

BOOK III

Eighty-Five Percent of a True Philosophy

6

Death Takes a Road Trip

CHAD FLANDERS

Somewhere, at some point, somehow, somebody decided that death equals credibility.

—CHUCK KLOSTERMAN (*Killing Yourself to Live*, p. 13)

The old philosophical saw goes: if a tree falls in the woods, and no one's around to hear it, does it make a noise? That's the basic version. There are variations, of course—including the recurrent lament of the Introduction to Philosophy student: If a tree falls in the woods, and no one is around to hear it, *does anyone care?*

Here's the variation that Chuck Klosterman hits us with in his book *Killing Yourself to Live*: if a rock star dies, and no one really cared about his music before, is dying something that can totally transform his career, making a nothing into a something? If a rock star dies in a plane crash, is his music even more worth listening to?

Case in point #1: Jeff Buckley. Before his death, his album and his career were okay, decent, respectable, even somewhat notable. But his catalog was hardly extensive. At most, he was someone to watch. This was all before he drowned in the Mississippi River, which apparently changed everything.

After his death, Jeff Buckley becomes classic, deep, and “real,” a messiah (p. 123). People—you know them, whether they admit it to you or not—listen to his cover of “Hallelujah” over and over and over again after they've broken up with their girlfriend or after some similarly major life event. The song

now “speaks to them.” The same song, written by Leonard Cohen, but now sung not by a living but by a *dead* Jeff Buckley is haunting instead of languid and meandering, full of a new and significant meaning, *even though the lyrics are the same as when Cohen sung them*. Every pause, every breath, is like Buckley’s last. He hangs on. Or at least he did hang on, until he didn’t. We can hang on. Maybe.

And in a way, strange as it sounds, it’s *actually* true that the song becomes different, even *sounds* different, after Buckley’s death. Of course, this has a lot to do with *us* changing, but the music seems to have changed, too.

But even weirder, Buckley’s death didn’t just change his music, make it more freighted with meaning, it changed *Buckley’s whole life*. Buckley’s whole life becomes *different* now that he died young. His life becomes tragic and profound, rather than routine and mundane. It becomes something it wasn’t when Buckley was alive. For Buckley, dying was a pretty brilliant career move: he only started living when he died. There are other examples, and *Killing Yourself to Live* is full of them: Elvis, Buddy Holly, Duane Allman and ultimately, Kurt Cobain.

This gives us two questions.

1. **How is it possible that dying could be really good for someone? I mean, isn’t death pretty bad?**

and

2. **Should we care that death can be good for someone? Or is it really a question not worth asking? Does it matter for us, who go on living?**

And this leads inexorably to a question about the two questions, viz., why should we read a book and then set about to answer a question the author is unsure is really worth asking?

Can Our Lives Go Better (or Worse) after We’ve Died?

Killing Yourself to Live is pretty much about these two questions. Klosterman takes a road trip to figure out why rock

stars, or a lot of them, seem to do so much better after death. But he's also on a road trip to see whether this is a question worth thinking about. He's always oscillating wildly between whether he's asking himself a really deep question, and whether it's really pointless to keep on asking it. Is it, Klosterman asks himself at several points, a question that serious people are interested in? Or is it a question only for flip-pant folks?

We might think of the question Klosterman is asking as a sort of secularized version of the question of what happens when we die. It's secularized because Klosterman isn't asking the religious question of what happens when we die—whether we'll be joining a chorus of angels singing the original chorus to Hallelujah by Handel, or whether we'll be with Judas Priest and Van Halen in hell.

No, Klosterman's asking whether *down here, on Earth*, it can be a good thing for people, particularly rock stars, to die. And not just a good thing for the people who keep on living, but *good for the people who actually die*. The question, we ought to admit right up front, is pretty strange. How could it be a good thing for a rock star's career, for his music, for his *life*, to *die*? Can good things keep on happening to us, when there's no "us" around anymore?

What, in short, could it possibly mean to say that people are benefited or hurt by something that happens after their death? If we stipulate that this life is the only life we have, and that when we die we're *dead*, then it would seem to follow that *nothing* can be good or bad for us after we die. All that's happened to us has happened already: there's nothing *new* that can be added to our stock of experiences, for good or for ill.

As Klosterman knows, however, this isn't true with rock musicians—sometimes, their story only really begins when they die. Their death somehow gives their life meaning that it might not have had already. This is, to say the least, weird. How can you get something from *dying* that you couldn't get by *living*? And how can this make your life actually go *better*? It worked for Jeff Buckley, anyway.

Aristotle, referred to by many in the middle ages as simply "The Philosopher," wrestled with a version of Klosterman's question in his classic, *Nicomachean Ethics*. He suggests the following example. Suppose a businessperson spends his entire

life building up his empire—he’s made the connections, built up the relationships, staffed his company with the best people. He runs it well, and then he dies. But then his sons take over his business, and through a combination of bad luck and careless decision-making, they squander his fortune and his empire. Aristotle’s question was, can we say that the failure of his business was a bad thing for the father, even though he was dead? Aristotle wanted to allow at least some force to the thought that people really can fare better or fare worse, even after they have lived out their lives. “It would be odd,” Aristotle says, “if the fortunes of the descendants did not for some time have some effect on the happiness of their ancestors” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 16). Especially, we might add, if the ancestors put a lot of weight on the fortunes of their descendants.

This phenomenon seems to make sense. We might put Aristotle’s point this way. At various times, we are all the authors and the subjects of several stories. Some of them indeed come to an end when we die and when we cease to be able to influence our story in any active way. But some of those stories have a life that outlives the death of their authors. We can still be the subject of our stories, even though—because we’re dead—we cease to be in any meaningful way the ongoing authors of those stories. If this is so, then even when those *lives* end, our “stories” are in some sense still ongoing. So what happens after we die may have some bearing, big or small, on how well our life story goes. The businessman whose business collapses after he dies has been, even in a small way, hurt by that loss. His happiness has waned. And that’s because one of the stories of his life—starting a successful business empire—didn’t end when his life did. It went on, for better or for worse.

This is how rock stars might go on to be helped or hurt after they’ve died. Buckley’s music gets discovered, or noticed, and all-of-the-sudden (or so it seems) his life is a success, his songs are meaningful, deep, and worthwhile. All of the suffering has paid off. His life, we might say, was not lived in vain (as he might have lived, had he not drowned, and remained relatively obscure). Buckley becomes immortal, not by not dying (which is the way Woody Allen wants to be immortal), but by having the most important part of him live on: his music. “Lesson: To live in the hearts of those we leave behind is not to die” (*Killing Yourself to Live*, p. 108).

Now, we have to be careful here because we might not want to say that *all* of what happens to a person after their death will change the meaning of the person's life. In fact, Aristotle seemed reluctant to give much weight to things like fame and celebrity status. Those things, Aristotle says, we can't really control even when we're alive, and if we can't control them then, it's an open question whether they should really be credited to us. Aristotle was big on virtue, and we *could* control whether we were virtuous enough. No one could give us virtue (Aristotle sometimes called this "greatness of soul"), and no one can take it away from us, even after we die. On the other hand, if we haven't lived virtuous lives, then no amount of success can make up for that. Think of Michael Jackson, whose death has resulted in even greater fame, but still wasn't able to remove the sense that the guy was, although a great artist, pretty messed up. So there is still something about *our lives* that can't go better for us after we're dead. If we've lived terrible, vicious lives, no number of posthumous fans can make *that* go away. We're stuck to a large extent with the lives we've actually lived.

However, Aristotle did contemplate the possibility that our lives might go better or worse after we die, even if only in a limited way. Rock stars can live on in the hearts of their fans. And this is the important point: their lives can go better or worse, not in just some objective sense, but in a way which is really better *for them*, even when they've died. Jeff Buckley's life has actually gone better since his death, strange as it may sound. Death might not be the end of a musician's career, but only the beginning.

There Are No Stupid Questions, Except the Stupid Ones

So it seems possible that our lives could actually, in some meaningful way, *go better* even after we die, and not in some spooky sense. Rather, our lives can go better insofar as our projects live on even after we die, in the hearts and minds of those who come after us.

But there's the rub. Whether our lives go better or not will depend on whether there are people who carry on after us, and in a way that actually *fits* with the way we lived our lives—or

wanted to live them. In other words, our success in our life-after-we're-dead depends on our fans, those who remember us after we're dead. And this can be a problem.

Killing Yourself to Live is book-ended by fans' reactions to two events. One, which nearly consumes the book and hovers over all of it, is the death of the fans at the Great White concert in West Warwick, Rhode Island. What's interesting and important about the people who died at that concert was that they were not famous—indeed, they were made fun of by those who weren't at the concert, practically moments after they passed away. But the people who went to the concert weren't there to be seen or to *say* that they had gone or that it was amazing, or that it sucked. Nor did they go in some self-consciously ironic mode, which treats it as a laughable event but fun in its disingenuousness, as when some folks go to karaoke bars and treat the evening as some sort of laughable event, even alongside those who are there in an earnest way to sing and hear their peers sing. (For more on that see Chapter 2 in this volume, "The Unironical in the Age of Irony"). Rather, these folks at the Great White show were there in earnest because they were just *fans*. They had that particular sort of integrity that a person has when he's *really into* a band, and doesn't care what anyone else thinks.

More importantly—at least for the lesson Klosterman is eventually going to draw—are the people who mourn for those who died in the Great White tragedy. They have had family members die, but they seem happy, as happy as any people Klosterman has ever met (*Killing Yourself to Live*, p. 35). Klosterman becomes fast friends with them; he does cocaine in one of their pick-up trucks. Their memorials to those who died that night, simple crosses, as well as the attitudes of those who mourn the dead must seem to Klosterman as exemplary ways to deal with death. There is no pretentiousness to them, as one of the mourners says of those who would go to concerts by Great White or Warrant. There is a sense that these mourners will go on with their own lives, as indeed even the members of Great White have decided to go on with theirs (p. 136). They seem to be genuine both in their remorse and in their happiness, and above all, in their dedication to those who have passed away.

By contrast, Klosterman is scathing about the reaction of "fans" to Kurt Cobain's death. The people who mourn Cobain

did not know him—except perhaps in some fantasy (p. 233). They have theories about why he died, but they don't really know why Cobain died, and it doesn't really matter to them. That's because ultimately, Cobain's death isn't about Cobain. It's about *them*, about what Cobain means to *them*.

In general, Cobain's death is "poorly remembered" (p. 244). In fact, it's so poorly remembered that people tend to *falsify* the past, and not remember it. The way many of Cobain's fans "remember" Cobain is to invent a past about what they think might have happened—what Cobain might (but probably didn't) mean to them. We tend to forget, Klosterman reminds us, that at the time of Cobain's death, Pearl Jam was the more popular band. There is a lot of "reverse engineering" going on, both culturally—what did Nirvana mean for *us*?—and individually—what did Cobain mean for *me* (p. 123)? We recreate the past—Cobain's and our own—in our own image.

With the death of the fans at the Great White concert, the memorial to them was really about *them*, the dead. But the death of Cobain isn't really about Cobain—it's more about the people who think that his death gave them something they were missing in their own lives. By having Cobain's death *mean something* to them, somehow, retrospectively, those who mourn Cobain gain depth: they gain an identity. By attaching yourself to Cobain, it "was now possible to achieve credibility simply by mourning retrospectively," Klosterman says (p. 226). You could become *cool* just by identifying yourself as a fan of Kurt Cobain, even if this only became true after Cobain died.

And here Klosterman flashes back to a conversation he had earlier in the book, at the Chelsea Hotel, where he first hears the lesson it takes him the whole book to really *learn*. There, he is trying to find the room where Sid Vicious's girlfriend had died. He is not the first one to look for this room. Some coming to visit even want to *stay* in the room where she died. The manager of the Chelsea Hotel, interjects, and says that those looking for the place where Sid Vicious's girlfriend died are people who have nothing to do: "If you want to understand what someone fascinated by Sid Vicious is looking for, go find *those* people. You will see that they are not serious-minded people. You will see that they are not trying to understand anything about death. They are looking for nothing" (p. 9).

What Klosterman learns at the beginning of the book, but only really understands at the end, is that the people who are fans of rock stars after their deaths are not serious people, that they are looking for nothing. They are trying to find something that just isn't there. These misguided fans are trying to find meaning in someone else's death, and somehow have that meaning make *their lives* better. Klosterman, too, has been looking for nothing the entire road trip, by trying to find the meaning of the death of rock stars. There is no meaning to it. The dead, he says at the end, are simply dead, and everything else we can say about them is just a "human construction" (p. 230). The scales fall from Klosterman's eyes.

When we look at those who follow the famous rock dead, what they're doing has "nothing to do with the individual who died and everything to do with the people who are left behind" (p. 230). They are not serious people. Neither was Klosterman, prior to his revelation. He spends the entire book going to the places where rock stars had died. What was he looking for? He was looking for nothing, after all. He was ignoring the truth that dead people are simply dead, and the rest is human construction.

This does not mean, necessarily, that the question Aristotle was concerned with—can we be benefited after we die?—has no answer. But it does suggest we are better off not asking the question. We have to ask, instead, why we are worried about whether people can benefit after they die. Sometimes, we really are worried about *them*: this is the lesson we learn from the Great White fans. Those who mourn *them* are authentic in their mourning, they aren't trying to create anything that wasn't there. Rather, they were trying to remember what *really was* there.

But the lesson we learn from the fans of Kurt Cobain is that we should be pretty suspicious of why we mourn people we don't know, or had nothing to do with our lives. We should worry that we are looking for something that was never there in the first place: we are fooling ourselves, and in a way, doing a disservice to those we are supposedly mourning.

And this brings us back to Jeff Buckley. It may seem that in his death, he is having a better life. But what gives him this better life? Fans. Those who are inventing a mythical present for him, creating something that wasn't necessarily there, imbuing

his songs with meaning they don't necessarily have. The fans are taking as much from Buckley as they are giving him.

So Klosterman leaves us with a profoundly ambivalent message about rock stars like Buckley and Cobain. By worshipping them, and mourning them, we are extending their lives—we're making their lives longer, and in some sense, better, than they would otherwise have been. But at the same time, such "life" is manufactured, invented, *not really authentic*.

The fans of those who died at the Great White concert give us a better lesson. Remember what was actually there. Don't make things more than they were. Don't give things more meaning than what they have. There was—and is—enough meaning in what was actually there. Buckley wrote some good songs. So did Cobain. But Buckley was no messiah, and Cobain didn't die for our sins. Nirvana was just a rock band, you know?

The Death of This Chapter and the Meaning of Its Existence

Killing Yourself to Live is in the end a subversive book. It's a book by a rock critic—and in many ways the archetypal rock fan—going on a road trip to see the landmarks of the famous rock dead. But the book ultimately concludes that it's not worthwhile to go on road trips to see the famous rock dead: only unserious people do that, the ones who find meaning in the lives of others and not their own lives. Klosterman is critiquing a certain way of *being a fan*.

This is a subversive thing to say about rock fans, the people Klosterman needs to survive as a rock critic. But it's a message made palatable by the fact that Klosterman needs to hear that message too. *He* needs to be reminded of the limits of worshipping the mighty dead, of imagining that they are more than they really are, and most of all, imagining that *they* can make us something we're not. He, after all, is the one going on the road trip.

In the end, Klosterman needs to kill himself as an unserious rock fan, to live as a more serious person. And by doing it to himself, Klosterman hopes that he can maybe save us having to make the trip ourselves.

7

Celebrity as the Sickness unto Death

JOHN THOMAS BRITTINGHAM

Am I for *real*, or am I full of shit? And what does it mean to be *real* anyway?

Am I only *real* when I cast aside my fancy gadgets, my social responsibilities, the vices I've come to cherish, and the so-called virtues I pretend to cultivate?

Am I a phony if I consider my electronic doohickeys, Don Draper-esque stunning good looks and soul-crushing self-confidence, my important (or at the very least self-important) and well-known friends, and my work successes as the most important parts of who I am? Is my self something that is constructed from all of the above-mentioned elements—a kind of fake ID for life—or is there something more to my self? Oftentimes, I don't ask myself these questions because I'm too busy concerning myself with the lives of others, be they musicians, actors, or tabloid queens. But even celebrities can't escape questions of a real or fake self—even if I always assume that they are as authentic as a Hostess Cupcake.

So, what are celebrities *really* like? As a journalist for several prominent music and culture magazines, Chuck Klosterman has had the opportunity to interview quite a number of celebrities. Inevitably, this question of what they're *really* like comes up whenever Chuck, himself, is being interviewed. Reflecting back upon these interviews, Klosterman notes how the identity of the artist *as* a celebrity is often as much a constructed artifice as their albums, films, and books. Some of these celebrities are aware of themselves as constructing an identity (Jeff Tweedy), while others appear to be completely

oblivious (Britney Spears). Some are obsessed with their celebrity identity (Billy Joel), while others seem like they couldn't care less (Robert Plant).

Still, before we can look at the relation between the celebrity image and the person who bears that image, we have to ask ourselves a deceptively simple question that we have yet to ask: what is a self? One way of thinking about what makes something "a self" is by understanding the self as a synthesis. Or, as the nineteenth-century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard put it, the self is a relation which relates itself to itself.

But what the hell does that mean? Is such a relation composed of just two parts or of more than two parts? And these parts are made of what exactly? Which parts are the *real* parts, and which parts are not parts at all? Kierkegaard is talking about a synthesis or relation between the temporal and eternal, finite and infinite, actual and possible parts of ourselves. It's not just a synthesis of who we've been, or who we are right at this moment, but of who we're capable of being.

Yet, bringing these two parts of the self together and recognizing them as actually the same self that we, ourselves, are requires some distancing. It requires being both an observer of the self and being the observed. Who better than our friend Chuck Klosterman to tell us about the experience of observing those who are observing themselves? And who better than some of the celebrities that Chuck has interviewed to tell us a little bit about ourselves by telling us a little bit about their selves? There is something interesting to note about our relation as readers to Chuck Klosterman as the author and as the interviewer. In a sense, we (the readers) are observing Chuck's observances of celebrities—observances that incorporate both the self-reflection of their famous subjects and the comments and interpretations of Chuck himself. Not only do we have the possibility of learning about ourselves from inquiring into these famous subjects, but we stand a chance at learning a little about Chuck too. We'll follow Kierkegaard's itinerary as we explore how celebrities manifest these sicknesses of the self, all the while trying to find out whether or not we are for real or if we are full of shit.

Behind the Britney Curtain

How is it possible that someone could be ignorant of having a self? It seems like the most obvious bit of knowledge in the universe. To be a human being that is still living is to have a self. End of story. Actually, it's not the end of the story—in fact, it's more like the beginning of the story. If the self is a synthesis or a relation as Kierkegaard thinks it is, then there are going to be multiple parts of the self that are in relation. For someone to be ignorant of having a self would be for such a person to be ignorant of one or more of these parts brought into relation with the parts that they do recognize. They would, for example, emphasize their obsessive consumption of profane amounts of television as an indication that they have become a keen observer of the human condition all the while remaining completely in the dark concerning the condition of their own personality. This person would then be someone who is completely unaware of their self as a whole, only recognizing those parts that are most immediate to them (and yet, at the same time, being ignorant of that which is so immediate it is overlooked—the self).

The perfect example of this first type of sickness of the self is Britney Spears. During his interview with Ms. Spears, Chuck recognizes this very paradox of identity almost immediately. In his descriptive setup to the interview, Chuck tells us that there is a risqué photoshoot with Britney where she's hidden behind a curtain. He knows that she is more or less naked behind the curtain but he, like the rest of us, is forbidden to go past this barrier.

Chuck says, “Apparently, the reason I am here is to be reminded that the essence of Britney Spears's rawest sexuality is something *I will never see*, even though I know it's there. This is why I am a metaphor for the American Dream. Culturally, there is nothing more trenchant than the fact that Britney Spears will never give it up, even though she already has” (*Chuck Klosterman IV*, p. 13). Keep in mind Chuck wrote this before the proliferation of photos of Brit's not-so-shrouded undercarriage on the Internet.

Britney's “rawest sexuality” is itself a metaphor for that part of the self that remains in question. Chuck points out that we're clearly not allowed to peek behind the curtain and see

that part of Britney which is excessively and intensely hers. However, Chuck also notices that this metaphor operates at another level. It's as though Britney herself is unaware of what is going on behind the curtain. She's the one being exposed, but she doesn't understand it that way. In fact, she doesn't even think about it.

"I ask her questions about her iconography", Chuck says, "and she acts as though she has no idea what the word *iconography* even means. It's not that Britney Spears denies that she is a sexual icon, or that she disagrees with the assertion that she embodies the "Madonna/whore" dichotomy more than any human in history, or that she feels her success says more than any human in history, or that she feels her success says nothing about what our society fantasizes about. She doesn't disagree with any of that stuff, because she swears *she has never even thought about it*. Not even once" (p. 13).

No matter what Ms. Spears might think about herself, anyone with a television in the first decade of the twenty-first century would say that it's undeniable that Britney Spears is a sexual icon. She is more than just her concrete, immediate self. We might even say that she symbolizes an idea that goes beyond herself. Klosterman says as much when he ruminates that "She is not so much a person as she is an *idea*, and the idea is this: you can want everything, so long as you get nothing. The western world has always been fixated with the eroticism of purity: that was how Brooke Shields sold Calvin Kleins, and that was how Annette Funicello sold the beach. But no one has ever packaged the schism like Britney Spears" (p. 14). Yet, as we've been saying, the schism doesn't immediately affect Britney because she doesn't even recognize it in the first place. The symbolic part of her self, the part that exists as an idea of the "wet-hot virgin," doesn't even enter her thoughts. She remains steadfast in her naiveté, not unlike a prudish girlfriend who's never even heard of blue-balls, be they philosophical or otherwise.

It would be understandable if Britney were the first instance of someone monumentally famous being completely ignorant of her public perception of what she has come to symbolize. However, Chuck identifies Britney as both another member of the blonde icon archetype that proliferates in American popular culture and as something new. "This is what

makes Britney so different,” Chuck tells us, “. . . she refuses to deconstruct herself. That falls in stark contrast with the previous generation of blonde icons, most notably Madonna (who makes it clear that she controls every extension of her existence) and Pam Anderson (who refuses to take her own Barbie Doll bombast seriously)” (p. 15). Britney, therefore, is a self that fails to recognize any part of herself that might extend beyond just her immediate goals and surroundings. She appears to live a fundamentally simple existence. She is an entertainer, and she amuses people by shaking her booty and singing songs that they like. There is nothing more to it than that.

Still, what might it mean for Britney to “deconstruct herself” as Chuck says? Would she have to recognize that her handlers are making her into a sexual icon in the manner of her predecessors despite the fact that she perceives herself as a pure entertainer? Would she have to accept that she is popular only partially because of her talent and partially because she fits into a role that American popular culture has perennially carved out for a select few of its more attractive young ladies? Or maybe she’d have to admit that she’s really good at working out and confusing bathing suits with formalwear. Perhaps, but Britney refuses to recognize these parts of herself. In fact, they entirely fail to describe Britney Spears—according to Britney Spears. There is no need to look behind the curtain because, according to Britney, there is nothing behind the curtain to see.

Regardless of how Britney views herself, we can recognize that Britney, as a brand or as a cultural symbol, is more than just the southern-born mouseketeer turned pop artist. And we can wonder, along with Chuck, if she is truly ignorant of herself as something more than just the immediate, unabstracted Britney that she’s always been to herself or if she has pushed the denial of this symbolic part of herself to such an extreme that we are all fooled into believing that she is ignorant of it. However, if we’re keeping with Kierkegaard’s diagnosis of despair, it’s almost undeniable that the Britney who Chuck interviewed was suffering a sickness of the self. Kierkegaard puts it this way:

This is the state in despair. No matter how much the despairing person avoids it, no matter how successfully he has completely lost himself (especially the case in the form of despair that is ignorance of

being in despair) and lost himself in such a manner that the loss is not at all detectable—eternity nevertheless will make it manifest that his condition was despair and will nail him to himself so that his torment will still be that he cannot rid himself of his self, and it will become obvious that he was just imagining that he had succeeded in doing so. (*Sickness unto Death*, p. 21)

What Kierkegaard is emphasizing here is that a person such as Britney, no matter how hard she tries to remain ignorant, cannot remain in ignorance about her self forever. In fact, it's not the case that there is nothing behind the curtain, that there is no deeper, more symbolic part of Britney. Rather, it's that she has lost that part of herself which is like an archetype, which is symbolic, which is an idea, which does go beyond the immediate image she has of herself. And that eternal part of her, that part of her that is beyond just her body or her person but is nevertheless still very much her—that part of her lays claim to the part that she does recognize.

So, is Britney for real, or is she full of shit? In a sense, she is very much for real, at least, to herself. But we can see that she might be full of shit. We're the ones that recognize that there's this whole big Britney brand which is connected to the sexy blonde or "wet-hot virgin" archetype that is perennial in American popular culture. So is Britney still full of shit if she doesn't think she is? And what about ourselves? If we deny the eternal and symbolic parts of ourselves—those parts of ourselves that push us beyond just our immediate, concrete situations—do we suffer a sickness of the self? Do we even have a part of ourselves that pushes us beyond ourselves? If we deny this driving part, this symbolic, eternal, or infinite part of ourselves, are we still for real? Or are we full of shit?

Imagine being in Chuck's shoes during this interview in 2003. Imagine listening to somebody completely deny anything other than what is most immediate to her regarding a career that is full of sexual symbolism and teenage fantasies. The very part of Britney that drives her to sing "Baby One More Time," wearing pigtails, a bare midriff, and a Catholic school girl uniform, emanating infantilized sexuality throughout, is the same part of herself that she seems to be denying. She *is* the sexual icon, the quintessential American product—sexy, sleek, and addictive. Imagine thinking, 'What's going to happen when you

realize that you're all these things people say you are? Are you going to freak out? Are you going to shave your head and attack cameramen with an umbrella? Are you going to run from bad choice to bad choice trying to anesthetize yourself to who you have come to recognize as being, in fact, you?" What went through Chuck's mind is unknown to us, as is what went through Britney's mind. It remains in question whether or not she was actively deceiving herself. However, as Klosterman recognizes, she still might be a genius for having maintained the deception for as long and in as steadfast a manner as she did.

Meditations of a Former Rock'n'Roll Messiah

While Britney Spears represents someone whose defining feature, at least in Klosterman's interview, seemed to be an unrelenting naïveté about herself as anything more than just an entertainer, this is certainly not the case with U2. More specifically, when Chuck interviews U2's lead singer, Bono, in Dublin on the eve of *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb*'s release, he formulates the question of identity as follows: "there is only one question about U2 that actually matters, and I'm still trying to figure it out . . . is Bono for real, or is Bono full of shit?" (*Chuck Klosterman IV*, p. 23).

With Bono, we have a celebrity that is both an extreme construction and someone who is desperately trying to be authentic. There is the Bono of rockstar posturing, of 3D concerts and messianic imagery, and then there is the Bono of the One campaign, of Jubilee 2000, and of countless other humanitarian causes he championed. But the question that we have to ask ourselves right now is this: "Is Bono someone who suffers from a sickness of the self where both the humanitarian advocate and the messianic rock'n'roller are artifices? And if they are performances, then what part of Bono is for real and what part is full of shit?"

What's most interesting about Klosterman's assessment of Bono and Bono's assessment of himself is how they both recognize that the most symbolic and self-consciously caring part of U2's career is precisely that part which is most inauthentic. How could this be? How could the heart on sleeve, advocate of the underdog, politically active U2 actually be less authentic

than the ironic, always sunglasses and skullcap wearing, iPod endorsing U2 of the 1990s and beyond? Klosterman identifies this desperation for authenticity as what made U2 so important in the 1980s. He says, "The reason U2 were (arguably) the most important band of the 1980s was because audiences felt they *always* took a side. What makes "Sunday Bloody Sunday" a powerful song is that something seemed to be at stake, even if you had no idea what happened in Northern Ireland during the winter of 1972. If anything, U2 seemed to care about things too much; there was no middle of the road on the drive toward Joshua Tree" (p. 30).

That U2 cared was undeniable. That they wanted us to *know* they cared is what remains questionable. What separates the early U2 from someone like Britney Spears regarding selfhood is that they acknowledged the symbolic, infinite, side of their band. U2 knew they were becoming symbols for something more than four lads from Ireland who played music together, and they wanted that almost as much as they wanted us to know that they wanted it. Bono assesses the situation like this:

I don't think anyone who's famous didn't *want* to be famous. The people who hide in the shadows and cover their heads with their coats when they're being photographed by the paparazzi probably think being famous is more important than it actually is, and—in a way—probably need fame more than anyone else. I've gotten to the stage where I almost forget I'm in a rock band, which was never the case in the 1980s. And that was annoying, because that wasn't sexy. Self-consciousness is never sexy. I mean, I've watched myself being interviewed on TV, and I just think to myself, *What an asshole*. (*Chuck Klosterman IV*, p. 30)

While Bono was never one to hide his light under a bushel, he does admit to taking fame far too seriously. In this statement Bono reveals to Chuck and to the rest of us that he is able to see the symbolic, iconic part of himself, and he casts it aside. In a way, Bono is saying that who he was in the 1980s, with all that grandstanding and posturing, was inauthentic. He admits to the symbols but he appears to lack the will to embrace them anymore.

Bono becomes a representative of Kierkegaard's second level of the sickness of the self: despair in not willing to be one-

self. Kierkegaard explains it as follows: “This form of despair is: in despair not to will to be oneself. Or even lower: in despair not to will to be a self. Or lowest of all: in despair to will to be someone else, to wish for a new self” (*Sickness*, p. 52). Kierkegaard sees a tension between those parts of ourselves that we want to acknowledge and those parts that we’d rather not admit are a part of who we are (for example, acting like a messianic figure who fronts an extremely popular rock band). So when Bono is disparaging his 1980s self for his seemingly self-righteous posturing, he is also suffering from despair. He sounds as though he wishes to be a different self than that iconic, flag-waving front man from Live Aid, as though he despairs in having been so self-conscious.

Acknowledging that such posturing is involved in the creation of an identity is something that another less famous musician, Jeff Tweedy of Wilco, spoke about with Klosterman in another interview. We might say that part of the reason why such posturing goes on in the first place is that, by creating a persona or an identity with passionate symbolic aspects is, in a way, quite cool. This is what KISS did with aplomb, but the same could be said for others such as Prince or Morrissey or Jack White for that matter. Tweedy, however, sees things quite differently. “It’s just that I’m uncool,” Tweedy says when asked about the overt normalcy of his middle-class life.

I have a great life but it’s an uncool life. It was a wonderful revelation to move to Chicago and make music and just be normal. So many artists reach a certain level of success, and then they cross over; they surrender everything to the service of their persona. Take somebody like Madonna, for example; you could never get to be that huge unless you surrendered every other impulse in your body to the service of your persona. Even with Bob Dylan, there was clearly a point early in his career where he was completely able to immerse himself inside that persona. And I think it’s disastrous that so many people destroy themselves because they can’t do it. They don’t have the intestinal fortitude. I mean, how many fucking people has Keith Richards killed? How many countless people has Sid Vicious killed? How many young girls has Madonna made insane? (p. 146)

To surrender one’s self to the symbolic or iconic part of the self is so common in rock’n’roll that it seems like a cliché. Yet, what

Tweedy is getting at is that one has to give up on that part of the self in order to retain any level of normalcy. The pursuit of a personality like that of Sid Vicious or Madonna is, in many ways, the pursuit of a self that is externally cool. And this pursuit of external coolness exacerbates the distance between the immediate self and the symbolic self. Both Tweedy and Bono go beyond ignorance of any self that is other than what is most immediate, but they both have reservations about the consequences of cultivating those parts of the self.

In like manner, Kierkegaard paints a picture of *the man of immediacy*, that is, the person who retreats from their symbolic, infinite self and hides in his or her own normalcy. “Imagine a self”, Kierkegaard says, “and then imagine that it suddenly occurs to a self that it might become someone other—than itself” (*Sickness*, p. 53). For example, imagine four young lads growing up in Dublin playing punkish music together. Now imagine that they, themselves, imagine that they could be something other than just four guys with three chords and the truth. That they imagine themselves as musical missionaries, bringing the listening masses anthems of social protest. They imagine themselves as a band that is not only famous, but one that matters. Or, in Kierkegaard’s words:

... yet one in despair this way, whose sole desire is this most lunatic of lunatic metamorphoses, is infatuated with the illusion that this change can be accomplished as easily as one changes clothes. The man of immediacy does not know himself, he quite literally identifies himself only by the clothes he wears, he identifies having a self by externalities (here again the infinitely comical). There is hardly a more ludicrous mistake, for a self is indeed infinitely distinct from an externality. So when the externals have completely changed for the person of immediacy and he has despaired, he goes one step further; he thinks something like this, it becomes his wish: What if I became someone else, got myself a new self? Well, what if he did become someone else? I wonder whether he would recognize himself. (*Sickness unto Death*, p. 53).

These celebrities, such as Bono, who recognize themselves by externalities—even if these externalities are things like heart-on-sleeve desperation or flag waving self-importance—these celebrities choose to become something else because they see

that their symbolic/infinite self has become something they despair over. They seek a respite from their infinite self because their immediate self is embarrassed.

And this is precisely the part about Bono that is so interesting; he is embarrassed about his behavior in the 1980s when everything appeared to matter and he seemed to care *too much* because it appears now to have been just posturing. But no one would say that the Bono of the 1990s or even the sunglasses-wearing elder statesman of this past decade was any less a posture. Klosterman, himself, seems to believe that

Bono thinks rock'n'roll is so shallow, in a way. He has always enjoyed the trappings of fame, but he feels the urge to balance it with something more substantial. He really is a walking contradiction. It's always all or nothing with him. There is almost nothing in the middle. (*Chuck Klosterman IV*, p. 31)

Still, the “substantial” part of Bono, the one that cares about AIDS victims in Africa but doesn't confuse that with rock stardom isn't so different from the Bono of the 1980s who did confuse, or at the very least conflate, the two. Bono wants to escape from the self-consciousness of his 1980s self but, in expressing this desire for escape, only reveals further self-consciousness. He is self-conscious about being self-conscious.

The despair which takes the form of willing not to be oneself recognizes that the symbolic or infinite part of the self—that part of us which is not immediate—does exist. One in this stage of despair just wants nothing to do with that part of the self. However, desiring to escape the trappings of fame or the symbolic parts of the self does not, in itself, make one authentically a self. Regardless of whether we are as famous as Bono or nearly unnoticeable, trying to escape that public or iconic part of the self is still a denial of who we really are. Besides, Bono in the 1980s seemed to really believe that U2's music was a force for social change. He seemed to believe in the ideals proclaimed so strongly by their ambient anthems that he could gesticulate on stage like a rock'n'roll messiah without the slightest hint of irony. So was Bono of the 1980s for real or was he full of shit? Is the Bono of our era, who looks back with embarrassment at his former behavior and seeks to escape it for real or is he full of shit? Was it that, in the end, those ideals

Bono proclaimed were wrong, or that they were just uncool and Bono would rather be cool than right?

In contrast with Bono, Klosterman regards Tweedy as the least pretentious rock star he's ever met. Tweedy's life is certainly uncool with its suburban home, kids in softball, soccer-dad milieu with complementary minivan and "proud parent of an honor student" stickers, but one cannot say that it is an inauthentic life. Tweedy understands the allure of that self-conscious desire for fame and all of its trappings, and he wants nothing to do with it. With Tweedy, there isn't any lingering embarrassment about his past or the unsexiness of his suburban lifestyle so much as there is recognition and acceptance of those parts of his self that are symbolic (and in a sense silly) and those parts that are concrete and downright "dad-like."

And what about us, for that matter? If we deny the parts of ourselves that are constructions, ideals, and symbolic—that is, those parts of ourselves that go beyond what is most immediate—are weeding out inauthenticities or are we simply in denial about who we really are? If we deny the iconic parts of ourselves, are we still for real? Or are we phony?

The Master of Puppets Is the Master of None

If the last form of despair was a weakness of the self through the denial of the symbolic or iconic (what Kierkegaard would call infinite) part of the self, the third form of despair embraces that side. In fact, this third form of despair embraces the eternal part of the self to the point that it becomes the only part of the self that matters. This is why Kierkegaard calls this form of despair "defiance;" it is a form of despair that defies its own finitude and limitations. In defiance, the self refuses to allow its limitations to lay claim to itself and refuses any limiting of its possibilities. There's perhaps no better example of this third form of despair than the lifestyle that rock'n'roll celebrities apparently enjoy. And there's no better example of why this lifestyle leads to despair than Metallica.

In his write-up about the Metallica documentary *Some Kind of Monster*, Klosterman attempts to drive home the point that "rock'n'roll manufactures a reality that's almost guaranteed to make people incomplete" (p. 108). Granted, his choice of

subject matter makes emphasizing this manufactured reality quite an easy task, but it is still one that we, as consumers of popular music, television, and film, tend to overlook. Perhaps it is not that we overlook that rock'n'roll in particular manufactures a reality all its own; rather, we overlook that such a reality leaves its participants fundamentally incomplete.

"I think most people in rock bands have arrested development" Metallica lead guitarist Kirk Hammett says. He continues:

"Society doesn't demand people in rock bands do certain things. You're able to start drinking whenever you want, and you can play shows drunk, and you can get offstage and continue to be drunk, and people love it. They toast their glasses to an artist who's drunk and breaking things and screaming and wrestling in the middle of a restaurant. Things like that happened to us, and people cheered."
(*Chuck Klosterman IV*, p. 109)

"How many people has Sid Vicious killed?" wondered Jeff Tweedy, and rightfully so. The consequences of the creation of an identity which is iconic are often far greater than one anticipated upon entering into the world of rock'n'roll. It also appears that we consumers of their artistic projects encourage such drastic behavior and then also turn up our noses to them when they reveal the hollowness of their lives.

Metallica is going through a drastic transition during the filming of their documentary, *Some Kind of Monster*; a transformation, which includes a stint in rehab for lead singer James Hetfield and sessions with a therapist, named Phil Towle. In the midst of this transition, the band's identity as a hard rock juggernaut begins to fray, resulting in disillusionment, anger, and despair. That people under a considerable amount of stress would begin to notice their relationships beginning to break down is nothing new. When that same thing happens to hard rock bands, it can be perceived as extremely odd. These bands are supposed to be brutal forces of nature more akin to a hurricane than a hurt puppy. This is why what happened to Metallica is so interesting: they broke down and did it all on camera. Metallica showed us what it means for forty-somethings to finally begin the process of maturing after having lived inside the symbolic or iconic self that they cultivated over decades.

“If you strip down all human beings to their core, you’ll find the same stuff,” Towle says,

you will find fear of rejection, fear of abandonment, fear of being controlled, fear of being unloved, and the desire to love and be loved. That becomes more complicated with hard-rock bands, because—when you exist in a mode of instant gratification—you’re never hungry for depth of intimacy. Sex, drugs, and booze are glorified in rock’n’roll, but those are really just symptoms of the desire for relief.” (*Chuck Klosterman IV*, p. 104)

Part of the process of cultivating a hard rock identity manufactured to be cooler or more brutal than the lives of most hard rock fans is that such an identity feeds off of debauchery. This debauched lifestyle becomes an identity all its own where “rock gods” can defiantly live like children and get paid millions of dollars to do so. It is almost as though, because they possess talent in other areas, we are all the more willing to concede that rock stars are above the consequences of the manufactured reality they enjoy.

“Metallica’s evolution as real people was aborted by their surreal existence,” says Towle. “Kirk Hammett once told me that coming off tour was like experiencing post traumatic stress syndrome; he said it was like leaving a war and re-entering real life. When I asked him why he felt that way, he said, ‘Because now I have to empty the trash.’ The profundity in that statement is its simplicity: rock stars are infantilized by people who do everything for them. We insulate them from a reality that would actually be good for them” (*Chuck Klosterman IV*, p. 109).

Having to take out the trash is not merely an element of maturing into what is commonly referred to as adulthood but represents the immediate and concrete forms of existence that rock stars appear to be continuously escaping. “Almost everyone that is really famous has cultivated personality. I can safely say that no one who has ever won an Oscar didn’t want to win an Oscar” says the actor Val Kilmer in another Klosterman interview (p. 45). Celebrities, it appears, always wanted to be that famous personality, as though they were a character in a performance piece about their own lives. However, such cultivation of a personality is not without its pit-

falls. Even when one lives behind the veil of one's own making, be it as a celebrated hard rock band member, an Oscar-winning actress, or a novelist, the concrete everyday part of the self lays claim to this ego-centric dream world of a self.

Kierkegaard pointedly remarks that, "The self is its own master, absolutely its own master, so-called; and precisely this is the despair, but also what it regards as its pleasure and delight. On closer examination, however, it is easy to see that this absolute ruler is a king without a country, actually ruling over nothing" (*Sickness unto Death*, p. 69). A "rock god" who can amaze with his bravado, excess, and talent at playing more notes than seems humanly possible but laments at having to take out the trash is, in Kierkegaard's eyes, a king without a country who rules over nothing. This is why Metallica tearing away the veil and revealing their bifurcated selves, alienated from their everyday concrete lives and yet no longer able to find fulfillment in their manufactured identity, is such a bold move and also such a terrifying prospect. James, Kirk, and Lars reveal that they are not only figures of strength, brutality, and coolness but also fragile human beings. And it is precisely the act of revealing this that is so terrifying.

Consider Kierkegaard's reflection on this phenomenon:

Consequently, the self in despair is always building only castles in the air, only shadowboxing. All these imaginatively constructed virtues make it look splendid. . . . In despair the self wants to enjoy the total satisfaction of making itself into itself, of developing itself, of being itself; it wants to have the honor of this poetic, masterly construction, the way it has understood itself. And yet, in the final analysis, what it understands by itself is a riddle; in the very moment when it seems that the self is closest to having the building completed, it can arbitrarily dissolve the whole thing into nothing. (p. 69)

When we think about rock stars coming to terms with having to take out the trash or live "normal" lives, we tend to think that it is simultaneously good for them and extremely uncool. Coolness tends to be equated with a kind of unrealistic detachment; a kind of life lived amongst castles in the air, as it were. Yet, when we think about the revelation of our own frailty, the

revelation that we, too, are shadowboxing and waiting for our symbolic or iconic self to arbitrarily dissolve into nothing, we are probably genuinely terrified.

So, is Metallica for real or are they full of shit? Are they for real because they recognized the fundamental poverty of living only in their manufactured and debauched reality? Are they full of shit for having hidden in said identity until the filming of *Some Kind of Monster* and now, having given up the conceit, have no idea who they are as people or as a band? In a way, they are the most “for real” of all the artists that we’ve focused on, save maybe Jeff Tweedy. Metallica finally acknowledges their frailty. They recognize that they are not just infinite, symbolic, iconic selves but they are selves that have a concrete, temporal, everyday part. Though the process is monstrous, they (well, at least James Hetfield) strive to reconcile these two parts of their selves.

However, this process of reconciling the self to itself is not, according to Kierkegaard, accomplished by any willing or action of the self. Such an act of the self would be done from the position of mastery, which is precisely the position Kierkegaard wishes to diagnose as a sickness of the self when he refers to it as despair in willing to be oneself. The self which believes itself to be the master of all it surveys, especially its own self, is deluded and cannot reconcile its self to itself. The only remedy for a self which either ignorant of its self, in denial about its self, or defiantly claiming mastery over itself has no recourse but to “rest transparently in the power that established it” (p. 14).

What might it mean to rest transparently in the spirit which gave rise to us? Might it be an admission of a fundamental human fragility, a recognition that we are not the masters of ourselves? Might it also mean recognizing that even the most embarrassing and mundane parts of our selves are still part of us, are still, at bottom, us? Might it also mean that we do attempt to deny who we really are and accept ourselves as a synthesis of mundane and iconic, temporal and eternal, actual and possible?

If I accept that I am a synthesis of my mundane, everyday, taking-out-the-trash existence and my symbolic, iconic, infinite, cultivated persona; if I accept that I am, as a synthesis, not the one who mastered myself nor a slave to the most imme-

diate parts of myself; if I accept that I am still subject to the seemingly arbitrary forces of nature and culture which act upon me and challenge both the perception and the lived experience of myself, then am I, as Chuck Klosterman wondered about Bono, for real or am I full of shit?

8

Killing Myself to Live in Carnival Square

MELISSA VOSEN

Once your reality closes down to zero, you're no longer part of it.

—CHUCK KLOSTERMAN

I am twenty-eight years old, and I'm in love with John Cusack. And even though I've never met pop-culture critic Chuck Klosterman, he knows my secret crush. It's a secret I share with millions of other women my age across the United States.

If I were being completely honest and self-reflective, I would have to admit that I do not really love John Cusack; that, of course, would be silly. I love John Cusack's 1980s portrayal of Lloyd Dobler, a character in Cameron Crowe's cult classic *Say Anything*. In 2000, Mel Gibson starred in *What Women Want*, a mediocre movie in which his male-chauvinistic character Nick Marshall heard the inner thoughts of women. Throughout the movie, Nick used this ability to try to figure out exactly what women are looking for in a partner, among other things. (Ironically, with the 2010 release of audiotapes belittling and threatening his model girlfriend, it appears Mel Gibson has learned next to nothing from playing character Nick Marshall. He still clearly has no clue what women want).

The answer, however, is so simple. All Nick Marshall had to do was ask Chuck Klosterman. Women want Lloyd Dobler.

Most women, however, realize this desire is problematic; Lloyd Dobler is a fictional character, and even if one views Cusack as Dobler, the likelihood of dating, even meeting, the real Cusack is relatively slim. And because Dobler and Cusack

are not one in the same, there would inevitably be some disappointment. Would Cusack really run ahead and remove glass from my path as we strolled passed a 7-Eleven in the early hours of the morning after an all-night kegger? Probably not.

But, if not Lloyd Dobler or John Cusack, Klosterman argues women want the next logical thing; they want their relationship to mirror the relationship of Lloyd Dobler and Diane Court. According to Klosterman, we *all* desire fake love, the love manufactured by Hollywood. While many women desire Dobler, I believe a good percentage of men, depending on sexual orientation, desire Diane Court, a character described in the movie as a brain “trapped in the body of a game-show hostess.” Perhaps this is what explains Cusack’s own notorious bachelor status. Does Cusack secretly desire Diane Court—and, unfortunately, even Ione Skye, the actress who played Diane, and does she even actually live up to his standards? Or, more likely, does Cusack not live up to the standards of millions of women across the United States? Does everyone that Cusack meets expect to meet Lloyd Dobler?

I don’t think Klosterman would claim to have a greater understanding of women or the human condition than the average Joe; he is just a normal guy. In fact, I’m sure Klosterman would argue that all Nick Marshall (and Mel Gibson) had to do was turn on the television or watch *The Notebook*. We want the fairy tale; we want Hollywood’s version of love. We want a little less of reality, a little less of ourselves. What we want is a little *more* fantasy, a little more of the one-dimensional television and movie characters, the systematic output of Hollywood, in our own life.

And, as Klosterman implies, none of us is immune to that desire. Our desire for fake love transcends gender, sexual orientation, race, and class. We are all susceptible, and we are all suspect. Klosterman notes that every time he meets an American who isn’t profoundly boring or mentally handicapped, he notices one “unifying characteristic.” Americans (sans the boring and sans the handicapped) have “the inability to experience the kind of mind-blowing, transcendent romantic relationship they perceive to be a normal part of living” (*Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*, p. 2).

Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs focuses on more than just fake love, but its subject matter revolves around one thing: reality

and our desire for anything and everything cliché. While many readers would never admit publicly their desire for fake love as Klosterman has, Klosterman presents a convincing argument by providing personal examples and drawing on popular culture; his argument certainly resonates with me. I own four movies—one of which is *Say Anything*. And if I were to venture a guess on how many times I have seen the movie, I would say into the hundreds, which, as my fiancé pointed out, is roughly eight days of my life. Ouch.

Why the incessant viewings? It's not because I don't subscribe to cable; it's because I love the idea of Lloyd Dobler and Diane Court—that and the WE channel has the movie on a fairly regular rotation.

Klosterman challenges how his readers view love and identity by providing humorous examples from his own life and popular culture. *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*, by all accounts, is a celebration of America's low culture and art. In one chapter, Klosterman argues that the teen comedy *Saved by the Bell* has meant more to its audience than many highly rated, award-winning television shows because of the audience's ability to relate to it (however unrealistic the show might be: see the Tori paradox or Zack's relationship with Mr. Belding). Klosterman writes, "I didn't care about *Saved by The Bell* any more than I cared about *The X-Files*, but the difference is that I could watch *Saved by the Bell* without caring and still have it become a minor part of my life, which is the most transcendent thing any kind of art can accomplish (regardless of its technical merits)" (p. 138). Klosterman's *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*, his "low culture manifesto," is an example of what Mikhail Bakhtin calls carnivalesque literature, literature that challenges traditional cultural views and hierarchies and champions low culture: Klosterman champions the low culture of women's undying love for John Cusack and Coldplay and an entire generation's fondness for Zack Morris.

Step Right Up 0:10

Bakhtin's carnival can best be described as a celebration of the subversive and the mixing of classes. Bakhtin argues that the carnival satirizes and undermines traditional views of culture by suspending the ordinary and the distance and hierarchies

between carnival participants; Bakhtin believes that carnivalization can have a liberating effect in literature (Bakhtin, "Carnival and the Carnavalesque" in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, p. 251). The carnival is also present in modern day television, movies, and other forms of media. Umberto Eco argues that the carnival still exists in different forms and beyond the town square; he writes, "Modern mass-carnival is limited in space: it is reserved for certain places, certain streets, or framed by the television screen" (Umberto Eco, "The Frames of Comic "Freedom" in *Carnival!* p. 6).

Television, an all too common subject for Klosterman, is often a place where traditional values are discussed and sometimes challenged; in television, hierarchies between participants (viewers) often vanish. How many different people, on any given Tuesday, watched *American Idol* in March of 2005? The answer is millions—from A-list Hollywood celebrities to minimum wage earning fast food workers (unless, of course, they worked the night shift). Around thirty million people from all walks of life tuned in each week to watch now pop-country princess Carrie Underwood take the Idol crown.

While popular cultural media such as television, the great equalizer, serve as a place or grounds for the carnival, Klosterman's book and analysis serve as a celebration of it. If you listen closely, you can almost hear Klosterman bellowing, "Step right up!"

Klosterman uses mostly sarcasm and humor to challenge and question traditional cultural views and disassemble hierarchies. When Klosterman is discussing Pamela Anderson's sex symbol status, he states, "We don't need Pam to know where she is; she helps us understand where *we* are" (*Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*, p. 84). While many may find it uncomfortable—even ludicrous—to suggest that former *Baywatch* star Pam Anderson is the compass for our society (or at least when Klosterman wrote *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*)—Klosterman believes otherwise. In fact, he chastises critics who are unnecessarily negative or snarky toward the 1990s blonde bombshell because we, as a society, have made her who she is today.

Klosterman believes that the reason many hate Anderson is because she represents an unrealistic image of the human race, an image that we as a society created and an image that many of us still desire to obtain. (I realize this still gives us no

logical explanation for David Hasselhoff). We hate, however, to see this image in real life—which is very similar to how Klosterman feels about Cusack. For Klosterman, Cusack represents an unrealistic image of love—and even though he isn't actually Lloyd Dobler, many of Klosterman's potential love interests see him as such.

Bakhtin also argues that one of the primary characteristics of a carnival is the crowning and de-crowning of a king; in *Cocoa Puffs*, Klosterman, low culture carnival critic, is both carnie and king. Klosterman shows us over and over our desire for both the ridiculously unattainable and the absurdly simplistic—which explains, in a nutshell, both our lust and hatred for Anderson and our preoccupation with *Saved by the Bell*. People want their life to have one meaning, and as Klosterman argues, people usually imagine something “completely imaginary” or “staunchly practical” (p.184). Ultimately, Klosterman's self-awareness is what crowns him king of the unordinary ordinary, king of the carnival.

Meet the Huxtables 0:57

Klosterman claims that instead of worrying about violent video games and movies, a common concern post-Columbine, parents (and the public in general) should be worried about how love and relationships are portrayed in the media. Klosterman believes that adults mesmerized by Hollywood's portrayal of love are much more dangerous than preteens mesmerized by an action movie peppered with fight scenes, explosions, and car chases. It's true that parent groups often protest excessive violence on television and in movies; love, however, is rarely their focus—unless, of course, nudity or teenage pregnancy is part of the plot. Ironically, what these groups fail to see is how the media influences them as adults. Klosterman believes that love scripted by the media has impaired our ability, even as adults, to access what is normal in a relationship. He writes, “There is no ‘normal,’ because everybody is being twisted by the same sources simultaneously” (p. 4). Instead of desiring our real, complex partners, we desire Lloyd Dobler.

For most of us, Klosterman believes we model our relationships, probably depending on our generation, after Cliff and Clair Huxtable or Chandler Bing and Monica Geller, and even

if we happen to model our relationship after our neighbors, a non-celebrity couple, it is likely that they are avid viewers of *The Cosby Show* or *Friends*. For Klosterman, everyone is vulnerable to the media; gender, sexual orientation, race, and class are irrelevant. Klosterman, despite his savvy critique, isn't even immune; he writes, "I wish I was Lloyd Dobler. I don't want anybody to step on a piece of glass. I want fake love. But that's all I want, and that's why I can't have it" (p. 10). Klosterman's über-self-awareness is what ultimately makes him carnival king. Rather than ignore the media's unfortunate influence, as many of us do, Klosterman recognizes the situation for what it is.

Many of us agree with Klosterman's accusation of John Cusack as responsible for the 1980s version of fake love. Who over thirty and under fifty doesn't love the iconic image of Dobler holding a giant 1980s-sized boom box to win back Diane? Admit it. You're humming Peter Gabriel's ballad, "In Your Eyes" right now. Most of us, however, might be a little less likely to admit we model our arguments after the arguments of Sam Malone and Diane Chambers. While we all occupy this carnival square, we all have different roles and degrees of awareness.

This Is the "True" Story 1:42

It isn't just relationships we attempt to emulate. Klosterman argues that MTV's *The Real World* is a successful franchise because it offers the public one-dimensional characters who are easy to imitate. He writes, "The show succeeds because it edits malleable personalities into flat, twenty-something archetypes. What interests me is the way those archetypes so quickly became the normal way for people of my generation to behave" (p. 31). It's easier, Klosterman argues, to adopt one of these one-dimensional personalities because it makes it easier for other one-dimensional personalities to understand you. It makes communicating with one another a lot less complicated. It is almost, in a way, essential for our survival. We must kill ourselves, sacrifice our personalities (and the personalities of our loved ones), in order to live.

Ultimately, Klosterman believes this flattening of characters into one-dimensional personalities is what makes *The*

Real World (as well as shows like *Saved by the Bell*) so successful. While smart teen dramedy *My So-Called Life* received rave reviews, it quickly was canceled because, as Klosterman argues, the main character Angela, played by a young Claire Danes, was too unique. Her feelings were too complex. This same phenomenon can be seen today. I mean, does everybody really love *Raymond*? Why were *Freaks and Geeks* and *Arrested Development* canceled while *Two and a Half Men* continues, to my thinking, its abysmal run?

The answer is archetypes. Angela didn't reflect any archetypes—nor did Jason Bateman's character on *Arrested Development*. Angela inhabited a world that was simply too real. Her love interest, Jordan Catalano, was illiterate, mostly due to undiagnosed dyslexia, but he also was a fairly talented musician who wrote, at times, profound song lyrics. He was messy. He was complicated.

We desire to model ourselves after the one-dimensional, and very unrealistic, characters we see on television, just as we desire fake love and have a propensity to model our relationships after the relationships of fictional characters. As Klosterman points out, Julie from the first season of *The Real World* was not an unintelligent, naive hick. And, even though I have never met Julie, I believe him. MTV, however, edited hours of footage, ultimately airing only a few brief clips, clips void of any context, until they molded her into just that.

The one-dimensional archetypes of *The Real World* simplify social hierarchies in general (*all* viewers aspire to be one of the seven cast members) while simultaneously making existing hierarchies more defined. But, as Klosterman points out, it makes communication between people easier. In 1994, youth across America began defining their sense of normal and their sense of self by sculpting their personalities after Puck, Pedro, Judd, Mohammed, Rachel, Cory, and Pam. What does it mean to be Puck and play the Puck role? For an entire generation who came of age in the mid 1990s, to play the Puck role meant being the guy who would eat his roommates' peanut butter with his bare hands while simultaneously picking his nose.

Despite the recent naming and branding of the "me generation" and the endless campaigns urging youth to embrace who they are, these archetypes have come to define a generation. We all know a Puck. We all know a Judd. We all know a Rachel.

A viewer watching *The Real World* or *Saved by the Bell* is like being a participant in a carnival. It is a celebration of the subversive because, as Klosterman writes, “*Saved by the Bell* wasn’t real, but neither is most of reality” (p. 147). It challenges what we know and what we define as real and as normal—just like our notion of love. Many of us are partake in everyday what Klosterman calls “low culture.” We do not have an elite social status, and we do not peruse high art. Yet, many of us are probably unwilling to admit—perhaps unwilling participants in carnival square—that we emulate twenty-somethings sexing it up (at least in more recent *Real World* seasons) on MTV. It’s an awfully hard pill to swallow, but as Klosterman writes, “Important things are inevitably cliché, but nobody wants to admit that. And that’s why nobody is deconstructing *Saved by the Bell*” (p. 136).

We want relationships that are unattainable; we want to date Lloyd Dobler or Diane Court. We want to be Flora from *The Real World*—even if she is the nosy roommate who crashes through a bathroom window because she is spying on her roommate getting it on in the shower. It’s easier to be flat one-dimensional drone.

Klosterman as King 2:52

As I mentioned before, Mikhail Bakhtin argues that one of the primary functions of a carnival is to throne and dethrone an unlikely king. Bakhtin writes, “And he who is crowned is the antipode of a real king, a slave or a jester; this act, as it were, opens and sanctifies the inside-out world of the carnival” (p. 252). I would argue that Klosterman, with his witty critique and as a champion of low culture, is *this* carnival’s king because throughout his text, he celebrates the inside-out world, challenging traditional views of love and identity—just to name a few.

Some of you may be wondering, how is Klosterman challenging traditional views of love when, according to Klosterman himself, we are all susceptible to the power of fake love and all model our personalities after a character in MTV’s dismal, no-music programming? My answer is this: while we all may be susceptible to fake love, not all of us are willing to see it for what it is. Klosterman, in this sense, is quite unique.

It was only after I read *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs* that I realized why I can watch *Say Anything* over and over again, year after year.

Knowing, however, is a burden all on its own, and knowing is why Klosterman has already been dethroned. He has already admitted, very publicly, that fake love will be a part of his life forever; he questions if he will ever truly satisfy a woman—and vice versa because of movies like *Say Anything* and women like me. He admits, even though he knows better, he wishes he were Lloyd Dobler. And regardless of where he goes, he knows that the cast of *The Real World* (doesn't matter what season) surrounds him; ultimately, he knows everything important in life, as he so delicately puts it, is cliché. This über-awareness is what makes him king of this carnival, slave to the media, and jester to the masses.

Throughout his book, Klosterman asks again and again, "What is reality?" Ultimately, he argues it is the only question worth asking. While some may disagree, I think Klosterman is right. It is *a* question worth asking, again and again. In a world filled with a fake love and archetypes, however, we may never really be able to find an answer. As Klosterman points out time and time again, just because we're aware— doesn't mean we're immune.

In the end, my desire for Lloyd Dobler and my fascination with Kelly Kapowski is why I'm a carnival participant and why I'm killing myself to live.

Watch
me
dream?

HYPERthetical Response #3

Watch me dream

SYBIL PRIEBE

At long last, someone invents “the dream VCR.” This machine allows you to tape an entire evening’s worth of your own dreams, which you can then watch at your leisure. However, the inventor of the dream VCR will only allow you to use this device if you agree to a strange caveat: When you watch your dreams, you must do so with your family and your closest friends in the same room. They get to watch your dreams along with you. And if you don’t agree to this, you can’t use the dream VCR. Would you still do this?

—*Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*, p. 128

Well, I have to answer YES to this because, um, NO wouldn’t be as much fun. Duh. However, before you label me as an exhibitionist or total weirdo, hear me out.

Okay, so just what the hell is a “dream”? Simple. It’s a bizarre mini-movie with our unconscious as the director; he cooks up the plot with a recipe of the day’s leftover tidbits, a dash of screwy things from our past, and, of course, tons of symbolism (snakes, teeth falling out, flying, etc. = things that make dream books sell like bestsellers!). Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung would probably agree with my definition. Okay, well, maybe they wouldn’t, but they’re . . . not here to defend themselves. And, honestly, Sigmund figured that dreams were straightforward events mixed with repressed thoughts; Carl knew we could attempt to understand them with the use of symbols and interpretation. I’m not that far off base, then.

According to the anti-Sigmund+Carl, Sri Swami Sivananda, the “Dream world is totally different from the waking world. . . . Sometimes we have a dream within a dream. During sleep, sometimes we are conscious of the fact that we are asleep and we are dreaming. In dreams more often than not we assume a body that is the master of the dream world” (Sri Swami Sivananda, *Philosophy of Dreams*, <http://www.dlshq.org>).

Long story short, this director—my own unconscious—could easily keep me from showing a VCR full of “naked me at the office” scenarios. How? Easy. There’s a strong possibility that I could control these dreams—mid-dream sequence, you know. I’ve done it, and you’ve probably done it. What if half way through the dream, I realize this will be seen by others? Bam! Change it up and suddenly clothing comes out of nowhere or the guy I was kissing turns into my current boyfriend.

What I’m trying to get at is that the philosophy behind dreams and dream-making is that they can be anything they want to be. And since I could control these dreams, I have an additional reason as to why I’d do this.

Money! This Dream VCR could lead to a taping of something better than existing movies and TV shows.

Think of the good dreams you’ve had—the insanely surreal ones with multiple meanings that you dissect with friends or haven’t told a single soul about (not the dull ones where you jump from hollering at Aunt Sue about her potato salad to the kindergarten classroom when Billy pointed out your imitation footwear). Who wouldn’t want to watch those wild rides? And think of the ways one could control this insanity to make the dream more insane!

Also, think of the horror flicks that wake you up with wet armpits. My sister can’t understand why I detest watching horror films; well, now she can view the ones that make me shiver when I’m “counting zs.” My sister could buy a copy of this VHS to view with her other horror-loving friends.

Now, think of the “bad” dreams you had to witness to alone. You will share it with a paying audience and that will make it easier to deal with, won’t it? If you were going to have the bad dream anyhow, why not make some cash?

Plus, think of your post-drinking dreams. Those are like current movies on acid, right? What I mean is if you were to have me watch re-runs of *Real Housewives of New Jersey* and do five

shots of Patron before zonking out, the dreams would be better than any reality show on right now! Bam! It would be pure insanity without a plot. Oh wait, that *is* most reality shows. Anyhow, they make a lot of Benjamins, so I definitely think I'm onto something. Or Chuck was. Whatever. You get our/my/his point. And, as I said before, what a bonus—I get a crazy night out with friends before pocketing the greens over the chaos I create when I'm unconscious.

Now, not only do I think I can control these dreams, but if my friends and family do watch—these dreams will explain my eccentricities. A side note to my original idea of the philosophy of dreams, is the idea that, well, we could really “see” what our family members are thinking and feeling. After my friends and family watch my weird-ass dreams, my attitude and oddness will only become more understandable and forgivable and obvious.

THEM: Sybil, why do people's faces get fuzzy and change into other faces?

ME: Um, you tell me.

THEM: It's statistically impossible to walk into a store where everything is your size, you know?

ME: Yeah, genius, I know. Tell my subconscious that.

THEM: So, do you think that when you scream in your dreams and nothing comes out . . . that that means you feel like no one listens to you?

ME: Good call, chief. Did you forget that I teach English to college students?

THEM: Is it annoying to have dreams where your teeth fall out for no reason?

ME: Yes. Totally. I want it to stop.

THEM: Wow. You must like architecture with all those dreams about building and tearing down walls.

ME: Yep. True story.

There is a slight glitch to this answer of mine. *Eighty-five percent percent of the time, I don't dream.* Nada. Zilch. Donut hole.

Talk about dream control! It would be a VCR recording filled with a 3:00 A.M. pee-break interruption and the occasional stop at 6:00 A.M. to check that I didn't miss my alarm. People would watch and fall asleep. I could potentially cure insomnia with my "somnia." Jeezus Pete—how great is that!

Lastly, this situation would eliminate me ever having to say again, "Oh my god, you'll never guess what I dreamt about last night." Because the reply would be: "Oh, yes. Yes, we *know*."