

BOOK I

Rock City Reflections

1

In the Fly's Eye

RANDALL E. AUXIER

There's a spectacular moment in Chuck Klosterman's novel *Downtown Owl* in which he lists the simultaneous, individual thoughts of twenty-two teenagers who are stuck in a boring English class. The teacher has just asked them what it is like to live in a society like Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The students were thinking, and I quote:

- 1) How awesome it would feel to be sleeping.
- 2) Unaffordable denim skirts. Fuck.
- 3) What it would feel like to be asleep.
- 4) Sleeping.
- 5) The lack of cool guys living in Owl, at least when compared to how the guys in Oakes were described by a cousin in a recent telephone conversation.
- 6) An empty room, filled only with white light and silence. . . .
- 7) The iconography of Teresa Cumberland, chiefly the paradox of why no one else seems to realize that she is a total backstabbing bitch who talks shit about everybody in school and then acts as if she is somehow the victim whenever anyone calls her on it.
- 8) The potential upside of being comatose.
- 9) Theoretical ways to make a Pontiac Grand Prix more boss, such as painting a panther on the hood or moving the entire steering column and floor pedals to the passenger side, which would likely

be impossible without a cherry picker and extremely expensive tools.

- 10) The meaning (and linguistic derivation) of the phrase “Gunter lieben glauchen globen,” as heard during the preface to Def Leppard’s “Rock of Ages.”
- 11) Being asleep, possibly inside a ski lodge.
- 12) Robot cows.
- 13) That one eighth grader with the insane tits, and the degree to which it would be life-changing to tickle her when she was naked. Was her name Judy? That seemed about right.
- 14) Sleeping.
- 15) My boyfriend has amazing hair.
- 16) I wish Grandma would just hurry up and die.
- 17) Nobody knows I have a warm can of Pepsi in my locker.
- 18) The carpeting in Jordan Brewer’s semi-unfinished basement that smells like popcorn and would provide an excellent surface for sleeping.
- 19) The moral ramifications of stealing beer from a church rectory, which—while probably sinful—would just be so fucking easy. I mean, it’s almost like they *want* you to steal it.
- 20) Being gay.
- 21) The prospect of a person being able to ride on the back of a grizzly bear, assuming the bear was properly muzzled. . . .
- 22) Firing a crossbow into the neck of John Laidlaw [the teacher] while he received fellatio from Tina McAndrew . . . (*Downtown Owl*, pp. 70–71)

It seems simple when it’s finished, but I find this list very impressive. I’m pretty sure that not many people could really pull this off (and I know I couldn’t). It’s not only the wide variety of perspectives here; it’s also their amazingly realistic infanthility. (That’s not a word, but I like it.) There is a complexity to Chuck’s immaturity that is, in itself, a sort of maturity. It’s like what would happen to a playful, fruity wine after twenty years in the bottle. No, never mind, bad analogy. Let’s

see . . . It's sort of like why *The Big Lebowski* is still funny. But that doesn't explain anything, it's the *same* thing. My point is: How can someone who is thirty-six even *remember* so many semi-mindless states of consciousness from so long ago? In a sense, he must still *be* there, or in this case, be *then*.

Maybe you're like me: if you really work at remembering some of the kids you went to school with—you'll probably need your yearbook, and your Facebook—it might be possible, with extreme effort, to come up with a list fifteen percent as good as this one. It just has an elegance, an economy, and—dare I say it?—even a sort of perfection. But then again, a housefly is also perfect in its own way, and this list is more like looking through the eye of a fly than your standard binocular literary demi-god. And I think that's part of what we like about the Dude (Chuck, not Jeff Bridges). This list of future Darwin Award winners (keep reading their story; it ends rather badly) is low culture at its, well, I was going to say "pinnacle," but that seems wrong. A pinnacle of the low? I think not. Klosterman's achievement is sloshy and smelly. This is a veritable octojohn of low culture.

An "octojohn" is an octagonal outhouse with eight holes back-to-back, all excrement being deposited in a single underground concrete tank. This disgusting idea was realized on the campground of the Quiet Valley Ranch in Texas, where the Kerrville Folk Festival is held. Two double-octojohns (eight holes for women, eight for men) were constructed in 2001. This is an idea worthy of anyone who doesn't take any shit and certainly freely gives others shit. These architectural marvels are slated for demolition. When destroyed, there will no longer be a job for the hippie volunteer who "stirs the tanks," an unanticipated necessity to prevent massive "backsplash" due to the shape of the tanks and the way that shit doesn't always flow downhill unless the hill is pretty damn steep or the shit is pretty thin.



Example of a
Kerrville Octojohn

Since you're a Klosterman fan, you already know that he uses lists all the time. It's a serious part of his writing style. He not only uses lists to economize in communicating information. He sorts and orders possibilities, he sequences events, he ranks things for their quality (or lack of it), and most of all, he plays with our minds by displaying the baroque and twisted order of his own, his own . . . peculiar idiom. I gotta be honest here. I don't know Chuck, but I know he was raised Catholic, and reading almost anything he writes I imagine myself as the young priest in the booth and this special sinner has made a bet with his pals that he can suck me in with his bullshit until I'm actually laughing, and even get me to ask him for further elaboration on the details of these sins. "And how did you do that to a fish on Friday . . . er, ummm . . . my son?"

Making Shit Up

It might surprise you to learn that philosophers have always, always used lists to great effect. Most of the greatest works in the history of Western philosophy contain lists, and the lists aren't just sitting there innocently recording the existence of things. When you make a list, there is almost always an "immanent order," meaning that something you value highly lies under the list. Let's say you want to rank the five greatest rock bands of all time. That's easy. It goes like this:

1. **Stones**
2. **Beatles**
3. **Who**
4. **Pink Floyd**
5. **Zeppelin**

In that order. There is no doubt about this list (even though Chuck puts Zeppelin third on such a list, but that's objectively false; anyone can see Zeppelin is fifth). This is not my opinion, it's the way the universe actually *is*. But the word "greatest"—what does that mean? In this case it means lots of things. Since you're an intelligent person, I know you won't argue with the bands I included on the list, or even with my ranking. But so

many stories can be told about why it is right. Let us celebrate the list.

The Stones have to be first because, as Chuck points out in *Downtown Owl*, it's the only band that provides a complete and nutritious aural diet (Chuck's character Vance Druid only listens to the Stones, and Vance is a hero, or as close to a hero as anyone can be in a book by the depressed for the depressed). Ah, now it comes clear. The operative factor in the order of this list is "completeness" of the music. This not only involves variety in sounds, but also variety in forms. There has to be blues, folk, country, and pop, even a bit of disco (for the same reason you put horseradish on a reuben—it's not that you like it, it's just that you need some pain with the pleasure), and it all needs to be cool.

My list also requires that the musicians resist the urge to indulge themselves, to the greatest extent they can manage (I mean, they *are* musicians, so you have to be realistic about this), and instead give the audience what *it* is hungry for. Completeness is measured from the side of the listener, not the high-end critic, not other musicians and producers; it's about the guy on the street who's smart enough to know the difference between what's cool and what sucks. So coolness is immanent in the list, recognizing that coolness has infinitely many forms and expressions, but is easily spoiled by any hint of self-reflexiveness. A person who is *trying* to be cool merely for the sake of being perceived as cool, is automatically not only not cool, but actually uncool. But it's okay to try to be cool because it's cool to be cool. That's a sort of piety to coolness itself. I mean, Elvis and Dylan and Springsteen are all cool, and they care about being cool, but they never cared whether *you* think they're cool because that would be petty and silly and small, and who the fuck are you anyway? And that's cool. Like my list.

I could go on, but maybe this is enough to make my point. Musical Completeness is really the factor in the universe that determines greatness, or should I say, the "magnitude" of a rock'n'roll band. It consists of:

A. Factors Determined Relative to Ordinary Listeners

1. Variety in rocking sounds

2. Variety in rocking forms

3. Low on the Register of Musical and Lyrical Self-indulgence

4. Coolness to Suckiness Ratio

- B. Factors Determined by High-end Rock Critics and Musicians = 0
- C. The up-chuck's factor, which is a certain unexpected capacity to resist cynicism while remaining thoroughly and totally snide. (This's why the Beatles come in second. John Lenon passes this test, but Paul McCartney does not.)

Now, I'm totally making up this shit, but that doesn't mean it's just shit that I made up. We could have, like, a pretty serious discussion about all this. It wouldn't lead anywhere, but who says we're trying to *get* somewhere? And so I'll confess, and you be my priest: I really don't know how I know that's the right order for greatest rock bands, but I do know it, and I will try my best, within the bounds of civility to make up a story that may not convince you of the truth, but will at least make you see why I can't really make this list in any other way. And that brings us to a surprising point.

A Firm Right Hand

I gave that example to try to show that there is “immanent order” in lists—usually it's a kind of value judgment, that something is *better* than something else. It's the immanent order that enables us to *make sense* of the list as a list of things that belong together. There can be lots of different ways to tell the story of a list and what kind of sense it makes, but every story you tell will only be partial. Some people call this “intensive order,” which is just a way of saying that you can't ever place the parts side by side well enough to analyze them fully. So I could write a book on the Stones, Beatles, Who, Floyd and Zeppelin, five chapters, and it could be like the best book ever written on rock music, and there would still be plenty more to say, and other ways to understand that list.

So when you look at a list, you sort of “get” something, and the something you “get,” the sense it makes, may be a very pre-

cise (or even very vague) sense of order. That order is based on some kind of value. If I give you a list like this:

eggs, milk, potatoe chips, soda, pretzels, dog food, card for mom's birthday

You know a shopping list when you see one, but if you're the right age, you also know it might be Dan Quayle's shopping list, and if so, you learned some things that weren't necessarily intended but that are immanent in the list (like, that Dan has a dog and is the spawn of a human mother, probably). The value judgments in the list are even more telling, which is that Dan probably likes junk food. No one in this day and age can look at such a list and fail to think "that man should eat better." In this case, the value placed on an item is expressed by its inclusion on the list in light of the obvious alternatives:

sprouts, chard, free trade coffee, cage free organic eggs, whole grain crackers, local cheese

This is not Dan Quayle's grocery list, or indeed a list made by any Republican. Republicans do not eat or value these items. But I can tell you a lot about the person who does make that list. That person feels guilty about eating animal products and is trying to minimize her environmental footprint, and believes she really ought to be a vegan but just can't quite get there and is tortured by her failure to live more simply. See how it works?

Even when you're just setting things in a time sequence, like Beatles, Stones, Who, Zeppelin, Floyd, you still choose one value over another. My list of bands records the sequence of the greatest impact on culture by each group. If I valued the sequence of their founding over that of their impact, the list would have been Beatles, Stones, Who, Floyd, and Zeppelin. Both lists make sense, and one could be mistaken for the other. If I just put that first list out there and asked you what was the immanent order, you might say "Date they were founded." You might say "That's a ranking of your favorite bands." You might say "Oh, that's just a list of famous English rock bands from the Sixties."

All of these would be sort of true, but not "necessary." And all I mean by that is you can feel in your bowels that even

though what you have said may be *accurate*, as far as it goes, it isn't really "true." Sure, those are my favorite bands, but why *that* order and why am I listing my favorite bands? You're just guessing. And those guesses aren't really compelling, they don't seem to fit the list the way a key fits a lock. But when I say "that is the sequence in which they became famous," you'll feel something a little different, a little tug on your brain that stretches down into your gut, and says "that's *it*," or at least, "that feels complete; it would explain everything I see here." That tug is an experience of "necessity," and I am here to tell you, friends and enemies, that philosophers like to be tugged in just that way, and they are pretty frustrated when they can't get any of that necessity action tugging on them. No tug = unhappy philosophers. They are more pitiful than Chuck when he's whining about being dumped again. Yes, what philosophers like is the firm right hand of necessity, tugging on their fleshy cortices 'til the pudding congeals.

We will get back to lists and how they do what they do, but I need to make a little detour through your gonads first. (Yes, women have gonads, too, but I do not claim any of them will enjoy this essay. If they do, they could give me a call.)

TMI

I like Chuck's writing in spite of his narcissistic whining. It's not the narcissism—I mean, I like Hunter S. Thompson. And I don't mind whining, as such, because I like my own writing. But what if Hunter S. Thompson was from North Dakota and actually never did anything truly stupid? He would have an exaggerated idea of how interesting his love life is and would have nothing better to do than to spread it embarrassingly all over the pages of his books, which is what I am talking about.

I can't possibly be the only fan of the Chuckster who has regularly felt that he has a TMI problem. I know so many things about Chuck that I didn't need to know, didn't want to know, and wish I could forget. I'm also suspicious. I have a feeling that much of his narrative has been exaggerated and otherwise fictionalized for literary effect, and sometimes he says as much. He encourages me to think this in the first part of *Eating the Dinosaur*, where he basically confesses to lying about things he doesn't even need to lie about. So in any given

instance, I don't know whether to be pissed that he told me something he really did that disgusts me, or whether his twisted imagination created it from tamer or less offensive images, and goddammit I hate being treated as a fool. I do not thrive on this aspect of the Klosterman literary legacy. I put up with it. Why? Well, I am sitting here with dozens of images in my memory that I wish had never appeared before my mind, but I kept reading, didn't I?

Plato actually talks about this problem. In the *Republic* he has Socrates tell this story:

Leontius, the son of Aglaion, was going up from the Piraeus under the outside of the North Wall when he noticed corpses lying by the public executioner. He desired to look, but at the same time he was disgusted and made himself turn away; and for a while he struggled and covered his face. But finally, overpowered by the desire, he opened his eyes wide, ran toward the corpses and said: "Look you damned wretches, take your fill of the fair sight." (439e–440a)

Chuck teaches us the lessons of Leontius a little more gently, although he depends on our willingness to rubberneck. It is hard not to see the same basic story in Chuck's journey to the death sites of so many great rockers in *Killing Yourself to Live*. And his conclusion that he thought he might learn something from this, but really didn't, seems also like a gentle reproach to himself for thinking that some wisdom might be hidden in having a look. Part of us knows going to those sites is just TMI, and part of us just craves a peek anyway.

Socrates brings us back around to our story when he adds: "And in many other places don't we notice that, when desires force someone contrary to calculation, he reproaches himself and his spirit against that in him which is doing the forcing, and, just as though there were two parties at faction, such a man's spirit becomes the ally of speech" (440a–b)? This is the tug of necessity working with both the right hand of reason, and getting a little strange from the left hand of desire. But the right hand doesn't know what the left hand is doing, and the result is that one utters "WTF?"

That little feeling that you just have to say something, or write something, is what happens when that nice little tug on the brain arrives in your gonads and then chucks itself up. You

sit there spilling your guts to anyone who will listen and before you know it, you've written or spoken your own little version of *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa-Puffs*, and now the world knows and you can't take it back. You've tipped your hand, revealed your unconscious crap; in fact, you've become a living breathing shit-canon.

The Recoil of the Shit-Canon

So what? Nothing to be ashamed of. We're all as twisted up and out of control as Chuck, right? Sometimes, at least? Come on, be honest for once. Reminds me of a story from Steven Tyler's recent autobiography. He says:

Early on in the band [Aerosmith] when I was still Jung and Freudened, I'd blurt out my sexual fantasies. I thought I was just being honest and saying what was on everybody's mind, but I made the mistake of talking this stuff in front of the band's wives. You know, stuff like how I liked doing it with two girls—twins preferably. "You're disgusting Steve" one of the band wives blurted out. . . . I'd say "What? Boys don't like threesomes? Don't all boys dream about that?" And I didn't expect my band mate to say, "Oh, yeah, I'm sorry, baby, that is my fantasy. And, honey, while Steven's brought up the subject of sexual fantasies . . ." What was I thinking? No man is going to tell his wife what he really likes. Because when he gets home, she'll Lorena Bobbitt his ass and he'll never find his licorice nib again. (*Does the Noise in My Head Bother You?*, p. 141)

Tyler was over sixty when he wrote this, and even he has learned a few things with age. One thing is, well, the nads never lie, but the truth is a damn poor guide to life in our lousy world. Desire is at the bottom of every list, and you'll never have the key to the list until you understand which desires are driving it, but the key that fits the door is never as simple as saying what you want. But young men don't get this, and old men learn it only from the recoil of the shit canon. Say what you want and see what happens. In Tyler's case . . . well never mind what all happened to him, but in Chuck's case, it's TMI and the effect is pathetic, and the recoil is that he eventually grew up. Sort of.

And what does it mean to outgrow the urge to say whatever wells up from your nads? It means you internalize the struggle

Plato describes in the anecdote of Leontius and his rubber-necking. We learn, eventually, to sublimate our urges, to schematize those images and sort them into complex forms of order, to grade and evaluate them according to their propriety, their attainability, their consistency with our previous choices and promises, and most of all, with respect to what others will think of us for valuing this rather than that, or that above this. When you're pondering a mate for life, as Chuck does throughout *Killing Yourself to Live*, one thing you do ponder is what does the choice of this person rather than that one say to the world about *me*, about what *I* value? There's no hiding it. Choose a pretty one and we know something about you. Choose a funny one and we know something else. Choose a cold one and we know a third thing. The recoil of the shit canon works thus: we will know what is really on your list by looking at the shit you kept and the shit you threw away (or that threw *you* away).

Intensive Magnitudes

A philosopher named Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) has something to say here. Most people think he's the third best philosopher in Western history, so if Plato is the Stones and Aristotle is the Beatles, Kant would be the Who. (If you're curious, G.W.F. Hegel is Pink Floyd and Friedrich Nietzsche is Led Zeppelin.) You can map lists onto one another, by the way, using some aspect of the immanent order in one list to clarify (or confuse) another list. And if you ever figure out the meaning of the sequence of numbers and letters in the first chapter of *Eating the Dinosaur*, please tell me what the hell it is. Anyway, I was going to talk about Kant for a minute. But that reminds me that I wanted to say something about how annoying Chuck's digressions are. So now I said it and can get back to Kant. Except when the digression is in the middle of something I'm bored with. In that case, it may be welcome. But I'm not bored with Kant, so I'll talk about that if I can remember what I was going to say.

Oh, right. Kant explained the difference between extensive and intensive magnitudes. You have probably heard this idea before, or even thought of it yourself, but here's the skinny. An extensive magnitude is a way of relating the parts of something

to the whole, where the whole can be divided so that the parts perfectly add up to the whole, without remainder, and the whole can be broken down into those parts while still remaining the same whole. For example, there are a hundred cents in a dollar. Take a hundred pennies and that just *is* a dollar, or change a dollar for two rolls of pennies and you *still* have a dollar (even if nobody wants it now). Extensive magnitudes allow us to substitute the whole for the collection of its parts or vice-versa. If you have all the parts necessary for building a replica of the plane that went down with Buddy Holly aboard, you functionally have the plane, in the extensive sense. The fact that you'll have to put it together to start your museum of rock deaths is beside the point.

But there's another way of looking at the magnitude of things in the world. Some things have parts and are made of their parts, but somehow the parts taken alone don't add up to the whole. If I take that same dollar and I ask what it will buy, you could give me an extensive answer—a list of everything in the world that is priced at a dollar or less. Or you could give me an intensive answer: “Hey bud, you can get whatever someone will give you for it.” That is an indefinite list, and highly contextual. In some situations, like when you're lost in the woods in Mississippi, a dollar isn't worth anything at all. In other cases, the guy with a dollar might be able to save the day, say, when the cute girl in line for Lady Gaga tickets is a dollar short and her credit card just got declined, and a dollar gets you her phone number as well as an appreciative flutter of the lashes. And what is *that* worth? Well, easily it's worth a dollar, but not in the sense of a hundred pennies. It's almost like there are two different dollars, the one that consists of a hundred pennies and the one that's worth whatever you can get for it, and they're the same dollar, but considered differently.

Now Kant says that not everything in the world has an extensive magnitude, but everything that truly exists does have an intensive magnitude. So there are some real things that you just can't break into their parts and still have the same whole, but everything real has an intensive magnitude nevertheless. This is a big idea. I have a hard time getting my head around it, but to give an example of something that has an intensive magnitude but no extensive magnitude: an idea. There are infinitely many perspectives on an idea, but no col-

lection of these will tell you everything about that idea. An idea has potentially infinite effects in the world. It doesn't exist at just one place or at one time. Ideas show up when they show up, and they spread in mysterious ways, and you cannot measure it with surveys or tools or even with other ideas.

A Rare Moment of Sobriety

I want to remind you of two of Chuck's lists from *Downtown Owl*, one primarily intensive, one mainly extensive and both are very effective. There is no reason to get all happy and punchy over intensive magnitudes. They are rich and suggestive and they bear most of the deeper meanings in life, but they are also ambiguous and frustrating. And extensive magnitudes, while they feel cold and mechanical, have the sweet finality of fact. A good map gets you where you're going because of its extensive fidelity. The last thing you would want for navigation is a road map with an intensive order.

In the first list, one of our three main characters, Julia, a twenty-two-year-old schoolteacher, now in her first year in Owl, North Dakota, is having a conversation with Vance Druid (the guy who only listens to the Stones). It's the first conversation they have had when both were sober. She's pretty sure she has a crush on him, and here is how Chuck reports, no, *lists* the conversation:

WHAT SHE SAID: So . . . tell me . . . how do you spend your non-drinking hours? Are you a farmer too? Everyone I meet is a farmer.

What she meant: I don't know anything about you. You look like every other guy in town, you don't talk very much, and you don't seem to do anything except drink. *But I suspect you are different.* Somehow you seem unlike everyone else I've met in this community, even though there is no tangible evidence that would suggest my theory is valid. This is my gamble. So here is an opportunity for you to describe yourself in a manner that will confirm my suspicion and possibly make me love you forever, mostly because I am searching for any reason to increase the likelihood of that possibility.

WHAT HE SAID: Yeah, I farm with my two brothers. It's their operation really. I'm basically just a hired hand. It's not bad, though. It's fine. I enjoy it.

What he meant: I was my father's third son. When my father died, the ownership of the farm went to my oldest brother, because that's how it always works. I own nothing in this world.

WHAT SHE SAID: What kind of farm is it? Do you raise any animals?

What she hoped to imply: I will talk to you about things that don't interest me at all. Just be different from everyone else I've met in this town. It doesn't matter how you're different. I'm flexible.

WHAT HE SAID: We raise bison. (pp. 112–13)

Following this, the entire remainder of the chapter reports a three-minute conversation (requiring seventeen pages) with the long subtext of each remark made explicit. It gives three perspectives on the same conversation at once. The first is what you would hear if you were a fly on the wall—the extensive conversation, in which the conversation is equal to the words exchanged in the order they were said. But the second and third perspectives, no less real, belong to a larger intensive whole. When we are given what each person is thinking that the other person doesn't know, we begin to see the same conversation in wider horizon. And there are at least three more perspectives to consider:

1. **Chuck's perspective as the writer of the dialogue—why he chooses the words he does and not some others**
2. **Chuck's intentions as the author—what he is trying to communicate, or what he wants the reader to understand as a result of reading these words and not others**
3. **The reader's perspective on these words, which includes attitudes, thoughts, and a whole complex of responses, like, why is Klosterman reporting the conversation this way?**

Well, this chapter of that book was an idea Chuck had for conveying a few moments, and maybe he thought a lot about the idea or maybe he just tossed it off one night when he was stoned, but either way, it was an idea. It was a possibility for taking an extensive conversation and pushing forward some of its intensive values, those that are immanent in the list itself. You wouldn't read a book that didn't do this in some way or another. But there are lots of ways to do it. Chuck's idea was just a little more stripped down and quirky.

Note that Julia started out looking for the very thing I explained from the start of this chapter. She had a suspicion that Vance was different and she wanted to feel that tug of necessity, that feeling of confirmation that her theory was right. But intensive relations *never satisfy that desire*. That is why philosophers like extensive relations better. Intensive relations open out on the wide world, and they don't deliver finished concepts and certainties. They keep our imaginations reaching into the realm of possibilities. As this chapter proceeds, we're frustrated that Julia and Vance are so close to really connecting with each other, but in the end, they mainly just miss why the other person was saying what was actually said. So, the conversation didn't quite unfold the way Julia had hoped, but the ambiguities remaining were due to the fact that the extensive aspect of the conversation didn't reveal much of the intensive order.

It's worth pausing over the idea that when you think you want something, you should consider whether you want it extensive or intensive. If it's the first, that isn't hard to get in the world. But it doesn't satisfy anyone for very long. The having of an extensive value is less fulfilling than the wanting of it. The longing for an intensive relation to something is intangible but probably deeper and more real. I have thought that Chuck's constant waffling over his relationships seem to say something about a confusion he may have had when he was younger about the extensive characteristics of his lady friends. He sat around making lists and over-thinking his connections, but the gals who put up with him always seem to have understood what he didn't get. Love has extensive characteristics, signs of its existence, but it isn't something we can commit to a list: How do I love thee? Let me not endeavor to count the ways.

Cold Comfort

Chuck comes from a cold place and he can be a downright cold-blooded creature. The second list is about Julia and how she was not prepared for a sudden North Dakota blizzard (even though she was from Wisconsin, she is a city girl and clueless about the great prairie). This is what Chuck writes:

Here are the things you need to do when trapped in a blizzard:

- 1) Stay inside the vehicle.
- 2) Remain calm.
- 3) Periodically examine your exhaust pipe, making sure that it is not blocked by snow.
- 4) Roll down the window (that is not directly facing the wind) one to two inches.

Here are the things Julia did when trapped inside her car during this blizzard:

- 1) She stayed inside the vehicle.
- 2) She remained calm (p. 264).

That's it. He finishes this short chapter with a list of the seven stages of carbon monoxide poisoning, followed by a list of the six things Julia was thinking as she experienced the first six stages. (The seventh stage is death, which Chuck reports: "7—.") The chapter is wholly extensive and entirely lists. That is how he finishes off a character we have grown very fond of. Shit happens.

Killing Yourself to Live

I have thought about this a lot. One thing that drew me to Klosterman's writing was his amazing ability to multiply perspectives. But I really only came to respect him as a writer when I read *Downtown Owl*, and the reason was that there was finally some balance between the intensive disorder of his thinking and the extensive desperation of his habits of endlessly organizing and re-organizing all that stuff into lists. I wanted to see that the immanent values in the lists jibed with both the inner and outer realities of life as we all have to live

it. He achieves this with his characters in that novel. He created the character of Julia just to kill her off. Why? There is no satisfactory reason, if you are asking for the intensive magnitude. And if you want the extensive answer, the one really tugging on your mind with necessity, well he gave you that list, didn't he? She didn't do what had to be done to save herself.

I had a cousin who died in exactly the way the character of Julia died, and at about the same age. I didn't know her well, but I remember when I heard what happened to her I experienced dissonance because she was beautiful, young, full of life, and deserved to live. And there you have a list, don't you?

A. Beautiful

B. Young

C. Full of Life

D. Deserved to Live

So here's your pop quiz. Is this list an extensive list of someone who is alive, or an intensive list of someone now dead? Or both. The fly's eye multiplies things intensively, uses intensive relations to broaden the perspectives on the possibilities of the world. But when the world acts, it tends to squash such flies by converting those intensive values into extensive necessities. Chuck gets this. He's a sort of fly on holiday with an indefinite amount of time to get the priest to laugh, or at least chuckle under his breath.

Oh, and my list of rock bands is the one and only example of an intensive magnitude wholly necessitated by the extensive world order. Or at least it tugs on me just the way I like.

2

The Unironical in the Age of Irony

SETH VANNATTA

Seinfeld reruns just aren't that funny any more. Between 1996 and 1998 my friends and I would gather on Thursday nights to watch *Seinfeld* before hitting the bar. The host was a high school classmate of mine and a liquor wholesaler, who would serve us his free "breakage." It didn't seem to get any better than that, and we thought each new episode of *Seinfeld* was a gem—sophisticated, clever, and racy.

This was before television programs on cable became brilliant, before the return of the primetime game shows and before Reality TV began to dominate the ratings. Watching *Seinfeld*, we felt like we were in on something with Jerry, George, Elaine, and Kramer. They were mostly annoyed by the everyday, and we could relate. We were all single, went on bad dates, and we liked good parking spots as much as they did, although they were more plentiful in Oklahoma City than Manhattan. That foursome glided over the surfaces of life, avoiding commitment, lacking sincere emotional attachment, and laughing their way through their Manhattan middle-aged existence. Jerry and Elaine encountered people who did give a damn about life, but those folks, with their ugly babies and "Desperado"-mesmerized, Carl Farbman obsessions were laughable. We laughed at them too, as if we were a part of the *Seinfeld* foursome.

But something has happened since then. Now, when I see Jerry overtly roll his eyes to indicate that he is being oh so obviously insincere (and I hear that damn laugh track roll with insider hilarity), I feel like I'm in a prisoner camp being forced

to watch *Everybody Loves Raymond*. What the hell happened over the last decade? Why and how had the best show on TV lost its luster?

The Unironical

I think Chuck Klosterman gives us some insight into this phenomenon, which turns on the concept of irony. Well, for Chuck, it actually hinges on his use of the neologism, “unironical.” Klosterman effortlessly writes and says “unironically” often. He writes *unironically* unironically. Chuck refers to himself watching the E! network *unironically* in *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*. I guess he was really serious about it. He said in an interview with David Grazian that the only people who visit Disneyland *unironically* are very small children. Their parents, or teens who visit the park, at least according to Klosterman, must be thinking, “This is all so fake and commercial and unmagical, but I am still here and the whole affair is fun in a detached, aloof sort of way.” Klosterman describes going to a karaoke bar, which serves two general classes of folks: the locals, who genuinely, that is, earnestly and unironically, enjoy singing and watching others sing, and young kids from the nearby college town who make a farce of the evening, as if anyone could take karaoke seriously.

Why does Klosterman obviously need this word, unironical, or at least its adverbial cousin, unironically? Only when irony itself has become so pervasive and difficult to detect could we need to declare that something has *not* been done ironically. Klosterman refers to the work of David Foster Wallace to illustrate that we live in an age of pervasive irony. Wallace wrote in 1993 about the tyranny of an irony which is all-encompassing and elusive, pervasive, but difficult to pin down and define. In *Chuck Klosterman IV*, we’re told that the Age of Irony is not dead, that it is alive and well in California—because Goth kids love Disneyland! In *Killing the Dinosaur* Chuck likens irony to Jason Vorhees. It cannot be killed, not even by the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, not even by the election of Barack Obama, which were both supposed to usher in new eras of sincerity. After about five weeks of seriousness, the hockey-mask wearing killer was back, walking intensely, but very fast, and lurking around every dark corner. But the tyranny of irony

cuts not with a madman's blade but with subtlety, constantly undermining the sincerity of human expression, spreading not fear but mistrust, cynicism, and posturing.

No one means what they say.

The cut of irony's blade creates a gash, but the wound never heals. It only grows wider, creating a distance between language and its meaning. Whenever this gap appears, the irony becomes metastatic, spreading like a cancer, building upon itself. The Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, describes this as a gap between the phenomenon and the essence. The phenomenon is the language, and the essence is the meaning, the thought. When thought is expressed in words, but the words do not express what is thought, but its opposite, irony materializes.

But wasn't *Seinfeld* funny and brilliant and cutting and edgy because of its irony? The characters were jaded, mistrustful, and utterly superficial. Jerry could not express the emotion of anger. When he tried, his voice pitched high, squeaky and effeminate. His friends—were they friends?—just laughed at him. Jerry's catch phrase in the face of human suffering and misfortune was a shrugging, "That's a shame." Jerry's best hope of understanding anything was by way of reference to comic books and Superman.

The Bizarro World

To see the irony of *Seinfeld* clearly, we have to enter the Bizarro World. And strangely, we have to meet the Bizarro Klosterman. Chuck tells us about archenemies and nemeses, the former helping us define ourselves as our complements, and the latter giving us something to root against in a primal, evil way. But he has not told us about a third archetype, the Bizarro—that person who occupies a parallel universe, whose every decision has been the opposite of our own. George Costanza embodied this universe for an entire episode of *Seinfeld*, and by making the opposite decision he would ordinarily make, he became instantly successful, snagging dates with attractive strangers and a choice job with the New York Yankees. Of course, Jerry remained Even Steven, because he had one friend ascend to success and another sink into failure: Elaine lost her job and her boyfriend, as she "became George," in the same episode.

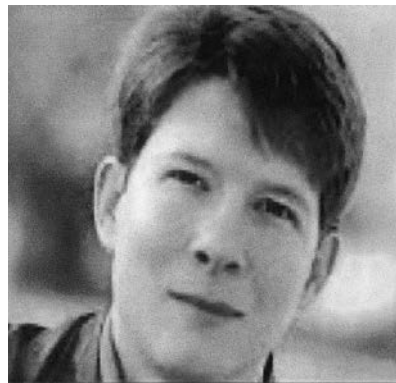
Elaine, herself, entered the Bizarro world in another episode, meeting the anti-George, the anti-Jerry, and even the anti-Kramer. Her new Bizarro foursome read for fun, was kind to one another, and ate at the anti-coffee shop which served only Sanka and no big salad.

Klosterman doesn't know it, but he has a real life Bizarro world counterpart. His name is Jedediah Purdy. Klosterman, born in 1972, grew up in Wyndmere, North Dakota, was raised with deer-hunting brothers and feverishly Catholic parents. Purdy, born in 1974 in Chloe, West Virginia, was home-schooled on a farm by a mom who had a PhD in Philosophy. Chuck went to public school and listened to KISS and Van Halen in his spare time. Jedediah entered the prestigious boarding school of Exeter at age thirteen. Klosterman matriculated to the flagship institution of the University of North Dakota. Purdy went to another famous university, Harvard. Chuck wrote a column aimed at Generation X, unironically called *Rage*. Purdy went to Yale Law School.

But both of these two dudes churned out publications. Chuck wrote *Fargo Rock City*, a humorous memoir about glam rock. Jedediah wrote *For Common Things: Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today*, in which he cites Michel de Montaigne with the ease that Klosterman equates his exes to members of KISS, in *Killing Yourself to Live*. Klosterman reads like late night bar conversation, Purdy like an over-studied GRE aspirant. Chuck cusses a lot; Jedediah eschews such symbols of disenchantment. While they are both popular culture



Chuck Klosterman



Jedediah Purdy

anthropologists, their conclusions are polar opposites. Chuck bathes in low culture, while Purdy wants only to sanitize us of its debilitating irony. They have both become quite successful: Chuck through his musings on Pamela Anderson giving head on screen and Jedediah through his tenured professorship at Duke Law School and his publications on liberty, violence, property, law, and civil disobedience. By the way, they look alike, at least if you ignore their costumes.

The Bubble Boy

I think Purdy's West Virginia farm-philosophical home schooling sheltered him a bit. Perhaps Purdy was like the Bubble Boy of *Seinfeld*, the germs of low culture could not enter his protected realm—only volumes of Edmund Burke's and Ralph Waldo Emerson's speeches were allowed to enter. And the other germ to which Purdy never developed any antibodies was irony. Klosterman was exposed to this early, and his system became immune. But when Purdy first encountered it, he broke out in reflective hives. Perhaps this is why Klosterman writes about the unironical, which to him is a strange and foreign creature, while Purdy sees irony as the standout. Purdy was probably the misfit from a West Virginia farm at Exeter, but he does have insight into irony.

Purdy describes irony as an attitude of detachment and disengagement from "the world." He tells us that Jerry Seinfeld is "irony incarnate." He writes, "Autonomous by virtue of his detachment, disloyal in a manner too vague to be mistaken for treachery, he is matchless in discerning the surfaces whose creature he is" (*For Common Things*, p. 9). The point of irony is a quiet disbelief in the depth of relationships and the sincerity of motivations. In *Seinfeld*, Jerry does not really believe in anything, except his own very simple set of self-interests. He constantly doubts the existence of social authenticity. But Jerry is not quite a cynic. Purdy tells us, "[Realizing the pretense of it all], the cynic stays home from the party. The ironist goes to the party and, while refusing to be quite of it, gets off the best line of the evening. An endless joke runs through the culture of irony, not exactly at anyone's expense, but rather at the expense of the idea that anyone could be taking the whole affair seriously" (p. 10).

Purdy says that irony, this attitude of detachment, of aloofness, of coolness, is most prominent among media-savvy young people. He says the more time spent in school, and the more expensive the education, the greater the propensity to irony. What he means is that if young people are well-read, have seen all the movies, and the ads, then they realize that there is a certain level of self-reference and repetitiveness to our emotions, to the very themes of humanity. So instead of having faith in the genuine expression of these truths such as love, fear, courage, and sacrifice, the ironist suspects that all emotion and opinion is imitation, an endless string of *Caddyshack* quotations, sports metaphors, and insider indie-rock references. Purdy says the ironist, “offers up the suspicion that we are all just quantum selves, all spin, all the way down” (p. 10).

No one means what they say.

Where Purdy is entranced by this phenomenon, Klosterman is so immune to it that he only refers to the unironical. Irony is so pervasive that he must strain to point out its absence. Klosterman’s opinion is that since about 1991, irony has become an everyday element in the American sensibility, and irony has become the primary type of humor, so much so that people in their twenties today do not even remember or understand humor that is not ironical. Klosterman attributes this in part to *Seinfeld*, where irony becomes a normative way to experience comedy. Since the heyday of *Seinfeld*, the disease of irony has only spread. Surely the process of taking a video of a young person getting tased, turning it into a rap and posting it on YouTube, has made irony a more pervasive paradigm. But, for Klosterman, the triumph of irony in the world of comedy is a kind of loss and sort of a problem. Not a loss in the sense Purdy meant it. Purdy longs for sincerity and commitment. Klosterman only fancies something better than *Seinfeld*. Chuck thinks irony has become such a dominant paradigm of entertainment media discourse that consumers are confused by literal messages. We’re all like the two slackers in the crowd at the Homerpalooza concert on the *Simpsons*. When one comments on the performance by the Smashing Pumpkins, “These guys are cool,” the other asks “Are you being sarcastic?” According to Chuck, his response is like we all feel, “I don’t even know any more.”

But the sarcasm expressed by those slackers is often just an imitation of irony. Perhaps when Purdy thought he saw irony

everywhere at Exeter and Harvard from his media-savvy schoolmates, he missed some of the nuances and contours to irony, confusing irony with mere sarcasm. Common in young students, this unsophisticated version does not understand itself. Investigating and questioning this ironic attitude in a young student often reveals that the student is not sure why she is being ironic, if she is being ironic, or even if she has a specific object of irony. Often they are merely imitating the sarcasm of their older siblings, parents, teachers and those embodying the dominant paradigm of thin *Seinfeld* sarcasm in entertainment. It imitates a disbelief in authenticity even if the student does not actually disbelieve. Another level of irony in young people is just teenage fear. Young kids avoid sincerity because being earnest is such a risk. It's so much easier to act aloof and play it safe. Reading Purdy's accounts of his experiences at Exeter, I imagine Purdy lacked some of the subtle social skills of keeping his cards close to his chest, a skill his supposedly ironic classmates at Exeter had honed.

Old School Irony

If we can dismiss some irony as just teenage imitation or social posturing, is it really as tyrannical as Jason Vorhees, slashing at us and widening the gap between our words and their meaning, our language and our thoughts? Has it hindered our access to know our own thoughts because, as we articulate them, we generate the gap between language and meaning? Perhaps we have forgotten the value of irony. Maybe in order to retrieve it we've gotta go old school and kick it with the original ironist, Socrates.

Kierkegaard actually wrote his dissertation on the concept of irony, and he sums up the way Socrates, not *Seinfeld*, is irony incarnate. Kierkegaard shows an ironic freedom in Socrates. He writes, "We have irony as the infinite absolute negativity. It is negativity because it only negates; it is infinite because it does not negate this or that phenomenon; it is absolute, because that by virtue of which it negates is a higher something that still is not" (*The Concept of Irony*, p. 261).

Socrates's life represents this negative freedom of irony; that is, the message of Socrates's life, the theme of his constantly negative freedom, is a macrocosm of irony. He parades

around engaging in dialogues with various students, Thrasymachus here, Glaucon there. But he does not dedicate himself to one or the other. Like Seinfeld, Socrates never commits. Jerry brakes up with a new woman every week for reasons as shallow as the way she consumes her peas (one at a time). Similarly, Socrates does not love Alcibiades in particular; he loves the pursuit of the ineffable ideal of love, whose servant he is, and by whom he is called never to engage himself positively, because so doing, would undermine his service to the idea. The content of Socrates's life is ironic because each of his dialogues ends in emptiness. Socrates, oh so annoyingly, refuses to define the idea being discussed. He never tells us what courage, love, or piety are. In fact, Socrates claims he cannot define the idea he serves. If you read these Socratic dialogues, Socrates never gave us an answer, he only questioned others, slaying his interlocutors with the knife of irony, as if Jason Vorhees had traded in a hockey mask for a snubbed nose.

Chuck the Gadfly

Is this Klosterman's task? Doesn't he wander around asking celebrities their intentions, their thoughts, and the meaning of their art? Doesn't he expose the gap between self-image and self-portrayal? Socrates was called a gadfly, because he buzzed about nagging the sophists and political high-ups. He was so annoying, that the Athenians eventually swatted him dead, or at least forced Socrates to off himself with a poisoned cocktail.

Isn't Chuck a bit of a gadfly, buzzing about asking penetrating questions to our pop culture heroes? If one of the signs of irony, according to Purdy, is coolness, and one of Klosterman's most central objects of inquiry is the coolness of rock stars, perhaps Klosterman is telling us something about the gap between outer persona and inner self created by irony. In *Chuck Klosterman IV*, he refers to supposedly authentic Morrissey fans, who don neckties and posture as sufficiently dour to qualify as the fans Morrissey would have wanted. At one point, Klosterman refers to a fan momentarily dropping his veil of irony only to express "a grain of semi-sincere annoyance" (p. 56).

Consider Klosterman's theory of "Advancement," which he claims bears no resemblance to irony. Rock stars can advance

themselves if they move beyond the rules created by their habitual iconography. Of course Chuck really only defines advancement denotatively, pointing to its exemplars, Lou Reed, Davie Bowie, David Byrne, and Joe Walsh. If their atypical artistic moments diverge too much from their routine templates—like a crappy episode of *Seinfeld* being played scene by scene in reverse, (and including in it a trip to India),—the move is overt. If the artistic gesture is done as a play or a farce on the artist's persona, then it is ironic. Klosterman's musings on the EKG charts of rock stars' artistic modalities exposes irony in a nuanced way, revealing its contours and defining them in contradistinction to Chuck's other made-up categories of rock careerism.

The Veil of Irony

Consider Klosterman's experience with Bono, in which Bono picked up several kids in his car and played his album to them, while playing air drums and harmonizing with himself. Klosterman asks:

Did this really happen? Am I supposed to believe that he does this kind of thing all the time, even when he doesn't have a reporter in the front seat of his car? And does that even matter? Was that car-ride the greatest moment in those four kids' lives? Was this whole thing a specific performance, or is Bono's entire life a performance? And if your entire life is a performance, does that make everything you do inherently authentic? Is this guy for real, or is this guy completely full of shit? (*Chuck Klosterman IV*, p. 24)

Chuck's asking about the gap between Bono's thoughts, his inner sense of self and his persona—his mask and his performance as Bono-for-the-world. Bono responds to Klosterman's question in a way that is completely natural and completely rehearsed, and Chuck likens Bono's responses to Bill Clinton's inspirational speech at the Oklahoma City bombing. Bono wears a veil of irony, but it's as if the veil has become stitched to his face, and the distinction between inner and outer has been effaced.

Chuck gives us insight into the pervasiveness of irony by illustrating one of its peculiar qualities. These days, detecting

irony is like looking at your own eyes without a mirror. One cannot identify irony as the foreground structure if irony is also the background. Instead, we can only discern moments of unirony, tinges of semi-sincerity, amid a picture framed by the ironical. The Gestalt has shifted. Chuck knows he is in the middle of the picture, framed by irony, so he can only bob and weave his way toward catching glimpses where earnestness discloses itself.

If Chuck's task is to highlight the unironical where it shows itself, Socrates's was to use the blade of irony to get at the truth, to give birth to the true idea, which he claimed to serve but did not know. Kierkegaard writes, "When Socrates declared that he was ignorant, he nevertheless did know something, for he knew about his ignorance; on the other hand, however, this knowledge was not a knowledge of something, that is, did not have any positive content, and to that extent his ignorance was ironic." Kierkegaard goes further to assert, "His ignorance was simultaneously earnest and yet again not earnest" (*The Concept of Irony*, p. 269). Was he writing about Socrates of ancient Athens or about of Klosterman of contemporary America?

Socrates knew that the objectivity of the culture of oracular proclamations had lost its validity, and he knew that the sophistic response to inconsistency of oracular law demanded his ironic scrutiny. Klosterman knows that the people he meets imitate reality TV characters, such as Puck and Pedro from the *Real World*, that they are performing the personas of reality TV archetypes. But what in Chuck's experience draws out his ironic scrutiny?

Both Purdy and Klosterman see irony as pervasive. Jedidiah wants to revive sincerity and commitment. Chuck merely notes when the unironical makes its rare appearance. Socrates wanted to show that a loss of actuality demanded more than phony argumentation by paid teachers of rhetoric. Chuck wants to know if we can ever have more than the veneer of our language, which is so thoroughly refracted through media and popular culture, that literal messages are now just confusing. Maybe all we can do is float through life on its surfaces, responding to every human drama with another *Star Wars* reference.

But if irony creates the gap between our fraudulent words and our inner thoughts, it also exposes the fissure, and at least

allows for the possibility of an unironical experience. We may not retrieve the sincerity of Purdy's idyllic West Virginia home-schooled upbringing, but we may have a better understanding of what the wound of irony is, even if Klosterman's contribution to our understanding of irony is to show us why *Seinfeld*, once the summit of TV achievement, now falls flat.

Purdy and Kierkegaard give us different versions of irony. Kierkegaard writes of the ironist, Socrates, who knows that there is pretense in the world, seeks to disclose it, but still believes in something. Purdy's description portrays the ironist, *Seinfeld*, who because of his culturally mediated, sophisticated existence, is defeated by disbelief and has succumbed to irony. Where Kierkegaard portrays Socrates as master of irony, Purdy characterizes *Seinfeld* as mastered by it.

Master of His Domain?

Where does Klosterman belong? Is he master of his domain . . . of irony? Or has he been mastered by it? Is Chuck detached and disloyal, or does he serve an idea of which he is ignorant? If he has been defeated by irony, like *Seinfeld* and like the sophists Socrates battled with, Chuck will employ insincerity because he supposes that reality is not at all what it seems. The sophists profited from the distinction between appearance and reality; *Seinfeld* makes a joke of it, offering the disbelief that anyone could take our cultural institutions seriously. Purdy claims that the ironist, having been nurtured by media's overuse of irony and by art's imitation of life, sees all of actuality as ironic and therefore disbelieves. He succumbs and falls towards a self-interested nihilism.

But Kierkegaard thought that irony is a part of every genuinely human life. Each of us has the ability to detach ourselves from the particularities of actuality. Socrates remains ironically afloat because he repeatedly disengages from his dialogues in which he pursued truth. Constant attention to any particular student or argument would represent an investment in actuality that could not be universalized by his own ironic method. The Purdyan ironist, *Seinfeld*, remains afloat as well, free from engagement, cool and aloof. He has achieved a certain level of sophistication in his realization that insincerity exists; he sees the gap between phenomenon and essence. Yet he is

hopeless to bridge it, so he treats it comically and never looks for more. The first of these, the genuine human life, searches for the truth. The second of these does not believe it exists. For the true (or “absolute”) is the bridge between phenomenon and essence.

Kierkegaard maintains that irony is a means, not an end. To master irony means to use irony to detect deceit. It also means being able to employ irony’s negativity in order to expose pretense or dishonesty, even if this use participates in the insincerity on one level by using language that does not accurately represent thought. The Purdyan ironist has realized that deceit exists but chooses to participate in it fully by only discerning its surfaces. Seinfeld treats irony as the end, the goal, not the path or the means to the truth. The master of irony understands that irony is the way, but not the truth.

Where authenticity demands self-knowledge and knowledge of one’s environment, irony maintains the self amid the environment because it lifts the self above its surroundings by disengaging when the search for truth falls short, when irony detects deception. The master of irony is more than a product of his environment, more than a slave to the veiled self-interests of others. The ever-present gap between the phenomenon and the essence births irony, and irony allows humans to live authentically amid the constant void.

Which life does Chuck lead? Is he master of irony or has he been mastered by it? Does Chuck serve an idea, even if he cannot define it? Does Klosterman believe in an idea? Does he have a cause?

I think Chuck resides in the middle, between the extremes offered by Socrates, the master, and Seinfeld, the mastered. Like Socrates, Chuck does know something. He’s sure of his own ignorance. Chuck knows that he does not know who he is, and he has helped us understand that we, too, do not know who we are. I think the idea he serves is self-understanding, but his pursuit of it does not begin from a privileged perspective. He cannot retreat to the Bizarro World and live inside Purdy’s bubble, judging the world from inside that immunity to low culture and irony. He cannot live amid the clouds, as Aristophanes thought Socrates did. Chuck has to start in the middle of things. Chuck is a comedic ironist in the vein of Seinfeld in that he can understand the world only through constant play of its

resemblances to the pop culture he grew up with and that composes the soundtrack of his life. Where Seinfeld refers to Superman, Klosterman refers to KISS. But Chuck also knows just how blurry his vision is, how media and art and culture have so clouded his vision, that he has no choice but to look for himself through the tint of their lenses. He investigates the relationship between phenomena—rock star personas, coolness, and over and underratedness—and essence—the inner being, thoughts, self-understandings of those rock stars. His inquiries do cut with the blade of irony. But he knows he cannot master irony, any more than he can bite his own teeth.

Seinfeld and Socrates Get the Death Penalty

The first shitty episode of *Seinfeld*, its last, inaugurated the age of every *Seinfeld* rerun sucking. My friends and I awaited the finale of *Seinfeld* in 1998 alongside the rest of America. And we were utterly disappointed. It wasn't funny. There was no soup for us in that debacle. Half montage, half reunion, the episode ditched its habitual formula and tried, failingly, to advance itself. Instead, it was overt. We stared at the episode completely confused, especially by its ending. But that was its brilliance. In that episode we were shown the anti-social, cold-hearted jerks we thought we loved. We were forced to see that perhaps a jail cell was their proper domicile.



Seinfeld's prison



Socrates's prison

Both Socrates and Seinfeld, the character, ended their lives in jail. The master of irony and the one mastered by it succumbed to a similar fate. Jerry avoided the death penalty, which was perhaps too harsh a penalty for Socrates, who accepted his death in service of the truth and obedience to state law. However, Jerry's character did die, (as the show ended), and he ended his existence commenting on the mundane and telling another joke. (The second button on George's shirt was too high).

Happily, Chuck is still with us, searching for himself and helping us do the same. We do not know how *unironically* he will serve his idea, but we do know that it will be funnier than a *Seinfeld* rerun.

**Culture can
be wrong?**

HYPERthetical Response #1

Culture can be wrong

GEORGE A. REISCH

“**W**hat depresses you more—being betrayed by an individual, or being ‘betrayed’ by your own culture?” It’s a trick question because Klosterman believes you can’t be betrayed by your own culture. Culture, he argues, can’t be wrong. This is a towering truth that we all overlook. As he puts it,

There’s a peculiar disconnect between how people exist in the world and how they think the world is supposed to exist; it’s almost as if most Americans can’t accept an important truth about being alive. And this is the truth to which I refer: Culture can’t be wrong. That doesn’t mean it’s always “right,” nor does it mean you always have to agree with it. But culture is never wrong. People can be wrong. Movements can be wrong. But culture—as a whole—cannot be wrong. Culture is just there. (“Culture Got You Down?” *Esquire*, December 31st 2004)

His argument is this: people can be wrong because they exist in a larger context of laws or traditions that they can defy or offend, like a criminal breaking a law. A movement, just a collection of people, can be wrong in the same way. But culture, Klosterman seems to think, is the largest context out there. And that mean’s it can’t be wrong. There’s no larger framework or setting outside of culture. His suppressed premise seems to be: for something to go wrong, it has to go wrong inside of, and with respect to, something larger than itself.

But that’s not true. There are other ways that something can ‘go wrong’ that have nothing to do with offending some

larger, superior framework or context. You can go wrong with respect to your own context or container—yourself. If my reason to live is to paint, or create music, or grow my business, then I could easily go wrong simply by turning my back on that goal or doing things to sabotage myself. I've gone wrong and betrayed myself only because I've veered away from values and goals that I personally hold dear, not because something larger is looking at me and shaking its head.

Culture can do that, too. Culture can chug along for years with its movies and books, laws and debates, trends and fads, songs, economic cycles, military conflicts, and what not, each of which is connected to the others in the big cultural stew that sociologists write books about. All these things hang together and form the culture we live in, talk about, and argue about. Then, the bottom can drop out. The whole thing can betray itself, the people in it, and everything that culture stood for in all its former integrity.

I refer of course to the release in 1981 of “In the Air Tonight” by Phil Collins. Phil and Atlantic Records opened the bomb bay doors and let this baby drop down on a world that would never be the same. It's been thirty years and *everyone* knows and, I trust, loathes this constipated dirge that slowly repeats the same three chords over and over. When the first verse is finally squeezed out, it has all the punch of an argument between second graders:

Well if you told me you were drowning
I would not lend a hand

Good because you're so ugly
I'd rather drown than have you touch me

From there we move on to cliché—it's been “a pack of lies” and “How could I ever forget?”—as the song's awfulness builds and snowballs. After the drums kick in, Collins sounds tortured—his “Oh Lord, Oh Lord”'s snarling and squealing like Joe Pesci at the hands of Macauley Culkin in *Home Alone*.

Musicologists refer to the popular music vapidness index. It's the ratio of a song's drama, pathos, and emotion to the substance of what the song is about. You want these numbers to match, more or less, giving good songs a ratio of about one. For

example, Springsteen bellows “Born in the USA” at about a 7 (out of ten) because, as the verses inform us, his character’s got some serious stuff to bellow about—Vietnam, alienation, ruined lives at the hands of Nixonian politicians, joblessness. I’d eyeball these, taken together, at 7 or 8. So, on the awfulness index, as you’d expect, Bruce does well. Around 1, maybe 0.9.

Collins, on the other hand, squeals and shrieks at around 9, possibly even a historic 10 by the time Culkín has got pliers on Phil’s fingers and has set his cap on fire. To have a hope of matching Springsteen, Collins’s song needs to up the denominator a notch or two—to keep some sense of artistic proportion and credibility. But what number should we put in the denominator? What is it that has got Collins so torn and worked up, tearing his shirt off his chest and yelling “Oh Lord, Oh Lord” as it’s “coming in the air tonight”?

[*sounds of crickets chirping*]

Nothing. It’s just “it”. A mere pronoun. “It” will be arriving later “tonight” but we know nothing about it. We know that Phil’s upset, that he’s more and more agitated as he feels it coming, that it’s so important God needs to know about it. But we, the listeners, are left with “it.” A placeholder. The something that is not really anything.

On the vapidness index, therefore, we’ve got a 9 divided by a nothing, a zero. That means “In the Air Tonight” becomes, by the time it is over, hyperbolically, *infinitely* vapid. There is no number you could put on the incongruity between the pathos and the emptiness of the lyrics. The performance is a directionless tantrum, like a balling child at the Walmart wailing through his tears, “But I waaaannnnnaaaaa. I waaaannnnnaaaaa”—making anyone with a human heart wonder, “what?” “What is it that this child wants? Can’t mom or dad just *buy it* and make them shut up?”

Is it gum, candy, a squirt gun? Whatever it is, the child can at least point to it so we can have a number, a 1 most likely because squirt guns and the like are not really that important. So, a 9 divided by 1 gives us a vapidness index of 9 for this kind of tantrum. That’s up there, but *it’s a child* so there’s nothing terribly wrong or out of whack here. But “In the Air Tonight” wails even harder, with a full complement of drums,

synthesizers, gated reverbs, and state of the art studio effects to help a grown man push himself to the brink of existential anguish in the face of. . .

[*more chirping*].

Were this just a deep track from an obscure band, Chuck's theory might be right. In that case, it would just be a bad song, perhaps written by a mediocre singer-songwriter. But because the song is (as they say) "a classic," one that is so loved and adored that it nearly broke the *Billboard* 100 a *second time* in 1984 (Wikipedia says), one that has been sampled, quoted, referenced, covered so often, it's a part of our cultural wallpaper. As much as a song can be, it's the flag of our culture. One that's gone wrong.

Why, I wondered, do people so often feel let down by popular culture? Why do serious film fans feel disgusted when another Tom Hanks movie earns \$200 million? Why do record-store employees get angry when a band like Comets on Fire comes to town and only twenty-two people pay to see them? Why do highly literate people become depressed when they look at the *New York Times* best-seller list . . . ?

It's because they feel betrayed by their culture. You, Chuck, claim that there's no basis for this feeling, but I believe there is. I agree there's no reason to be upset if people like a movie that you don't like, or people don't like a band that you love. But "In the Air Tonight" and other let-downs are not ultimately about the people who feel let down. That is accidental and secondary to the culture's betrayal of itself and all the people in it. It has happened. It may happen again. I think I can feel it coming.