

BOOK IV

The IVth Critique

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Only Chuck Can Save Us

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On July 8th 2010, LeBron James provided Americans and the media pundits they love to hate with a unique opportunity.

For a long while it has seemed that the days of the public media event with moral consequence has been relegated to a semi-mythical past full of fireside chats, Lincoln-Douglas debates, and other things from tenth-grade social studies class. Today presidential debates are just mile markers in the horse race and the closest thing we've seen to a real discussion over an important, nationally-experienced media moment was the argument over whether Janet Jackson's mostly exposed nipple was the cause or merely the result of America's demise into a realm of Godless depravity somewhere between Sodom and Sweden. Sure, we've got *Meet the Press* and a million blogs that break down every moment of everything. But blogs are a type of fragmented, specialty media. It's hard enough to talk with your friends about what you watch or read, let alone have a national discussion.

Yet, LeBron, by renting an hour on ESPN and making the biggest *Decision* in basketball history since they got rid of those short-shorts worn by Chuck Klosterman's beloved 1980s Celtics, gave millions of Americans something to discuss. In front of tens of millions of people, LeBron shattered the collective heart of Cleveland, choosing to leave his hometown Cavaliers and join the Miami Heat.

It was a surprising, meaningful moment that said a lot about America's attitudes about individuality versus community, labor versus capital and race's relation to cultural power.

Lebron's moment captured the attention of people inside and out of the sports world, mixing business, entertainment, culture, and the ethics of personal behavior into a strangely fun cocktail reminiscent of the "wop" the North Dakotans chug in *Downtown Owl*. And yet, for the most part, no one on ESPN's vast family of media properties got into these deeper, more fundamental questions when talking about Lebron. No one except Chuck Klosterman.

For most commentators, Lebron's program, *The Decision*, was merely an opportunity to complain about the spoiled nature of the contemporary athlete or perhaps to preach a vaguely free-market perspective espousing personal freedom through sophomoric and often personal job-hunting metaphors. Skip Bayless, a particularly unctuous ESPN talking head, spent segment after segment talking about Lebron's "lack of remorse" about leaving Cleveland, never taking the time to explain what exactly the man should be sorry for. After a few days I had had enough of ESPN's missed opportunity to talk about something significant that garnered considerable attention by people who weren't hardcore sports fans.

Only God Can Judge Me

But then I stumbled upon Klosterman's appearance on the ESPN podcast, *The B.S. Report*. The exchange between Chuck and the program's host, Bill Simmons, featured virtually none of the annoyances of standard media fare. It was an in-depth discussion about Lebron's choice, unencumbered by either commercial interruption or a sense of score keeping. Whereas ESPN's long-running program *Around the Horn* literally gives points when one of its guests says something of perceived value, Simmons and Klosterman weaved in and out of a complex discussion without the need to one up one another or sneak one last word in before the ShamWow guy or a lime-flavored light beer bottle commandeered the screen.

And more importantly, Klosterman made serious points—things worth actually thinking about beyond the realm of mass culture in which he reigns so supremely. Whereas other commentators played "Who's to blame?", Chuck asked us to interpret Lebron's bold choice to dump a fledgling rust belt city with

a vicious history of sports tragedy as the whole world watched in terms of our contemporary conception of confidence.

Most people saw James's attention-grab as a marker of profound insecurity, yet Klosterman, quoting Tupac, suggested that James's apparent heartlessness was instead telling the world "Only God can judge me." In other words, James's insistence on buying an hour block on ESPN to do what is traditionally achieved via a quick phone call and a signature wasn't a plea for attention; it was a statement of profound self-control. James was proclaiming his refusal to enable us in our addiction to vicarious living through stars like himself. He wasn't going to let the American public force him to become the kind of one-dimensional character that *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs* argues is the real legacy of *The Real World* and reality TV.

Sure, Lebron was supposed to be a Good Guy. But he did this Bad Thing, Chuck argued, for our good as well as, his own. He did something "bad" because he wanted to, and he did it publicly because we should all know that the molds our hyper-mediated world wedge us into are neither healthy in the long run nor satisfying in the short term. It may sound simplistic, but for someone in Lebron's position of wealth and influence, the idea of truly "being yourself" is actually kind of profound.

Now, in the interest of full disclosure I need to point out that I don't think Chuck's right. Personally I believe, and believe that Chuck probably believes, that Lebron's just a youngish guy who came into the possession of a bad idea and some even worse advice on how to execute it. Nonetheless, I really, truly appreciate the fact that Klosterman was able to take this meaningful cultural moment and, through the new medium of podcasting, debate its more subtle elements less than a month after it happened on a program with millions of listeners. Klosterman's contribution strengthened our collective discourse not only about Lebron, but also about celebrity culture and the ways in which all of us are asked to play our roles as opposed to look more deeply and critically. Using the vocabulary of political philosophy and communication theory, Klosterman was contributing to what is known as the "public sphere," a concept that underpins much Western thought on the nature of democracy and productive public citizenship. And the Lebron podcast is just one example of Klosterman's

uncanny ability to debate popular culture in public forums in ways that make us think about the nature of our society. So, yes, I'm making the claim that Chuck's ideas about the appeal of Abba in America or Val Kilmer being "advanced" make our democracy stronger.

Chuck in the Public Sphere

The idea of the "public sphere" comes from the seemingly immortal ninety-year old Jürgen Habermas, a German philosopher who not only is still alive fifty years after writing a book that changed political thought forever, but who also still produces new articles now and then.

As you might suspect, Jürgen Habermas and Chuck Klosterman are not writers who share space in many sentences. The former is compared to philosophers like Hegel and uses chapter titles like "The Paradigm Shift in Mead and Durkheim: From Purposive Activity to Communicative Action." His jargon-laden, *extremely* historically informed prose is the kind of thing I'd tried to make inside jokes about as a graduate student and is probably twenty-five percent responsible for me remaining single for the majority of the period. Klosterman, on the other hand, uses chapter titles like "Every Dog Must Have His Every Day, Every Drunk Must Have His Drink" and proceeds to give us fifteen pages on the genius of Billy Joel. He has perfected a style that projects intelligence without the baggage of pretension or seriousness that so often comes with it; he's obviously a smart guy, but he doesn't let that get in the way of a good time. If you ever bump into a group of people with .edu email addresses throwing back drinks and laughing too loudly, it's probably true that they a. think they are being as witty and down to earth as Chuck and b. are doing nothing of the sort. It's hard to be reasonably smart, reasonably funny, reasonably accessible, and still make your, hopefully reasonable, point. Trust me, I'm trying right now and the success-to-effort ratio isn't what it could be.

Klosterman's arguments are well considered and often surprisingly rigorous, yet they are also, in every sense, popular. Not only does his work sell many times more copies than Habermas's *The Transformation of the Public Sphere*, which went decades before even being published in English, but

Klosterman also focuses on things that people know and love. Whereas Habermas's arguments hinge on conceptions of eighteenth-century French bourgeois society, Klosterman uses Zack Morris and Larry Bird to prove his cultural points. Habermas, as we'll detail shortly, uses historical fictions for the sake of philosophical truth while Klosterman employs contemporary fiction to teach his readers about their own cultures. However, Klosterman's public persona, especially when combined with new communications methods such as podcasting, makes him just the sort of guy that Habermas, the champion of the public sphere, should be glad we have around.

Yes, Habermas wants people to discuss big issues like the future of democracy and the best way to achieve the public good. And, no, Klosterman doesn't much care if the discourse goes much beyond the realm of popular culture. However Habermas's theory of the public sphere suggests that perhaps even Klosterman's apparently trivial arguments have the potential to do just that. When Chuck and Bill Simmons argue about Lebron or do battle for two hours over the virtues of the *Lost* finale, they may well be encouraging just the sort of engagement that Habermas thinks produces better citizens and societies.

Grad students rapping about the canon of western philosophy over PBR represents just the sort of scene that Habermas evokes in his groundbreaking description of eighteenth-century Europe, a time during which, his most famous argument goes, the world's only truly functional "Public Sphere" existed. According to Habermas, this was a time in which open, public debate flourished because there was a space in which the people had the ability to identify the true nature of their collective interests in the best possible fashion—through logical reason. In other words, for one reason or another, people during this period were able to put aside their own agendas in order to pursue an absolute, objective truth. It's a questionable claim and one we'll take a closer look at later, but it's a key to Habermas's idea about the public sphere. If it seems like too much of a stretch to you that people could be so objective, think of one of the interludes in *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*. Klosterman asks you to envision a time portal through which you discover one day you'll fall in love with Canadian Football. Habermas's argument wants to look through one in which people were once

supremely rational. Yeah, it's unlikely, but it's no sillier than a football league with a team called the "Allouettes." (For more on this read "Turn off the CFL").

The Crucible of Debate

Habermas's claim is that as the European Feudal system collapsed at the end of the Middle Ages and royalty lost its ownership of everything, spaces like pubs and parks emerged where people could meet a public and stop thinking of themselves as subjects of the king. The result was, according to Habermas, spaces of vibrant debate and intellectual engagement that served as the underpinning of a truly successful democratic system. In particular, he points to the salons and teahouses that emerged during this period and attracted a diverse group of individuals, considering the time period. Just as the citizens of Owl, North Dakota, in *Downtown Owl* only seem to talk meaningfully about anything at the bar or the diner, the European citizens of the time found these new public space as bastions of unfettered expression beyond the reach of the King. It's somewhat like the freedom of subject matter and mode of address that you'll find in Klosterman's various projects. While Chuck might toe the company line while writing in *Spin* and pull some punches, when he's talking only for himself on a podcast you'll often find he's freer in tossing out ideas. Yes, he's still in public, but the metaphorical king is off his back. In the Europe of Habermas's philosophy, the salon or pub gave the people a similar freedom, resulting in an informed and influential public able to smartly and effectively articulate its needs, desires, and opinions.

Essential to Habermas's conception of the Public Sphere's golden age was this lack of external interference. Without external meddling, people had the ability to focus on the one thing that really matters: a clear, unbiased argument. Think of the difference between two talking heads on cable TV versus the way that Klosterman debates with Simmons on *The B.S. Report*. The talkers want to score points and will appeal to the emotions of the audience and one another to score their point. When Skip Bayless argued about LeBron on ESPN, he built his case on James not looking "happy to join" Miami or "sad to leave Cleveland." These things might be true, but how can you

have a meaningful discussion that starts that way? What can you say to such a thing, other than that it's irrelevant?

Klosterman, however, offered a definition of confidence via Tupac's "Only God can judge me" life-philosophy and went on to show how LeBron's actions suggest he fits that notion of confidence. You can disagree with Chuck, but to do so you have to argue logically about what it means to be confident or what LeBron actually did. This is the sort of rational debate Habermas locates as the heart of the public sphere of eighteenth-century social clubs and print journals. People knew that they had better check their personal preferences and prejudices at the door, and they forwent the sorts of petty, selfish motivations that impede people from really getting to the truths of matters. Their goal wasn't to be right on a personal level, but instead to discover, communally, what makes the best sense.

Now you're probably thinking Habermas is just a bit full of it. It's not hard to parody his picture of Europe's past as a Disney World for tweed-wearing professors and Mr. Bottomtooth from *Family Guy*. Not only is it hard to believe that such a time and place ever existed, but there aren't too many people for whom it even sounds like a great place to visit. Can we really take seriously the idea that people at some point in the past were truthfully able to put aside their social positions and personal preferences in order to focus entirely on the merits of one another's arguments? For example, if I were to bump into Klosterman at a Manhattan bar one night, and we were to get into a verbal battle over, say, the cultural significance of KISS guitarist Ace Frehley's obsession with UFOs, I'm fairly certain that Chuck's pop guru status would irreparably bias everyone involved in the discussion. The hipsters would appeal to the fact that he's said about a million smart things about KISS in his life, and I've never said any. They would then notice me drinking a beer that was either too ironic or not ironic enough and dismiss me altogether. Furthermore, as Chuck and I did battle over whether or not Frehley represents "alien" elements of American culture, I'd be desperately trying to score points at all costs. It's far cooler to tell your friends you beat such a pop culture guru in an argument. It certainly trumps the importance of accessing a philosopher's ideal of "objective truth." So is Habermas to seriously have us think

that in similar, if perhaps more somber, arguments a few hundred years ago in Bavaria, things would have been so fundamentally different?

The Ideal Ideas Exchange

Probably not. Or at least no more than Klosterman is trying to convince us that one day we might wake up with our musical tastes “reversed,” as per the chapter in *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*. Habermas knows full well that the picture he paints is an idealized one that, at best, glosses over some serious rough patches, not the least of which is the fact that minorities, the disabled, the young, the elderly, and females almost certainly couldn’t have even gotten through the door of your average French salon. Instead, what Habermas is doing is establishing, through what is essentially a piece of historical fiction, the ideal form of discourse that he believes ought to take place in the public sphere of a well functioning civil society. It’s a thought experiment, something that Klosterman fans are well-versed in. The past he paints is what we should aspire to if we really want a society that is based on providing the best lives for its citizenry as opposed to catering to the whims of the powerful. His point is not so much to say how great things were in the past, but instead to show us how many light years away our current environment is from how things need to be if we want a society that truly looks out for its own best interests. No, it’s not as fun as the what-ifs in the Klosterman *Hypertheticals* party game, but what do you expect from a German guy named Jürgen?

But even if we acknowledge that the Habermas is idealizing the style of debate that took place during the period of his glorious public sphere, we’re left with another nagging problem. Yes, there are people who like to go to bars and argue about politics, but there are lots of other things to discuss, many of which are a lot more fun. In the example above, I referenced an argument over Ace Frehley and Alien lifeforms as opposed to one over the virtues of stem-cell research mostly because in social settings the more engaging topic is one the most likely to evoke extended discussion.

Most of us don’t get paid to compare Ralph Nader to Rivers Cuomo and daydream about chewing on a triceratops, so when

we get home from work, we want our “intellectual” engagement to be fun. If you have trouble believing that Europeans a few hundred years ago had as much fun debating the merits of restructuring the local sewage system or the definition of justice than you do arguing about your favorite basketball team, you’re not alone. Habermas, serious though he may be, not only acknowledges this phenomenon, but he even embraces the idea that there is value in talking about fun stuff. He may have had *Don Giovanni* in mind more than Nikki Sixx or Axl Rose, but the idea is there. Before the salons and cafes turned into bastions of debates over the public interest, there was, in the Habermasian narrative, a “public sphere of letters” that developed. French, German, and British citizens would gather together not only to talk about, say the best use of public land, but also the merits of new plays, the latest trends in musical composition and the superiority of certain authors. It appears that if a debate over the originality of Mozart sonatas could be a productive part of the public sphere, Klosterman’s contention that Paradise City, a Guns N’ Roses cover band, is the most “sonically pure” band in the world could be as well. After all, popular culture has always been popular for a reason—it’s not clear that Axl Rose is one iota more obsessed with sex than *Don Giovanni*, lover of all things erotic.

And Habermas may well concede this point. In his account, debates over art and culture not only serve as a sort of training ground on which to try out the sorts of rhetorical strategies necessary for proper political debate, but they also play the very crucial role of teaching people that arguments don’t always have to involve advocacy. For example, when you read Klosterman’s article “Appetite for Replication” about Paradise City, the stakes are, presumably, very low. Unless you have a personal preference for dressing like Izzy Stradlin and doing shots of Jack Daniels until you can’t see straight, the virtuosity or authenticity of people who do have such predilections probably isn’t a matter of significant personal gain. However, in Habermas’s way of thinking, this can be a good thing.

By personally evaluating Paradise City you’re engaging in an activity much like the idealized citizens of the “public sphere of letters” were doing in Habermas’s eighteenth-century Europe. The key is to contemplate something you have found enough interest in to take seriously and learn the facts about,

but which you have no apparent rooting interest. This may sound simple enough, but it's not an easy thing to do. You could pick up a scholarly tract on the essence of beauty that you have no stake in, but it's unlikely that you'll really debate the merits of the argument if you're not at least an amateur expert in the field. It's also easy enough to pick up the op-ed page of your local newspaper and evaluate both sides of an argument over school vouchers. But unless you have some personal stake in the matter, it will likely be hard to delve into it fully. At the very least, most people wouldn't have a very good time doing so. But "Appetite for Replication," in arguing that a tribute band can express an unparalleled purity of devotion to a set of songs, gives the reader the opportunity and motivation to consider something with a relatively high level of intellectual rigor without having any personal stake in it. In Habermas's portrayal of the ideal public sphere, people learn to think objectively and abstractly in large part because topics like art and music provide motivations beyond personal gain to do so. The fun one has in arguing about the band, in this case, matters, so long as it brings along with it the virtue of rationality. Your time dabbling in the "public sphere of letters" is training you to put aside your personal stake in say, Affirmative Action, and cast your lot with the side of the issues that appeals to your sense of truth and justice.

Blaming the Media

In Habermas's semi-historical worldview, the public sphere, which once gave everyday people a place to fairly and effectively advance their collective interests, slowly died out, leaving a civil society capable of little more than serving petty, partisan interests. At this point Habermas and Klosterman appear to be most at odds. Whereas Klosterman has made a career of studying the hidden and not so hidden virtues of American popular culture, Habermas takes a stance far more common amongst the intelligentsia. He blames the media. More specifically, Habermas bemoans the way in which for-profit, mass media has replaced sites of more efficient and honest public discourse. The depth, creativity and submerged meanings that Klosterman finds in even the most banal examples of American popular culture are, for Habermas and his

influential academic protégés, mere by-products of a centuries-long cultural deterioration. If the French salon was the peak of Western communicative discourse, the “don’t drink and drive” episode of *Saved by the Bell* that Klosterman devotes a full chapter to may well be its deepest, if most fun, valley.

The problem, according to Habermas, begins with the way in which the public and private spheres were re-blurred in the industrial and post-industrial eras, setting the stage for crassly commercial modes of public debate and, eventually, media production. Corporations and governments mix their interests to the point where you can’t tell them apart. Congress is inundated with corporate lobbyists. Groups of citizens have no choice but to act in kind, putting together admirable but unmistakably advocacy-oriented groups like the NAACP, GLAD, and ACLU in order defend their own interests. When they argue, it has very little to do with truth. It’s sort of like the exchange between Julia and Vance in *Downtown Owl*, where Klosterman tells you both what each character says as well as the kind of creepy, totally selfish thing that they are really trying to get across. When companies or interest groups talk in the public sphere they try to sound ethical and kind, but just like Julia, they’re mostly trying to screw whoever they’re talking to.

And this, Habermas argues, is just the beginning. It’s not just the mind-set with which groups and individuals enter debates that limits the success of the public sphere. It is also the means by which they are able to do it. Salons and literary journals were crafted, according to Habermas, for the specific purpose of fostering real, rational debates. Discussions were informed not simply by the momentary interests of the masses, but also by an understanding that certain topics must be grappled with for the public good. This is not, of course, the case with the vast majority of major contemporary Western media. The texts that Klosterman engages with, by and large, exist for a single purpose: to make people money. Time travel movies, the NBA, and Britney Spears are commercial products with aesthetic or political attributes that may well be overwhelmed by the interests of their financial backers. At the very least, they wouldn’t exist if they couldn’t turn a profit; the shareholders wouldn’t stand for it. And certainly this phenomenon is not exclusive to the realm of entertainment media. Cable news stations, ostensibly places with ample time for debates on real

issues, work hard to brand themselves to appeal to niche viewerships, combining the interests of their corporate advertisers with those of specific target audiences to create a sphere in which rational argumentation is at best a tertiary concern. Essentially, Habermas contends that our newer forms of argument and cultural expression—the newspaper, television, mass-produced literature—let motivations like money, fame, and political advocacy get in the way of the fully rational debates we ought to be having. With every moment of our discursive experiences seemingly sponsored and targeted towards specific goals, there simply is no public sphere that exists even as a meek substitute for the mythical European past he celebrates.

On the surface, Chuck Klosterman's work seems to represent a mad celebration of Habermas's dreary vision. Klosterman is most certainly a commercial entity, having worked for mass-media giants like ESPN. His books, high-priced retail items in their own right, make the case for further consumption of media and the interest-group driven advertising that underwrites the production of popular culture. Many would argue that Klosterman's very celebrity image and public persona serve as an advertisement for the crass, commercial elements of American life. Seeing the respect and admiration conferred upon a pop-culture devotee such as Klosterman gives people an excuse to feel okay about their lack of real engagement in the world of public affairs. While apparently more conscientious media critics bemoan the demise of investigative journalism, Klosterman tells us that Billy Joel's music cuts to the heart of the human condition. He thus absolves us of our pop culture crimes and makes us feel okay about deleting *Meet the Press* from our DVR so as to squeeze in another episode of *Jersey Shore*. Habermas could not possibly be in favor of such a move.

Saving Democracy through Pop Culture

To this accusation Klosterman would likely plead guilty, although he clearly doesn't see it as much of a crime. In fact, Klosterman actively crusades against the notion of a guilty pleasure, arguing publicly on the podcast *Contexts* that guilty pleasures ought not to be thought of as such at all. Klosterman

makes the simple but rational case that aesthetic judgments such as “guilty pleasures” are not only pretentious, they also don’t represent the way we truly engage culture. Innocence and guilt simply don’t reflect the honest experience of watching movies or listening to music, they reflect the way want people to think about our taste in movies and music. In making this claim Klosterman makes an argument that I believe moves him in a direction that Habermasians ought to embrace. During his appearance on *Contexts*, a free podcast devoted to long-form interviews, Klosterman contends that the sort of criticism that leads one to castigate certain works as “guilty pleasures” attempts to replace individual enjoyment with a top-down system in which the trends embraced by taste makers at a given cultural moment take precedence over one’s own experiences.

Although he does not go so far as to embrace Habermas’s idea that a “public sphere of letters” ought to employ rational discourse in order to discover the truth about cultural artifacts, he does remark that his unique brand of criticism aims to give people new ways to think about popular culture, not to sway their opinions. For example, Klosterman says that if a mainstream critic likes the way that Fleetwood Mac’s album *Rumors* sounds, he’ll just conjure up an argument for the social relevance of its lyrics in order to make their instinctual reactions to the work seem intellectually justified. This accusation quite neatly parallels that of the Habermasian critic, who claims that the arguments of the combatants in the contemporary public sphere are driven by personal motivation, not the real truth of the matter. Ideally, for the supporter of Habermas, Klosterman would engage with culture in order to determine its essence and meaning for all of society as the eighteenth-century literary journals supposedly did.

However, coming from a post-modern perspective in which such absolute truths are taken as highly suspicious, Klosterman does the next best thing. He uses rational argumentation in order both to entertain and to provide a template for readers who want to think through the culture around them while avoiding the commercially friendly thumbs up/thumbs down forms of criticism that are so pervasive. Maybe arguing that *When Harry Met Sally* makes us all yearn for “fake love” isn’t what Habermas had in mind, but it does evoke a level of

rational engagement with culture far deeper than most popular writing and far, far more accessible than what generally comes from our university professors.

And whereas new media forms play a role in the demise of the public sphere in the Habermasian account, new technologies are actually providing Klosterman with a platform to reverse this process. Klosterman's discussion of the problems with contemporary cultural criticism took place in a form rarely seen in popular media over the last few decades: the long-form interview. *Contexts*, the program on which the debate was featured, is available free via iTunes. During the program public figures are allotted up to two hours, commercial free, to discuss contemporary topics. As a result the time and sponsor-driven considerations of most popular media are absent. This is crucial, as Habermas's notion of the public sphere requires lots and lots of time.

If you use Habermas's preferred dialogue method of intellectual discovery, nothing comes fast or easy. One could easily argue that the single greatest detrimental effect that modern media has had on the public sphere is the way in which financial interests perpetually shorten the amount of time in which individuals are allowed to make their point. Sound bites become shorter each year and political slogans have been reduced to single words— Hope, Change, Strategy, Lock Box, and so on. Rational arguments simply can't take place at such speeds. Podcasts such as *Contexts*, however, shake off this trend. By giving their guests more time to speak and allowing someone like Klosterman the ability to logically discuss engaging topics in full, this new media form has the potential to fill a similar role to that of the literary journals that Habermas celebrates.

The Message in the Medium

This improved form of public discussion is even found in the realm of commercial podcasting as evidenced by Klosterman's extremely popular appearances on ESPN's *The B.S. Report* podcast, such as the LeBron James episode. The *Report* is an undoubtedly commercial affair, featuring guests promoting new movies and interviews brought to you by the Subway Fresh Take hotline. However, just like the commerce-free

Contexts podcast, *The B.S. Report* is a truly long-form interview program, with discussions of sports and popular culture that can exceed two hours in duration. Such a situation is simply unthinkable anywhere else in the ESPN media universe, where *Sportscenter* feature stories are often no more than three minutes long.

However, Marshall McLuhan was wrong, the medium is not the message. It takes a figure such as Klosterman to bring out the potential of Simmons's platform. Whereas most *B.S. Reports* have a pleasant, trivial feel to them, Klosterman's episodes inevitably dig deeply into issues that, while perhaps not the sort of thing Habermas would discuss over a pint, nonetheless provide fodder for substantive discourse. For example, on the March 5th, 2010, episode, Simmons remarked that he believes the hip-hop and R&B artists don't belong in the Rock'n'Roll Hall of Fame. In most commercial contexts such a comment would go unchecked, as there would be little time or motivation for a major corporate entity like ESPN to engage with such a question. However, given his approach to popular culture and the freedom of the podcasting medium, Klosterman called out Simmons on his statement, asking him to justify it and going on to assess the racial elements of aesthetic criticism in American music.

It was a rational, in-depth conversation that was both fun and available to Simmons's millions of devoted fans. While many people might disagree with Klosterman's take on the racial implications of music criticism, the podcast modeled a discussion about a crucial American issue in a forum that draws the attention of a wide swath of the American public. No, the hardcore Habermasian is not likely to declare *The B.S. Report* the modern-day equivalent of the French salon, but Klosterman's work in the medium of podcasting nonetheless provides a counterbalance to the prevailing narrative in which the mediated public sphere gets worse with each passing day.

So is Chuck going to save American democracy one fake review of *Chinese Democracy* at a time? No, probably not. But personally, I think he's helping, not hurting. Sure, there will be those who read him, fall in love and decide to devote their lives to getting to the bottom of *Full House* as opposed to investigating government corruption or fighting for social justice. But if they write like Chuck and get us thinking about our culture in

a way that recognizes how meaningful the seemingly small things can be and, along the way, teach us a little bit about rational thought, that's fine by me. Personally, I believe that no matter what we do, the next generation of top American thinkers is pretty likely to have honed its debate skills through arguments about reality TV with a few drinks in them after their freshman poly-sci midterms. And trust me, if you happen to end up at table next to them in the bar, you'll be happy they're doing their Chuck impersonations, not their Jürgens.

10

Football, Fútbol, and Chuck

BENJAMIN LISLE

I spend an inordinate amount of time trying to deduce the nature of existence by watching football games.

—CHUCK KLOSTERMAN

I spend an ordinate amount of time trying to induce the very human artifice of culture by watching football games. Like Chuck Klosterman, I love sports. I am certainly one of Klosterman's sporting sixty percent—that group of his readers possessing “a near-expert understanding of sports,” as opposed to the other forty percent with “no interest whatsoever” (*Eating the Dinosaur*, p. 148).

Like many people, my relationship with sports has been one of the most persistent and enduring associations of my life; it stretches back to my very earliest memories, costumed in crimson corduroys, perched on the blowy upper deck in Norman, Oklahoma. Rife with passion, though somewhat short on eroticism, my relationship with sports has been deeply emotional, psychological, and, at times, intellectual. When Chuck Klosterman forces himself on my sports, fondling them with his shabby interpretations, violating them and then (and then!) boasting about it in print, something must be done.

Why should I—or you—care about how Chuck Klosterman interprets sports? Sports are meaningful. They are a major mode of cultural expression, a practice through which millions of people gather to play and watch every day. Sport has been a space where ideals are staged, challenged, and inverted. Sport has been where we work out what it means to be “manly” or

what becomes a “lady.” It has been a lens through which we examine race and contemplate how it intersects with socioeconomic class and biology. Sport has been a socializing agent, where we’ve educated children and lazy half-wit foreigners about American virtues of hard work, competition, and co-operation. And demonstrated their opposites. Chuck Klosterman presumably doesn’t watch Kent State play Eastern Michigan in football to recalibrate his sense of proper masculinity. But certainly watching Kent State play Eastern Michigan recalibrates Chuck Klosterman’s sense of proper masculinity.

Klosterman’s interpretations of sport—particularly the two footballs, soccer and American gridiron—are interesting both because they are idiosyncratic and because they are representative. They are stamped with his characteristic markings: hyperbole, digression, and inventiveness among them. But they also channel mainstream American sporting discourse. Klosterman’s exegesis of the footballs is a good sample of a certain prominent American sports ideology.

The meaning of a sport like football—like any cultural text—is unstable. It shifts and evolves, depending on (among other things) who is interpreting, when they’re interpreting, and how the game is played and watched at that moment. Chuck Klosterman is not only an armchair quarterback, but an armchair anthropologist as well. His interpretations of sporting cultural practices—like mine—aren’t definitive. They are contestable.

Chuck Klosterman and the '86 Celtics

How do we interpret sport? The ideas of Hans-George Gadamer in *Truth and Method* give us a way to consider how things are interpreted. According to Gadamer’s theory of interpretation, Chuck Klosterman’s subjectivity—his thoughts, his concerns, his sense of himself, his *prejudices*—come about through his experiences and conversations with the world around him and its people, past and present. I’ll call this “culture,” using a broad conception of that word. Culture is the human world we live in and how we think about that world.

When Klosterman comes across something he needs to understand—something he must *interpret*—the basis for that interpretation is his culture. He inherited culture, but he also

constructs and channels it, continuously, contributing to shared cultures. So, when Chuck encounters a “text” (in the broad sense of that word)—let’s say, the 1986 Boston Celtics—he brings to bear preconceptions and prejudices born from culture as channeled through Chuck. He interprets the 1986 Boston Celtics armed with these cultural beliefs and tendencies, regarding, for example, basketball history, racial politics, and moustache semiotics.

Klosterman can’t make the 1986 Boston Celtics mean anything he likes. The text, the Celtics, can resist certain interpretations. They can’t (for example) truthfully be read as an expression of gay liberation—because any self-respecting, self-critical interpreter remotely savvy to the text and its historical moment wouldn’t read them that way. In fact, the Celtics can challenge Chuck’s preconceptions, altering his cultural orientation. They can convince him that he should, in fact, prefer a sexual position that resembles Danny Ainge’s jumper to Jamaal Wilkes’s (*Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*, p. 105).

And so, reader and text, Klosterman and the Celtics, are in dialogue. This dialogue isn’t historically fixed and frozen, but fluid and continuous. Interpretations aren’t stable, because interpreters and the objects of interpretation change. Danny Ainge’s jumper may have expressed a certain sexual position when Klosterman wrote the essay “33.” After seeing Ainge in a suit for the last few years, Chuck’s interpretation of that jumper’s sexuality has shifted, if just ever so slightly.

Soccer Resists Klosterman

Klosterman provides readers a lovely example of a sport resisting an interpretation in his essay on soccer, “George Will vs. Nick Hornby,” from *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*. When Klosterman sees soccer, he tells the reader, he is reminded of “my guys”—“a collection of scrappy, rag-tag, mostly unremarkable fourth- and fifth-graders I governed when I was sixteen years old” (p. 89). His experience as youth coach of “my guys” was a confounding one for the young governor who, on his job application, listed Bob Knight and George Orwell as his role models (not Orwell the socialist, presumably, but Orwell as stand-in for Orwellianism).

The problem was this: whereas young Klosterman wanted to shape these ten- and eleven-year olds into, as he put it, “a war machine” (pp. 90–91), the mothers of Wyndmere, North Dakota quite predictably and understandably weren’t keen on seeing their children turned into Klosterman’s sporting Hitler Youth. Or, as he saw it, “They wanted to watch their kids play a game where their perfect little angels could not fuck up, and that would somehow make themselves feel better about being parents” (pp. 94–95).

This little-league coaching experience dictates Klosterman’s understanding of soccer. This experience establishes his set of interpretive prejudices and compels him to conclude:

Real Sports aren’t for everyone. And don’t accuse me of being the Ugly American for degrading soccer. That has nothing to do with it. It’s not xenophobic to hate soccer; it’s socially reprehensible to support it. To say you love soccer is to say you believe in enforced equality more than you believe in the value of competition and the capacity of the human spirit. (p. 95)

Ouch. He doesn’t stop there. “It should surprise no one,” he writes, “that Benito Mussolini loved being photographed with Italian soccer stars during the 1930s; they were undoubtedly kindred spirits.” Really limbered up, Klosterman makes his big exit: “Every time I pull up behind a Ford Aerostar with a ‘#1 Soccer Mom’ bumper sticker, I feel like I’m marching in the wake of the Khmer Rouge” (p. 95).

I can appreciate the tyranny of the minivan and won’t begrudge a man a taste of that sweet hyperbole—particularly if he’s trying to sell a few books. But an author needs to recognize that when a text says “no,” it means “no.” His argument is this:

- 1. Soccer is an anti-sport, an exercise in “enforced equality” in the best traditions of militaristic, totalitarian regimes.**
- 2. The youth sports leagues of Wyndmere, North Dakota illustrate this point because mothers there resist the totalitarian militarization of their ten-year olds.**

Klosterman's thinly sublimated attraction to *Il Duce* seems to cloud his logic. He extracts an interpretation of an entire sport from a minute sliver of that sport's form and practice—in this case, the culture of its youth leagues in rural North Dakota. This becomes even more problematic when we consider that “my guys” were a little-league *baseball* team.

Yes, Chuck Klosterman's interpretation of soccer is built on his experience as a youth baseball coach. He first tries to barge his way through this inconvenient truth, writing, “And even though I happened to be coaching the game of baseball that summer, this was the experience that galvanized my hatred for the game of soccer” (p. 90). Of course. Perhaps worried that some readers might actually be paying attention, he later revisits this potential pitfall, explaining, “Now, perhaps you're curious as to how my ill-fated experience as a baseball coach has anything to do with my maniacal distaste for soccer; on the surface, probably nothing. But in that larger, deeper, ‘what-does-it-all-mean?’ kind of way, the connection is clear. What those . . . mothers wanted me to do was turn baseball into soccer” (p. 94).

Hold on a minute: who's turning baseball into soccer here?

Given the dynamism of meaning—its inherent instability born of shifting subjectivities, intersubjectivities, and historical contexts—I hesitate to brand an interpretation “wrong.” But certainly an identifying characteristic of an inaccurate, erroneous, untruthful interpretation is a willful intellectual neglect on the part of the reader. There may not be definitive, objective truths, but surely there are definitive, objective falsities. Klosterman isn't engaging this text in dialogue at all; instead he whacks away at a soccer straw man constructed by boilerplate red-blooded American sports discourse—soccer is Marxist, soccer is socialist, soccer is fascist, soccer is for pussies. Klosterman unwittingly provides a lovely example of soccer as viewed through one half of the culture wars. But that certainly doesn't make it a plausible interpretation. The text is not having it.

Klosterman, Football, and the Thwarted Dialogue

Klosterman's reading of the other football, American gridiron football—most fully realized in the essay, “Football,” from

Eating the Dinosaur—is certainly more compelling than his interpretation of soccer (though that, in itself, isn't an endorsement). For starters, he actually knows something about football, which facilitates more of a dialogue with his object of interpretation. He also considers the game's shifting historical contours—an examination that is central to his interpretation.

What is football? What does it mean? Klosterman concludes that the game satisfies a fundamental need that he and others possess; its popularity emanates from its "interesting contradiction." He writes that football

feels like a conservative game. It appeals to a conservative mind-set and a reactionary media and it promotes conservative values. But in tangible practicality, football is the most progressive game we have—it constantly innovates, it immediately embraces every new technology, and almost all the important thinking about the game is liberal. (*Eating the Dinosaur*, pp. 127–28)

Football seems conservative, but it's really liberal: an intriguing argument. Klosterman believes that the onus is on him to define the game's "liberality" rather than its "conservatism"—the latter largely goes without saying. And certainly, the game is shot through and encrusted with all sorts of conservative virtues—ideological and iconographic. Football is thoroughly patriarchal, defined by hyper-masculine warriors at the center and hyper-sexualized eye candy on the fringes. Much of the sport's energy—particularly at the high school and college level—emanates from its traditions, its local alliances and rivalries, its cultural initiations handed down from one generation to the next.

But then, a reader can't really be certain what Klosterman means when he terms something "conservative." When he calls football "a conservative idiom" compared to baseball, ("A Brilliant Idea!"), I wonder if there's some other cultural practice named "baseball" of which I'm unaware. Surely he's not referring to the sport without a clock, the sport that begins with the planting and ends with the harvest, the sport that still sometimes stages games in the middle of a weekday. The one with wood bats. The one that Klosterman claimed, in a different essay, "sells itself as some kind of timeless, historical pastime that acts as the bridge to a better era of American life"

(*Eating the Dinosaur*, p. 153). To call football a “conservative idiom” in relation to the original American team sport demands the question: more conservative how?

Sorting out what “conservative” means should be the easy part. What about “liberal”? Klosterman seems to interchangeably use “liberal,” “progressive,” “freethinking,” and “innovative.” He claims that gridiron football’s liberality is expressed through the tactical innovations that appear on our television screens every few years or decades—offensive plays like the read option or defensive shifts between three- and four-man fronts. He uses the rise of the “read option”—a particular play in which the quarterback “reads” the weak side defensive end before determining his course of action—as a prime example of football’s inherent progressiveness. Inherent, that is, but unexpected, given the game’s conservative veneer. The read option is remarkable, Klosterman argues, because it is essentially a strategic flash-in-the-pan, illustrating how liberal, progressive, and innovative the game is. “It’s still new,” he writes, adding, “It didn’t really exist in the 1970s and ’80s, and when I first saw it employed in the late ’90s, it seemed like an idiotic innovation” (p. 141). Here’s how Klosterman describes the seemingly innovative read option:

the quarterback . . . ‘reads’ the weakside defensive end. If the defensive player attacks upfield, the quarterback keeps the ball and runs it himself. . . . If the defensive end ‘stays home’ . . . the QB hands the ball to the running back moving in the opposite direction. Basically, the read option is just the quarterback making a choice based on the circumstance. (*Eating the Dinosaur*, p. 149)

The play sounds deliciously simple—a simplicity that strains Klosterman’s claim for its being an innovation. Klosterman’s description sounds a lot like sportswriter Arthur Daley’s account of the “keep-or-give option play” in 1954. The quarterback, Daley explains, “takes the snapback... holds the ball . . . and looks the end squarely in the eye. . . . If the end lunges in at him, he flicks outside to a halfback. If the end veers wide to cover the halfback, the quarterback keeps the ball. No matter what he does, the end is dead.” This “fashionable” offense, run out of the Split-T formation, was being used in the mid-1950s to great effect by Bud Wilkinson at Oklahoma, Jim Tatum at

Maryland, and Frank Leahy at Notre Dame. It was an offense so pervasive that the *Times* ran another story in 1955 (“Football Hard Work for Fans, Too”) that explained to readers what they were watching on television and hearing on the radio every weekend. The key to the offense, the writer instructed, was the quarterback “keep option,” wherein “the quarterback retains the ball until the defensive end commits himself.”

Whoa, Nellie! The forward-thinking modernity of the read option suddenly seems an exercise in postmodern nostalgia—a fashionable repackaging of the option plays run out of the Split-T in the 1950s, the Veer-T in the 1960s, and the Wishbone in the 1970s and 1980s. New England Patriots head coach Bill Belichick (quoted by Tim Layden in “Old Is New Is Old”) said of Klosterman’s supposedly innovative option plays run out of the spread offense, “Call it whatever you want, but it’s single wing football.” The “single wing” Belichick refers to was indeed a major football innovation . . . in the early 1900s when hatched by the legendary Pop Warner. We might pretend that the contemporary read option is dramatically different from these earlier—and constantly present—tactical maneuvers. We might grant Klosterman his timeline, under which the read option didn’t exist twenty-five years ago and was a play of “mild desperation” in the late 1990s. But even then, an inquiring reader must ask herself: “If football is so innovative, why did it take twenty-five or even just ten years for an effective play to become popular?”

My primary mission here, however, is not to challenge Klosterman’s nebulous conceptions of the liberal and the conservative, but instead to examine what the read option means to him—for that is where we start to decode what he really sees when he watches football. For Klosterman, the read option is not particularly interesting as it is executed. Its importance, instead, is symbolic. The read option “is symbolic of something unrelated to the practice of football; it’s symbolic of the nature of football and how that idea is misinterpreted because of its iconography” (*Eating the Dinosaur*, p. 128). Football’s conservative iconography thus runs at odds with the game’s actual “nature.” In fact, it conceals it, causing people to “misinterpret” the game.

In this configuration, the game’s “nature” is revealed through its tactics and, by extension, its strategies. Play-calling

is football's essence. This is an interesting claim, for it pushes to the margins many elements of the sport that most people would consider also essential to its character—the brute physicality, the blinding speed, the acrobatic elegance, the tailgating and stadium fan cultures, the cheerleaders, the girlfriends, the parents, the jumbotrons, the patriotic fly-bys, the John Maddens, the uniforms, even just the actual execution of the plays on the field. In fact, according to Klosterman these things that seem so central to the game are deceptions, part of the “iconography” of “misinterpretation.”

This reductive assessment constrains the game of football to a series of tactical and strategic adjustments. To understand this, the reader only need skim the essay. Klosterman writes about the read option. He writes about the impact of forward passing. He walks the reader through some of the game's more recent innovative coaches. (This final move comes after a profoundly disingenuous assessment of how the game is packaged; Klosterman claims that the NFL “only uses football” to sell its sport, unlike its major-league competitors, as if it's not one of the most patriotically bombastic artifacts in American cultural history.) This is a telling presentation, almost wholly devoid of actual players (Brett Favre, Klosterman's totem of football conservatism, makes a cameo appearance). Klosterman makes a fetish of football play-calling, and thus, a fetish of the football coach.

The Fetish of the Intellectual Tyrant

Klosterman's essay on soccer is, of course, not about soccer at all. Or even baseball. It's really about the tension between a coach and players. It's a conflict fueled by Klosterman's desire to be the Whitey Herzog of Wyndmere. In the midst of his description of the “my guys” episode, he detours to explain his coaching philosophy and motivations:

To be honest, I was merely coaching these kids the way I had wanted to be coached when I was in fourth grade. I was a pretty fucking insane ten-year-old. I was the kind of kid who hated authority—but sports coaches were always an inexplicable exception. For whatever the reason, a coach could tell me anything and I'd just stand there and listen; he could degrade me or question my intelligence or sit me

on the bench to prove a point that had absolutely nothing to do with what I did, and I always assumed it was completely valid. I never cared that much about winning on an emotional level, but winning always made sense to me intellectually; it seemed like the logical thing to want. Mostly, I just wanted the process of winning to be complicated. I was fascinated by anything that made sports more cerebral and less physical. (*Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*, p. 91)

Klosterman here moves effortlessly from the figure of the coach-as-tyrant to the intellectual complexity of sport (seated, as it is, in the figure of the coach-as-cerebral-complicator). By suggestion, he fuses together these two coaching identities, the tyrant and the philosopher.

Authoritarianism and intellectualism: two virtues that most people would much more likely ascribe to Marxists, communists, and socialists than flag-waving, proto-American sports nationalists (or Americans in general). These are two virtues that Klosterman seems to ascribe to soccer: it is, after all, the sport of Mussolini and the Khmer Rouge. And yet, authoritarianism and intellectualism are those qualities that Klosterman seems to most value in American sports, as suggested in his essays on the two different forms of football. How could this be? How could soccer be “inherently un-American” while football—the sport whose “nature” is expressed through the tactical innovations hatched by the intellectual lordling over a managed bureaucracy—be somehow essentially American?

Considering the roots of football might help Klosterman work his way out of this wet paper sack. In “Football,” he makes much ado about the addition of the forward pass to the gridiron game. For those who used and faced it, the forward pass expanded the spatial dimensions of the playing field in a practical sense, most famously with Notre Dame’s upset of Army in 1913. Many believe that this period marks the beginning of the modern game of gridiron football because it is when football started to resemble the game we know today. But if we want to unpack the game’s fundamental modernity—the game as an expression of a modern, organized, rationalized worldview—we should step back a bit further.

Football as soccer and football on the gridiron both emanated from roughly the same game, practiced under differ-

ent sets of unstable rules—those that emphasized kicking and those that allowed handling. Walter Camp, the “Father of American football,” played the central role in codifying the gridiron version in distinction to its soccer and rugby cousins from the 1870s through the 1890s. He oversaw the game’s transformation into a modern sport—modern in the sense that it acquired a set of accepted rules, codified by organizations, which allowed it to be played competitively by strangers. Under the steerage of Camp, football became a symbol of not only manliness—important in a period when people widely fretted over the manliness of its urbanized men (particularly effete university men)—but also corporate organization.

Camp, who also managed a New Haven clock factory, was fascinated by Frederick Winslow Taylor’s “time-and-motion” theories of scientific management that revolutionized American industry. He recreated football as a bureaucracy; in fact, football’s closest analogue wasn’t war, but the expanding bureaucracies of the late 1800s. For Camp, football was a way to develop young men—a vehicle for forming characteristics that would assure success in a newly incorporated America. Football, he theorized, would teach men to become useful cogs in larger machines. In *The Book of Football*, he wrote:

The object must be to use each man to the full extent of his capacity without exhausting any. To do this scientifically involves placing men in such position in the field that each may perform the work for which he is best fitted, and yet not be forced to do any of the work toward which his qualifications and training do not point. (Oriard, *Reading Football*, pp. 44–45)

It’s not quite Marx’s “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.” But it does idealize submission to a managed hierarchy, like one a young man might face when he left Yale and entered the workforce as an aspiring manager, several rungs down the bureaucratic ladder. And it most definitely was not association football.

Association football, or soccer, was and is a much less rationalized sport. The dynamism of the game—its free-flowing play—put the impetus on players rather than coaches. This was what Camp cast his game against. Everything about gridiron football was managed; for example, the rugby scrum was

separated into alternating possessions, the field was divided into intervals (resembling a “gridiron”), the play was split into “fairs” (now known as “downs”), and individual plays were scripted. Camp replaced spontaneity with control and predictability. Atop it all sat the intellectual tyrant, the puppet master pulling the strings.

Now just because this is what Camp was trying to do—and succeeded in doing formally on the field—doesn’t mean that this is the meaning, essence, or “nature” of football. As cultural historian Michael Oriard argues in his excellent study of early football and the media, *Reading Football*, the media often worked against Camps’ ideals and goals. Camp thought the sport inculcated modern corporate values, subordination to the group, industrial time discipline, hierarchy, and specialization. The media, instead, celebrated individuals and sensationalized violence, stoking spectators’ desire for a more open-ended, dramatic form of play than Camp envisioned. This desire would contribute to the institution of the forward pass.

But the mutability of meaning—at any moment and across time—doesn’t change the fact that Camp wrote his values into the genetic code of the game. Watch the two footballs today. Football is hyper-rationalized, spatially and temporally; all of its players play particular, specialized roles and set out, over-and-over again, to execute pre-scripted actions dictated by a cabal of managers. Its organizational structure is vertical and compartmentalized. Soccer’s continuous, non-linear action and the players’ relatively interchangeable skill sets reflect a horizontal structure. Does this horizontality signify “enforced equality,” as Klosterman claims (*Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*, p. 95)? Hardly, for the power of the tyrant—that necessary power of enforcement—is diminished. This is a horizontality that combines the athletic expression of individuals working in combination for collective imperatives, loosely steered by the strategic vision of a marginalized leader. Sounds rather American. Or, at least, it sounds rather like Americans like to think of themselves.

What does Chuck Klosterman see when he watches football? He sees something he understands. It’s something ordered and Taylorized—a series of specimens in separate Petri dishes. It is *rationalized* and controlled, easily broken

down and assessed. Its power structures are clear. The game of football reveals itself to the reader.

The game of soccer doesn't. Its tactics and strategies are more mysterious to the American raised on the discrete episodes of options and quick slants. Soccer is fluid and messy—often more exasperating, but also more often transcendent, than its gridiron cousin. In it, Chuck Klosterman thinks he sees dictators and shackled souls, yearning but unable to breathe free. But what he would see, if he listened to the text, is the game that Walter Camp, the proto-modern bureaucrat, couldn't manage.

11

Media Ecologist without a Cause

KEVIN BROOKS

Chuck Klosterman is more than a music critic or a sports talking head; he is a media ecologist. From *Fargo Rock City* to *Eating the Dinosaur*, he offers extended philosophical investigations into the ways in which media—not just music, but television, radio, 'zines, the Internet, “new media,” clothing, food, hair, sports, and occasionally politics—work together to significantly shape (or at least massage) our sense of identity, our sense of being, and our relationship to the world, without us generally knowing or realizing what is going on.

A media ecologist is a philosopher with an eye turned towards big-picture analyses of the history and philosophy of technology and media (hence “ecologist”), rather than a philosopher working on small, focused philosophical problems, or a media critic reviewing and evaluating cultural products. Klosterman has been and often seems like a critic because he eats Cap'n Crunch and media content for breakfast, but at the end of the day, he is in fact frying the bigger fish for dinner.

Chuck is using his analysis of heavy metal, Britney Spears, U2, *Saved by the Bell*, and laugh tracks to try to understand the social, psychological, and ontological effects of media on individuals and culture. Klosterman's clearest ties to the media ecology tradition manifest themselves through his consistent riffing, borrowing, and remixing of the language and approach of media ecology's leading figure, Marshall McLuhan (1911–1980), an influence Klosterman has yet to acknowledge in print.

You Owe McLuhan Everything, Duuuude!

Klosterman is a kind of Marshall McLuhan for the twenty-first century for a few legitimate reasons and some random coincidences.

1. McLuhan proved that a dude from nowhere—Winnipeg Manitoba Canada, about three hundred miles north of Wyndmere, North Dakota—could be the world’s premier media wonk, paving the way for Klosterman.
2. McLuhan broke almost all the ground on academic analyses of popular culture and media, starting with sixty short essays (*The Mechanical Bride*, 1950) on everything from newspapers to Superman to sports and Coca-Cola, followed by twenty-six chapters on media as diverse as bicycles, clocks, and television in *Understanding Media* (1964). McLuhan’s analyses, however, weren’t very academic, so in a way, Klosterman has come full-circle in paying his unacknowledged debt to McLuhan, hammering out elaborate quasi-academic, organically philosophical analyses with occasional sources cited—something McLuhan rarely bothered with. McLuhan got people to take media seriously, and his disciples, like Klosterman, went nuts!
3. Woody Allen had the good sense to give McLuhan a cameo in *Annie Hall*, undoubtedly prompting the writers of *The OC* to give Klosterman a similar (though less embodied) cameo in one of their episodes.
4. Klosterman’s key concepts, his vocabulary, and his analytical style seem to owe McLuhan almost everything (as I will elaborate below), but he has yet to come clean and acknowledge any debt. I’m writing, Mr. Klosterman, to collect on this debt.

McLuhan, in breaking all this ground, didn’t have to worry about whether he was providing socially valuable knowledge beyond “understanding media”—that was enough. Klosterman carries on this important project; he brings to it a fresh and foul-mouthed perspective, and he is willing to pay close attention to all sorts of mass media products that would choke, like

a rock star's vomit, most critics and philosophers. But unfortunately, Klosterman doesn't even want to claim this little bit of importance for his work. He prefers to just wanna have fun: "All my criticism is autobiography. I have no interest in persuading (or dissuading) readers from liking anything" (ESPN). And of course, he is famously not feeling guilty about not doing anything to save the world, let alone the bell ("Not Guilty," *Fargo Rock City*, pp. 259–263).

But that attitude is just wrong, and Klosterman knows it—he even hints that he knows he could do more to make himself useful. So, in the tradition of the great American pragmatic philosopher Richard Rorty, who didn't believe it was possible to really convince people with arguments so much as humor, I'd like to "josh" Klosterman out of his complacency, and get him to use what Rorty calls "light-hearted aestheticism" for good, instead of indifference. I'd like him to become a media ecologist *with* a cause.

Chuck Klosterman: 85% Media Ecologist

But first the praise, because Klosterman is doing some good in the world, in spite of his lack of intention. Klosterman was helping the world understand media and the much-neglected phenomenon of heavy metal as early as "Dec, 12, 1985." This chapter from *Fargo Rock City* is a quintessential media ecologist's attempt to understand why a few kids who listened to heavy metal end up killing themselves, while most, like Klosterman, just put a blow-drier to their head. The underlying message of metal, Klosterman argues, is "get noticed." Killing yourself is one way to do that; big hair is a more reasonable option.

But Klosterman doesn't just hop from point A to point B in this serpentine chapter. He wanders through an analysis of Rush as Christian Rock band—perception is reality, Klosterman argues—and then he provides deft analysis of the media ecology of the 1980s and early 1990s. He points out that metal, unlike punk or late 1960s psychedelic, was available on mainstream, album-oriented, FM radio: media source #1 for getting some attention. The Eighties were also what Klosterman calls "The Golden Age of Periodicals" (*Fargo Rock City*, p. 51)—*Hit Parader*, *Circus*, *Kerrang!*, and *Metal Edge*

provided real coverage of the metal scene, not just teen idol posters. These magazines made it to rural North Dakota when and where media source #3—MTV—couldn't always penetrate. But Klosterman offers his sharpest media ecology insight when he says, "You did not have to see MTV to be affected by it: You only had to know it was out there. One way or another, the images would all slip into everyone's collective unconscious" (p. 52). What better way to be noticed than to penetrate someone's unconscious? What better way to do media ecology analysis than notice the convergence of various media forms, resulting in a spike of popularity for a particular musical genre (hair metal) at a particular time, and even in a particular place (rural America)?

Near the end of "Dec. 12, 1985," Klosterman offers up a twisted variation of McLuhan's global village: "With the proliferation of media, the need for attention became paramount. All of America was now a singular club scene. You could see a band perform through videos, and you could effectively "hang out" with the guys in the group by reading magazine articles" (*Fargo Rock City*, p. 56). The "singular club scene" will resonate with most readers interested in media as "the global village" writ small, but Klosterman, perhaps unknowingly, also grasps McLuhan's belief that communication at the speed of light is largely "haptic," is largely about "keeping in touch," or "hanging out" because, as Klosterman acknowledged earlier in the chapter, the "interviews were often horrible and the information often fabricated" (p. 51).

This kind of analysis permeates *Fargo Rock City*; Klosterman's media ecology approach makes *Fargo Rock City* required reading, not only for understanding heavy metal but for understanding media. When I recommend *Fargo Rock City* to people, they frequently say, "I don't like heavy metal." I don't know anyone who hates heavy metal more than I do, but Klosterman's analysis makes sense of why this senseless genre was so popular, why it flourished in the Eighties but has chugged along consistently since then, an example of what McLuhan would call the "figure-ground" effect. Heavy metal accomplished its goal of gaining great attention and notice, (*the figure*), then it slipped back into *the ground* or environment of culture and media, still prevalent but not so noticeable. The Guitar Hero/Rock Band driven metal revival makes perfect

media ecology sense as it connects some teens and parents through a new medium, retrieving the older media form, re-packaged as a game, but also widely available in new formats (CDs and MP3s) for easy consumption and distribution.

Klosterman has drawn (consciously or unconsciously, I don't know—does it matter?) on other McLuhan concepts throughout his career, clarifying that he is not a critic but a media ecologist interested in tackling big-picture questions through investigations of single artists, athletes, performers, and other curious people. In “Bending Spoons With Britney,” we get to see him working at the question, “What is her cultural significance?” and more generally at the question of how a particular type of celebrity functions for various audiences. Klosterman doesn't explain McLuhan's concepts of “hot and cool media,” but his answer to these questions is that Britney is a medium in and of herself, and a cool medium at that, despite the many hot pictures of her that appeared alongside Klosterman's original article. “Hot” to McLuhan means “high definition” or “well-defined;” cool means “low definition” or “minimally defined.” So when Klosterman notes her lack of definition, he is mixing in some McLuhan:

She is truly all things to all people: a twelve-year old girl thinks she is a hero, that girl's older brother thinks she is a stripper, that older brother's girlfriend thinks she is an example of why women hate themselves, that girlfriend's father secretly wishes his twelve-year daughter would invite Britney over for a slumber party. As long as Spears never overtly says “This is who I am,” everyone gets to inject their own meaning. Subconsciously, we all get to rebrand Britney Spears. (*Chuck Klosterman IV*, p. 18)

Klosterman acknowledges that understanding Britney Spears is only important if you care about understanding popular culture, but of course we should want to understand popular culture. It is a multi-billion dollar a year industry; it occupies our time, our attention, our energy, our money. We need to understand how media work, especially as we move through an era in which the tools of production are increasingly available to individual citizens, not just the media giants. So those of us who care about media owe Klosterman a debt of gratitude for pushing media ecology into realms most academics and

philosophers don't want to tread—heavy metal, Britney Spears, and *Saved by the Bell*, to name a few—and for making the analysis so much more entertaining and insightful than the product itself. For this work, I have credited Klosterman with being eighty-five percent of a media ecologist; with just a little philosophical refresher and a tiny commitment to something other than himself and popular culture, he can (and should) become fully formed.

The Other 15%

As Klosterman continues to “probe,” as McLuhan liked to say, more diverse topics and media, he fortifies his core media ecologist values. *Eating the Dinosaur* includes his best media ecology essays yet (about the NFL channel and laugh tracks), and his most sustained reflection on technology in general, worked out through his response to the Unabomber's manifesto, *Industrial Society and Its Future*. Klosterman's response, however, re-iterates his obsession with authenticity and his apparent belief that there might be some self and some world outside or beyond technology and media. No one-hundred-percent-card-carrying media ecologist believes this.

Klosterman uses this essay to admit that he hates technology but it is of great importance to his life (so far so good), that the Unabomber's critique of the dehumanizing effects of media is not so crazy (agreed), and that we have never been less human than we are now (whoa—hold on a minute!), but we like it (okay).

We are living in a manner that is unnatural. We are latently enslaved by our own ingenuity, and we have unknowingly constructed a simulated world. The benefits of technology are easy to point out (medicine, transportation, the ability to send and receive text messages during Michael Jackson's televised funeral), but they do not compensate for the overall loss of humanity that is its inevitable consequence. As a species, we have never been less human than we are right now. (*Eating the Dinosaur*, p. 228)

I might appear to be splitting hairs as I pick apart this paragraph, because there is no doubt that as a species we are more removed from the natural world than we used to be. We are

undoubtedly more dependent upon technology. I can even live with “enslaved” by technology—that was certainly McLuhan’s language and concern. And we do indeed live in a more elaborately simulated world.

But all of these qualities are just part of being human.

Maybe we have gone too far, as Klosterman suggests, but maybe we haven’t gone far enough, as a futurist like Ray Kurzweil argues in *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology*. Kurzweil thinks technology will enable him (and perhaps a few believers) to live forever. Klosterman has staked out his simplistic position that we are somehow less human because of our technology, instead of recognizing that we have always been, and will continue to be, tool-using animals.

Klosterman is even further out of line, however, when he writes about the “the overall loss of humanity that is [technology’s] inevitable consequence” (p. 228). McLuhan was very clear in *The Medium Is the Massage* and other works that “There is absolutely no inevitability as long as there is a willingness to contemplate what is happening” (p. 25). The whole point of being a media ecologist is to understand the media, which in turn will enable our species to make better choices about which media and technologies to embrace or shun, or even better yet, to understand the positive potential as well as the negative implications of any media. Klosterman, in this crucial paragraph, seems to believe that we are enslaved by our technology and that we might as well stop worrying and learn to love the text message. He has also suggested that we can dream of a future war against the machines—we can optimistically imagine that we won’t lose (“Robots,” *Chuck Klosterman IV* p. 292).

This paragraph by Klosterman, and this essay on the Unabomber, is just one more example of Klosterman’s obsession with authenticity. He is usually worried about whether celebrities and their products are authentic or not, but in this essay, he is actually wondering if any of us can ever really be authentic, ever really be human, in our media saturated world. I would really like Klosterman to give up this obsession, because media ecologists have more or less dealt with and dismissed the problem. We are tool-using, symbol-(including media)-using animals, and there is no world outside our tools and symbols that we can get to or inhabit in order to become

fully human (again?). The annoying thing about Klosterman is that he actually understands this, but he won't give up on the dream, and that is what makes him a media ecologist without a cause.

While he might desire this natural, unmediated world, he knows that he's pretty much trapped in the heavily mediated existence he currently inhabits: "I aspire to think of myself as an analog person, but I am not. I have been converted to digital without the remastering, and the fidelity is appealing" (*Eating the Dinosaur*, p. 229). This acceptance of his digital existence should have enabled him to stop obsessing about authenticity and ontology, and allowed him to focus more on politics and ethics, as any self-respecting philosopher and media ecologist who read and absorbed Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) was able to do. But Klosterman hasn't been able to do that, even though he frequently acknowledges that he probably should. Until Klosterman can make these changes—give up ontology and metaphysics, take on politics and ethics—he will remain only eighty-five percent of a media ecologist.

Everyone Is Guilty of All the Good They Haven't Done—Really

Klosterman knows that the mass culture crappola he writes about is worse than trivial in relation to real human problems. He writes, "Compared to the depletion of the ozone layer or the war in Liberia, I concede that the existence of Britney Spears is light-years beyond trivial. But if you are remotely interested in the cylinders that drive pop culture, it's hard to underestimate her significance" (*Chuck Klosterman IV*, p. 14). Klosterman uses the same syntactical and logical structure in "Ha ha," he said. "Ha ha" when he writes about laugh tracks in television. "These are not real problems (like climate change or African genocide), because those issues are complex and multifaceted; . . . these [non problems] are things that make me feel completely alone in the world because I cannot fathom how the overwhelming majority of people ignores them entirely" (*Eating the Dinosaur*, p. 162). Klosterman is clever enough, and not incorrect, to say that Britney Spears and laugh tracks mat-

ter—he does an exceedingly good job of explaining their importance. But why does he so consistently compare the importance of his insignificant (yet oh-so-significant) topics to the really massive, really important, issues of the last fifteen years?

The reason, I wildly speculate, has a lot to do with being from a German Catholic family in North Dakota. Media is not the only powerful institution in our lives; family, religion, community, and place are pretty significant too. To be from North Dakota, regardless of one's ethnic heritage, instills a need to be useful; add to that a little German stoicism, a touch of Catholic guilt, and I suspect that Klosterman knows that he could turn his substantial interpretive powers to more weighty issues. He has admitted as much: "if I spent as much time analyzing al Qaeda as I've spent deconstructing Toby Keith's video for 'Whiskey Girl,' we probably would have won the war on terrorism last April" (*Chuck Klosterman IV*, p. 263). Nothing that we know about him would suggest that he is in fact remotely interested in climate change, Liberia, or Rwanda, except for the fact that he keeps bringing these topics up before he launches into the massively trivial stuff he really cares about.

So, I am going to call his bluff and ask him to turn his powers—philosophical and linguistic—towards one of these issues. I am not going to ask him to become Bono, and actually do something that might reduce global poverty. I'd be satisfied if he would think about and write about the media ecology that keeps so many people watching *Saved by the Bell* re-runs or the NFL channel, at the expense of paying attention to the mounting tensions in Sudan that might result in a return to war after a mere five-year respite from one of the longest and bloodiest civil wars in Africa. Or I'd love to see him tackle the inverse problem: why is it that our haptic technologies, the ones that made the head banging crowd feel they were hanging out with Def Leppard when they read *Kerrang!*, cannot make us feel similarly close to the displaced people of Darfur?

McLuhan made a bit of an attempt to apply his interpretive powers to global problems when he wrote *War and Peace in the Global Village* during the height of the Vietnam War, but he barely referenced the war and probably spent too much time talking about the historical significance of the stirrup—brilliant stuff, but a little confusing, and a little too far from the issue at hand. Klosterman, you owe McLuhan everything (even

if you didn't realize it), so at least try to finish this battle for your figurative father, okay?

Susan Moeller's *Compassion Fatigue* is probably a better media ecology model than *War and Peace in the Global Village*, as she documents the way that many global crises of 1991 resulted in news agencies unable to "sell" another crisis to their audience. Somalia's, Sudan's and Ethiopia's internal battles, mixed with famine and disease, were indistinguishable to the average American news consumer, and the news agencies of the time were content not to sift through the differences. There is nothing funny about *Compassion Fatigue* and its subject matter, but I think turning his attention to real global problems will give Klosterman a nice challenge. I want him to be smart, funny, and philosophical, but I want to see him tackle an issue or two of substance. He knows what the issues are—he keeps listing them at the start of his essays—so why won't he take them on?

Klosterman might be more comfortable revisiting Bono after all these years, or turning his probing mind to the substantial global work done by Angelina Jolie, but in doing so, I really, really hope he doesn't ask "Is she for real?" and "Is this kind of work authentic?"

If Klosterman decides to take on the more pressing issues he hints at, I will certainly not be wondering: "Is he testing his audience the way Garth Brooks tested his audience with Chris Gaines?" "Is Klosterman just trying to be Nicholas Kristoff, or does he see himself as the George Clooney-type?"

I'll be saying loud and clear, "Way to go, Chuck! You make the Peace Garden State proud!" And I'll be pounding my gavel and saying "No longer guilty!"

Jack
and Jane
pseudo-
rationalism?

HYPERthetical Response #4

Jack and Jane pseudorationalism

GEORGE A. REISCH

In *Chuck Klosterman IV*, Chuck offers a hypothetical question to his readers. Jane breaks up with her boyfriend, Jack, because he ended up watching a woman masturbate in his apartment. Jack never touched her or kissed her, but during a late night drunken and flirtatious conversation, he indulged this woman's "bizarre sexual quark" (p. 272). Chuck wants to know whose side you would take, Jack's or Jane's.

Chuck's hypothetical about Jack and Jane (CKIV, 271) points to a classic philosophical trap. Otto Neurath, one of the greatest philosophers that you've never heard of (because, in fact, most philosophers have barely heard of him) called it "pseudorationalism."

The "rationalism" part is just what Chuck's hypothetical gets into—the reasons and rational framework we appeal to when we try to specify exactly why something is wrong, such as cheating on your spouse or partner. The rationalist presumes that this framework is real and objective. If they just think about it right, everyone can see it and understand it.

The "pseudo" part is the trap. Because rationalism fails. Often. Big time. It clearly succeeds in logic, in mathematics, and other symbolic languages that we humans have created because those languages *are* the rational definitions and rules we've put into them. But when the goal is to understand things like nature, people, and ethics, we're not in this logical Kansas anymore. The hope that matters can be captured and analyzed in some rational system is bound to fail because so many things

we care about exist outside of our imaginations, definitions, and rules.

Nancy Cartwright, the philosopher (not the voice of Bart Simpson) who happens to be a big fan of Otto (the philosopher, not Bart's bus driver) wrote a book called *How the Laws of Physics Lie*. They lie because laws of physics are mathematical relationships, like $F = ma$, that describe how physical objects behave only when they are connected to busloads of qualifications and caveats that the laws themselves *don't* mention. Relationships and events in nature—involving temperature, atmospheric conditions, motions, chemical compositions, radiation levels, gravity, friction, and so on—are in fact always more complicated than textbook stories about perfect objects moving on “frictionless” planes in the absence of all interfering forces or conditions. The world in which the laws of physics *don't* lie is the world of our imaginations, not the world of nature itself.

That's okay because we know the laws lie and we know, or can usually figure out, how they lie. Science can deal with it. But *human* relationships are more complicated than physics or chemistry. With people involved, rationalism almost automatically becomes pseudorationalism because human phenomena and relationships are so varied and complex. That's why there's no agreement about whether what Jack did was so bad. That's why, even among those who agree that Jane was right to dump him, “everyone uses a slightly different, weirdly personal argument to explain what makes it so bad” (*Chuck Klosterman IV*, p. 272).

Ethically, we're all pseudorationalists. We read the story against the backdrop of our own personal values and experiences and try to fit the story, as we've interpreted it, into neat and clean definitions of ethical behavior. We each interpret the story at least a little bit differently, and then suppose, falsely, that each of us accepts the same rational definitions of ethical behavior. Finding that ten or twenty people agree precisely about Jack and Jane is like finding ten or twenty that agree about whether *The Exorcist* is more scary than *Alien*, or whether *Chinese Democracy* is better than *Abbey Road*. We know that's impossible, but we still try to convince each other that our take on Jack and Jane is the *right* one.

The crucial thing is whether Jack and Jane themselves are pseudorationalist. If they are, that's bad—not bad philosophy

(which they probably don't care about) but bad for them and their relationship. If Jane honestly believes that she has to dump Jack only because he violated some cosmic rule that says *when in a committed relationship thou shalt not watch thy neighbor masturbate* then she's a pseudorationalist. It's not that she's dumping him for a bad reason, it's that she's dumping him for a reason that really isn't a reason. Outside Jane's imagination, there is no such objective, rational law. As Chuck points out, "watching someone masturbate" is too vague to support a law or a policy—what about pornography? Madonna on the 1984 MTV music video awards? Baboons at the zoo? Is Jack forbidden from watching porn, Madonna, or going to the zoo?

Well those are *different*, the pseudorationalist will reply, and concoct qualifications and exceptions in a vain attempt to prop up their rational ethical architecture. "Baboon's aren't people," they'll say. Yes, but they are distantly related to us and everyone has a cousin or two who seems inhuman, at least in some respects. So it would be okay to watch them masturbate? "Madonna didn't actually masturbate," they'll say. But what if Jane didn't actually masturbate in front of Jack but just went through all the motions and pretended to? This is the thing about pseudorationalism. Whenever you try to get to the bottom of something, you always spend more time defending your pseudorationalism instead of figuring out what really matters.

There may be good reasons for Jane to dump Jack. They're just not "rational" or objective. She doesn't need to rely on some cosmic moral rule to dump him if the incident shakes her faith in his commitment, confirms doubts she's been having about her happiness in the relationship, or if she believes he did it to hurt her, or *whatever it may be*. We don't actually know the reasons why Jane did what she did, but if she's not pseudorationalistic about it, I think she did what she had to do. It was as right as things get in a non-pseudorationalist world.

But if she's a pseudorationalist, it may not have been right. Suppose she dumped Jack in 2005 not because of her honest, personal reasons but instead because of some know-it-all friend convinced her to accept the commandment: *When in a committed relationship thou shalt not watch thy neighbor mas-*

turbate. Then, in 2006, depressed about the breakup, she enrolled in a grad program at NYU to try to make a change in her life. In 2007 she read Nancy Cartwright and Otto Neurath and in 2008 decided that she no longer buys into pseudorationalistic ways of thinking. Then she realizes . . .