

# BOOK II

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## Know Thyself and Thy Cocoa Puffs

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# 3

## Glam Rock Identity

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Long, unkempt hair, tight pants, cowboy boots, lacquer nails, frilled shirts—when we read Klosterman’s books, we thought Klosterman would look like an authentic glam rocker.

If you’re like Klosterman and have a fascination, if not love affair with, glam rock, then you’re in the right place. Prepare to face your own glam rock identity. Are you ready for the transformation from anonymity to fame and from poverty to wealth? If so, the tabloids will write about you and photograph you, and your fans will scream at your every guitar riff and hip thrust. But who will they be following? You? Or some phony persona? Will your identity be a mere mask?

### What Is a Glam Identity?

Well, a real glam rocker has an extravagant style. “Glam” stands for glamour, as in something glamorous, sensational, and alluring. Glam rock, also known as glitter rock, is a genre of the rock music born in the UK in the 1970s. The glam-rock scene was concentrated in Los Angeles and centered on bands such as Guns N’ Roses, Ratt, Motley Crüe, W.A.S.P., Quiet Riot, Dokken, and Cinderella. The list of glam-rock legends goes beyond LA, including Poison and Heavens Edge from Pennsylvania, KISS, Twisted Sister, White Lion from New York, Alice Cooper from Detroit, Bon Jovi and Skid Row from New Jersey.

Besides simple and effective guitar riffs and melodious solo-parts, those bands also share a peculiar fashion style. They rock with long and unkempt hair, with purple guitars, polyphonic

singing. Their lyrics celebrate a hedonistic lifestyle. Glam rockers are famous for their enchanting fashion style—sparkly clothes, tight tiger-print glitter suits, platform shoes, sparkling jewels, and dramatic make-up. No wonder that a superficial rock critic, or an indifferent audience might say that this kind of music is just a provocation intended only to shock the public, making use of a superficial and external form, while the quality of music and poetics of these bands is rubbish. But fans of this kind of music, Klosterman and the rest of us, consider glam rock to be artistically valuable. Of course, there is a certain amount of trash in glam rock as well, but at its heart glam rock does have creative value. In his first book, *Fargo Rock City*, Klosterman skillfully turns a story of childhood in North Dakota—and the history of the glam rock bands he grew up with in 1998, such as Twisted Sister, Guns N' Roses, Motley Crüe, and Poison—into a serious philosophical contemplation of the joys and paradoxes of rock music.

The growth of glam rock was mostly unrecognized from the perspective of high-class rock criticism, but that lack of attention from the mainstream has just fueled its rebelliousness. But aren't all rock musicians rebels of a sort? We can say that today there are two kinds of rock fans, ones who are truly addicted to the hell rhythm of rock, and others who, from a more detached perspective, consider rock'n'roll to be a legitimate rebellion against the social conventions. We can see glam rock as a social movement powered by a lower-class ideology for young people. In their affinity for rock music, middle-class kids deliberately adopted lower-class values to oppose the values of their parents. Young people felt that rock musicians were "one of them," people who shared common interests and attitudes with their audience.

But is glam rock a truly unique phenomenon, or is it a movement with limited social significance? For example, long hair is one of the characteristics of the rocker. What's the role of the long hair in the everyday life of the rock fans and musicians? Can we say that wearing our hair long is a way to identify ourselves as a rocker, or it is just a part of the concert ritual through which we become a part of the noisy and colorful atmosphere of a rock spectacle?

We assume that readers of *Fargo Rock City* have done some rocking in their days. In *Fargo Rock City: A Heavy Metal*

*Odyssey in Rural North Dakota*, Klosterman tells us: “You know I’ve never had long hair” (p. 1). Never had long hair, but exhilarated with the long-haired musicians and their music? Hmm. Many readers might jump to conclusions and say: “Okay, he’s well shorn, but he likes rock music. Long hair is not an important characteristic for rock music.” Wait a minute. Is this true? How essential is a long hair to rock music? Maybe it is necessary only in order that the fans at concerts can shake their ratted out mops and create one of the symbols of glam metal followers? Is that head-banging some kind of a ritual, a festivity of the fact that we’re part of the loud and noisy atmosphere of the rock concert? Still, Chuck did not identify with glam rock in that way, despite his merits in promoting glam rock. So why did he avoid the visual identification with the rockers?

We have noticed that ol’ Chuck is well shorn, in that sort of thirty-something Justin Bieber-quaffed look. Is this an accident or a purposeful attempt to be the calm, unassuming rocker? Maybe in his early years, Chuck’s mother was a great role-model. She must have taught him to cope stoically with all the troubles in life. That could be the main reason why Chuck took a reasonable and measured approach to rock music. The Stoics, from their founder in Athens by Zeno, to the more famous expounders such as the emperor, Marcus Aurelius of “Gladiator” fame, and the slave, Epictetus, have received little attention from glam rock fans. The Stoics considered destructive emotions to be the result of errors in judgment, and that a sage, or person of “moral and intellectual perfection,” would not suffer such emotions. Stoics were concerned with the active relationship between cosmic determinism and human freedom. They believed that it is virtuous to maintain a will that’s in accord with nature. Because of this, the Stoics presented their philosophy as a way of life, and they thought that the best indication of an individual’s philosophy was not what a person said, but how he behaved. Perhaps Chuck values this stoic way of life, and views rock through the more measured and self-controlled lens of stoicism.

If so, he’s got a bone to pick with the famous German philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, who says that there are two main kinds of art—Dionysian and Apollonian. Apollonian art (think Joe Satriani—more on him later, Mr. Big)

symbolizes Apollo, a Greek god of profound dreaming symbolizes self-control, healing, and general common sense. On the other hand, there is Dionysian art (think G N' R, Motley Crüe), which symbolizes Dionysus, is a god of wine, excess, wildness, anger, emotion and passion. Yes, glam rock and metal are Dionysian arts that celebrate wine, women and song (think Whitesnake song, Coverdale, Moody, Marsden, Murray, Lord, Paice). Chuck is an Apollonian with Stoic values, who writes about modern Dionysian art—glam rock. Quite the combo!

### **Whose Identity Would Chuck Steal?**

If Chuck could change his identity and become somebody else, who would Chuck become? The one and only Joe Satriani! He would identify with the one of the best virtuosos of the Eighties and Nineties, just to play the guitar in Satriani's way for the first time in his life. Isn't that every guitarist's dream? Every musician has said at least once: "One day I would play like . . . (Van Halen, Kirk Hammet, Steve Vai . . .)."

So when stealing identities, you should go all the way, and take their entire spirit, not just their guitar playing talents. But since this is not possible, we can imagine that most musicians spent many hours in their rooms and garages to learn to play like their idols, and in this way they do take some of their identity. I also practice to play Satriani songs because I have also wanted to play like Satriani, despite the fact I am a girl (Ivana). Incidentally, my nickname, "Ibanez," is the name of the guitar that Satriani plays. In 1990, a company named "Ibanez" started a Joe Satriani series, selling guitars bearing Satriani's signature. Not only was Satriani a lead guitarist in Mick Jagger's first solo-tour in 1988, but his playing technique attracted Deep Purple, so he joined them in 1994. Satriani taught many great guitarists, and I wish I could have been one of them!

The fact is that all the great music heroes influenced one another, either directly (by being students in this case) or indirectly (through the media that surround us). What would the world look like without musical heroes that we admire? If we take a visual identity of our hero and imitate his style of play, soon we will become just a pale imitation. Instead of mere imitation, we should incorporate his style and idiosyncrasies. Then

we should strive to surpass him, we should creatively add our own uniqueness to his, and create a new identity, developing our own style on the foundations of our rock hero. Chuck directs us to understanding the function of celebrities, who rule the media. From Chuck we can learn a lot about ourselves, how to achieve our own desires, but never forget to stay ourselves and be unique! Chuck manages to do this—thieve parts of identities while creating his own unique one. Perhaps we should learn from him.

So, if you want to be wise like Chuck, you need to forget about stealing Satriani's identity and go about the life you were given. By all means, take in what you want from your glam rock heroes, but do not strive for the unattainable. Control what you can, and know what is out of your hands, (your rep and your time of death among them). Don't serve the passions, learn how to handle your destiny, let your good sense prevail over your emotions, and be happy with what you have.

### **So Who Needs a Glam Rock Mask?**

Some people think that glam rockers are exhibitionists with a bizarre fashion style, or just modern clowns with no musical value. Others think that the mask worn by the glam rocker has a hidden message, which conceals the shame of the musician and his fear of self-exposure.

René Descartes once said that an actor puts his mask on, so that no one can see shame on his face. Is the glam rocker ashamed of himself? Descartes's thesis indicates a relation between an actor's shame in playing himself, and the absence of shame in playing someone else. Descartes does not think that an actor puts on the mask in order to represent his character to an audience. On the contrary, he claims the mask represents something far bigger than that. Not only does the mask serve the actor, hiding the discomfort of his own skin, but it serves the audience, protecting them from the same discomfort of seeing oneself at the event. If the actor's face were disclosed, an actor would no longer be an actor, and for that reason the audience would transform from the viewers into the participants in disclosure of the others and themselves.

Klosterman's chapter "Appetite for Replication 0:56" in *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs* adds another layer of intrigue to this

question of glam-rock identity. Klosterman observes the phenomenon of “tribute bands,” more specifically, a Guns N’ Roses tribute band, Paradise City. When you watch Paradise City, you are watching a “real copy”—a paradox if there ever were one—of Guns N’ Roses. Their songs, stage performance, image, and personas meticulously mimic the members of G N’ R.

Klosterman goes on to argue that tribute bands are actors who get hold of a band’s musical reality and then pretend to be something they’re not. Chuck writes: “If a tribute band were to completely succeed, its members would no longer have personalities” (p. 58). But is the tribute band’s embodiment of the character of the actual band really that complete? The pleasure the audience gets from such a performance is doubly dubious. Is the person screaming at a Paradise City concert screaming because of Paradise City or at the G N’ R songs they are performing? Is the experience based on the performers, or has there been a mental flip, which reversed the faux-performance to the original artifact in the mind of the duped fan?

About five hundred people have paid \$12 to watch Paradise City. At the same city, original band Dokken can’t reach five hundred people. Klosterman wonders “how the real guys in Dokken feel about being as popular as five fake guys in Guns N’ Roses” (p. 67). Therefore, it is not unusual for people to pay the same amount or even more to see a copy as they would to see a different original. But we do imagine that the popularity of the original band drives the ticket sales of the tribute band’s shows, which plays set lists from the band’s most popular phases.

But we also wonder how much self-identity does a band member acquire by playing in a band such as Paradise City, if he plays Izzy Stradlin, for instance? Does he lose a part of his own personality by taking on someone else’s? Do they even ask themselves: “Who Am I? Or (Perhaps More Accurately) Who Else Could Be Me” (p. 13)?

### **Are Our Identities as Twisted as Twisted Sisters’?**

Chuck warns: we are living in a world of media satiety. He also confesses: as he gets older, Chuck seems less certain about the



world, writing “It’s interesting to think about this and to understand this world. People are mad on culture and saying—I don’t understand the world. But nobody totally does, of course it seems strange, especially when it is about things that become commercial” ([thesocietypages.org/officehours/2010/02/07](https://thesocietypages.org/officehours/2010/02/07)). Does anyone here understand the world?

The omnipresence of media changes our sense of reality and our understanding of self-identity. Media create a monoculture, so the structure of our existence becomes increasingly similar to everyone else’s in the world, and cultural particularities get flattened. As a result we have a feeling of alienation and loneliness among the crowd. And Klosterman thinks that such alienation can grow into a big cultural problem. Media seduce us through radio, TV, newspapers; they manipulate our consciousness, shaping our identity according to current trends. In a way we become copies without the original, identical to everyone else, but not ourselves. When this happens, our identity is completely effaced, because we are no longer self-same. (After all, the word identity comes from the Latin word for oneness, which means that some being, phenomenon or attribute is equal to itself).

The appearance of information technologies, especially the Internet, enabled the creation of a new Internet culture, a new identity. We enter into a virtual reality where we can be whatever we want. He can make his dreams come true and have the identity he wants. But where is our identity when we are online, in the virtual communities such as Facebook or MySpace? One of the basic questions in the conception of the virtual worlds is: *Who are we when we are online, how far can we enter the virtual worlds and still remain ourselves?* Chuck answers: “I guess I’ve just really become comfortable with the idea that none of this is real, and that we’re not quite in the Matrix, but it’s close, and that all the things we’re doing are constructions” ([thesocietypages.org/officehours/2010/02/07](https://thesocietypages.org/officehours/2010/02/07)). We can conclude that our brave new world calls into question the notion of self-same identity by the virtualization of our egos in online technologies. But glam rock bands, in their real and copied incarnations, also raise this same question. Who are the rockers, who are their imitators, and who are the fans of each? What is the relationship of our own identities to the masks of Facebook and glam rock?

## **Chuck—a Modern Socrates?**

Chuck has noticed this conundrum in our search for self-identity amid the masks of musicians and MySpaces. Chuck concludes that our search for ourselves is a function of our alienation and isolation. Chuck is aware that we are all alone, isolated, and lonely. In response to this isolated loneliness we go on journeys, actual and virtual, as attempts to escape from ourselves, not to be here, not to be who we are. Perhaps we long to depart from ourselves in our online journeys and our forays into the world of glam rock. We're just trying to protect ourselves from loneliness and find peace in our souls. But the anxiety that drives our self-escapism is really a fear, a fear to ever face ourselves and live up to the famous ancient philosophy, "Know thyself."

According to the legend, "Know Thyself" was written on the Temple of Apollo at Delphi. Apollo is a Greek god of music, the arts, and the sun. He has urged humans to perceive their own bounds and mortality, because that awareness allows them to communicate with god. Apollo was worshiped for being a god of light and the sun, life sustaining gifts for us mortals, and he was worshiped for being a god of the arts and beauty, that which gives life value. Through the Delphic oracle, Apollo called Socrates the wisest man. But what is wisdom? Do we have to be philosophers to be wise? Who is a philosopher anyway? We're told a philosopher is a person who loves and desires wisdom, but who does not claim that he owns it. For a philosopher no answer is final; the philosopher keeps asking questions. Socrates was always searching for meaning through the dialogues he had with his friends and foes. He used to say that he does not want to teach anyone about life, because he is also still learning how to live. His followers wrote his thoughts down, but he was against that, telling them that they should not memorize his thoughts because that only proves they don't have their own thoughts. It's necessary to think, to make one's own conclusions, to believe in one's own mind, one's own common sense. Without conscious cognition about yourself, not even gods can help you.

Socrates remained loyal to his thoughts and to himself until his whole life. In 399 B.C., when democracy was blossoming in Athens, Socrates was accused of disrespect for the

gods and corrupting youth. His death penalty, meant to suppress his influence, actually became the triumph of his calm, consistent thoughtfulness. Even though his friends made his escape possible, Socrates stayed in prison and drank the poison, respecting the laws of his state. Can we say that Socrates succeeded in knowing himself? We can't say that for sure, but he raised awareness of the need to know ourselves, and we all must realize that this is our ongoing philosophical pursuit, to know ourselves.

Looking at the sentence "Know thyself," some other questions appear. How do I know myself? Who am I? Is it possible to know oneself when we are not even able to understand the world around us, nor our role and purpose in it? How do we know ourselves in a world that constantly changes, and causes changes in our identity? Chuck answers this question for us: all the things we learned and understood seven hours ago are now out-of-date, so we have to start all over again.

When talking about love and rock music, Chuck makes another point about shifting identities. He considers that most popular rock music produces false images of ideal love, like Coldplay. He blames crappy bands like Coldplay for ruining his love life, as he can never live up to their phony fantasy love images. But if we know that Klosterman is well aware of the influence of society in forming and changing our understanding of identity, how can he and we not escape the tail-chasing twist of searching to know ourselves amid both a shifting identity and an anxious fear impelling us to quit the search altogether?

Lucius Seneca, a Roman Stoic philosopher, once said that the life lived best is not the longest life, but the life that lasts long enough to be fulfilled. Is your life fulfilled? Socrates's certainly was, and Chuck is trying to follow him. It's only necessary to dare, to be brave enough to make your wishes come true, and to realize the life you have always dreamed of. Consider Chuck as our exemplar, our modern Socrates, a person who dares to write about popular culture. Chuck reflects on the relations between rock music and social frameworks, and dared to publish a book about metal rock at the nexus of rural culture and the search for self-identity. Chuck actually created what he was looking for. He says of *Fargo Rock City*: "It was the kind of book that I always wanted to read, and

could never find” ([thesocietypages.org/officehours/2010/02/07](https://thesocietypages.org/officehours/2010/02/07)). So he wrote it!

Seneca said that it is not true that we don’t dare because things are difficult, but things are difficult because we don’t dare. Chuck’s creative exploration of today’s pop-culture helps us to understand American culture; his provocative attitudes, written in plain language, seduce his readers while making them think. These are the things that made him an icon of post-modern culture, a modern day Socrates, and an exemplar of stoic virtues!

Socrates was the wisest of men, not because of his knowledge, but because he understood his ignorance. Understanding that we do not know who we are, and appreciating that the quest for self-knowledge is a mysterious and puzzled one is the condition which makes the daring search possible. Chuck inspires us to reflect on the relationship between our love of glam rock music and the difficulty of knowing ourselves. Our reflections do not give us the definitive answer to the question, *Who am I?* But this isn’t a reason to quit asking the question. Instead, Chuck inspires us to ask the question whose answer is elusive and ever shifting. Perhaps our glam rock identity is not a superficial search for money or fame, but the more important task of finding ourselves amid the masks we wear and the masks worn by our glam rock heroes.

# 4

## Reading, Writing, and Thinking with Chuck

SETH VANNATTA

Chuck cops to his own BS in *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*. He admits to contriving his personality through a limited number of consciously selected conversational devices. He writes:

My witty banter and cerebral discourse is always completely contrived. Right now, I have three and a half dates' worth of material, all of which I pretend to deliver spontaneously. This is my strategy: If I can just coerce women into the last half of that fourth date, it's anyone's ball game. I've beaten the system: I've broken the code; I've slain the Minotaur. If we part ways on that fourth evening without some kind of conversational disaster, she probably digs me. Or at least she *thinks* she digs me, because who she digs is not really me. (p. 7).

Is Chuck just a phony, trying to get into his dates' pants, or should we cut the guy some slack and figure out if he's telling us something deeper about the human condition?

### **Chuck's Full of It (But at Least He Knows It)**

I think that Chuck's just admitting to the inevitability of being slightly inauthentic in our relationships. I mean, who could really "be themselves" on a first few dates? After all it's really hard to be ourselves when we don't really know who we are. I once told a group of middle schoolers at Casady School in Oklahoma City, where I used to teach, that they should break

certain rules. The most important of these rules was “Be Yourself.” Telling a twelve-year-old to be herself, when she is in the hormone-drenched flux of change and socialization, is as futile as attempting to avoid contriving one’s discourse on a first date.

Baring your soul on a first date isn’t really realistic, and it’s not necessarily more authentic than just admitting that your conversation on that date is somewhat staged. We’re in a constant struggle to know who we are, and so part of that struggle is going through the contrived banter of first and second dates. So what’s the best path to this elusive self-knowledge?

When I taught junior high in Oklahoma City, one year our theme was “self-discovery.” We had the slogan posted on the wall in colorful construction paper as the background to famous quotations by great thinkers of the past from Socrates to Einstein. Perhaps we were suggesting that the purpose of education is to discover ourselves, and so maybe we thought that we could find out who we are by doing our homework.

## Reading Is a Bore

Chuck secretly suspects that he hates reading. Like many of my seventh graders and like some of us, Chuck feels as though reading is something that he forces himself to do. And he suspects that many people might consider him irrelevant because of this. I’m not sure this is the case. I *do* find Chuck relevant, and his remarks about reading don’t piss me off or disappoint me as if I were Chuck’s junior-high English teacher. Chuck tells us that since he writes at roughly the same speed as he reads, he feels as if he should be writing, which is what he is paid to do. This makes sense.

I suspect that many of us actually feel the same way Chuck does. I admit that just because reading is boring doesn’t mean that reading is not the route to self-knowledge. But must we bolt ourselves to desks in libraries to figure out who we are? Surely not. Since Chuck suggests that writing, not reading, seems a more valuable way to spend his time, and since so much of his writing is in the service of self-understanding, perhaps we can write our way to self-knowledge.

Often I feel just as Chuck does, that reading is almost passive, a “neutral, reactive way to spend an evening” (*KYL*, p.

166). (By the way when people hear what I do for a living, they often ask me if I “love to read.” This question always strikes me as strange, and I almost never know how to answer. I do not “love to read” any more than Chuck does, but I certainly like reading more than *not* reading. But in this way, I do not “love breathing” either. And I have never and will never use the phrase, “curl up with a novel,” which makes my skin crawl).

### **Is Writing Difficult?**

Instead of reading and getting diminishing returns on my reading, I feel I need to write. People often ask me if writing is difficult, which is a tough question. My inclination when asked about the difficulty of writing is to search for some underlying assumption in the question about writing. I suppose those who ask about the difficulty of writing mean to ask me whether or not it is hard to hold all of your ideas inside your head in an organized way and then exert them onto a computer screen. If such a rephrasing of their question is acceptable, then a false premise in their question emerges. Writing is *not*, as they assume, a process of transmitting the inside of oneself onto the outside world. Rather, writing is a function of attending to one’s thoughts.

### **What Is Thinking?**

If writing means attending to the thoughts in our heads, then what does it mean to think? What is thinking? Is the process of thinking an application of an organized concept in our heads onto the messy particularities of our experience? Do I organize my world in thought, and do I exert some thinking power over my external environment? Such a conception of thinking subtly suggests that there is a little me inside myself doing the thinking, a ghost in my bodily machine.

Many philosophers have worked with such a conception. Plato offered us the idea that our soul is like a chariot, whose driver was our capacity for rationality. The rational part of our soul, which does math and makes sensible arguments about how to rate rock bands, drives the horses to pull the chariot, and these horses represent our appetitive and spirited natures,

these last two horses doing all of the Cocoa Puff eating, SoCo and Lime drinking, and nemesis fighting.

René Descartes told us that there is a thinking substance, the mind, which is separate from the body and unlike the body, is not extended in space. Descartes thought that there were really only two things in the world, minds, which do all the thinking, imagining, and doubting, and bodies, which include all the tangible stuff of the world. Immanuel Kant figured that the only way we could make any sense of the world was if all of our judgments about it were accompanied by an “I” that does all the thinking. (He called this the unity of apperception, an ego which necessarily accompanied all of our thoughts).

The philosophical question accompanying the supposition of a thinking self or a rational subject is *how do we have access to ourselves as thinkers?* Chuck seems to wonder this all the time in his writing. He is mesmerized by Britney Spears’s seeming lack of insight into who she is and what she represents. Britney seems oblivious to the fact that she represents an icon of unavailable sexuality, that society fantasizes about her veiled and protected sexuality (at least at the time of his interview).

In *The Visible Man* Klosterman’s character, Y——, the arrogant “scientist,” who has the ability to cloak himself and “objectively” observe people without being seen, seems to think that he can discover who people *really* are by watching them when they’re alone. Y—— is convinced that his subjects play a variety of roles in their lives of work, of friendships, and of relationships. Y—— thinks that beneath this all, he’ll find these subjects’ “essence,” their true selves. Y——’s therapist and we readers are left speculating on how Y——’s quest for a true understanding of someone else is a mirror, reflecting the opacity of ourselves to ourselves. Do we really know who we, ourselves— independent of our work selves, social selves, and romantic selves, our personas—are?

Chuck is befuddled by Val Kilmer’s inflated sense of self-knowledge. Kilmer claims to know what it is like to shoot a man *better* than Doc Holliday, who really gunned people down, and Kilmer claims to know what it is like to fly a fighter jet *better* than those who have actually been ejected from an F15. The paradox of how an actor could think he knows himself better



than someone who actually does the things that the actor portrays in a film brings us again to the difficult question of how we know ourselves at all.

Philosophers have offered all sorts of answers at this question of how we know ourselves. Descartes answered this question by saying that we do have a clear access to our thinking selves. All we need to do to be sure of the mind that does the thinking is try to doubt it. Descartes doubted everything that could be doubted, the world around us, the concepts of science and math, and more. But he could not seem to doubt the fact that he himself was doing the doubting, the thinking. Hence, he famously said, "I think, therefore I am." The thinking self, the mind inside the bodily machine was just that self-evident to him.

Kant argued that our understanding of the world is the result of our application of some concepts in our minds to the world that we experience through our sights, sounds, smells, and feels. According to Kant, when we blow off our reading and sit to watch *Saved by the Bell* or listen to Wilco on our iPods, those objects of our sense perception, our eyes and ears, conform to the concepts in our minds. The problem is that we don't have access to these concepts while they're working. What we see, the trite lessons learned by Running Zack or the underrated semi-geniusness of Jeff Tweedy, occurs right at the intersection of our reception of these things through our senses and our application of concepts to them. Without the concepts these things would be meaningless, but since they always mean something, our concepts are always working. Kant seemed to be saying that we cannot figure anything out about our own thinking while we're doing the thinking. We are blind to the working of our minds as our minds do the work.

So what are our alternative approaches to self-knowledge? Do we even know who is doing the thinking? How do we go about grasping the *I* that thinks? Do we, as Chuck does, drive around and wonder about the meaning of our relationships with former lovers? Do we just reflect on the stuff we like, such as crappy *Saved by the Bell* reruns and transcendent Wilco tracks? That seems to be part of the story, but philosophers have been trying to figure this out for quite some time.

## Who Am I?

Philosophers in the twentieth century tried to answer this question in many ways. Sigmund Freud suggested that consciousness, the mind, was in reality an *effect* of a structured unconscious, to which we have a sort of indirect access through interpretations of our dream-life, interpretations of our relationship with our mothers, (what did it really mean when she called us “nice bugger?”), and interpretation of our unconscious habits, (such as our self-reflexive laughing when things are not actually funny, as when we find ourselves without exact change in Germany).

Michel Foucault showed that the rational subject, the *I* that does all the thinking, (which Descartes and Kant had been presupposing as a continuous foundation for thought), was in fact a constructed product of language and discourse. The thinking self was not continuous through each cultural epoch, but instead a construction relative to the discourse of each social sphere. Foucault doubted that some neutral rock critic, Klosterman or otherwise, could float through time making judgments about which band rocked the hardest, (Led Zeppelin, not AC/DC, Chuck). Instead the language we use to describe the world somehow shapes our conception of who is doing the describing. Chuck does not criticize Coldplay as some sort of king standing above his realm of rock. Rather, Chuck is just a construction of the language he uses to characterize them, that is, “the shittiest fucking band I’ve ever heard in my entire fucking life” (*Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*, p. 3). (I’m not sure what this says about Chuck, but I do not mean to suggest that the critic inside his head is made only of foulness and filth).

Another philosopher, Martin Heidegger, offered the idea we should abandon the attempt to retreat inward to discover ourselves. Instead, we’re always thrown into the world, a world of things, relationships, people, trends, and culture. For Heidegger, we are a unique sort of being, (the human kind), for whom *Being* is a question, and this *Being* includes our *own* being. For Heidegger, we can only recover ourselves through our engagement with the world of things. One way he puts this is that instead of doubting or casting aside all the inauthentic, everyday ways of engaging in the world, including obsessing over *The Real World* or watching ourselves die while playing

The Sims, we must restore ourselves in and through all that inauthentic junk. Heidegger suggested that following the crowd was one of our inevitable activities, but an activity shot through with the possibility of finding our own authentic possibilities. We inevitably fall into a mode of anonymity, watching the shows that everyone watches and following fashion trends or counter-fashion trends along with the crowd.

### Thinking about Thinking

What we see through this brief history of thinking about thinking is that the process of thinking is tied up with the question of self-identity and self-knowledge. If we give up the notion of a stable, certain, self-transparent *I* who exerts my understanding on the world, then we are left with a sort of unstable, transient activity of attending to things in the world. Through these things, we learn about ourselves. Such a notion brings us back to Chuck, who once said, (and I paraphrase), *My writing is different because it's things I'm interested in, and I'm really just writing about myself and using those subjects as a prism.* Chuck is writing about himself, but he is using things to refract his thoughts through. For Heidegger, this is not a fault; this is an inevitability. What things does Chuck like? Chuck likes what everybody likes. Chuck likes pop culture. And nothing is more inauthentic and crowd-following than pop culture.

But what is thinking? I suggested above that thinking is the process of attending to our thoughts, which might seem utterly circular. But if we give up the notion of a thinking self doing and exerting the thoughts, then what are we attending to when we think, and how does such a process work?

### Thinking Is Daydreaming on a Long Drive through Montana

Consider why reading is so often an activity that we feel we're forcing ourselves to do. Many of us encountered problems reading as young, or old, students. Why was reading so difficult? For me, and for almost all of my students, reading was and is hard because our minds wander away from the narrative on the assigned pages and toward something else. As a young student

I thought I was alone, the only kid in class who had this problem. I was not alone, and it has taken me over thirty years to realize that the tendency to drift in thought did not have to be a shortcoming as a student. Drifting in thought could be a potential virtue. The proper skill I needed to cultivate was in fact thinking, but thinking meant putting the book down and attending to these thoughts with a level of active engagement. The stuff of thought, the content of our daydreams, is a potential goldmine. Attending to these thoughts, this stream of consciousness, as William James called it, is the first step in writing. The next step is walking to the computer and documenting the stuff of that realm.

### What Goes On Inside Chuck's Head

If to say that when we're thinking we are *in thought* is more than mere metaphor, then we need to attend to the logic of being-in-thought. How do thoughts connect with one another in the stream of consciousness? Such a question brings us back to those modern philosophers (such as Descartes and Kant). The logic at work in much of the philosophy of these moderns, those who presupposed the continuous foundation of the thinking subject, was a logic of classification. Aristotle gave us this propositional logic, in which we find subjects connected to predicates by linking verbs. The subject is the particular of our experience and we put it under a category, a predicate. *U2 is overrated*, in this way of thinking, just means that the particular band, *U2*, belongs to the category of all things overrated. *U2* is the same as those other bands in that category and different from others not in it.

Classificatory logic, however, is not the only logic available to our thinking, and I am offering the hypothesis that when we attend to our thoughts the way Klosterman does when driving across the country visiting the places where famous rock stars died, our thoughts are connected not by the logic of classification, but by the logic of similarity. Foucault, one of those philosophers who questioned the continuity and self-sameness of the thinking subject, refers to the logic of Petrus Ramus. Ramian logic was the Protestant Reformation's alternative to the Aristotelian logic inherited by the Catholic theologians and modern philosophers.

Foucault was attracted to this logic in part because he thought that the logic of classification was a mode of discourse which made possible all sorts of dividing practices, a logic which erected walls and cells into which we could categorize types of behavior and people. The modern world, moving with the momentum of classificatory logic, divided up things into all sorts of binary oppositions, sane and insane, healthy and unhealthy, male and female, normal and deviant, civilized and barbarous, even overrated and underrated. Foucault viewed the modern subject as a sort of striving *not* to be the marginalized other of all of these binary oppositions. The thinking self was a product, a construct of the culture whose mode of discourse was this type of dividing language and logic. According to Foucault then, the mind inside Chuck's head is just the attempt not to be as shitty and fake as Coldplay.

The alternative logic, the logic of similarity, views the world as an ongoing play of resemblances and similarities. The structure of the world, on this account, is analogy, and the philosopher who writes analogically that *life is robbery*, for instance, discloses something structural about nature. Foucault uses the character of Don Quixote as an example of someone wandering in the modern world of classificatory logic, and by his constant search for similarities, appearing to be crazy. Quixote is convinced that windmills are giants to be attacked. Classificatory logic had banished all resemblances into the impoverished realm of mere imagination. In such a culture, Quixote is insane, living only in his head.

Perhaps it's too easy to dismiss this logic of similarity and say with the crowd that Quixote was in fact crazy. But does such a dismissal discount our actual experience of attending to our thoughts? When we think about our daydreaming, how does one thought lead to another? Our thoughts seem connected by an endless string of resemblances, which re-present that which they signify. When Chuck signs Luke Dick's copy of his book, (See "How Chuck Got Chicks") the signature is meant to re-present the actual author, Chuck.

This re-presentation of the objects of our thought is like Klosterman's experience of walking down the stairs of dead Replacements guitarist Bob Stinson's apartment after failing to learn much about Stinson's death in *Killing Yourself to Live*. Klosterman recalls listening to "Bastards of the Young" on his

car radio, weeks after the funeral of his friend who had died of cancer. He burst out crying because “Bastards of the Young” was his friend’s favorite Replacements song, and the song lyrics discuss burying people and struggling with the memory of the death of loved ones. The remarkable trend on which Klosterman reflects is that eventually, any Replacements song would trigger his memory of “Bastards of the Young,” which would trigger the memory of his friend. The way his thought connected was by resemblance, and the similarity in Chuck’s thoughts and memories bore the presence of his friend, and the entirety of his painful loss, even if the signifiers had been removed chain link by chain link from the actual cause of his sadness.

When Klosterman listens to the four KISS solo albums in *Killing Yourself to Live*, he reflects on his potential over-reliance on pop culture as a prism through which to understand the world. Chuck writes:

Has it really come to this? Have I become so reliant on popular culture that it’s the only way that I can understand anything? (p. 214)

Klosterman hopes that he would have the better sense not to relate the potential death of his mother or a Rwandan genocide to rock music resemblances. And I feel sympathy for his hesitation. But he proceeds to reflect on his many romantic relationships through the prism of former members of KISS. The structure of his thinking is that of analogy. Chuck writes: “Yet here I am in Montana, and this is what is on my mind” (p. 214). He could have written, “This is the realm of my thinking. I am *in* thought, and as I attend to the play of resemblances therein, this is what presents itself to me.” He proceeds:

Diane is sort of my own personal Gene Simmons . . . Lenore is more like Paul Stanley . . . Quincy is, of course, Ace . . . Dee Dee would be Peter . . . And this process does not end with these four, either; I once had an extended fling with an actress named Siouxie, . . . I mentally compare her to Eric Carr, a man who actually played drums for KISS longer than Peter Criss . . . I dated a photographer in Ohio . . . she was like guitarist Bruce Kulick . . . There was a woman in Fargo whom I met at the mall . . . Tina was my Vinnie Vincent. (pp. 214–16)

Now, this goes on for three pages, and I have cited Chuck enough to let you see the string of resemblances which present themselves to him and that he lets his readers in on. Now, you're saying to yourself, this is just a writer's device, a conceptual scheme through which he can refract his self-involved obsession with his sexual history. Yes and no. The logic of similarity expresses the nature of things by revealing their structure as analogy. The logic gains its momentum by our attention to it. But this does not detract from the fact that our thoughts are connected by it. That it enables us, after we had attended to our thoughts, to make use of it as a consciously applied schema speaks to its richness and power, not to its poverty or weakness.

Two things are going on here. One is the question of thinking, the logic of our thoughts. The other is about the thinker, the one who first attends to her thoughts and then appropriates their logic of similarity and resemblance as a powerful plan to understand the world.

Recall that Chuck said that he was really writing about himself and using popular culture as a prism. Why could he not just write about himself directly and spare us the details of the history of the members of a band, whose bassist front man was most known for his uber-long tongue wagging?

### **Know Thyself through Your Favorite Band**

Could it be, thinking against Descartes, that we do not have such an easy access to ourselves? Klosterman takes up this question explicitly in his first chapter of *Eating the Dinosaur*. During an interview with the American documentary filmmaker, Errol Morris, Klosterman wants to know why people answer questions in interviews when asked. Klosterman has spent most of his career in journalism *asking* the questions in interviews, but in his more recent fame, he has been on the other end of the dialogue, *answering* questions of interviewers. He wonders why he answers the questions. In one of Morris's responses, we get a gem of philosophical speculation quite relevant to my musings in this chapter.

I'm not sure we truly have privileged access to our own minds. I don't think we have any idea who we are. I think we're engaged in a constant battle to figure out who we are. (p. 5)

If Morris is correct, and I think he is, then Heidegger was correct as well. We are inevitably thrown into a world and can only recover ourselves through our engagement in the mode of anonymity, the mode of following the crowd. Klosterman has built his young career following the crowd. He likes what the crowd likes, and this is, of course, popular culture.

However, Chuck does not pretend that by his conscious selection of which pop culture trapping to appropriate that he can stylize himself as authentic. He admitted to being fully contrived on his first few dates. He only has three and a half dates worth of material, which he pretends to deliver off the cuff. But since Chuck doesn't know who he is, how can he be himself on the date? We are in a constant struggle to know who we are, just as Morris said, and so part of that struggle is going through that contrived banter of first and second dates, although I think we should avoid "coercing" women into anything, including just staying into the last half of the fourth date.

Is Chuck a phony through and through, or does Chuck also strive after the authentic life? I think that Chuck's admission of his BS on his first dates is a wiser confession than some might think. Chuck *knows* he's ignorant of who he is. And he knows he's trying to figure out who he is. Self-knowledge is the condition for authenticity, surely. But Chuck also knows that an authentic existence cannot be had by any direct approach, as that would only register as fake. Nor can authenticity be achieved only by a rejection of tradition, authority, and all that a counter-culture has deemed co-opted by the mainstream establishment.

This is especially true since the idea of authenticity by way of rejection of the mainstream has itself been co-opted and sold back to youngsters at the mall repeatedly. Even attempts to be genuine by coloring one's hair purple can seem as inauthentic as drinking Mountain Dew because we self-identify with NASCAR driver, Dale Earnhardt, Jr. Since we're all thrown into this world, (we did not choose to be here), and we are all fallen in the Biblical sense, (we are imperfect), we must inevitably take up a relation to the world of fleeting things, tenuous relationships, and shifting projects.

The world of fleeting things includes the junk of pop culture, such as *Saved by the Bell* reruns. (By the way, much like Chuck, the summer of 1993 included for me the routine of, after



bussing tables from 6:30 A.M. to 2:30 P.M., watching four *Saved by the Bell* reruns in the afternoon . . . instead of reading. My four went for ninety minutes, the middle portion of which contained two episodes, to which I would flip back and forth until I could give full attention to the last episode. Tracking the plot development of two episodes of *Saved by the Bell* simultaneously was, well, not difficult).

The world of tenuous relationships includes our own personal narratives reconstructed through the filter of rock music icons. I, too, went through my Led Zeppelin phase, and I declared as Chuck says every adolescent male does, “Wow. I just realized something: This shit is perfect. In fact, this record is vastly superior to all other forms of music on the entire planet, so this is all I will ever listen to, all the time” (*Killing Yourself to Live*, p. 200). While we’re on the topic of Zeppelin, recall the logic of what makes them so popular. Their “rib-crushing” qualities are their resemblances:

They sound like an English blues band. They sound like a warm blooded brachiosaur. They sound like Hannibal’s assault across the Alps. They sound sexy and sexist and sexless. They sound dark but stoned; they sound smart but dumb; they seem older than you, but just barely. Led Zeppelin sounds like the way a cool guy acts. Or—more specifically—Led Zeppelin sounds like a certain kind of cool guy: they sound like the kind of cool guy every man vaguely thinks he has the potential to be, if just a few things about the world were somehow different. (p. 199)

Now granted, in *some* of Klosterman’s logic of similarity, he swings and misses, but I think he did tap into some structure of nature revealed by way of analogy.

Our own shifting projects include those phases of our rock band tastes which seem to embody the structure of our experience by analogy. But we do still have an existential task. We must recuperate ourselves and achieve authenticity in and through these transient styles. This is our ongoing project, and through an exemplification of the attention to one’s thoughts, Chuck illustrates the insights of attending to our thoughts and the logic of similarity which give them order. Furthermore, Klosterman shows the wealth of value they provide as prisms to know ourselves.

Finally, what Heidegger gives us as a description of authenticity concerns the realization of our mortality. We must question the direction of the crowd when we are called as if by another voice, our conscience, to do so. If we attend to this call, we become individuals and we realize our ownmost possibilities, as we anticipate the possibility of our own death. We project authentic existence in anxious resoluteness toward our deaths. Klosterman's anxiety and obsessive writing over death suggest that he is on a long path and constant struggle for the authenticity which he knows cannot be had by any easy formula.

I think his writing helps us travel the same path. He realizes, alongside Heidegger, the intimate relationship between living and dying. We live towards our own deaths. The more this possibility is a reality to us, the better chance we have of living up to our ownmost possibilities. Chuck writes, "We are always dying, all the time. That's what living is; living is dying, little by little. It's a sequenced collection of individualized deaths" (*Killing Yourself to Live*, pp. 112–13). Now, we do not need to break up our experience into little atomic parts as Klosterman does to understand that living is a living toward our own death. But perhaps the extent to which people strive *not* to know the reality of their living as dying is coextensive with their living in an inauthentic rut. Their fear of death causes them to blind themselves to themselves. Their thinking self is, as Foucault suggested and as Freud intimated, a retreat from the marginalized Other, represented by decay and death. Owning up to the inevitability of our own deaths helps us recover ourselves from the crap which we are always caught up in.

## Writing, Thinking, and not Reading

Is writing difficult? If Descartes was correct, and, in order to write, our thinking mind must hold its knowledge inside in an organized way and then transmit it onto a computer screen in an exertion of magical proportions, the writing is more than difficult—it is impossible. Writing, as a product of attending to your thoughts, is not hard. You just need to put down your reading and attend to your thoughts and the logic that structures them, much like Chuck does for us.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I'm indebted to Kenneth Stickers for his work on the logic of similitude which I incorporated in this chapter.

# 5

## Fake Love Lives

CRAIG ROOD

“No woman will ever satisfy me,” he says. And with a title like “This Is Emo,” it’s easy to suspect Chuck Klosterman wallows in self-pity. But he doesn’t just spew out his faults and frustrations. He says that when it comes to love, many of us fall short of our ideal and are left frustrated and confused. Klosterman claims it’s not his personal problem, but a cultural one.

On the surface, Klosterman’s argument makes a lot of sense. While most sixteen-year-olds writing English reports can articulate that the mass media creates expectations that are difficult—and often impossible—to fulfill, Klosterman goes beyond the traditional analysis of the media’s influence on body image and violence to claim that the media manipulates the way we view relationships and love. He blames Coldplay for songs that “deliver an amorphous, irrefutable interpretation of how being in love is supposed to feel” and for persuading people to want that feeling for real (*Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*, p. 4). He blames actors like John Cusack for creating a cult following among women for his role as Lloyd Dobler in *Say Anything*. He blames all of us for letting art and life become interchangeable.

Klosterman’s claim is intriguing, but what does it mean beneath the surface? Philosophically, what does Klosterman mean when he says no woman will ever satisfy him?

## **She Loves Him, She Loves Him Not; She Loves Him, He Is Not**

Klosterman claims that others can't satisfy us because we judge them against the impossible standards set by movies, love-songs, and sitcoms. We screwed up by letting art become the ideal that we hopelessly stumble toward. And we're going to be frustrated and a bit anxious as we constantly fall short.

In Klosterman's Lloyd Dobler/John Cusack example, he claims that viewers mistook the role of a character for the actual person who did the acting, and viewers fell in love with the person in the role. In "This Is Emo," Klosterman writes, "It appears that countless women born between the years of 1965 and 1978 are in love with John Cusack. . . . But here's what none of these upwardly mobile women seem to realize: They don't love John Cusack. They love Lloyd Dobler. When they seek Mr. Cusack, they are still seeing the optimistic, charming, loquacious teenager he played in *Say Anything*" (pp. 2–3). The women, including Melissa Vosen (See "Killing Myself to Live in Carnival Square"), love a role played by a man, not the man himself. Klosterman continues:

And these upwardly mobile women are not alone. We all convince ourselves of things like this—not necessarily about *Say Anything*, but about any fictionalized portrayals of romance that happen to hit us in the right place, at the right time. This is why I will never be completely satisfied by a woman and this is why the kind of woman I tend to find attractive will never be satisfied by me. We will both measure our relationship against the prospect of fake love. (*Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*, p. 3)

In philosophical terms, Klosterman's point illustrates the distinction in metaphysics between appearance and reality, between what seems to be and what is. In everyday terms, it means the love-deprived twenty-something is living in a fantasy world and doesn't realize it. Lloyd Dobler doesn't exist, and the women seeking him are bound to be disappointed. Furthermore, men will become disillusioned because they will be judged against a standard that is based in fiction (and men do the same to women). Klosterman explains:

If Cusack and I were competing for the same woman, I could easily accept losing. However, I don't really feel like John and I were 'competing' for the girl I'm referring to, inasmuch as her relationship to Cusack was confined to watching him as a two-dimensional projection, pretending to be characters who don't actually exist. Now, there was a time when I would have thought that detachment would have given me a huge advantage over Johnny C., inasmuch as *my* relationship with this woman included things like 'talking on the phone' and 'nuzzling under umbrellas' and 'eating pancakes.' However, I have come to realize that I perceived this competition completely backward; it was definitely an unfair battle, but not in my favor. It was unfair in Cusack's favor. I never had a chance. (p. 2)

Klosterman could never be Cusack. But what's worse: women would always want him to be like Cusack and—without realizing this—he would try to be like Cusack (or maybe Zack Efron, Vin Diesel, or Morgan Freeman).

### **Klosterman, played by Chuck Klosterman**

Klosterman's point about the influence fictional characters have on our own sense of self and character raises questions about individual identity and how someone becomes who they are. To a large extent, identity seems learned. Who we are and who we want to be are constantly influenced by our surroundings, including those around us. To some extent, we're all actors, trying to play parts. A passage from existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* helps to illustrate this point:

Let us consider this waiter in the café. His movement is quick and forward, a little too precise, a little too rapid. He comes toward the customers with a step a little too quick. He bends forward a little too eagerly; his voice, his eyes express an interest a little too solicitous for the order of the client. . . . All his behavior seems to us a game. . . . He is playing, he is amusing himself. But what is he playing? We need not watch long before we can explain it: he is playing *at being* a waiter in a café. . . . This obligation is not different from that which is imposed on all tradesmen. Their condition is wholly one of ceremony. (p. 82)

The waiter in the café plays a part, a role he's learned from experience—from movies, from watching other waiters, from

being a waiter and adjusting to customers' expectations of waiters. Beyond his first day of work, I doubt he ever thought, "I need to figure out how to be like a waiter." Still, he tries. And the fact that he tries makes his actions seem unnatural and inauthentic.

Several contemporary philosophers would argue that we all role play. We're always acting or performing (hence this theory of identity is called performativity). Performing in this context does not necessarily mean deceit, though some roles are more sincere than others. Judith Butler, a feminist philosopher, claims that this is what happens with gender. Echoing Simone de Beauvoir's claim that "one is not born a woman, but becomes one," Butler asks:

Does being female constitute a 'natural fact' or a cultural performance, or is 'naturalness' constituted through discursively constrained performative acts that produce the body through and within the categories of sex? (*Gender Trouble*, pp. xxviii–xxix)

Butler's question gets at the fact that women are not born with an innate desire to wear makeup or paint their fingernails. Women learn their gender (or choose to rebel against gender norms as did glam rockers in the 1980s). Through repeated performances—by themselves, with others, and in fictionalized portrayals—and feedback from others, women learn what it means to be a woman; for the most part, women try to fill this role and other men and women expect it.

Just as gender is performed, so are other aspects of our identity (like our jobs, as the passage from Sartre suggests). As I compose this essay, I think and act like a writer (and so does Klosterman). I've developed my own approach, but this approach exists within the context of what I was taught in school, what I've seen in movies, accounts of famous authors (many of which are tragic, including Sartre's addiction to Corydrane), and narratives I've learned from friends. I cannot sit down at a computer without this background, without this knowledge of the writer's role.

Likewise, you, as a reader, come to this essay with expectations of what it means to be a reader. In part, your knowledge has been influenced by the culture you are part of: you have learned about the best environments for reading, how to hold

the book, what kinds of things (if any) to write in the margins and when, and so on. (And you'll probably be self-conscious of this for at least the next paragraph—or stop reading out of spite.)

This point about our identity being performed shows up throughout Klosterman's work. In his analysis of MTV's show *The Real World*, Klosterman writes that by the third season both the characters on screen and his real life acquaintances "started becoming personality templates, devoid of complication and obsessed with melodrama" (*Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*, p. 39). In the preface to his interview of Britney Spears, Klosterman explains that he doesn't feel like he knows the real Britney, and, what's worse, neither does she: she seemed "unable to differentiate between (a) the person who was famous and (b) the person she actually was" (*Chuck Klosterman IV*, p. 11). And in *Eating the Dinosaur*, Klosterman complains about fake laughter. He encourages readers to "Watch *The Daily Show* in an apartment full of young progressives and you'll hear them consciously (and unconvincingly) over-laugh at every joke that's delivered, mostly to assure everyone else that they're appropriately informed and predictably leftist" (p. 173).

Our identity and views of the world are largely learned and performed. We create who we are, and the project of identity creation is ongoing. Specifically, Klosterman suggests in "This Is Emo" that our understanding of love is learned. And he is right that the mass media often isn't the best teacher. From our favorite movies and television shows, we can learn what a romantic evening and first kiss should be like, and how people communicate and look at each other. One of the problems, Klosterman notes, is that "The mass media causes sexual misdirection: It prompts us to *need* something deeper than what we *want*" (*Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*, p. 6). If identity is a performance, the roles we cast for each other are often unrealistic (insane, perhaps); it's like expecting a third grader to play Hamlet—or expecting that woman in the coffee shop to be as emotionally clichéd and flirty as women in all *Lifetime* movies and romantic comedies since at least 1989.

The problem of fake love affects all of us. Klosterman laments that whenever meeting others, "I notice that they all seem to share a single unifying characteristic: 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). Later on, he tries to analyze the cause of this phenomenon:

The main problem with mass media is that it makes it impossible to fall in love with any acumen of normalcy. There is no ‘normal,’ because everybody is being twisted by the same sources simultaneously. You can’t compare your relationship with the playful couple who lives next door, because they’re probably modeling themselves after Chandler Bing and Monica Geller. Real people are actively trying to live like fake people, so real people are no less fake. Every comparison becomes impractical. This is why the impractical has become totally acceptable; impracticality almost seems cool. (pp. 4–5)

We’re in love with fiction, according to Klosterman. We expect ourselves and those living and breathing before us to act and feel like the projections we see on the screen. They do, to an extent, but they also fall short. And we’re disappointed.

Can we ever experience others for who they truly are? Can *they* ever be truly authentic? Can *we*?

### **An Authentic Performer?**

“Real people are actively trying to live like fake people, so real people are no less fake” Klosterman writes (pp. 4–5). But what does *real* mean in this context? Is there a natural self, a self immune from the media? A self immune from others? (The obvious answer is no. But keep reading; the detailed answer is worth your time. For real.)

Klosterman claims that “art and life have become completely interchangeable” (p. 8)—that is, fiction and reality have bled and neither is completely separable. Our lives are like Plato’s allegory of the cave: we’re all trapped in a cave, watching shadows on the wall, thinking these shadows are really real, not understanding that they are imperfect reflections of what is real. To modify Plato slightly: the cave is now a movie theater with reclining seats—but we are no less deceived. Surfer kids in California and Emo kids in New Jersey (and even farm kids in North Dakota) see fake love and think it’s real love.



Klosterman says we all confuse real and fake love. But “love” in the movies is a kind of love that doesn’t work outside of the movie theater (Plato scorned art as being an imitation of an imitation). We aren’t John Cusack and the girl walking on the street isn’t Anne Hathaway (at least not on my streets; and yes, the streets in North Dakota are paved; and no, there are only about eleven people in the state who actually sound like the characters in *Fargo*). Yet we pretend and maintain the delusion that our everyday life should be like the lives we see in sitcoms and movies, according to Klosterman. We continue to choose the fake world over the real world, and we continue to be disappointed.

Klosterman explains, “But this is how media devolution works: It creates an archetype that eventually dwarfs its origin. By now, the ‘Woody Allen Personality Type’ has far greater cultural importance than the man himself” (*Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*, p. 5). We both act and expect others to act like Woody Allen (or anyone else famous), though, for most of us, we aren’t completely aware. From our experiences, we learn what it means to be funny, what it means to be an interesting person, and what it means to have an exciting relationship. But when such meanings are modeled after fiction, we’re likely to be disappointed. We fail to meet our expectations because our expectations come from movie scripts. Trying to adapt these scripts to our three-dimensional world is often impractical. (Klosterman’s argument rests on the premise that fictional relationships are unattainable because the expectations are too high, when, in fact, they may be too low).

In light of Klosterman’s 2009 marriage, we might say Klosterman was mistaken: he thought he would never be satisfied, but now he seems to have found someone. We might be tempted, but the version of his self that wrote *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs* anticipates such an objection. After explaining that no woman will ever satisfy him, he continues:

Should I be writing such thoughts? Perhaps not. Perhaps it’s a bad idea. I can definitely foresee a scenario where that first paragraph could come back to haunt me, especially if I somehow became marginally famous. If I become marginally famous, I will undoubtedly be interviewed by someone in the media, and the interviewer will inevitably ask, “Fifteen years ago, you wrote that no woman could

ever satisfy you. Now that you've been married for almost five years, are those words still true?" And I will have to say, "Oh, God no. Those were the words of an entirely different person—a person whom I can't even relate to anymore. Honestly, I can't image an existence without \_\_\_\_\_. She satisfies me in ways that I never even considered. She saved me, really."

Now, I will be lying. I won't really feel that way. But I'll certainly say those words, and I'll deliver them with the utmost sincerity, even though those sentiments will not be there. . . . But here's the thing: I *do* believe that. It's the truth now, and it will be in the future. (p. 1)

Saying this (rationalizing this?) makes his argument apply across time. He claims that no woman will ever satisfy him—not in two months, two years, or two decades. Never. His claim isn't about love and identity for a particular person at a particular time and place, but for everyone, always. This makes his argument philosophical—and makes Klosterman's angry critics call him arrogant (or an "ass-head," but seriously, who calls someone an "ass-head?"—answer: Mark Ames).

## **Authenticity Is Dead—The Media Killed It**

The issues of individual identity and love relate to the nature of reality (philosophers call this metaphysics) and knowledge and our way(s) of knowing (philosophers call this epistemology). Klosterman's analysis raises two basic philosophical questions. A. What's real? B. How do we know?

There are about as many different answers to philosophical questions such as these as there are philosophers. Thales, the father of Western philosophy, claimed that reality was ultimately made of water (ironically, he fell into a well while staring at the sky; I suppose this gets back to my earlier point about identity being learned: philosophers have been accused of having their heads in the clouds ever since). Heraclitus claimed that reality is constant flux. Parmenides said that reality is one, complete, and unchanging. Plato is a hybrid of Heraclitus and Parmenides: for Plato, this world is constantly changing, but that is because we are deceived by our senses; we can acquire knowledge, but only through our reason in contact with another complete and unchanging world—the world of forms. Modern scientists will likely claim an atomic theory,

echoing Greek philosophers like Democritus and Empedocles, in which there is only one, material reality.

Klosterman's most obvious intellectual kin is none of these thinkers, but rather, a contemporary cultural critic, Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard has a more abstract (and obscure) take on Klosterman's point, though their views of reality are basically the same. Rather than say what reality is made up of, Baudrillard claims that we cannot know reality because our experiences are always filtered by language and culture. One of his best known works is *Simulacra and Simulation*. While conventional uses of "simulation" imply intentional deception or artifice, Baudrillard's use suggests that the deception is a necessary part of all our experience. Baudrillard writes:

Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. (*Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 1)

In Klosterman's analysis, Woody Allen represents what Baudrillard calls "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality." Allen is everywhere—with traces found in subsequent movies, your behavior, your neighbors, your friends. According to Klosterman, Allen "made it acceptable for beautiful women to sleep with nerdy, bespectacled goofballs; all we need to do is fabricate the illusion of intellectual humor, and we somehow have a chance" (*Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*, p. 5). But, as Klosterman points out, few realize that Woody Allen (or anyone else famous) is what they are attempting to imitate; in other words, though the original role or archetype is continuously imitated, we are not always aware of or able to identify this origin. To take this a step further, the actors we see in movies today are trying to be in some sense like real people—but they are also trying to act like an actor (a role shaped by other actors from other movies). At the same time, we try to be like them. Given all of this, it's not exactly clear what it means to be authentic.

Baudrillard's phrase, "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality," gets to the heart of post-structuralism, a contemporary take on language and reality. In post-struc-

turalism, the old view of a clear relationship between a word or sound-image (signifier) and a concept (signified) becomes fragmented; more precisely, the relationship between signifier and signified is mutually reinforcing, yet constantly changing. It's like saying that reality influences our language and reality is influenced by language—except the relationship is much messier than that. In Klosterman's terms, "Real people are actively trying to live like fake people, so real people are no less fake" (pp. 4–5). Baudrillard explains that there is "No more mirror of being and appearances, of the real and its concept" (p. 2). Or, to use the linguists' terms, simulacra do not represent a connection between a concept (a signified) and ultimate meaning (a transcendental signifier); simulacra can only point to an endless web of signifiers because there is nothing real and stable to refer to. According to Baudrillard, we are stuck in a world of the hyper-real, deluded by mass culture and unable to access anything directly.

Baudrillard's argument is a new take on Kant (bear with me; it will all make sense in just a bit). Immanuel Kant, an eighteenth-century German philosopher, is best known for what he called his second Copernican Revolution. Just as Copernicus showed that the Sun, not the Earth, was the center of our solar system, so Kant wanted to make a similar inversion for philosophy. (And tragically, Kant succeeded). Many philosophers before Kant's revolution thought reality was the center; a human mind needed to conform to or perceive reality to acquire knowledge. (Our concepts conformed to the objects of our perception according to this paradigm). However, Kant argued the human mind was at the center; knowledge was not acquired, but rather, constructed by the human mind. The mind actively constructs or shapes reality by means of the mind's lenses (what Kant calls forms of intuition and categories of the understanding), like space, time, and causality. We cannot know things-in-themselves (the *noumenal* world) because our mind is always imposing structure on the world; all we can ever know is things as they appear to us (the *phenomenal* world), and thus, our knowledge is incomplete. (The objects of our perception conform to our concepts according to Kant's paradigm).

Baudrillard's metaphysics and epistemology are similar to Kant's. However, rather than claim the existence of *innate* cat-

egories of the mind like Kant, Baudrillard claims that the categories or lenses are *social constructions*. All of our past experience imposes on our present experience. If there is an ultimate reality, or things-in-themselves, we can't know it. According to this view, we can only access hyperreality, a world constructed by us through our language and culture.

Baudrillard's views of culture, language, and reality are notoriously controversial. His book *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (1995) is introduced by a scene in which CNN reporters on the front lines of the Gulf War are watching CNN to figure out what is going on in the war. Baudrillard goes on to argue that the media has simulated our experience of battle and destruction to such an extent that it is impossible for there to be any sense of an underlying reality of the war. Now, I don't think Klosterman is this outrageous, but I do think his analysis of love in the media assumes views similar to Baudrillard's about the nature of reality and the power of the mass media. For instance, in *Eating the Dinosaur*, Klosterman writes, "I get the sense that most of the core questions dwell on the way media perception constructs a fake reality that ends up becoming more meaningful than whatever actually happened" (*Eating the Dinosaur*, back cover). For both Klosterman and Baudrillard, reality is socially constructed through experience, including images and language. But whereas Baudrillard seems content with this, Klosterman seems to retain hope for authenticity—a reality, he implies, that is immune from media.

## Media(tion) and Authenticity

Movies, music, and television are all forms of media; they mediate, or are the means by which we connect to plots, lyrics, and characters, all of which can teach us about things like self-identity and relationships. For Klosterman, the mass media makes everyone a bit artificial: we always perceive others and adapt to be like or unlike them. Klosterman's argument seems powerful until we ask a really basic question: Can we ever be absent from the media? In asking this, I am obviously referring to the mass media, as he does, but I am also pushing his argument a bit further to ask whether the media—both overtly fictional and not—really refers to all of our interactions. In other words, is all of our experience mediated or sit-

uated? By making this shift, the question really becomes: Can we ever exist apart from a context, apart from things in the world?

Aristotle and the empiricists claim that to be alive is to be able to perceive—to see, hear, touch, taste, and smell—and to think. Our mind at birth is *tabula rasa*—a blank slate, upon which experience writes and from which we form our understanding. Our knowledge is learned, and so it has to come from somewhere. We cannot know concepts like “intelligence” or “love” without coming in contact with conceptions of these in the world, conceptions likely to have been influenced by movies, music, novels, sitcoms, our neighbors, and so on. We might create a new concept of love, but the roots of such a concept are ultimately traceable back to experience. *To be* is to be in the world.

Most of us recognize the increasing influence of the mass media, and Klosterman is right to be concerned about its pervasiveness. He jokes that “in the nineteenth century, teenagers merely aspired to have a marriage that would be better than that of their parents” (*Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*, p. 4). The Internet, movies, and sitcoms didn’t become part of everyday life until the twentieth century, but haven’t there always been media, even if not on as massive and pervasive of a scale? Hasn’t all of our knowledge been mediated by the sum of our experiences, including books, plays, newspapers, our neighbors, our past, and our present situation? Doubtless, neither Plato nor Aristotle knew of Kelly Kapowski or Monica Gellar, but don’t you suppose their judgment of women was at least influenced by Helen of Troy or Antigone?

Klosterman wants real love, and thus, real people. On one level, this makes sense: fictions perpetuated by the media can be destructive if we try to enact them in our everyday lives. What’s problematic, philosophically, is that he counts on readers having a clear division between “that which comes from the mass media” and “that which doesn’t,” and his tone suggests that the latter is better. But his main point is that the distinction is false; as he says, “art and life have become interchangeable” (*Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*, p. 8). Yet, by implication, Klosterman longs for a reality that is non-mediated, one that is cut off from context. “A relationship,” Klosterman claims, “based on witty conversation and intellectual discourse” is

just another gimmick, and it's no different than wanting to be with someone because they're thin or rich or the former lead singer of Whiskeytown. And it actually might be worse, because an intellectual relationship isn't real *at all*. My witty banter and cerebral discourse is always completely contrived. (pp. 6–7)

Shortly after, he continues, “she *thinks* she digs me, because who she digs is not really me” (p. 7). What, then, is a *real* basis for a relationship? What, then, is the *real* self?

In fairness to Klosterman, I don't think he would state this outright, but the argument he puts forth in “This Is Emo” implies a Platonic ideal of a pure, unchanging self. Klosterman—like Plato, Kant, and Baudrillard—presumes a lost paradise of pure being (whether the world of forms, the *noumenal* world, or a world apart from culture). The problem is that no such world exists. We can't escape from the media—and more broadly, we can't exist apart from mediation or context. Nor should we try. There is no “real” self completely cut off from the self that sees, breathes, listens, and speaks.

We should not disparage our process of being and knowing as inauthentic or fake, nor flounder in emotional angst. Culture and context do not create a fake world, nor do they disqualify our knowledge or way(s) of knowing. We must exist and know by some means. Our real, “authentic” self—our only self or selves—is one that has to be in this world, the world of people, pop-culture, and everyday performances. The point is not to escape from the mass media or mediation, but to be in control of it. Self-control, Aristotle suggests, means we must not be guided primarily by emo(tion), but by reason and the perceptual evidence of this world—a world which we can understand and change.

What's frightening about Klosterman's diagnosis is that we seem trapped. Everyone's conceptions of love are mediated and, according to him, delusional. Klosterman explains that “Fake love is a very powerful thing” (*Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*, p. 3), though he fails to question whether fake love is the only thing with power. But let's ask the question now: Is culture destiny—or do we have the power to act?

When taking in conceptions of love (or gender, work, and so on), or when mimicking the interactions between Diane Chambers and Sam Malone (or Monica Gellar and Chandler

Bing, Diane Court and Lloyd Dobler), do we have the freedom to stop and say “No, this isn’t right—this is nonsense”? Do we have a center of control apart from the scripts for the roles we attempt to perform? If we can enact such a power—and if others do the same—we might be able to establish standards for relationships that others and ourselves can satisfy—or surpass.

Klosterman proclaims, “No woman will ever satisfy me,” and he then explains, but “I know it’s not my fault. It’s no one’s fault, really. Or maybe it’s everyone’s fault.”

The response should be, “How fatalistic!”



Turn off the  
CFL?



## HYPERthetical Response #2

# Turn off the CFL

MATT SIENKIEWICZ

Someone builds an optical portal that allows you to see a vision of your own life in the future (it's essentially a crystal ball that shows a randomly selected image of what your life will be like in twenty years). You can only see into this portal for thirty seconds. When you finally peer into the crystal, you see yourself in a living room, two decades older than you are today. You are watching a Canadian football game, and you are extremely happy. You are wearing a CFL jersey. Your chair is surrounded by books and magazines that promote the Canadian Football League, and there are CFL pennants covering your walls. You are alone in the room, but you are gleefully muttering about historical moments in Canadian football history. It becomes clear that for some unknown reason you have become obsessed with Canadian football. And this future is static and absolute; no matter what you do, this future will happen. The optical portal is never wrong. This destiny cannot be changed. The next day, you are flipping through television channels and randomly come across a pre-season CFL game between the Toronto Argonauts and the Saskatchewan Roughriders. Knowing your inevitable future, do you now watch it?

—*Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*, pp. 131–32

Chuck's question here hits upon a profound concern deeply engrained in both the history of religious thought and moral philosophy. What he's described, in fact, outlines almost perfectly the manner in which traditional Jewish and Christian thinkers have conceived of God's all-knowing, timeless perspective on the world. It's a moment that will smack anyone

who believes in an all-powerful Creator harder than a couple of too-strong Witty Chuck cocktails at one point or another. If God knows everything, then He is not only aware of the contents of my web history, but also knows what unsavory things I'm going to do in the future. This is not simply embarrassing—imagine your mom could walk in and catch you doing unspeakable things you haven't even done yet—but it's also a direct and rather horrifying assault on your freedom. If God knows you're going to do something, do you really have any freedom when you do it? Is it fair to say you have any freedom at all? Does this get you off the hook for throwing up those Witty Chucks at your hipster buddy's ironic Val Kilmer film festival party?

Here Chuck seems to be providing what might be described as the “movie” solution to this theological problem. As you watch yourself watching the CFL's fourth-downless football (seriously, someone thought it was a good idea to have only three downs, great if you love punting) you're sort of seeing a movie of your future self. But that doesn't mean it was scripted.

Think of the chest-wax scene from *40-Year-Old Virgin*. Just like God watching you surf the web or Chuck's hypothetical future, you're watching guys who couldn't make the Oakland Raiders bumble across the field. When you watch Steve Carrell get the hair ripped out of his chest, you've been temporally displaced from the event you're watching—just like God always is. Remember, an all-powerful God is thought to have invented time, thus everything that's ever happened or ever will happen is essentially part of God's DVD collection, to be watched whenever He's bored with running the universe. Similarly, you can watch the waxing scene now or watch it later, it's never going to change. But none of that changes the fact that Carrell's yelps and expletives emerged from his own free will. They may or may not have been written in the script but the fact that you're seeing it in a form that ensures it will never change does nothing to change that fact. As long as your vantage point has a different relationship to time than whatever it is you're watching, it's at least logically possible that free will remains in play.

So, Chuck's magic portal doesn't have to strip your life of all meaning or make you one of those guys who talks about *The Matrix* as if it's important. Which is really good, 'cause you'd probably have to re-watch those terrible sequels if it were. But this doesn't quite answer the question. So what should you do?

Well, we live life with a degree of certainty about our future anyway, no? I hate to break it to you, but one way or another, we all end up in a similar place, physically at least. So, you've lived your whole life knowing you're going to die and nonetheless decided to devote your limited time and resources to learning what some guy with too much time on his hands thinks about Chuck Klosterman's weird filler material about Canadian Football. If that major revelation hasn't thrown you off of your game, knowing you're someday going to take seriously a bunch of guys who collectively go by the name "the Alouettes" probably shouldn't be more than a hiccup.

Or, to put it more straightforwardly, no, you shouldn't watch Canadian Football. That'd be like saying "Hey, I'm gonna die one day, might as well just jump in the box now." Seriously, they play with only three downs.

