

# Chuck at the Crossroads of Low and High Culture

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We all have guilty pleasures, don't we? During the summer of 1993, my guilty pleasure was watching *Saved by the Bell* reruns. That summer I bussed tables in Vail, Colorado. After the lunch shift I would swing by the video store, pick up a classic movie, a Hitchcock or an Academy award winner from long ago, get in a quick jog, and then veg on the couch for an hour and a half watching four episodes featuring Samuel Powers and Zack Morris. (The middle thirty minutes covered two episodes on different channels).

Somewhere in North Dakota, Chuck Klosterman (the first syllable rhymes with 'coast') was doing the same thing. But for Chuck, this was no guilty pleasure. Nothing more lofty or altruistic was being postponed by this ninety-minute routine. He wasn't even postponing his consumption of high art, watching *Citizen Kane*, for instance. I know this because Klosterman wants to rid the phrase "guilty pleasure" from English diction. He thinks it's a phony category of entertainment.

The contributors to this book do not agree as to whether Chuck is right that "guilty pleasure" is an empty expression. But I don't think they view reading Klosterman as a guilty pleasure, even if we think that concept is one worth keeping—or even if we think Chuck is lying to himself about the status of guilty pleasures.

Chuck's distaste for the phrase "guilty pleasure" is really just a suspicion that either the distinction between the street paved for "serious" work in philosophy and the one for spontaneous

riffing on pop culture is bogus or the paint used to mark the direction of traffic has so faded as to be indiscernible.

Some serious-minded people have tried to issue philosophical traffic tickets to Klosterman. He's been accused of misinterpreting Jacques Derrida, of all violations! In the face of this accusation, Chuck pled guilty, telling his self-proclaimed high-culture copper that he had never read Derrida. When Klosterman did peruse the French philosopher's work, he was doubtful that his accuser had ever read Derrida either.

Klosterman wanders the streets without paying any attention to the rules commanded by high culture sovereigns. He follows his interests and inspirations, come what may. The contributors to this book have read some Derrida and lots of Klosterman, and they've consumed their fair share of *Saved by the Bell* reruns. (At least I have). In doing so we find ourselves at a strange intersection where high meets low—Kierkegaard meets KISS or Baudrillard meets Britney Spears.

Confronting the work of Chuck Klosterman at this entertaining intersection forces us to ask whether the roads that constitute two forms of culture, the high and the low, are real or imaginary. If these one-way thoroughfares are real, then they only intersect once if at all, and their crossing each other is potentially dangerous. Violent accidents await, and we need some traffic rules to prevent disaster. But if these roads are fake, then the intersection is really infinitely inflated, allowing a continuous flow of traffic, spontaneously producing new travel patterns and rules of engagement.

The contributors to this book bring some philosophical lens to Klosterman's project, as if to highlight what is already there, or to reflect on the same subject matter as Klosterman in a more consciously philosophical manner. This book is a celebration of the idea of engaging in culture in a thoughtful, reflective way. We are amenable to violating the supposed traffic rules maintaining the one-way streets of high and low culture. We are hopeful that such violations will produce new ideas about the meaning of pop culture and more.

The intersection of pop culture and philosophy is fortunate to have Klosterman as one of its libertarian traffic cops. But Chuck's a traveler too, and in reading his reflections on the meaning of music, movies, celebrity status, TV, and video games, we ask a lot of questions. How are our relationships

affected by our inundation in pop culture and the multiplication of media? What do pop-culture trends say about our values? How do we rank our pleasures, goods, and interests if we're willing to break down the distinctions between high and low art? What's good, what's beautiful, and what's true?

Most importantly, how is our access to the good, the beautiful, and the true a refraction of our relationship to pop culture? If we can't glimpse behind the veils of irony, appearance, persona, and inauthenticity, what are we left with? Are we left only with phoniness, cynicism, and disenchantment, or can we recover a modicum of earnestness, reality, self-understanding, and authenticity in and through our favorite bands, sports teams, video games, movies, and TV programs?

Chuck tells us: "In and of itself, nothing really matters. What matters is that nothing is ever 'in and of itself'" (*Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*, Preface). With or without Immanuel Kant's *noumena-phenomena* distinction in mind, Chuck reminds us that we seek access to the in-itself, to the real and the true, but we cannot escape our own perspectives. We are always unconsciously applying the categories of our understanding to the objects we engage with, and those objects include rock bands, video games, cultural icons, and sports teams. Nothing Klosterman writes pretends to be in-and-of-itself. Chuck doesn't pretend to write from a privileged perspective or from a foundational one. He writes in the middle of things and lets his interaction with the pop culture generate its own concepts. Then he uses those as formalized conceptual schemes to organize his pop culture realm. In doing so, he uses pop culture as a prism to do a philosophical biography.

In *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*, Chuck writes about a Guns N' Roses Tribute band, Paradise City, reflecting on the meaning of a band whose sole purpose is to efface their own identities in order to imitate the equally constructed identities of another band. In doing so, he shows us the layers of self, persona, and constructed identity not only in performing rock bands, but in ourselves as well. In *Killing Yourself to Live*, he travels across the country visiting the places where famous rock musicians died, and the story turns into a long reflection about the meaning of dying and its relationship to the meaning of rock stars' careers and memories, its relationship to love and sex, and ultimately its relationship to our own lives.

Klosterman writes in the space between inauthentically following the crowd, disingenuously attempting not to be a crowd follower by some self-stylized, already co-opted way of rejecting the mainstream, and the existential project of recovering a sense of self in and through our involvement with the stuff of pop culture. That space and that project of self-understanding is one strand of thematic unity in his writing. This is a more meaningful theme because he's so obsessed with death and dying. Living with the possibility of our own deaths is more authentic than the retreat from that possibility. Seeing the dying in the living is one of the ways I think Klosterman is recovering himself and helping his readers do the same.

Klosterman produces literature that challenges the traditional road rules of culture criticism. Klosterman champions the low culture of women's love of John Cusack and Coldplay and my generation's fondness for Kelly Kapowski. Chuck subversively undermines the travel tenets of culture criticism by suspending the distance and hierarchies between those who travel the supposed paths of high and low culture.

We find this liberating.

The varied contributors to this book follow Chuck's lead, navigating the intersection between Socrates and *Saved by the Bell* in a way that breaks down the strict distinction between supposedly high and low culture. The authors are fans and critics, devotees and doubters, but we're all inspired by Chuck's come-what-may mantra. We celebrate the logic of Klosterman's writing, his endless string of resemblances that compose his thinking about the soundtrack of his and our lives.

Chuck has reflected on our musings in the book, as he has written the epilogue. Of course this just adds another dimension to the meta-character of the book. Chuck writes on pop culture. We write on Chuck writing on pop culture. Chuck writes on us writing on him writing on pop culture.

As you read what follows, know that you are at a crossroads. The supposed high road traveled by the Immanuel Kants of the distant past and the supposed low road traveled by the Pamela Andersons of the recent past have intersected, and we only have Chuck Klosterman, the western canon of philosophy, and the stuff of pop culture to help us navigate them. We'll break a few rules along the way because we're not sure if the roads are real or not.

We're also not sure whether or not our libertine attitude is a guilty pleasure. Read on, and decide for yourselves.