize Internet content creators, stand-up comedians, and other stars within Hollywood because he is one. Being part of the group that is the target of the joke establishes validity and gives the audience permission to laugh.

When making a joke, the laugher can attempt to cause humor through recognition, in which the humor is meant to cause identification between the audience and the subject of the
laugher (Atwood “What’s So Funny” 176). Burnham does this in *Inside* by making himself both laugher and laughee. He invites the audience to identify with him whilst directing laughter at shared experiences and behaviors. Next, there is humor where the comic directs laughter “at” rather than “with” the joke’s subject. Here, the audience distances itself from the subject of the joke through their laughter. The humor of derision and distance serves the purpose of comforting the audience in their difference from an undesirable group and solidifying their separation (Atwood “What’s So Funny” 176). The effectiveness of laughter “at” a subject is dependent on the identification between the laughee and the audience. A joke shared by a laugher and an audience who already share the same beliefs about the joke’s subject will successfully uphold the prescribed social distance, whereas a joke told by a laugher to an audience that upholds a different set of values will not maintain that distance. Instead, the laugher will be isolated from the audience and reprimanded for the disconnect.

The effectiveness of humor is additionally influenced by the relationship between identities, and how each party views members of each identity. The importance of social status or standing is best explained by author Rebecca Krefting:

> You can laugh at people that are “better” than you, turning the tables and making you feel superior; you can laugh at people that are “lower” than you (i.e., stupider, inferior in some way) and maintain your social standing; or you can draw laughter at your own expense, that is, you invite the audience to feel superior to you, (48).

Because the success of a joke is largely dependent on people’s pre-conceived understandings, and perceptions of themselves in relation to others, *humor is subjective*. Most humor can find an audience. The woke mob is not the overwhelming majority some comedians currently claim it to be, nor is it an entirely harmful force for all comedians. Some modern comedians are able to harness the resentment of other audiences toward the perceived liberal majority. They find success in the humor of pushing back against expectations of socially aware
and just comedy. Australian YouTuber and stand-up comedian, Isaac Butterfield is one such person.

**The War on Comedy**

Isaac Butterfield begins his 2020 stand-up comedy special *Anti-Hero* with a sequence where fake college protestors storm the stage, demanding his cancellation. He creates a fantasy in which he has evoked mass outrage, and therefore mass recognition. Butterfield frequently incorporates the word “canceled” into video titles on YouTube and even has a podcast titled “Cancel Me Now”. His comedy relies on controversy and criticism of movements perceived as “woke”. Butterfield’s jokes usually punch down at minorities and rely on directing laughter at those he sees as deserving of ridicule – particularly fat women, vegans, feminists, the LGBTQ+ community, and oddly enough, cyclists. His comedy has gained traction by serving the dual purpose of validating viewers who hold similar viewpoints and stirring outrage from those that do not. The response by those of opposing viewpoints is then farmed for further content. Butterfield belongs to the group of comedians who believe in the “war on comedy”.

For Butterfield, comedy itself becomes the perceived object of criticism, rather than the subject or nature of the jokes employed in the execution of a comedic performance. But criticism leveraged against comedy meant to alienate the audience from a group is not an attack on comedy itself. It is a criticism of the alignment of the subjects of laugher, laughee, and audience. Laughter at a minority group by a laugher in a position of privilege no longer adheres to the values of many audiences, and this difference of values is at the core of the change in how some audiences react to comedians. Of course, this change does not pertain to all audience expectations, otherwise, Butterfield would not have 1.84M subscribers. There remains an audience that identifies with the divisive humor of comedians like Butterfield. Comedy is a
matter of taste, and changing tastes of the majority should not be taken as an attack on the rights or voice of a comedian. Often the perceived mob and “war on comedy” is a talking point used to create space for comedy that is divisive and to feed the anxieties of viewers regarding their freedom. Criticism of offensive humor is made an issue of freedom of speech, and comedians on the attack raise alarm about the direction of society. What they perhaps willingly miss, is the negative impact of their humor, or the existence of a perfectly willing audience that does agree with their divisive viewpoints.

The supposed “war on comedy” is an object of satire in Burnham’s comedy. *The Inside Outtakes* contains a skit in which Burnham hosts a fake podcast in which he plays both host and co-host, “two comedians talking shit no filter,” about comedy in the modern day. With a fake ad at the bottom that reads “Sponsored by Manstuff – Products made for men by men with men in mind because of men in general,” Burnham laments about how “PC culture is exhausting,” “SJW feminist freaks” hate comedy, and people don’t understand comedy (44:38). He only slightly exaggerates the inflammatory rhetoric used by creators like Butterfield, claiming it is impossible to make jokes or express opinions, and that comedians are being silenced. This skit serves the purpose of highlighting other reactions in the comedy world to shifting audience expectations. It also draws the defensive and combative reaction of some comedians in contrast to Burnham’s comedy, which has taken a much more anxious approach to acknowledge these changes. Interestingly in the skit, the comedians whom Burnham is critiquing state “we as comedians are philosophers,” and he seems to mock the act of taking comedy too seriously. The skit becomes an attack on himself as a comic as well, as both *Inside* and *The Inside Outtakes* are overflowing with Burnham’s philosophical musings draped in comedy.
Mocking comedians who are overly concerned with the “war on comedy” serves the purpose of distancing Burnham’s comments about the end of comedy from the inflammatory statements made regarding the “war on comedy.” Burnham wants to say his piece about how comedy is changing but does not want to be tied in with others who are making different arguments on the same subject and this skit creates that distance. Comedy has in recent years become a discourse in which its own future is being debated and addressed in specials and performances themselves, much in the way academics may cite, build off of, and refute each other’s works.

**Punching Down (And Punching Back)**

Though it is doubtful that a true “war on comedy” exists, it must still be noted that canceling is a very prevalent cultural phenomenon. Canceling exists on a spectrum, and the nature of the cancellation experienced by a comedian or creator varies in each situation. Additionally, despite the protests of many self-declared anti-woke, anti-cancel culture comedians against the supposed death of comedy resulting from absurd online interactions, many are dependent on manufactured outrage to maintain an audience. In a world where everything is content, and anyone can be a creator, being problematic is a way to stand out. This is evident in Butterfield’s cancel culture fetishism. The woke mob is not a threat, but fuel for his content. These creators harness the fear of censorship to garner large followings. Moreover, the online debate regarding freedom of speech when it comes to making harmful jokes that target minorities or other at-risk groups often conflates the phenomenon canceling with censorship, but the power of angry Twitter users should not be equated to the more legitimate power of governments and corporations. When thinking about the conservative outcry against cancellation, the earlier days of comedy in the United States must be considered, when performers could be arrested in certain states for
addressing certain topics or saying certain words (Kelley). State suppression and angry tweets should not be equated. Nesteroff explains, “[i]f it is illegal to say something, that is censorship. If somebody protests what you say, that is not censorship,” (qtd in Kelley). Audience protests, online or in-person, against content they find harmful, are not an attack on freedom of speech but an expression of it.

Then, just as there is a difference in the power of an audience voicing their opinion online and laws enforced by a State; there is a difference between humor that aligns with established powers and humor that goes against them. Humor that “punches down” is often in alignment with institutions of authority against groups that do not have the power of institutional retaliation – people of color, women, LGBTQ+, persons with disabilities, etc. It is the humor of oppression rather than resistance, derision rather than satire. But some comedians cannot see a difference between humor targeted at an oppressor, i.e. the comedy of satire, and humor directed at a marginalized group. Or worse, they see humor that targets a marginalized group as humor against the oppressor due to a skewed perception of the world, such as anti-Semitic humor.

The humor of satire, as explained by Atwood, is laughter that strikes up at someone in power or a system of power. It is “laughter used as a weapon, scathing and destructive, in which the laughter assumes that the object is not feeble and silly but evil and dangerous,” (Atwood “What’s So Funny” 176). Using humor as a weapon against the powerful is the most dangerous for a comedian because it is those with power that can instill the most consequences. One example is Kathy Griffin’s cancellation after she posted a photo of herself holding a mask painted to look like Trump’s severed head. The photo depicts Griffin straight at the camera, grasping the Trump mask by its feathery toupee as blood runs down the face. The image mirrors that of Perseus holding the head of Medusa triumphantly, directly implicating Trump as an evil to be
vanquished. The image sparked online outrage and immense backlash against Kathy Griffin. Her cancellation went beyond Twitter hashtags and general online ridicule experienced by other comedians. It was more institutional. Griffin was fired from her CNN New Year’s Host job, twenty-five theaters canceled her stand-up show, and she was essentially blacklisted in the industry (Wenger). Griffin’s statement “I wasn’t canceled. I was erased,” illustrates the key difference in humor that is directed up or down (Wenger). The reaction to Griffin’s statement against the current administration led to immediate monetary consequences. She was also contacted by the Secret Service and Department of Justice and considered an actual threat. The distaste for the current administration that Griffin expressed with the photo is supposedly supported by the woke majority, and yet she faced more institutional consequences than anti-woke comedians.

There has been miscommunication somewhere in the online debate about who truly holds the power and is able to enact real consequences. Angry Twitter users may be able to trend cancellation hashtags every other day and scare certain creators off the platforms, but the ability to erase remains with institutional powers. The government, corporations, and Twitter CEOs with an abundance of time and money have the power to truly silence or censor, and yet the threat is attributed to users populating the YouTube comments sections or “ratioing” a Tweet. Furthermore, these entities that hold this institutional power are beyond cancellation themselves. For large corporations, the ultra-wealthy, and high-profile celebrities, cancel culture is irrelevant because the masses do not have the resources to enforce real accountability or cause real harm. This is not to say the masses cannot dangerously retaliate against individuals, but only to clarify the difference in the threats faced by those who speak out against an institution, and those who side with institutions against those without power.
Taking all this into consideration, there are real impacts of cancel culture that cannot be ignored. With enough outrage creators and influencers do occasionally lose their platforms or at least their ad revenues. They receive death threats, have their location exposed, have the police wrongly sent to their home, or can be harassed or attacked in public. It is not new for comedians to make jokes that are controversial, rude, or harmful – what is different about our modern digital age is the ability for audiences’ reactions to be platformed, spread, and held up as an example of cancellation (Fin Taylor qtd in “Recent History of Comedians Being Assaulted on Stage”). It’s not the offense that’s new. It’s the ability to publicize it and be validated in it. To illustrate both the possible threat of cancel culture in the real world and the absence of true institutional censorship of those who punch down, the recent attack of Dave Chapelle should be considered.

Dave Chapelle has long been considered controversial but the particular issue that arose again in 2021 concerned his comments about transgender people. Chapelle has a history of making transphobic jokes in his standup and in his special The Closer, released on Netflix in 2021, he doubled down on those remarks. Chapelle attempted to create laughter of derision but despite online outrage and a walkout staged by Netflix employees, The Closer is still available on the platform and received a Grammy for Best Comedy Album in 2023. Chapelle also headlined the Hollywood Bowl and hosted Saturday Night Live despite public disapproval. In the latter, he only deepened that disapproval with his anti-Semitic monologue defending Kanye West. But even with the calls for his cancellation, Chapelle remained a platformed and successful comedian.

What differs from the typical reaction of online outrage and media buzz, is that on May 4, 2022, at the Hollywood Bowl, an audience member with a knife in his possession attempted to tackle Chapelle. Immediately following the attack Chapelle turned to the audience and joked that
it was a transgender man that had tackled him, but no motivation for the attack was ever made public. Physical attacks that actualize online cancellation would be the dream of comedians like Isaac Butterfield for whom cancel culture is a particular fixation. It solidifies their image as a resistor or voice of reason. Controversial comedians like Chapelle and Butterfield enjoy getting emotional reactions from those they label as “the left” and their anti-woke rhetoric is used to fuel the idea of “the war on comedy”. It seems when punching down at minority communities that have already experienced institutional violence, justification must be created by goading the minority group into punching back, creating the illusion of a two-sided fight. And yet, while it is true that rich and famous comedians are not heroes, nor anti-heroes, it is also true that there has been an increase in violent attacks on comedians by audience members.

In addition to Dave Chapelle, other instances are the infamous slap of Chris Rock by Will Smith, the attack of comedian Joe Kilgallon, and an uptick in attacks on smaller stand-up comedians by audience members. Some suggest the increase in violence may be connected to Trump-era divisive politics and the pandemic. People may simply no longer know how to act in public after two years of isolation (Stevens). Stand-up comedy can often be divisive but physical violence was rare until recent years. There is something that is causing “people feel increasingly emboldened to lash out if a comic displeases them” (Spitznagel). Perhaps it is the ever-dissolving invisible barrier between the audience and the performer. Beyond being able to gain access to more comedians, social media allows people to voice and be validated in their opinions, building up their sense of righteousness and motivating them to action.

The increase in physical violence is as much a symptom of the digital age as the perceived online war on comedy is. The fixation on the war on comedy overlooks the role online spaces play in generating that outrage to sustain usage. Outrage causes more watch time, more tweets,
and more content. It is the prioritization of controversy to fuel engagement that leads to a world in which “we’re rewarded for despising each other,” (Jennings). The online war between sensitive audiences and insensitive comedians is a product of a larger issue with online media consumption, not the central conflict that will do the most harm to comedy.

**The Fool and His Audience**

Beyond the humor of derision and humor of satire that involve imbalances of power and opposition to an “other”, there is the previously mentioned humor of “recognition and identity” in which the audience laughs with the person making a joke (Atwood “What’s So Funny” 176). Self-deprecation falls within this category as it encourages the audience to connect with the comedian and often serves the purpose of establishing them as “the fool,” a stage persona that can be used to protect the private self while providing the audience a mirror for the flaws or shortcomings they may observe in themselves (Keisalo 122). Such reflexive humor also has its place in modern-day cancel culture and can serve as a shield or method of controlling the perceptions of the audience. Burnham uses self-deprecating humor to align the audience with him and attempt to mitigate any retaliation against him for past cancelable offenses. Burnham is privileged yet anxious and unhappy. He is beaten down by the information overload of the digital age and the weight of being under constant observation. He then puts these struggles in the spotlight to be ridiculed by his audience. Laughter is both reward and punishment for the fool, and for Burnham, it certainly seems to be both.

Burnham is both self-deprecating and self-aware. Burnham addresses any potential concerns or criticisms through the comedy itself rather than attempting sincerity divorced from his art. By presenting himself through his recognizable comedic form, but enclosed within the
manufactured interior space of the special, he constructs a space for confession. Burnham offers himself up to his audience for cancellation, but, in doing so, has largely avoided it. The song “Problematic” is a look back at his past, a confession, and a plea for forgiveness that Burnham uses to illustrate his self-awareness.

At its most basic level, “Problematic” is Bo Burnham’s attempt to take responsibility for his past and offer a critique of his past comedy before external pressures require him to do so. Burnham had previously admitted in *Inside* that he levies criticism against himself “before anyone else can,” and the song illustrates the need to control the criticism. In “Problematic” he states that he wrote intensive jokes, acknowledges a culturally insensitive Halloween costume, and asks the viewer “Are you gonna hold me accountable?” The lyrics are accompanied by visual sequences of Burnham working out in slow motion bathed in contemplative sepia light. The visuals accompanying his critiques of himself grow increasingly absurd, mocking overly serious attempts at self-improvement, before shifting to shots of Burnham against the wall, arms spread in a patch of light shaped like a cross (see fig. 2).

The visual creates a comparison of the overwhelming scrutiny of the audience to crucifixion. Burnham feels as if he is being put up for judgment, but it is himself that has chosen to do so. He
willingly exposed his actions and then levied criticism against his lyrical apology within the same song.

The second verse mirrors the structure of the typical influencer apology, where the canceled celebrity, creator, or comedian establishes their cancellable offense as a moment of the past from which they have already grown, regardless of how close to the present the offense was committed. Burnham claims “I’ve done a lot of self-reflecting/ Since I’ve started singing this song,” parodying the promises made to audiences by other celebrities and showcasing the absurdity of claims of immediate growth and change. How can a person have entirely reflected and changed from their actions in a moment that has not yet even ended? But this line highlights the necessity of such immediate self-correction, and the hyper-vigilance creators are expected to use to scrutinize each of their actions. Beyond showcasing the expectations of the current moment, this line then also seems to show the viewer Burnham’s self-doubt and the critical lens he feels he needs to use to examine each of his words and behaviors. Both the current social moment and Burnham’s anxieties call for constant immediate reflection upon a past that is not even truly passed and an ever-present fear of having said or done the wrong thing.

“Comedy” is the second song in Inside and it directly engages with questions regarding the future of comedy. In the first verse, Burnham directly asks the question “Is comedy over?” and...
the question “Should I be joking at a time like this?” The current events of 2020, particularly the killing of George Floyd and subsequent protests, are crises that are too immediate to be a source of humor. Moreover, Burnham as someone not directly affected or participating has no real need for the humor of survival. In the past with songs like “Sad” from his comedy special *what* (2013), Burnham has allowed himself the escape of humor to cope with suffering, but by *Inside* he is no longer sure it is appropriate of him as an observer to leverage tragedy for comedy.

After Burnham asks if he should be joking “at a time like this” he dismisses his fears regarding the appropriateness of comedy, and potential alternate courses of action such as giving up his fame, followed by the sarcastic claim that he will heal the world with comedy (*Inside* 1:22:45). Then through a sequence of jokes that serve to demonstrate his social awareness, recognize his privilege, and acknowledge the hypocrisy in his claims, Burnham shows the audience his ability to meet their expectations of comedic social awareness. Lines of acknowledgment like “most likely they’ll pay me” are paired in the song with visuals of Burnham scribbling in notebooks and puzzling over whiteboards trying to create the optimal comedic work (*Inside* 1:20:01) (see fig.3). The song both recognizes the ineffectiveness of comedy as a true driver of social change and still grasps the hope that what Burnham is creating with *Inside* will have a positive influence. He sarcastically proposes that more than making a sad world funny, the comedian may have some greater societal role.

Previously in “Sad” Burnham had concluded:

> Laughter, it's the key to everything/ It's the way to solve all the sadness in the world/ I mean, not for the people that are actually sad/ But for the people like us, that gotta fucking deal with 'em all the time/ Being a comedian isn't being an insensitive prick/ Capitalizing on the most animalistic impulses of the public, it's being a hero! (2:59 - 3:23).

This seems to be the primary purpose of comedy Burnham decided upon in 2013, but by 2020 his perspective was altered by the greater demand for socially responsibility of comedians.
Burnham’s whiteboard notes mapping out the impact of comedy are shown to the audience as he sings and attempts to demonstrate his understanding of comedy’s role in reinforcing cultural values. They also reflect his skepticism about his real impact and the sarcasm of the phrase “healing the world with comedy” (Inside 1:20:01).

Furthermore, during the sequence in “Comedy” where Burnham inspects himself in the mirror with a magnifying glass, he illustrates how these questions about the purpose of the comedy are connected to him as a performer. Burnham has often used his audience as a lens through which to scrutinize himself and the changing comedic landscape only further calls into question what it means for Burnham to be a performer. His purpose and contribution to society as a comedian was questioned further as societal issues became more immediate during the pandemic. The digital age is bringing an age of post-comedy, and social media is creating a cultural environment that may make traditional comics obsolete. Burnham’s hyper-aware comedy is a continuation of his on-going conversation with cultural issues that have always been relevant to him and an adaptation to the external environment of 2020 and 2021. Many of Burnham’s fears regarding the audience, the devaluing of all creation into content, and the cycles of consumption and production exacerbated by the Internet are being actualized. Inside documents the attempt to recognize and name these fears and the search for a way forward despite them.

The Set and Stage

The digital age has caused changes to how comedy is distributed and thus how it is performed and consumed. The adaptation of stand-up shows to Netflix specials has created a new form of stand-up that is a simulation of liveness. When a stand-up show is recorded, there is
often an understanding that what the viewer at home is witnessing is the “real” event. But these specials do not capture the event as it was. The camera work provides angles and guides the viewer’s perceptions in a way a true live performance does not. Moreover, many specials add footage to the beginning or end of shows to set the scene for the audiences at home. This choice provides a different context to the comedy show than that experienced by the actual live audience, whose pre- and post-show experiences cannot be entirely controlled. Lastly, comedy specials often compile multiple performances from multiple nights in the same venue. The performance the at-home viewer receives is constructed from shots of the real event, cuts to the audience at that live performance, and additional backstage footage. Their perspective is constructed by the director or producer of the special (Gillota 47-48). Audiences viewing at home see a constructed performance “that never took place” rather than a true equivalent of the live event (Auslander qtd Gillota 48). The live show available to viewers is then no longer a replica of the original live event, it is instead what theorist Jean Baudrillard refers to as a simulacrum. It is a copy without an original. A representation of something that does not truly exist.

Stand-up specials are “constructed products that attempt to maintain a semblance of liveness,” (Gillota 48). The construction of these fake live events challenges the boundary between the real and the virtual. A recording of a live show is evidently not a live show, nor is it a reproduction of one. It is something new made from pieces of liveness. Inside is then of course not a live comedy special, nor is it a comedy film with a concrete plot. It is something else entirely. Inside follows the musical-comedy style of Burnham’s earlier comedy shows, and in some ways acts as a substitute for a live show as necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Inside is virtual comedy for the pandemic age and has no pretense of being live or real.
The Internet and social media have blurred the line between the virtual and the real, the constructed and the authentic. For Burnham, this blurring within the digital space accompanies the spread of COVID-19 in 2020. He states in *Inside*:

> I’ve learned that real-world human-to-human tactile contact will kill you, and that all human interaction whether it be social, political, spiritual, sexual, or interpersonal should be contained in the much more safe, much more real interior digital space. That the outside world, the non-digital world, is merely a theatrical space in which one stages and records content for the much more real much more vital digital space, (24:30).

Here Burnham acknowledges the COVID-19 virus and engages with the theme often seen in outbreak narratives, in which the physical contagion is accompanied by a second metaphoric disease. Literal disease necessitated the transfer of all human life to the virtual space, but our technological dependence and disconnect from reality is also an infection. Hyperreality accompanies the shift toward post-comedy; this term refers to the preference of individuals for illusion rather than real objects. Hyperreality is achieved through “the modification of an object or cultural icon to make it more appealing than its actual form. It is specifically linked to post-modernism since it is a product of deconstructionists’ attempts to discover ‘the truth behind truth,’” (Torikian 100). In his monologue, Burnham refers to the digital as more real and favorable to the actual outside world. In this dystopia, the physical world exists for the creation of the illusion, which is preferable. In proposing this dystopia, not so far from our reality, Burnham asks the viewer to face the results of modernity, of the world humans have created for themselves.

Hyperreality is accompanied by the actualization of the society of spectacle, which is a cultural model “dominated by representations in which the spectacle is totally merged with the social culture, and the individual experience of reality is increasingly filtered by media” (Debord qtd in Codeluppi 51). Culture is heavily influenced by the media as it creates needs and alters perceptions. The culture of sensation and spectacle spread through the vehicle of the Internet...
creates a preference for the virtual, which is purposely constructed to be more appealing than the actualities of the physical world. The preference for the virtual is a symptom of the harm that excessive engagement with digital spaces has done to the minds of its users. The goal becomes content creation, the gathering of objects to fill the virtual space. Comedy is affected by the need for content as much as it is impacted by “cancel culture” and the manufacturing of outrage online.

Ultimately, humor is not over. There is still space in society for jokes and humor, but the role of the traditional performer has shifted. No real individual can fit the expectations of audiences, who prefer to see themselves mirrored in fragments that reflect back specific experiences and viewpoints. This is part of the infection of the digital age which has conditioned audiences to expect to be catered to. Having the whole world an algorithm feeding them what they want to see including what they desire to be outraged by. Live performance finds itself in competition with the safer, more easily accessible virtual performance. Moreover, performers themselves may be safer behind the screen. The primary source of humor has shifted from one of person-to-person interaction, stage performance, and traditional media to the image, the online space, and the humor of absurd reality.
There is no shortage of jokes about the COVID-19 pandemic. Many comedians have tried making light of current circumstances, attempting to get the audience to laugh about the pandemic. Not every comedian has dwelt on the appropriateness of this laughter and its moral complexities in the way Bo Burnham has. Perhaps they have in the privacy of their own minds, without airing it out to audiences. Many comedians dove right into unapologetic COVID jokes with their return to live stand-up comedy shows in 2021 and 2022. In contrast, Burnham in his special does not say the virus by name. Instead, he conveys his comedy special’s connection to the conditions of the pandemic through his emphasis on his isolation, references to the dangers of human contact, and other descriptions that imply the pandemic.

Burnham incorporates the themes of contagion into his comedy and societal critique, particularly in the more satirical elements of his show – the skits and fake ads. It is through themes of contagion that Inside becomes more than just a virtual form of stand-up comedy and differs from the work of Burnham’s contemporaries. Rather than being the pandemic equivalent of a live show, Inside adopts and interacts with themes of contagion to develop a narrative and engage with more critical questions regarding disease and transmission. Burnham draws attention to the underlying societal contagion without repeating common talking points regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. He engages more with the underlying issues than other pandemic-era comedians, and the emotions surrounding them. This nexus is where Inside straddles the boundary of comedy special and outbreak narrative.
Inside does not fit into any generic box. It instead transcends categories and incorporates elements of many different genres. Outbreak narratives, for the purpose of this analysis, are narratives that:

[F]ollow a formulaic plot that begins with the identification of an emerging infection, includes a discussion of the global networks throughout which it travels, and chronicles the epidemiological work that ends with its containment… Microbes, spaces, and interactions blend together as they animate the landscape and motivate the plot of the outbreak narrative: a contradictory but compelling story of the perils of human interdependence and the triumph of human connection and cooperation, scientific authority and the evolutionary advantages of the microbe, ecological balance, and impending disaster, (Wald 2).

Inside does not fit the usual definition of an outbreak narrative for several reasons. First, it is a comedy special and not a novel, film, or more traditional form of storytelling. Second, rather than being a narrative that looks back at a previous contagion, or ahead to hypothetical future contagions, Inside describes contagion within the current moment and thus does not have a conclusion or “containment” of the disease. Lastly, the special forgoes descriptions of the actual COVID-19 virus itself to focus instead on the secondary metaphorical contagion, and the themes surrounding contagion identified by Wald: “the perils of human interdependence and the triumph of human connection and cooperation… ecological balance and impending disaster” (Wald 2).

Inside does in some ways follow the plot progression of previous outbreak narratives like Atwood’s Oryx and Crake, but as a musical comedy special, is less formulaic and structured. The first half of Burnham’s comedy special identifies symptoms of the underlying contagion – digital contagion, or what the Internet is doing to us and our minds – as Burnham explains the dilemma caused by changes to comedy. He laughs at our current modes of communication with loved ones through “FaceTime With My Mom” and “Sexting,” pokes fun at the individuals need to perform in “White Woman’s Instagram,” explains the current political climate through his
interaction with a sock puppet in “How the World Works,” and identifies an unignorable symptom of this underlying disease in “Bezos I”. Each of these songs explores how society was operating in 2020 during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Each symptom is explored lightly, as *Inside* is a comedy special, but there is an underlying criticism of how society functions. Burnham calls attention to our increased technological dependence and how that dependence has contributed to the loss of meaning in our interactions. Simultaneously, he recognizes the humanity underneath the layers of performance and posturing. Take the heartfelt post in “White Woman Woman’s Instagram” accompanied by the widening screen or the paragraph projected in the background of “Sexting” that checks in with the partner and discloses insecurity. While outwardly cynical, Burnham’s special also provides glimpses of the underlying longing and the need for community. While Burnham directly states that while the act of actual physical contact will kill you he also still believes in the necessity of human connection. This belief is illustrated throughout the special by Burnham’s performance of interpersonal relationships and through his direct addresses of the audience. In “All Eyes On Me” Burnham asks the audience for their attention; in “Goodbye” he asks them both to take his place and to save him. Though human connection is what allows contagion to spread—both the physical disease and the secondary corruption of the human mind online—Burnham cannot help but desperately reach out to others. He pleads with his audience not to be left alone and asks for connection. Disease illustrates the necessity of community; even as human contact becomes a source of danger.

After exploring the symptoms of our chronically online lives, *Inside* then shifts in tone with the song “Look Who’s Inside Again.” It’s at this point that the special begins to more explicitly describe the extent of the corruption. From this point in the special onward, Burnham
gets more personal and he explores the effect of the Internet on himself as an individual. He looks at the complexities of his past, his anxieties revolving around his performance, and the depression associated with physical isolation. He also considers the greater underlying threat of capitalism, and the devasting impacts of humanity’s need to constantly consume, create, expand, and spread. In this way the comedy special moves from the identification of the infection to an analysis of its spread and a consideration of the threat and necessity of human contact. As explained above, Inside differs from many prior contagion narratives in its inability to follow a narrative structure in which there is a conclusion involving the containment of the disease. Burnham states repeatedly that what he is writing about isn’t ending. This proclamation refers to COVID-19 continuing longer than expected but also the internal crisis continuing longer than expected.

The primary metaphoric models of contagion used to examine Burnham’s work are boundary transgression or penetration and uncontrolled re-production or repetition. Boundary transgression is visible when pre-established ideas lose their borders and begin to mingle or blur in ways that defy the previous norms. Reproduction or repetition occurs in instances of doubling or the duplication of one thing into many, the way a disease grows or multiples. Through these modes of contagion, Burnham’s Inside aims to identify the underlying causes of the visible symptoms revealed during the literal pandemic. It is with the use of the themes of contagion that Inside further pushes through the barriers of his prior comedy specials and engages with the most pressing questions regarding our future. The special captures how the literal pandemic and its resulting isolation are accompanied by a metaphorical pandemic. The spread of a disease that corrupts the body is mirrored in the spread of a disease that corrupts the mind. This secondary contagion is the reduction of art to content, the habitualization of harmful habits of consumption,
the encroachment of corporations into the sociopolitical sphere, and the apathy to these changes fostered by the information overload of the Internet. To then raise awareness of these threats, Burnham performs the Internet and makes use of recognizable modes of communication through which the very issue of his critique has spread. *Inside* replicates models of disease transmission to critique them through satire.

**Satire: Jonathan Swift and Contagion**

Satire is used throughout *Inside* and *The Inside Outtakes* when Burnham recreates ads, marketing pitches, YouTube outros, Twitch streams, recreation videos, and all other sorts of Internet content. To communicate its desired message, satire reproduces in some form the object of its critique. This is where the creation of satire mirrors the spread of disease, as the original text is reproduced or replicated. Satires “shoot out” from an original text or problem through the rapid dissolution of categories and previously held certainties (Mackie 361). Satire replicates and breaks down boundaries, a parallel to the spread of disease. One of the earliest examples of this replication is the satire of Jonathan Swift.

Swift was a 17th-century Irish satirist whose works were foundational in developing the genre of satire in the English language. His first major work, *A Tale of the Tub* (1704), follows three sons that represent different types of Christianity and acts as a critique of the way different denominations have altered their beliefs from the original teachings of Christianity. *A Tale of the Tub* has been described as “a parody of the book as book,” due to Swift’s additional critique of the “abuses of the Gutenberg era” (Kenner qtd in Mackie 368). He was very outspoken against the reproduction of texts, and yet widely circulated several works. Paralleling this is Burnham, who is currently an outspoken critic of comedy, content creators, and all forms of entertainers
while being one himself. Just as Swift’s *A Tale of the Tub* is a parody of a book as a book, *Inside* is a critique of content as content.

Swift felt that the printing press led to the suggestion that the cosmos of thought could be reduced to “a single technological space,” where language became “as reducible to a closed set of interchangeable parts; knowledge as comprised by material objects—texts—created by the shuffling and recombination of these interchangeable parts.” Commercial printing for Swift turned language into a “material object” or product (Mackie 367). Oh, what would Swift think of digital type and the widespread availability of texts online? He warned that once texts were “[r]educed to printed matter, the products of modern culture [would be] subject to displacement and decay; they [would] perish quickly, ‘sunk into the abyss of things,’” (Swift qtd in Mackie 367). It is this very concern Burnham has picked up in the modern day: a concern that art has been reduced to content, an object to be consumed and produced and forgotten. Burnham has produced parodies of pop songs, country songs, and now with *Inside*, comedy specials. In parodying both stand-up comedy and online content, Burnham has parodied himself. Comedy, music, art, and film become reduced to the all-encompassing label of “content”. These commodified units of entertainment are then spread and reproduced, and through satire, Burnham also takes part in this reproduction.

In oversaturated digital spaces works and their replications are quickly consumed and forgotten. Mimicking a creator teaching other wannabe creators, Burnham asks in *The Inside Outtakes*, “How can I create content that will cut through the noise” (41:19). The reference to online content as “noise” – and Burnham of course is not the only one to refer to it as such—gives legitimacy to Swift’s concerns centuries earlier. The speed at which content can be reproduced and copied has created an overstimulating cacophony in which there are so many
things that no singular thing can hold an individual’s attention. Burnham, like Swift, adds to the noise and participates in the reproduction with his critique. It is impossible not to. The easiest way to spread ideas is to take advantage of the virality of the Internet.

The satirical ads, skits, and brand parodies Burnham provides fulfill a similar role as Swift’s work and thus face a similar dilemma. In creating a copy of the original, satire is both a response and a recreation (Mackie 364). In replicating the disease, the author or creator is enabling its spread through their response. Burnham may ironically act out brand messages, or parody woke ads, and the encroachment of corporate greed into social issues, but the vehicle through which he is spreading this message is a monetary piece of content. Burnham benefits financially from platforming these ideas, his comedy special is not simply a think-piece meant to evoke awareness to issues. Burnham receives money from Netflix for the special and from Spotify where its music is platformed. He sells a boxed set of the album and merch including merch that parodies other brands. At the most basic level, Inside is a piece of content with a message from which profit can be gained. More than this, after its release, Inside also experienced virality. Countless soundbites from the special went viral on TikTok; The special was the fuel for countless trends; The lyrics were used in titles and playlist names; images became memes and screenshots were used in edgy Tumblr moodboards. Inside went viral, just as it was meant to. It is a critique of content as content. A reproduction of the very object it scorns.

**Satire: Atwood’s Oryx and Crake**

Just like Inside, Margaret Atwood’s Oryx and Crake (2003) blends humor and disease outbreak. Her novel more closely follows the tradition of outbreak narratives established by writers like Defoe and Camus, but like Inside uses humor to explore contagion and critique
modern society rather than relying on narrative alone. Atwood’s use of satire is also like Burnham’s in that both draw attention to the dangers caused by capitalism, our materialist and consumerist culture, and the darker nature of our unending quest for progress. Atwood explains *Oryx and Crake* as a piece of speculative fiction, meaning it is a piece of fiction that constructs a hypothetical future using means “already more or less at hand,” (“In Context” 513). Speculative fiction explores the consequences of new and proposed technologies, the nature and limits of what it means to be human, the relation of humans to the universe, changes in social organization, and the realms of the imagination, (“In Context” 515-516). Speculative fiction is not a prediction, but an extrapolation of possibilities from the current moment to examine the consequences of our actions in the present (Barclay 2022). Burnham’s ads, commercials, brand consultant skits, interviews, and other parodies of different types of branded content are satirical but could also be considered speculative. They are just absurd enough to be separate from our current media reality, but one must only take a few steps from the bizarre present to arrive at a reality where these pieces of content are possible. At the core of speculative fiction, is the concerning possibilities for reality.

*Oryx and Crake* confronts anxieties regarding technology and progress from the early 2000s, many of which have only continued to grow in our current moment. Atwood creates a world where the government has no power and has no need to control people, as corporations and the media have already done so. The encroachment of corporations and brands into social movements is one way in which corporate power aims to insert itself into every aspect of life. The Internet is a vehicle for this invasion. The user is bombarded with branded content and guided by the algorithm into developing new wants. Our world is not so different from the one Atwood creates, which is characterized by “a domination of society by corporations, the
devaluing of art and language, and rampant consumerism,” (Barclay 2022). This is also the future Burnham fears. He has the same worries for the future – corporate control, the reduction of everything to content, and unhindered consumerism.

Much like Atwood, Burnham uses humor as an alternative to despair (Dudley 105). The symptoms of the underlying societal contagion are presented as humorous songs, “something people can relate to” to echo Burnham’s words at the end of what. There are moments in the special where Burnham does seem to fall into despair, and there are moments where his goal seems to be the evocation of pity or discomfort in the viewer. These moments are then followed by another joke or another song. Atwood describes survival laughter as laughter “…born from conditions so awful that you either have to laugh or stick your head in the oven,” (Atwood “What’s So Funny?” 176). When confronting the possibilities of our increasingly digital and aggressively capitalist reality, both Atwood and Burnham evoke laughter and an alternative to hysteria.

One of the most prominent examples of the greater societal contagion in Oryx and Crake is the blurring of the boundary between sex and violence. This boundary transgression is enabled by the consumption of online content by Internet users in Atwood’s hypothetical future and results in an understanding of the world in which the stimuli of pleasure and pain are interchangeable. The blurring of these boundaries is best illustrated by the scene where Jimmy, the protagonist, and Crake, the antagonist, browse the Internet together flipping between pornographic content and programs showing executions. They browse these videos interchangeably until all the images become one. Jimmy says “if you switched back and forth fast, it all came to look like the same event. Sometimes they’d have both things on at once, each on a different screen,” (Atwood Oryx and Crake 86). For Jimmy, the ease of access and an
overwhelming abundance of both violence and sex allow for unhindered consumption. From here both types of media are reduced to simple stimuli. Both types of input become as interchangeable as they are consumable. The “[o]verstimulation makes it near impossible to engage critically and analytically with the online media,” and the viewers develop an altered perception of reality indicative of the greater social contagion,” (Barclay 2022). The Internet is the carrier of content, the means through which it goes viral. It is this role as a carrier that Burnham has also picked up on *Inside*.

Burnham’s song “Welcome to the Internet” resembles Atwood’s scene where Jimmy and Crake flip between violence and gore online. The number starts with Burnham as some sort of MC or tour guide of the Internet, presenting the various elements to the viewer. He is almost like a salesman displaying his wares in his attempt to show something the viewer will find appealing. He even ominously says “[i]f none of it’s of interest to you, you’d be the first,” (0:11). He presents to his viewer a deluge of different pieces of content such as a recipe for pasta and a news story about a dead 9-year-old. Burnham rapidly lists off pairs of content that make no logical sense together, increasing in speed, simulating the overstimulation of the Internet. He pairs fantasy sports and pornographic Harry Potter art, rumors and a broom, death threats and grooming, Zoom and finding a tumor, healthy breakfast options and killing your mom, and more. The pairs are entirely mixed up with no correlation between the objects, mimicking and recreating the way an Internet user encounters content.

Burnham describes every action as ways to “engage” (0:44). Fighting or participating in racism are both forms of engagement, the same way consuming sexual content or informative content are both engagement. It is a world where being “happy,” “horny,” or “bursting with rage” can all be boiled down to the action of “engagement” (0:38). The emotion becomes
irrelevant. It is all just engagement with an unfeeling algorithm. The Internet (the algorithms, its creators, the people who make money off of social media apps) does not care what feelings they cause as long as it drives this engagement. In “Welcome to the Internet,” Burnham shows that this reduction is more than just the blurring of sex and violence. It is the blurring between sex, violence, the mundane, the absurd, the political, and the apolitical.

Burnham like Atwood uses boundary transgression to reveal how consumption is intertwined with violence. The reduction of all digital creations to content allows objects and emotions to become interchangeable. Pieces of media are reduced to the engagement they can create. The online space allows for capitalism to accomplish its goal of breaking down all boundaries to establish the “radical law of equivalence and exchange,” (Baudrillard 22). This destruction of meaning is where consumption becomes violence. The Internet is a vehicle through which the capitalistic need to consume can function at its best. The Internet allows the conversion of all parties into creators and consumers of content. Both Atwood and Burnham use satire to draw attention to this problem.

**Burnham’s Contagion: Going Viral & The Creator**

The cycles of consumption and production that plague modern society include three primary parties: creators, consumers, and corporations. Burnham is a consumer of content, as we all are, as well as a creator. From this dual perspective, he can explore in depth the relationship between content creators and their audiences within Inside and The Inside Outtakes. The performer/audience relationship has of course always been a primary topic of Burnham’s work, whether it is his personal relationship in “We Think We Know You” and “Can’t Handle This” or the relationships of other creators in “Repeat Stuff” and “Country Song”. But in Inside, Burnham
this time directs his viewer’s awareness to online content creators. He does this through acknowledgment of the viewer’s relationship to him. As he is filming, Burnham illustrates the uncontrolled doubling of the self that comes along with Internet fame through skits satirizing the content Internet personalities such as Twitch streamers and YouTubers.

Burnham’s examination of the performer/audience relationship most closely models the spread of disease. Internet fame and content creation blur the boundaries between the real and the virtual, life and work, and the perceived self and the actual. The loss of distinction between the online performed self also results in a doubling and the duplication of the self. Burnham makes heavy use of visual layering within *Inside*, as the virtual medium allows the use of more cinematic artistry to convey Burnham’s message. He crossfades between images of himself, stacks takes on top of each other and creates sequences in which he is in conversation with himself. These techniques draw attention to the fragmenting of Bo Burnham and the blurring of time and self within his isolation. Using these models, Burnham links his personal struggle with his identity as a performer to the viral nature of the Internet.

Preceding the song “Problematic,” Burnham shows the viewer a clip of himself as a silhouette viewing a projection of his first viral video “My Whole Family Thinks I’m Gay” playing on the wall (50:18). Burnham watches contemplatively as the younger version of himself plays this song before launching into “Problematic” and apologizing for his past content (see fig. 4). The doubling of Burnham’s current moment and his beginnings visually represents how the past is still encapsulated in the present, especially in the current age of the Internet and especially for creators like Burnham whose fame was born from his Internet virality. To Burnham, this past self still informs his current performative self. In being a performer in the digital age, all versions of the self are accessible for scrutiny and often held up as representations or replications of the
same performer, unchanged by the passage of time. Burnham’s old content and past behaviors do not represent him as he is in the moment of filming Inside, and yet those pieces of himself are encapsulated on the Internet. Each version of the self can become a copy, stripped of its original time and context, that is spread across the Internet to worldwide viewers.

This intense scrutiny by Internet users and the way moments in time can become immortalized then results in performers such as Burnham feeling the need to constantly analyze and reanalyze their presentation on the Internet. Burnham illustrates this layering and the need to constantly self-police his own content in the skit following “Unpaid Intern” in which he reacts to himself singing the song, then reacts to his reaction, then reacts to that reaction, and so on until there are four Burnhams layered on the screen each passing judgment upon the moment immediately preceding it (see fig. 5).

Beyond the doubling that occurs in response to the expectations of social performance on the Internet, Burnham also experiences duplication within his isolation throughout the special’s filming. There emerge approximately three semi-recognizable stages of Burnham within the special – the hopeful and inspired early quarantine Burnham, the cynical but determined mid-quarantine Burnham, and the defeated long-haired end of Inside Burnham. He even sells merchandise of these three selves. These Burnhams layer with approximately forty minutes left in the special when the middle-Burnham speaks to his audience telling them not to kill

Fig 4. And Fig 5 “Problematic” and “Unpaid Intern,” Inside, Directed by Bo Burnham, performance by Bo Burnham, Netflix, 30 May 2021, https://www.netflix.com/watch/81289483?source=35
themselves and listing some halfway convincing reasons in opposition. This speech starts with just the shot of the middle Burnham but is then projected upon the chest of the silently glaring end-Burnham (see fig.6). This plea then seems to transform from a speech made just to the viewer but a speech to Burnham himself.

As Burnham evaluates, reevaluates, and re-reevaluates his beliefs and experiences while in isolation, specific moments of clarity (or insanity) become fragments that move between spaces and times untethered. Pieces of Burnham and his thoughts move throughout *Inside* and appear alongside other versions of himself. The space he has created, the inside space, the isolated space of quarantine, has dissolved the solid boundaries of time and allowed for copies of Burnham to exist in the same moment. There is no chronological order in *Inside*, clips of Burnham with short hair (signaling the piece was filmed early in quarantine) and long hair (filmed further in) do not appear in chronological order. This is most evident with the song “Goodbye” which starts with a take evidently from the very early days of quarantine, in which Burnham introduces the “possible ending song” (8:02). After he starts singing, Burnham from a more middle stage of filming crossfades in and is layered over the early-pandemic Burnham’s takes (see fig. 7). The song “Goodbye” was not written or filmed at the end of Burnham writing the special, as his long
hair in songs such as “All Eyes On Me” indicates. “Goodbye” expresses hope to Burnham’s viewers rather than the demands made by Burnham in “All Eyes On Me”.

Visually, “All Eyes On Me” also plays with the duplicating and layering of Burnham. In the version from Inside, Burnham performs in front of a projection of himself (see fig. 8 and 9). The Inside Outtakes shows a similar setup but also includes the many takes of the song all spread out across the screen.

The layering of these copies of Burnham’s self and the many takes he shows the viewer illustrate the artistic process and the madness evoked by the creation of a piece like Inside. The duplication visually represents the continuous duplication of the self that is demanded of the
performer. Fame and virality on the Internet mimics the spread of disease as the original object spawns countless duplicates that are not confined to any particular space.

Laying on the floor surrounded by camera equipment Burnham poses the question, “Maybe the flattening of the entire subjective human experience into a lifeless exchange of value, that benefits nobody except a handful of big-eyes salamanders in Silicon Valley…maybe that’s not good,” (Inside 56:53). Burnham is referring to the way content creation and consumption have become central to the human experience, and how this is harmful to all but the creators of the platforms in which this value is exchanged. By referring to Inside as content and characterizing it as such throughout the special, Burnham establishes it as merely another object to be used in this exchange in value. Moreover, content creation becomes the primary goal of an entertainer like Burnham, a performer skilled at content creation who was catapulted to fame through the virality of the Internet.

Burnham also sarcastically tells his audience, “One must interact with the outside world the way one interacts with a coal mine…” and says the outside is a “theatrical space” to gather pieces of content that can then be exchanged for value inside the “much more real, much more vital, digital space” (Inside 23:55). This sentiment is echoed by fellow content creator and comedian Dan Howell in his live show We’re All Doomed (2022) when he remarked, “the priority is capturing the cool bits of life on camera and posting it as content.” Burnham and other famous creators more than others, understand the cycles of producing and consuming content, as they are the ones most dependent on the exchange of value. From inside this system, Burnham is clearly able to see the dangers of this reduction. Once all human creation and experience are reduced to fragments to be exchanged online, our experiences in the outside, real-world lose meaning. The threat is a total disconnect from reality and a preference for the virtual.
Burnham’s Contagion: Chronic Distraction & The Consumer

Burnham of course is not a creator alone; like most, he plays both roles in the relationship of production and consumption. Burnham too consumes content. Moreover, as it is his job as an entertainer to understand and fuel these consumption habits, he has a different awareness of his own consumption. The primary concern with these habits of consumption is their excess and the resulting overstimulation that blurs boundaries.

Beyond illustrating the dissolution of boundaries, “Welcome to the Internet” shows the addictive nature of online spaces, and their underlying goal to keep users on an app or platform. There is an uncontrolled growth of online users and, with each individual, an uncontrolled growth of digital use. In “Welcome to the Internet” Burnham sings to the audience, implied to be made up of Gen Z, about the underlying purpose of the internet. He claims that it “… did all the things/ We designed it to do,” (3:03). The algorithms exist for a reason, they are meant to increase usage because more watch time, longer scrolls through the For You page, more engagement, means more ad revenue, more exposure, and more growth.

Burnham refers to the addictive nature of social media and the Internet when he sings “Now look at you…Unstoppable, watchable/ Your time is now/ Your inside’s out/ honey how you grew/… It was always the plan/ To put the world in your hand,” (3:13). Here Burnham implies sinister intent behind the habits of consumption that were formed through Internet usage. People’s lives revolve entirely around unstoppable consumption and unstoppable demand for content and entertainment. Users will always ask for more from corporations that profit from the demand. Social media companies and media companies want users to want content, material items, social media exposure, etc. Users’ desire to have more, makes money. When consumers
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don’t desire anything, brands strive to create a new desire or need. To do so, users must be kept in the consumption loop for longer and longer periods, being exposed to more content.

There is safety and security for users in this media loop; there is a false sense of control over the habits of consumption. Users find pleasure and security in online spaces that are tailoring content to keep that user on the platform longer (Littlejohn 191). This security then contributes to the preference of users for the virtual space and the shift towards hyperreality. Online there are:

A perpetual stream of visually enticing new content accessible instantaneously through a medium that makes us feel that we are in control even as we are becoming increasingly passive and that rewards us with visual and auditory cues that make us feel at each moment that we have just accomplished or discovered something (Littlejohn 191).

Algorithms fuel our curiosity, drawing the user further down the rabbit hole. In some cases, it is the morbid curiosity of the viewer that is being fueled, where the concept of “doomscrolling” was born. “Doomscrolling” refers to the habit of scrolling through bad news or upsetting content, and allowing the algorithms to spiral consumption of that content out of the user’s control. Dan Howell talks a lot about doomscrolling in his (actually live) stand-up comedy show. In his show he claims this gloomy habit of consumption is “just capitalism…and it is working exactly how they intended.” Howell echoes much of what Burnham and other creators have recognized about online spaces. He is referring to the same issue as Burnham is in “Welcome to the Internet,” with equal glee describing how the algorithm traps the user in a horror show of doom and gloom.

Whether it is morbid curiosity, manufactured outrage, or the call of attention and Internet fame that keeps users on social media platforms, the goal is the same – to habituate the usage of these online platforms and keep the users dependent on them. The goal is to create a cycle of consumption and production centered around each individual user for the third player within the cycle, the corporations to extract a profit and maintain their power.
**Burnham’s Contagion: Corporations & Consumption**

Historically brands and the corporations that back them up have been the influencers of culture, “cultural innovation flowed from the margins of society […] Companies and the mass media acted as intermediaries, diffusing these new ideas into the mass market. But social media has changed everything,” (Holt). Social media was projected to be a new channel by which brands could connect to their consumers and connect their consumers to culture. But instead of connection, brands found that people no longer needed brands to connect them to culture. Social media has altered how culture functions. Digital crowds (crowdcultures) are so effective at creating entertainment that brands no longer play the same role, or have the same influence, and they cannot compete with the online masses, (Holt). With direct access to their interests, hobbies, favorite celebrities, and other elements of culture, brands no longer fulfill the same role as a cultural intermediary. With this change, brands are left scrambling to establish marketing techniques that can still reach consumers.

Brands by nature must interact and be a part of culture to sell products but the integration into social movements becomes harmful to the political nature of those movements. Social movements are of course part of culture, but capitalizing on them threatens to make them economic ventures for corporations. Social movements lose their ability to truly change oppressive systems when the largest players in these systems act as the “voice” of these movements. Brands make the movements something that can be commoditized, bought, and sold; wokeness becomes a currency and an element of the capitalist cycles of exchange.

The adoption of social movements by corporations is a symptom of woke capitalism. This is one of the primary underlying issues that come to light throughout the course of *Inside*. Corporate social responsibility has morphed into a woke form of capitalism in which a
“progressive” image is used to strengthen capitalism and power has shifted from the “political sphere of democracy to the economic sphere of capitalism,” (Rhodes 11). Many of the same voices that assert the left has waged a war on comedy, claim that wokeness may bring the death of capitalism, but corporations “going woke” does not signal the end of capitalism. Rather it shows the growth in its power (Rhodes 11). By taking on social responsibility corporations establish themselves as the alternate enforcer of morality where traditional powers have failed. As there is a widespread loss of faith in the United States government, aided in part by the Trump presidency people look to other powers to uphold the moral standards of the nation, and the strongest power is that of corporations (Rhodes 44). But corporate entities do not have the public good in mind. Woke capitalism is about economics and money, not democracy.

Unfortunately, in many cases, the actions of corporations do not match the ideologies they spew, and corporations continue operations just as before and with the same goal of increasing revenues, regardless of the harm they do. The cries for change from corporations were triggered by the initial urge to “go woke or go broke,” (Rhodes 77). Woke capitalism is a defensive move against actual leftist movements and aims to “preserve, if not enhance, a status quo where corporations hold an increasing share of political power,” (Rhodes 83). Corporations are not going to address social problems that are actively against their economic interests. Woke corporations may make statements in support of BLM, or create inclusive ads, but social justice guided by corporate self-interest will not offer solutions to structural inequalities, especially economic ones.

Fig 10. The Inside Outtakes, Directed by Bo Burnham, performance by Bo Burnham, Netflix, 30 May 2022, https://www.netflix.com/search?q=the%20inside%20outtak&jbv=81621584
Burnham plays the part of the woke marketer in *The Inside Outtakes* where fake pop-up ads appear over shots of him recording his comedy special and during transitions. “Online-Only Child Therapists now accepting Crypto!” reads one ad (see fig.10). “Mental health awareness decade at Kohls! All laceless shoes 60% off! Stay Inside,” says another (see fig. 10). Each takes a social or health issue and pairs it with a product. Burnham only speculates slightly from our current reality to create these dystopian ads. By satirizing ads in this way, Burnham aims to draw awareness as to the danger and ridiculousness of turning to corporations to remedy societal problems. Brands and the corporations backing them have no intention of making changes for the greater societal good though. The primary purpose of a company is to make a profit for its shareholders, its purpose is to continue to grow. Social movements are then not real concerns of companies, but marketing opportunities. Movements become *carriers* of branded messaging.

The breaking down of the barrier between social issues and economic interests is part of the underlying infection. The ultra-connected online space became the ultimate observation tank to watch this disease grow as the interconnectedness between the social and economic spheres became more evident. Virtual spaces allowed for closer or at least more visible contact between the corporate and the social which allowed for further spread. This is what Burnham is trying to bring to light with his satire.

**Scapegoats & Carriers**

The identification of concrete signs illustrating the underlying contagion is another fixation of Burnham’s, and of course in 2020, the easiest capitalist scapegoat was none other than Jeffery Bezos. *Inside* contains two songs about Jeffery Bezos, “Bezos I” and “Bezos II” and *The Inside Outtakes* contains “Bezos III” and “Bezos IV”. The first contains sarcastic praise of Bezos’ achievements, encouragement of further growth, and a comparison to other billionaires. With
this song, Burnham does not explicitly critique Bezos. He chooses instead to describe the current reality, which is enough on its own to evoke despair in the viewer. As YouTuber CJ the X observes in his commentary video “Burnham vs Bezos”, Burnham “simply describes the momentum of Bezos’s trajectory which is extensively the American dream” leaving the viewer with only the harsh reality of Bezos’ domination (9:05). Bezos used the system perfectly to become one of the richest and most powerful people in the world. More than this, his momentum did not stop with the pandemic. In fact, Jeff Bezos’s wealth grew by $48 billion between March and June 2020 (Rhodes 25). By describing and praising Bezos’s success, Burnham draws his viewer’s attention to it but uses the viewer’s existing knowledge of the context of this success to evoke hopelessness and hysteria. Then, in the second Burnham repeats Bezos’ name and his congratulations to him, further drawing attention to Bezos’ massive power and wealth, again without taking the time to explain himself to the audience. Burnham’s audience can feel what Bezos represents without it being explicitly stated. Bezos is the contagion personified—greed and endless expansion in human form. He lived the American dream; he won.

More than this, Bezos is guilty of participating in woke capitalism. Like other billionaires, he uses philanthropy to distract from systematic problems and attempt to improve his image (Rhodes 87). But there is no amount a billionaire can give to charities or causes that undoes the harm that is actively being done to grow their wealth—“offering some light relief of the symptoms does nothing to change the underlying disease,” (Rhodes 89). The philanthropy that accompanies the continued growth in wealth for billionaires and CEOs like Bezos signals the emergence of a state where “the personal whims and predispositions of the ultrawealthy determine the future of the world’s citizens,” (Rhodes 96). This is a dystopian state, not all that different from the future created by Atwood in Oryx and Crake. Woke capitalism is a
progression towards this world, where corporations have all the power, where habits of consumption are all that is needed to control the populace.

It is this fear of a government of the ultrawealthy who have no regard for the wellbeing of the citizens within the states they control, that is one of the deeper fears being actualized in the modern age. Atwood speculated about how this may come to be in her 2003 novel. Through *Inside* Burnham voices that same fear of what we are allowing capitalism to do to our world, our minds, and our future. Woke capitalism is corporations seeking moral justification for their existence and “positioning themselves as the saviors of the exploitative inequality-generating system that they produced,” (Rhodes 83).

Who shares in the guilt and blame for the state of our world (economic problems, social inequalities, the climate crisis) is one of the central questions of *Inside*. There is a crisis regarding the question of how much the individual is to blame for the larger state of society, especially for those who benefit or are untouched by the systems that harm others. Putting the blame on Bezos allows an escape from this internalization and provides a face to which blame can be assigned. No one individual is responsible for the state of the world, but it is easier, to accept the emotional release of pointing at Jeff Bezos and declaring him guilty.

Thus, Bezos fills the role within the outbreak narrative as the scapegoat. The elite, the top 1%, the world’s billionaires, are the faces of humanity’s capitalist crisis. Bezos is treated as the visible symptom of the underlying corruption. This is why Burnham and other comedians like Dan Howell latch onto him as a symbol. In Howell’s show, the audience even gets the pleasure of holding a mock trial and choosing to catapult Bezos and other members of the elite into the sun. This sort of comedic bit, in which the blame can be placed on individuals, establishes the ultrawealthy as scapegoats or carriers of the capitalist disease. They are made symbols of the
greater underlying issues because they uphold and benefit from the status quo. But regardless of where the blame is placed, there is still not any singular person who can be truly held responsible. Ultimately, it is the economic system of capitalism that has reduced living into a value exchange and the information overload of the Internet that has dissolved meaning. As Burnham has illustrates throughout *Inside*, the desire for consumption is now beyond the control of the user as corporate power takes control of our economic system. Moreover, it is this very desire for consumption, which is equated to growth and progress, that is the biggest threat to humanity.

The desire for never-ending progress fuels the economic crisis, the reality crisis, and the climate crisis—the largest, most incomprehensible threat of all. Through *Inside* Burnham connects the capitalist takeover of social and moral issues, the disconnect between individuals and the climate crisis *caused* by the Internet desensitizing users, the manufactured state of chronic distraction, and the constant push for more. In *The Inside Outtakes*, Burnham mimicking the rhetorical style of a Ted Talk says:

[I]t can’t sustain like this, not with this much speed, not with this much force. The fear of what when it ends, when it hits the brick wall. And the other fear, the deeper fear, the unspeakable fear, of never hitting the wall, of this feeling never-ending, never slowing down, but rising forever… an endless and pointless climb towards a terrible and dense nothing (18:36).

Just as in Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*, Burnham identifies the need for progress and the capitalistic need for growth as the driving force behind this greater contagion. Burnham’s fear echoes Baudrillard’s observation that media is “accelerating in a void” of replicas and copies (qtd in Nunes 324). The production of *more things* simply for the act of creation or for the purpose pushing limits results in a loss of meaning. The online space, our new reality, is oversaturated with information and content that is so plentiful it is no longer meaningful. Striving for continuous growth only hastens the speed of this devaluation. The ever-expanding
reach of the Internet is a product of progress; the siren’s call of the virtual space is a product of a desire for more than reality. Individual curiosities and the desire to consume have been exploited by corporations as they simultaneously try to establish themselves as the moral backbone of society. Social media has become the battleground in which a battle for control of the individual mind and perception is taking place. These are the threats that Burnham grappled with in 2020 and 2021 while in isolation. The pandemic created a space where the issues of performance, the digital age, societal inequalities, the climate crisis, rampant consumerism, and our isolation from each other all came to head. Inside is an extension of this work using themes of contagion brought to the forefront by the literal pandemic. The special and its outtakes capture the concerns of modernity, through the use of “content” the very object of critique, and concludes that every aspect of existence has been infected by the need to produce and consume, and the Internet has become the most infectious carrier.
Between 2016 and 2020 Burnham took a step back from the public eye and shifted towards projects directing and writing for other content creators. This self-imposed isolation then became part of the collective quarantine of the public at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Burnham’s initial isolation was largely due to his worsening anxiety regarding live performances, particularly about his relationship with his audience. The coupling of this isolation with the mandatory isolation of the pandemic, Burnham’s previous understanding of himself as a performer was, once again, forced to change. As can be seen in *Inside*, there is no real answer or solution to the anxiety Burnham feels about the world or his position. Both *Inside* and *The Inside Outtakes* are plagued by an inability to end, and Burnham eventually is drawn to the conclusion that the only illusion of an end he will reach is the end he creates. The final scene of *Inside* where Burnham smiles as people laugh at his terror of being trapped outside in the spotlight indicates a sort of acceptance of these realities, but his repeated goodbyes on various social media platforms in 2022 indicate he has no current plans for a return to public life following *Inside*.

*Inside* seems to be a way for Burnham to make peace with the past versions of himself and his present self. The viewer gets to watch as this battle unfolds in which Burnham’s personal struggles come to head with larger realizations of privilege and his role as a public figure. The personal, political, and philosophical are intertwined into one giant looming question and crisis. *Inside* and *The Inside Outtakes* revolve around several questions such as: What is the future for Bo Burnham? What does the future look like for those like him in privileged positions? What is
our future as a society? How did isolation during the pandemic create a space for pondering these questions individually?

During the pandemic, individuals, while physically isolated, became more globally connected via online platforms which caused an awakening of many to larger societal issues. The awakening was already in progress, but the space of reflection allowed by the isolation of the pandemic allowed a true realization of privilege and a more complicated evaluation of the world. Through Inside, not only is Burnham forced to reckon with his privilege, but he also must reckon with what it meant for him as a public figure, symbol, or example.

Burnham remarked in January 2021 on the Happy Sad Confused podcast that the pandemic was a “very psychic time,” in which people were not just struggling financially or socially but also mentally. Isolation forced many to confront their internal feelings and experiences, previously suppressed in the hassle of their daily lives. Burnham joked in the podcast “Now I’m encouraged by the government to be in my own head” (7:52). Consequently, many people had to come to terms with their own personal crises in addition to confronting the large societal dread at the realization of the ways our economic and social systems are set up to fail. Moreover, the dual crisis and awakening also led to a realization of how deeply rooted the cycles of consumption/production are. It has led to a realization of how individuals unknowingly but willingly participate in structural inequalities.

Thus, Burnham’s struggle captured by Inside contains many elements. He confronts his privilege and role as a performer in the modern age in addition to the anxieties and concerns he already harbored regarding his relationship with the audience. These external issues of privilege, influence, and performance are then intertwined with layers of personal history and mental health struggles. Performance, privilege, pandemic, and the confinement that causes all of these
elements to interact helped fuel the creation of Inside. The infection of society is also an infection within each individual and in his confinement, Burnham tries to make sense of these boundaries between social issues and personal responsibility, performance and truth, the Internet and reality. Inside becomes a space for all of these forces, external and internal, to interact with each other; it becomes a space for Burnham to try and make sense of these connections and search for answers.

“We’ve Got You Surrounded”

Burnham’s return to making “content” with Inside is introduced as a gift to his audience. In the opening, Burnham sings “I made you some content/ Daddy made you your favorite/ open wide/ here comes the content/ it’s a beautiful day/ to stay inside” (“Content” 1:13). Here he speaks to his audience as his children who have been waiting for his return. Content quite literally becomes an object of consumption, something to be eaten and taken into the body. This connects to how Burnham establishes the performer/audience relationship as a cycle of consumption and production throughout the rest of the special. From his beginning to the present, Burnham has not shied away from accusing multiple forms of art of being content production. This relationship, he suggests, between himself as a content producer and the viewer as a content consumer is also at the core of Burnham’s fear of selling out. Through his rise to popularity, Burnham grew increasingly anxious about his position as an artist and his responsibility to an audience.

Burnham captured this anxiety through the vehicle of performance in the final song from his show, Make Happy (2016) which was his last comedy show before his long hiatus. This song titled “Can’t Handle This,” starts with jokes about Burnham’s small problems like pringle cans and burritos, before delving into Burnham’s struggles as a performer. Part of the reason his
position as a performer is so anxiety-inducing for Burnham is he feels that he is losing his sense of self. His desire to be genuine and his desire to entertain are constantly at war. In Make Happy Burnham confesses, “The truth is my biggest problem’s you: I want to please you/ But I want to stay true to myself…” (“Can’t Handle This (Kanye Rant)” 5:08). Here he confesses the warring desire for recognition and his fear of it. He experiences the desire to please the audience and the desire to create freely. After this confession, the lighting changes and Burnham goes back to doing his job and becomes a mere silhouette, illustrating the switching between Burnham the person and Burnham the performer, and both are put on display on the stage.

Burnham seems to experience a “feedback loop of create → anxiety → performance → praise[…]He loves the acclaim and accolades, as who wouldn’t enjoy being celebrated, but feels a tremendous deal of guilt over the idea that he has ‘sold out,’” (Tripp). Losing himself and fulfilling the expected role brings satisfaction but also fear, just as remaining true to himself as a person evokes the same emotions. Performance is both what brings Burnham joy and causes him much of his stress. The song “Can’t Handle This” performs those warring emotions to the audience. In a Reddit response to a question regarding this final song, Burnham replied,

“After my last special what., I started to have panic attacks while on stage, and it made performing really stressful and terrifying for a little while. And so I wanted to try to find a way to talk about that. It’s the bit I’m most proud of because it came from something I was pretty ashamed of and didn’t even really want to admit to myself. And performing it actually made me feel less anxious because now my anxiety was part of the show. Rather than being this anvil hanging over my head on stage that could drop at any moment, this thing I had to just ignore and power through, it became part of the story. Once I gave it a purpose it receded a bit. A bit. (@bomakehappy).

For Burnham, the fictionalization or performance of his anxiety, and incorporation of it into the narrative of his show, eases it. This was the case with “Can’t Handle This” and then Inside. On stage Burnham has remarked, “I’m not honest for a second up here” but then Inside is meant to be just that, honest. Also, during “Can’t Handle This” he says, “They don’t know the
half of it,” (“Can’t Handle This” 6:15). In some ways, Inside seems to be meant to show the viewer some of those pieces. It takes the viewer inside Burnham’s mind and through his self-analysis, self-doubt, regret, and ponderings about the world. Inside expands on what Burnham attempted in 2016 to try to create a more detailed picture of his conflict as a performer.

Inside is neither solely a performance nor solely a confession. With the piece, Burnham is acting out the self-reflection and self-doubt of the pandemic to connect with the audience. Is Burnham’s life as terrible and isolated as Inside’s set makes it seem? Probably not. In an interview in January of 2021, he confesses to his privileged life and awareness of his situation in comparison to others during the pandemic (Happy Sad Confused). Inside performs the pandemic. Burnham is not literally trapped in his guest house, he is not actually entirely isolated during the pandemic. But in taking away all that and constructing a space within our screens that is just Burnham and the viewer, he lays bare his past and inner thoughts more fully.

The isolated space of Inside is also significant beyond the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Burnham got his start on YouTube, filming himself singing songs at his piano in his room and then posting it online. Inside mirrors, this beginning set with a lot more sophisticated equipment, lighting, materials, and editing. In “Look Who’s Inside Again” Burnham sings, “I was a kid who was stuck in his room” as an explanation for his start. He connects the current moment trapped to being isolated in his childhood bedroom and once again finding some solace in the process of creating with the phrase “being in/ trying to get something out of it.” The scenes where Burnham replays clips of his early career further connect temporal moments to each other. His current moment connects to his “beginnings” and is searching for answers. But Burnham can find no answers internally and finds himself unable to give Inside and The Inside Outtakes a singular concrete ending. In “All Eyes On Me (Outtakes Version)” Burnham admits he had
started his quarantine comedy project with a point to make, but forgot. The quest for meaning within this project was lost in the creative process itself. Digging deeper just revealed more issues. There is no answer to be found inside of oneself that can make the feeling or larger anxieties driven by external forces go away.

“It’s Beat Me Down”

Throughout *Inside*, Burnham has mocked the way the Internet has enabled corporations to pursue unhindered growth and infected the minds of users with an unstoppping need to consume. The ever-expanding menu of content is force-fed to users, overwhelming and overstimulating them until traditional boundaries are blurred and the absurd becomes familiar. Burnham captures the result of this overstimulation in the face of constant content, crisis, and content based on crises with the line, “You say the ocean’s rising-like I give a shit/ You say the whole world’s ending- honey it already did” (“All Eyes on Me” 3:17). The overstimulated state manufactured through media usage creates apathy towards the real dangers, as users are no longer able to conceptualize reality and differentiate it from the virtual. Additionally, the constant flow of negative news and habits of doom-scrolling also feed this apathy, as the darkness of the world becomes expected and total chaos appears to be the reality.

Throughout *Inside* Burnham has illustrated the attention he pays to social issues – BLM, the climate crisis, #MeToo, woke capitalism, socio-economic inequality, etc. – and yet this mental awareness is coupled with an emotional numbness. There is a growing dread that this time is not enough, and it is time to resign to our fate – because major players in this coming destruction do nothing to help and individuals are powerless in their divided state to make real change. Instead, Burnham finds unity in this collective destruction and collective end where the contagion wins: “We’re going to go where everybody knows, everybody knows” (“All Eyes On Me” 0:50).
In “All Eyes on Me” Burnham plays with the idea of surrendering. The song captures being trapped in inaction and continuing to fulfill a role or habit. Burnham speaks to an audience that is not there, asking them to get up and look at him, the performer, as he faces this potential future. “All Eyes On Me” is everything all at once – Burnham’s relationship with the audience, his questions about the future, and his feelings about the pandemic—all mixed up and put together. The song encapsulates the desire for attention, the guilt that accompanies this, and the stress this conflict causes. Moreover, Burnham emulates madness in the visual sequence accompanying the song, waving the camera around with his hair in his eyes. He is also projecting videos of his performance onto himself during this performance, once again duplicating and repeating again and again and again. He laughs manically as he calls to the audience to get up and cheer, get down and pray, playing with his power as a performer or an influencer.

Burnham needs an audience, though their attention makes him guilty, he loves the spotlight though it cripples him with anxiety. He tries to come to a solution to all this angst in the final song of Inside, “Goodbye” which is a plea to the audience and a call to action, a goodbye to humanity and an acceptance of the future. He sings in “Goodbye,” “[d]oes anybody want to joke/When no one’s laughing in the background” (1:02). Though the audience is the thing he feared, Burnham needs the reward of their attention. He needs them even though constant observation causes anxiety and fear. Burnham also makes a request of the audience, “[h]ow about I sit on the couch and watch you next time?” asking them to fill his shoes and to one day take his place. He continues in his goodbye to say, “[a]m I going crazy? Would I even know?” referencing the state of near madness caused by his confinement before pondering if he is right where he started. The isolation, both self-imposed and as a result of the pandemic has blurred lines between past, present, and future.
“Goodbye” is the first of several moments in *Inside* that feels like the end of the special. Burnham spirals in this song through all these questions of what his relationship to the audience was, what this relationship has become if it has changed, and what to do next. He repeatedly promises “to never go outside again” yet is then cast nude into the spotlight as his own warped voice mockingly sings “[w]ell, well look who’s inside again/ went out to look for a reason to hide again” which shoes intention of hiding, yet exposing him regardless (see fig.11). In this sequence, Burnham is literally and metaphorically exposed to the viewer, hunched pathetically at his piano. Being nude in the spotlight illustrates how he has presented his honest hopes, needs, and fears to the audience and is a visual representation that shows how vulnerable this makes him. It is a visual representation of how humiliating it is.

![Fig 11. *Inside*, Directed by Bo Burnham, performance by Bo Burnham, Netflix, 30 May 2021, https://www.netflix.com/watch/81289483?source=35](image)

Following Burnham’s exposure to the spotlight, a stream of light from the door indicates Burnham is now able to leave the room from which he has been “trapped” filming *Inside*. Once he is clothed and outside, Burnham is once again cast into the spotlight (see fig.12). He is visibly anxious and tries to return to the room but finds the door locked, struggling with the handle as the audience laughs on. This sequence then fades, and it is revealed to be projected on a wall, which Burnham himself is observing seemingly alone, though the laughter of some unseen
audience is still able to be heard. Upon seeing himself panicking, unable to get inside, but hearing the laughter of his viewer, Burnham smiles, and the special ends. These multiple, and extended, endings illustrate Burnham’s intentional exposure of himself and acceptance of the ridicule he has invited. Through his honesty, and raw portrayals of his helplessness and fear has exposed himself to humiliation but also connection. The laughter at Burnham can also be one of identification. But with this laughter and connection in the final scene of Inside, there is also the revelation that the freedom of outside Burnham thought would exist when he emerged has disappeared. Outside is still a performance, and Burnham cannot escape observation (CJ the X 1:50:55). So, while “Goodbye” and the ending sequence are about connecting with the audience through the shared feelings of anxiety about performance in the digital age, the ending sequence also leaves the audience with the chilling truth—inside is also out. Opening the door is not an escape.

Finally, it should be noted that the musical portion of Make Happy and Inside both end in the same. At the end of Make Happy Burnham goes outside and is greeted by a (fake) family and illustrating a separation from the pain expressed in his comedy. At the end of Inside, he goes outside but it is not the end of the performance. Burnham is instead subjected to another
audience and their laughter but here accepts it. Both comedic works—one pre-self-imposed isolation, and one during-externally-motivated isolation—present the outside as an escape from the turmoil Burnham deals with when confronting the performer/audience relationship internally. Yet they differ in their conclusiveness. Going outside marks the end of Make Happy, whereas outside at the end of Inside only leads back to the inside and the cycle repeats. This illustrates a change in Burnham’s understanding of his relationship with comedy and his audience.

Performance is both inside and outside; the boundaries have dissolved. This dissolution is part of the larger contagion that also concerned him throughout the special. Every action has an audience, whether Burnham himself or an external viewer, and the struggle of Burnham’s performance has followed him from the stage. It has infected every layer of existing and self-understanding. Inside and outside have lost their previous boundaries and all states of being become performance—and this experience is not unique to Burnham. Performance is demanded of all individuals in virtual spaces, where everyone becomes a potential subject for public ridicule and scrutiny. The dissolution of the boundaries between inside and outside, the private and the public, are not unique to Burnham, and his performance of these decaying boundaries illustrates this greater underlying infection.

“A Special Kind of White Guy”

Inside is where personal anxiety meets quarantine anxiety meets greater existential crisis. Burnham voices the helplessness that emerges from all three. The feeling of being trapped is very much connected to the pandemic but it is also connected to the digital enclosures that have been created. Yet, as much as the feelings of entrapment by the pandemic were felt by many, Burnham’s experience is in no way universal, and the specific struggles and worldview he performs in the comedy special are shaped by his white, liberal, celebrity perspective of the
world. Burnham is not actually physically isolated: his guest house is a set in which he staged *Inside*. It is a space for performing the emotional turmoil inside of himself and a space for exploration. Many people during the pandemic were more literally isolated, many others did not experience isolation at all. The ability to isolate to protect oneself from the COVID-19 virus was not an option for frontline healthcare workers, other essential workers, those living in poverty, the homeless, or any other number of people for whom the pandemic had them outside grappling with the realities of the literal virus, rather than the more metaphorical themes that plagued Burnham.

The view Burnham presents is both from inside himself and inside a class privileged enough to be mere observers of the pandemic, rather than struggling with its immediate physical effects. Comedy by nature is linked to the specific social position of the comedian and thus allows a glimpse into their world perspective (Keisalo 117). Burnham’s comedy is shaped by his privilege and white habitus, a fact of which he is not entirely unaware. White habitus is the “factors that contribute to the solidification of… White subjectivity” (Bonilla-Silva xviii). These factors include where a person is born, whom they go to school with, the media they are exposed to, the community they become a part of, and the other environmental factors that shape individual experience and perspective. Burnham often jokingly comments on his white suburban upbringing and his childhood media consumption, and how this influenced his style of comedy. By the time of the creation of *Inside*, in addition to this distinctly white childhood, Burnham’s perspective is shaped by his fame and wealth. His leftism, however sincere, is inevitably warped by his social position.

The anxieties Burnham taps into and performs in *Inside* are ones that are more likely to be shared with a viewer who also has an understanding of the world that is both white and liberal.
The disconnect between *Inside* and the experiences of people of color was first discussed by YouTuber F.D. Signifier in his video essay “Bo Burnham's *Inside* and ‘White Liberal Performative Art,’” in which he discussed how the experience of watching *Inside* differed for people of color. Within the special, the themes of contagion and the more abstract fear of the “end of the world” comes from the perspective of someone who is not immediately facing the physical threat of the COVID-19 virus, police brutality, environmental catastrophe, etc. Burnham is voicing fears of a larger audience, but the emotions he feels are more likely to be shared with someone in a similar socio-economic, racial, political, and financial position. It is not a criticism of Burnham as a creator to address how *Inside* is shaped by Burnham’s identity and privilege.

There is a tension, especially for viewers that do not share Burnham’s position, between the existential questions and the urgent material concerns of the pandemic (Loofbourow). Burnham is deeply concerned about social inequalities during the pandemic whilst his use of *his guest house* as a set for this exploration shows his own position within this hierarchy. But it is this very position of privilege that allows Burnham to explore larger societal issues and to have the resources to platform his message. When discussing his 2016 special *Make Happy*, Burnham stated,

> I think the problem is that oftentimes, the only people that are qualified to talk about something are people that, were they to talk about it, they’d be hypocrites. I don’t think I would know certain things if I hadn’t benefited from it. So I feel like it’s sort of my job to pull the rug out from under something. I just wanted to do a show with bells and whistles about bells and whistles, to make a spectacle about what spectacle is, (Schwartz).

Burnham has done the same thing with *Inside*. From the position of a successful, wealthy, white, straight, male, he is best able to see all the ways privilege benefitted him. From his own success as a content creator, he is able to see the insincerity and greed necessitated by such a career. As a white liberal, he is best able to see the failings of the well-meaning but uninformed
or misguided efforts of someone online. From inside the problem, Burnham is better able to describe it. But what about solving it?

“**Remember Who's on Whose Hand**”

Performative wokeness is one symptom of the white worldview held by many well-meaning liberals. Burnham critiques this performance but also partakes in it. In his comedy, he expresses the correct opinions online because it is expected of him and maintains the loyalty of his fans. In *Inside*, “How the World Works” is Burnham’s best performance of his wokeness. It’s packed full of truly leftist talking points and allows Burnham to illustrate his understanding of social issues to his audience. The second verse is as follows:

The simple narrative taught in every history class/ is demonstrably false and pedagogically classist/ Don’t you know the world is built with blood?/ and genocide and exploitation/ the global network of capital essentially functions/ to separate the worker from the means of production/ And the FBI killed Martin Luther King/ Private property’s inherently theft/ and neoliberal fascists are destroying the left/ And every politician, every cop on the street/ protects the interests of the pedophilic corporate elite (1:11:30).

Through this part of the song, Burnham is confirming he is a “woke” comedian, shielding himself in part through the use of “Socko” telling the audience these things. This mirrors the platforming, reposting, and resharing of many liberal talking points online throughout the pandemic. While Burnham critiques corporations and influencers for their performative wokeness he does the exact same thing. Recreating the performance is also in a way taking part in that performance, but it is done so in a way that is entirely aware of this performative nature. What does the recognition of these failings of white people do for Burnham?

The interlude of “How the World Works” involves Burnham, acting as the well-meaning white liberal, questioning “Socko” about what he, as a white straight male, can do about the many societal issues “Socko” listed off. When “Socko,” tells him to educate himself on his own he apologizes and says “I was just trying to become a better person” illustrating how white
people have internalized these greater structural inequalities as a moral issue they can simply choose not to take part in. It is his guilt that prompts him to attempt to address the issues, not simply a desire to see change or help others. “Socko” calls him out on this performance and says “Why do you rich fucking white people insist on seeing every socio-political conflict through the myopic lens of your own self-actualization?” Fighting racism and other inequalities becomes an internalized personal journey for Burnham, playing the role of a well-meaning white person. Rather than viewing these conflicts and racism as a structural thing, the well-meaning white person views it as an individual. From here in the interlude, Burnham’s character reacts aggressively to “Socko” and silences his voice, unable to deal with confronting the reality of the situation. In doing so the liberal/well-meaning white person resumes back into the role of the oppressor as it is the role they are habituated to fulfill. “Socko” is worn on Burnham’s hand to represent the way white liberal’s platform the voices of those in minority communities, but still act as the oppressor. If that voice dares speak against them, the benevolent or “good” white person, the minority risks losing that platform and that support.

In acting out this whole interaction, Burnham is illustrating the problems with white people who individualize racism and also the performative nature of some “good intentions”. Burnham has criticized the performative wokeness of the individual and corporations, recognized his privilege, questioned the impact and importance of his comedy, and more, but in the end, he has still created a comedy special, a piece of “content” that is confined within a white, liberal understanding of the world in which Burnham himself is performing wokeness.

One function of Inside is then, to be a vehicle for exploration and recognition of these reactions from white liberals, and the inability of many to critically interrogate their own whiteness. The constructed isolation and set of Inside create a space for Burnham and his
viewers to unpack what it means to be privileged in 2020, what their choices are, and what to do with the feelings of entrapment. The crisis expressed in “Comedy” and “Problematic” is connected to the realization of whiteness and recognition of privilege. When canceled for past mistakes, or fearing a potential cancellation, a creator like Burnham, if they genuinely want to improve, must turn inward and more critically examine their experience. In doing so it is nearly impossible to avoid encountering questions of one’s privilege. The larger then becomes of how to address or move forward from that realization. Privilege is not a choice, and more than that benefits that person. Unable or unwilling to step out of that social position, the privileged person is left with guilt and can become stuck in a state of inaction.

The song “1985” from The Inside Outtakes both critiques Burnham’s privilege and also illustrates the point F.D. Signifier makes regarding the desire to simply feel better about one’s position. Burnham expresses a desire to go back to a time before wokeness, before awareness of the harmful structures he takes part in and the privilege he holds. In “1985” Burnham sings “I wanna be my dad in the ’80s (Scott)/ My oblivious white dad in the mid-80s (Scott)/ My dad was an oblivious white guy (general contractor)/ My father was happier than I am,” (2:05). The connection Burnham makes here is that he and his father are essentially the same except for their awareness. His dad’s obliviousness to his privilege allows him a happiness inaccessible to Burnham who is woke. The song expresses a guilty desire to escape this state of knowing. But, once awareness is gained it cannot be easily lost, and returning to a state of true oblivion is impossible.

“Feel Good”

Going back is impossible and the only way is forward, but doing so in a truly constructive way is complicated by the individualism and self-improvement mentality of the
current culture. Systemic issues have become tied with the individual quest to be a good person. The current culture, due to both canceling and aggressive individualism, often leads to dividing members of a privileged group into those that are “good” or “bad”. Such division disregards the systemic nature of the issue. America’s rampant individualism makes it difficult for people to understand themselves as pieces within a structure without internalizing and personalizing the issue. The insistence that problems like racism can be attributed to individuals only distracts from the larger societal issues and distorts reality (Bonilla-Silva 174). This individualization of the problem was only exacerbated by the Trump era, when white liberals were able to place the blame on “Trump supporters as the ‘real’ racists and, in doing so, created a binary picture of ‘good Whites’ and ‘bad Whites’” (Bonilla-Silva 37). The polarization of American politics has furthered the individual moralization of specific problems, with those on both sides looking to deem the other as either good or bad.

It is not just specifically the issue of racism that Burnham addresses in his comedy, but this binary viewpoint regarding all political and social issues permeates the discussion. The oversimplification of social issues is hard to reconcile with an awakening to privilege and systemic problems. The individual becomes overwhelmed when trying to reconcile the systemic with the own personal growth encouraged by culture. It is second nature for well-meaning liberals to look inward at themselves for answers to the greater existential dread they feel about the world because their whole lives they have been told that they can fix their problems, their sadness, and their pain through self-improvement and changes to the self, not through changes to society. The greater existential dread is made personal because doing so is the only way to feel better without societal change. Inside oneself is the only place where the individual can have some semblance of control, but even this, Burnham discovers, is an illusion.
Inside is not a refuge, but the larger tasks at hand seem impossible. This is why many scholars and critics who discuss social movements and social change emphasize the need to start small, change habits, alter language, and make changes in individual communities. Attempting to understand the impact of the bigger picture can freeze the individual. The vast knowledge available through the Internet and the deluge of content online does just this—overwhelming the user and encouraging a state of dissociation, and thus inaction. Here is where individuals—users and consumers—can then fall victim to woke capitalism, which allows for virtue signaling and material expressions of political beliefs through choices of consumption. Woke capitalism is also about “feeling better” about social issues by participating in the consumption of the “correct” goods or media. It provides the material means for individuals to feel as if they are creating change without the effort of real impact. It allows an escape from the guilt. This is a guilt that is encouraged by these corporations and brands, which urge their consumers to create social change, knowing very well that it is not the singular individual that has the power to do so.

It is this feeling that often leads to inaction after the awakening. This guilt, referred to by scholars as “liberal guilt,” “leads to paralysis with respect to taking social or political action to repair the harm committed” (Todd 357 – 358). The individual remains frozen, unable to start to address the systems they have unwittingly benefited from. Yet, without meaningful action, there is no way to ease the feeling. The well-meaning white liberal may try to hide through their online activism, consumption habits, and inward reflection, but the monumental task of large-scale societal change remains the only true remedy. Burnham proposes that the only way for his hysterical state in Inside to end is if he stops doing it and yet the ending still drags on because that is not the real answer. The problem is not the individual. Inside, while a space for exploration and acceptance, is also a hiding place that must eventually be left. Staying inside is
remaining in inaction. The realizations from the inside must be brought out into the bright, blinding, and laughing, exterior, outside space.
Outside

The state of being “inside” has many meanings within Burnham’s special. It refers to being physically trapped inside due to the pandemic: it refers to being inside Burnham’s mind; it refers to being inside the infection. It is the perspective of the Internet from the vantage point of someone well-versed and integrated with its use. Inside is a critique of content creation, comedy, fame, and capitalism from the very center. From inside, Burnham describes the symptoms of the underlying problem, struggles to grasp the size and implications of the underlying issue, and must reckon with his role as an individual part of larger systems. Inside is where comedy can meet contagion. Confinement brings all the working elements of the world and the individual mind into one shared space and inside is where they can be understood in relation to each other. Inside is a hybrid born from the cultural and technological moment of the pandemic that reflects back the specific despair of that moment.

To be a space that enables the interaction of societal questions with personal crises, Inside mixes traditions of comedy and narrative. Inside is among a growing number of standup comedy specials that subvert tradition, stray from liveness, and lean into the themes of post-comedy. With his special, Burnham addresses issues at the forefront of modern conversations regarding culture, such as canceling, wokeness, activism, consumerism, and social media. Burnham throughout the special uses comedy as a lens to examine cultural shifts. He attacks the combative and surface-level generalizations of comics who insist there is a war on comedy and instead dives into how canceling is connected to the continuously evolving relationship between a creator and their audience that is in turn impacted by the experience of both parties in digital spaces.

This critique is Burnham’s entry point into a conversation about the greater threat of hyperreality. Burnham is not alone in his position as a former Internet star, questioning
everything and gazing into the twisted machine that catapulted him to his current position. *Inside* has performed this reflection and captured the agonizing cycle of self-observation, doubt, and despair. The choppy, raw, and sarcastic but sincere commentary on the current cultural moment and the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, voices the concerns of many living through this age. Not only amplifying spoken concerns but capturing the internal feelings of chaos and fragmentation. *Inside* encapsulates the despair of the pandemic – a despair that has not yet left.

Burnham establishes the Internet as the carrier and the means through which symptoms of the underlying problems present themselves. His primary concern is what the Internet has done to the minds of its users and what it is continuing to do. It has warped perceptions of self, society, and the world. The Internet is a tool that can link us to the basest elements of our humanity and separate us from them. The infectious nature of the Internet, and how Burnham incorporates these elements into *Inside* is what then aligns the comedy special with more traditional outbreak narratives detailing the spread of disease. It is through its hybridity, engagement with contagion, and ability to articulate the emotions of the pandemic, that *Inside* distinguishes itself from other pandemic-era comedies.

Contagion is illustrated through *Inside*’s depictions of the dissolution of boundaries between the performer and their audience, between the real and the virtual, and between all matters of feeling and emotion. Sex, violence, the mundane, and the absurd, all become blurred in Burnham’s performance. All things are reduced to slivers of content that feed the capitalist cycle of consumption and production. More than this, there is uncontrolled replication and repetition of content on the Internet and a spread of ideas like infection. This repetition affects all Internet creators, who become infinitely repeating copies of themselves as they try to police and understand themselves in a hypercritical world, whilst simultaneously being cut up and spread
throughout online spaces. These patterns of disease outbreak are illustrated within Burnham’s comedy special. At its most basic level, *Inside* is a narrative of “the perils of human interdependence and the triumph of human connection…” (Wald 2). The connection provided by the Internet is the greatest threat to humanity, but it is also the only means to reach each other and come to an understanding of the current danger. The Internet is the problem but is also essential for the solution. Burnham struggles with the necessity of using the Internet to communicate his message, just as prior outbreak narratives have struggled with the necessity and danger of human connection. More than this, Burnham is forever tormented by the existence of the watchful eyes of his audience within the online space, while unable to truly give up that connection. He always has something more he wishes to share or another connection he wishes to create. He says goodbye but always seems to come back for *just one more thing*.

Being inside should be a private and personal space, but in his special Burnham makes the interior space a stage. He acts out his internal crisis to an audience that he cannot see but is granted access to every intimate moment. He shows himself eating, sleeping, and crying. He dances barely clothed in front of the camera in multiple scenes before fully stripping down in the final moments. Burnham both metaphorically and literally lays himself bare within *Inside*. Yet this interior, deeply personal space is constructed. It is a set where intimacy is performed; where Burnham stages his agony, his guilt. Through this space, Burnham presents his personal confession, alongside his greater societal worries. Allowing these crises to interact in a way they have for many in a similar social position. The societal and individual questions of privilege, activism, change, and action are all called into question. It is a space where everything can be all at once and become one great mass of fear, uncertainty, and guilt.
What Burnham understands and recognizes is that there is then nothing that can be done about this chaotic mass. With each attempt at an answer or solution to this overwhelming digital and existential threat, he doubles back on himself. Each attempt at acceptance spins back into the crisis. This is why *Inside* is plagued by an inability to end. Again and again, Burnham states his inability to finish the comedy special as the thing he is writing about does not end. He says the only way for things to stop is if he stops, and yet he keeps going. He talks about the end of comedy, the end of isolation, and even the end of humanity yet finds no real conclusion. Both *Inside* and *The Inside Outtakes* drag on with multiple endings and play with the idea of returning to the outside while reaching no definite solution. But as an artist and an individual, how can Burnham be expected to solve the problems of humanity he is describing?

*Inside* tries to leave the audience with a glimmer of hope when Burnham smiles in the face of his exposure and humiliation before launching to the end credits song “Any Day Now” which promises an end. But *The Inside Outtakes* released exactly a year later reminded audiences once again that it isn’t stopping. The pandemic despair has bled into a “post”-pandemic despair. It has led to a realization that the startling truths uncovered by the circumstance’s pandemic cannot and should not be forgotten. The problems revealed by the pandemic were not solved in its wake; the most pressing concerns of our society did not disappear with the creation of vaccine. There is no vaccination or cure for the despair felt by many after their awakening to humanity’s greatest threats. The post-pandemic era is defined by the continued awakening and continued anxiety in the face of the future, thrown into sharper relief by our recent peril. It is defined by the war between overwhelming despair for the future and moments of hope.

The final song of *The Inside Outtakes*, titled “The Chicken”, once again approaches hope. Burnham details the journey of the chicken across the road and the world that lies before her on
the other side. He sings “a life of brighter days, a width of road away,” seemingly implying the existence of better times, not just for this chicken, but for us as well. But this last song is not the end of *The Inside Outtakes*; hopeful endings and happy endings no longer fit quite right.

Following “The Chicken” Burnham continues to parody woke capitalism, then plays the same smiling clip from the end of *Inside*. He plays the song “WTFIGO” as the ending credits roll, which encapsulates Burnham’s continued disorientation. Then despite having played the ending credits, the outtakes just keep going. From there Burnham shows a screen-recorded clip of him editing the special, once again drawing the viewer’s attention to the performative nature of all of it. Finally, Burnham shows a fake YouTube ending screen, the platform where it started before fading into a second-long clip of the ocean. The final scene is of outside. But at this point, what does it even mean to be outside? What does one do when they go there, leaving the interior space? What does one do with the excess despair? What is the correct way forward?

Professors like Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, the author of *Racism Without Racists*, suggest the only way forward is to maintain awareness. To educate yourself and keep educating yourself. To take action at the community level and keep taking action, changing what you can. Carl Rhodes, the author of *Woke Capitalism*, similarly calls for his reader to remain aware and not accept things as they are. This is the resounding cry throughout many activist communities and social movements – start small, keep educating yourself, and work from the ground up. Focus on what you can do, and not the collective societal terror so large and incomprehensible it seems nothing can be done to dismantle it. This is in part the conclusion Dan Howell arrives at the end of his comedy live show, turning inwards to yourself and your own life also means doing good in the immediate, present moment. It means making changes to what you can change, the parts of
society your own life touches. In the end, such an approach does not ignore the magnitude of the
danger but gives the only actionable solution.

It is very likely there will never be an answer to the greater existential questions Burnham
was unable to make peace within his confinement, and instead, Burnham and the viewer must
make peace with the unknown. But one cannot help to return to the question, is this enough? Is it
enough to focus on the small scale, not ignoring the larger issues but holding them off to the side
while tackling that which is achievable? Even without the oppressive weight of the pandemic, it
is easier to find hope, to not feel as if everything is collapsing all at once, but the underlying
dread and despair remain. So, what do we do with the questions Burnham explored in Inside?
What do we make of this greater untethered and ever-growing fear that many of us feel? The fear
that the world is ending, that we are too late, and that even taking those small steps will never be
enough. This is the fear that sticks with Burnham even after the end of Inside, the end of the
pandemic. This is the fear that sticks with the viewer when their screen finally fades to black,
and Netflix asks them what they’d like to watch next. There is no immunity to this fear.

In a world that lacks reality, lacks boundaries in time and between places, in a world where
the illusion is as good as the real, who is to say we have not reached the end? In the post-human,
post-comic, post-pandemic, post-reality, post-everything who is to say that we have not already
reached end times? That we have not gone so far in that we cannot get out? Perhaps all that can
be done is hold on tight and do whatever good we can before hitting the wall. Perhaps all that can
be done is hold tight until the planet consumes us, until our innovation consumes us, until we
consume ourselves. There is so much fear of an apocalypse, a dystopia, a robot takeover, and the
end times. There is a fear of whether we are already in them. Maybe we are past the need for
such a fear. Maybe the end will just go on and on and on and we will simultaneously know that
we are in it, but never reach a stop. There is no stop. There is no out. Some might cover their eyes and convince themselves they cannot feel the speed at which they hurtle forward. Some might look down and pretend they can get off at any time. Some might look up, for salvation, for some answer, something that will stop the speed at which they hurtle forward. But through denying, rationalizing, or praying for intervention, there is no way to not feel the wind rushing past or the force that is being exerted upon the body. There is no way to not know, on the inside, that we are hurtling farther and farther into the unknown, into the future, into the past, into ourselves, into all that is incomprehensible, inevitable, and unstoppable.

A positive note, a sliver of hope, and a happy ending does not sit right because we are past the point where happily ever after seems possible. We are in the unwritten and the uncharted. The dread and despair we are reckoning with is this lack of end; this infinity where every fear comes true, and time keeps moving forward regardless. So, Burnham was wrong, whatever this is, does not stop when he chooses to, when anyone chooses to. There is only onward. That is the truth that is inescapable. That is the truth Burnham finds pulling frantically on the door handle, finds as the chicken crosses the road, and finds as the water crashes against the beach. There is no ending to find. We must stop cowering inside, waiting for the world to end.

It already did.
Endnotes

1. See Adam McKay’s *Don’t Look Up* (2021) as an example of another post-comedy written during the pandemic that addresses the same anxieties about the end of the world and the impact of the Internet on the human mind.

2. See F.D. Signifier’s “Leftist Infighting Almost Killed Me (Broke Bread)” for further discussion on the goals of canceling, particularly from inside the progressive of leftist movements.

3. For more on Burnham’s earlier commentary on art see “Art is Dead” from *Words. Words. Words.* (2010).

4. For more on Burnham’s earlier commentary on the role of comedy see “What’s Funny” and “Traditional Stand-Up” from *Words. Words. Words.* (2010) and “Sad” from *what.* (2013).

5. Bo Burnham’s *Eighth Grade* (2018) delves further into the ideas of constant individual performance. Burnham has pointed out on numerous occasions that it is teen girls that relate to his messages about performance and observation the most, and this is because they feel the most societal pressure to perform. This film further explores those feelings and how the Internet creates a constant imaginary audience demanding performance.
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