

# BOOK V

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# Downtown Owl of Minerva

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# 12

## How Chuck Got Chicks

LUKE DICK

“Put this next to the title page,” says the clerk exhaustively, tiny eyes peering over the rims of his Buddy Holly glasses. I can’t tell if he’s bespectacled from some natural vision deficiency or of the need to be ironically dorky. He hands me a yellow sticky with my name, handwritten in all caps: *LUKE DICK*. The lack of serifs always seems to make my moniker more startling than normal.

I fumble through my new copy of *Killing Yourself to Live* to find the title page (viii, if you care) and wonder why the fuck it would matter which page Klosterman signs. The two hundred or so people in front of me at the Barnes and Noble in Union Square seem to share something in common, besides a liking for CK and a need to prove to their friends that, indeed, Klosterman has physically touched their book. I’m not quite in the mood to ponder it just yet.

I let the aroma of overpriced coffee carry me through the line at a zombie’s pace, wondering if it’s at all desperate for a grown-ass man to be waiting for a culture critic to sharpie something impersonal for me. Actually, I wonder just *how* desperate it is. The line is filled with plenty of beautiful women, and here I am waiting for an autograph, listening to Boston’s “Rock’n’Roll Band” (probably Chuck’s mix) through a PA at an ironically high volume for the literature section. I’m reminded of being a ten-year-old, waiting on Brian Bosworth (“The Boz”) to sign my football jersey, secretly hoping that the two-time Butkis Award-winning linebacker would notice I was donning his trademarked haircut. The University of Oklahoma linebacker’s

professional career was short-lived and controversial. Thank God he is immortalized in *Stone Cold*, amongst other action thrillers. I still regard him as the Axl Rose of football and am awaiting his swan song.

Even though I haven't gone so far as to emulate Klosterman's hairdo, every minute in the line is somehow emasculating, and by the end of it, I am feeling ten and lost again. Listening to the fans in front of me ask Chuck questions on politics, sports, and the future, gives the impression that he's some kind of oracle. How did Klosterman do it? How did writing about rock stars make him a rock star, cool kids hanging on his every word? AND, how did Chuck get three to four hundred suckers like me to line-up on a weeknight to listen to a journalist? Despite his occasional self-deprecation, he's an empowered dude, with plenty to show for his work. I want to know why, where, and how he came by this power.

## The Mystery of Generating Cocoa Puffs

Now, if I were looking to historically detail the rise of Chuck, I could trace his career, from Fargo to Akron, Akron to NYC, charting his time and highlighting the progression of his essays, but these would be only superfluous details to his empowerment. Better to look at the nature and spirit of his writing.

I found *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs* on a Barnes and Noble shelf as an undergraduate. I couldn't resist the title and bought it, almost sight unseen. When telling my Okie friend about going to see Chuck at a signing, he answered with a bizarrely southern joke about *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs* in his most radical drawl: "If you talk to ol' Chuck, tell him I li'kat book about fuckin' 'n' Fruity Pebbles." Kudos, Scribner. You picked a winner.

I can't remember if I ever had the balls to pass it off as "research" in an academic setting, but I couldn't deny that Chuck Klosterman was onto *something*, whatever that something may be. Besides, it read a hell of a lot easier than Heidegger. There are plenty of pop culture journalists critical of Klosterman, but I would dance on Lester Bangs's grave arguing that CK is the most insightful rock critic I've ever read, especially when he talks about Led Zeppelin. Of course,

Klosterman's supremacy is debatable, as is everything associated with art and art critique. I actually spent a few hours reading the one and two-star reviews (criticisms) of Chuck's books on Amazon. This experience was actually side-splittingly funny, because most of the people who took it upon themselves to shit-talk the man seemed to invoke their own inner-Klosterman to do so. That is, I was reading *inspired* insults. Klosterman-inspired.

Negative criticisms are a dime a dozen. So are shitty bands. These two entities feed off each other in a self-perpetuating pop culture cesspool. Regardless of how funny this can be (and it can be very funny), it's really no more valuable than listening to the wittiest kid in class hurl insults at the fattest kid. The interplay is utterly forgettable when it comes right down to it. Klosterman is unique in that he has more to offer than snarky jabs at average bands.

At his best, Klosterman gives both extraordinary and mundane pop culture reflective credence. He is inspired, and it shows in his writing. Inspiration is mysterious, a neglected and worthy philosophical topic. The initial spontaneity required to spark a quality creative effort as a song or as an essay is perhaps something other-worldly—or at least inexplicable. Where does an idea come from? Most everyone who has a television experiences Pamela Anderson and Lady Gaga, yet Klosterman is the one cranking out sentence after sentence. How does he come by his ideas? Given that they both seem to read and watch the same things, why is it Klosterman who is writing the books and not, say, my sister? There is real talent and creativity at work in his ability to draw meaning out of even in the most ephemeral pop happenings. The effects of his writing are magnetic.

### **B-Ionic Spectator**

How is it that *anyone* ever “comes up” with an idea? Klosterman has had more than his fair share of inspiration for his essays: Billy Joel = cool for being uncool . . . Gaga = famous for being famous . . . Reality TV = the confusion of reality with what is supposed to be reality. . . . He has distinguished himself from the vast majority of critics in that he actually has some aesthetic ideas and makes cultural connections in his writing rather than simply throwing around some adjectives.

So, what's the process? Perhaps he is eating his Cocoa Puffs, or maybe he's in the middle of ordering his cheeseburger when—BAM—somehow a conscious connection is made between his passive absorption of all things pop and his inclination to ascribe meaning to the world. Then, he sits down, writes, is inspired more, writes . . . and, *voilà*: a new pop essay. Maybe General Mills' cereal recipe is the incendiary, igniting the flame of inspiration. Or perhaps the secret to creative spontaneity lies in perfectly melted American cheese. Doubt it. Plato has a theory about this phenomenon.

Plato's pop culture dialogues read about as easy as Shakespeare to a high school stoner, which is to say, considerably easier than most other philosophers' works. Plato's greatest hits are more voluminous and have lasted longer than any pop culture icon, save Homer or Sophocles, whom Plato would consider emotional sellouts. Longevity has to count for something in pop culture, right? Just to give us some perspective: the Beatles have fifty years under their belt and still sell gobs of records. Plato has been on the scene roughly 2,400 years, and his work still commands a dollar. Not to mention that his body of work addresses pretty much any real issue of human importance for both thinking *and* non-thinking types.

Plato discusses the notion of inspiration in his dialogue entitled *Ion*. The dialogue is a conversation between Socrates and a rhapsode named "Ion." In ancient Greece, rhapsodes were something like the tribute bands of our times. Instead of playing G N' R's "Use Your Illusion" (I and II) from beginning to end, rhapsodes would travel town-to-town, performing epics from the great poets. There were even popular contests for the best rhapsode at various festivals. Granted, this sounds like as much fun as a medieval fair, but that was a different time and place. Don't be surprised if in two thousand years years our brand of popular culture is obsolete. As much as I love Gaga, I doubt trapezoidal hair and giant great Danes will be all the rage in the year 4000. Fame, as well as fame monsters, are ephemeral.

Ion was the Homer tribute band, perhaps performing as a one-man-band under the name "Homer Alone." Often performing the *Odyssey* in one sitting, Ion would pull all-nighters, provided the wine. Ion only had eyes for Homer, and his passion for the stage and narration ended with Homeric epics. As Plato

puts it, when addressed or asked to discuss any other poet, Ion “went to sleep,” so to speak. Perhaps this is what you all are doing now, since I have switched subjects to something un-Klosterman. I realize it was probably Klosterman’s name and not Plato’s that prompted you to buy this book. But bear with me.

Plato’s explanation of Ion’s passion for Homer is that Ion is actually experiencing indirect, maddened possession. This “possession” is a chain reaction, beginning with the splendor of the divine muses. The muse inspires a poet like Homer, working him into a frenetic stupor until he has created a poem. This mysterious creative genesis finally results in a piece of art the artist or poet perhaps doesn’t even understand. If you’ve ever actually made a piece of art, you might be able to relate to the obsessive behaviors that result from the act of inspiration and creation. The artist or poet works on their piece to get it “just right,” not knowing precisely how to define what “just right” is. After listening to an artist’s mission statement, you’ll often be bored to tears and left rolling your eyes at their inability to articulate anything remotely accurate about their art.

Plato estimates that a muse sets off a chain reaction, directing inspiration to a poet or artist. The poet, in turn, channels the inspiration into the creation of a poem or epic, inspiring rhapsodes, actors, and eventually spectators. The chain of inspiration goes something like this:

Muse → Poet → Art → Rhapsode → Actor → Spectator

This step-wise relationship of aesthetic experience, Plato likens to a magnet. The muses are the magnets, full of force and vitality, drawing in the poets and causing inspiration in them. The poet’s art, in turn, attracts the rhapsode, the actor, and eventually the spectator. The assumption is that the farther away from the muse one gets in any given piece of art, the less the magnetic force. That is, listening to G N’ R perform *Appetite for Destruction* is much more compelling than listening to a local tribute band’s rendition of the same, because they were the ones originally inspired. Still, even a great tribute band can be pretty powerful and draw a crowd of spectators.

I imagine that most of us are spectators, as there are many more people watching movies than writing or acting in them,

many more music enthusiasts than songwriters or performers. As spectators, we are several levels away from the intensity of that initial inspiration, in Plato's estimation. That's not to say that experiencing the effects of the muse is dull for a spectator, by any means. How many movies have made you cry? How many concerts have compelled you to sing at the top of your lungs? We're all spectators to some degree, and the effects of the arts on us are powerful. Klosterman got his start by being an inspired spectator, reviewing records and writing about pop culture. Hundreds of ideas and essays later, he's a bestselling author, and holds court at the front of Barnes and Noble, signing autographs.

I want to know if he's really inspired, or if he's just a spectator like I am. That is, does Chuck get to love up the muses or just a few bookish types? If Plato is any reliable guide, my guess is that before *Downtown Owl*, he probably only got to second base with the muse, Thalia. *Downtown Owl* was the first time he'd gotten to smoke the post-coital cigarette with her. But they were both drunk at the time, and since then, it has been hard to tell if their romp was just a one night stand brought on by good beer, good jokes, and a good juke box. All we know is that in the morning, she was gone. No note. No number. The muses don't have cell phones or Facebook accounts. They're those mysterious and enigmatic chicks you just hope to run into on a lucky night.

### Chuck's Power Chord

If Klosterman isn't regularly knocking boots with the muses, how is he selling so many books? Other than *Downtown Owl*, he's only given us his own articulate musings—neither philosophy nor gifts of the muses, according to Plato. Yet CK has gained power by hawking words. If he's generally just another spectator by Plato's lights, then how does he command such a crowd? Why wouldn't the crowd simply go directly to the artist, rather than listening to a critic? I've noticed a trend in Klosterman's facial hair. Perhaps his success and empowerment are directly proportionate to his beard. If so, it's probably best if we seek the answers to questions of empowerment from the man who donned the most wicked moustache of all, Friedrich Nietzsche. Stylistically, I would liken Nietzsche to



the love child of Tom Waits, Captain Beefheart, and Ted Nugent: Brilliantly abrasive, intellectually austere, and frequently cocky. His records are equal parts compelling, rocking, and irritating . . . be warned.

Nietzsche, like so many philosophers, sold far more books post mortem. Much of his philosophy concerns notions of power and how it has been acquired and interchanged throughout the history of mankind. Even morality can be attributed to a long and complex power struggle, according to Nietzsche. At the very heart of nature is the imperative to live and survive. As humans, we're bound by this imperative, which impels us to procure food and shelter and to procreate by any means necessary. For many animals, hunting and mating territories are delineated and maintained by physical power. If one animal encroaches upon another's territory, there is some form of physical challenge, eventually decided by the more cunning and powerful animal. Physical power is the main currency of the animal world. Just spend one Saturday watching PBS's *Nature*; there is plenty of evidence to suggest that our history as humans embodies this struggle for power, albeit on a more sophisticated and bloodier level. Pull up Google Maps, and rest assured blood was shed for just about every boundary drawn. Google boasts Maps, Books, Images, and Videos, but there is no Google Morality. Nietzsche is certain that the lines delineating morality and human artifice were drawn by power struggles.

The life of one organism requires the death of another. I have to kill to live, whether it's a cow or a stalk of ripe broccoli I choose to eat. This brutality exists for all living things. Granted, the lettuce doesn't run from us when we pick and eat it, but it has a natural impetus to survive. Anything with cells does. Nietzsche claims that modern moral values, such as altruism, meekness, humility, spiritual goods, are unnatural. It was once the case that the warrior class ruled, enforcing their own values, which included valor, pride and strength. Every ancient empire was built in this manner, valuing and perpetuating the warrior's ideal of power. The history of human civilization is an espousal of raw, brutish power, in which conquest, enslavement, and building empires on the back of the vanquished foe is the penultimate goal. Nietzsche deemed the warrior class's notions of morality the "master morality." The warriors became the masters through physically and strategically overpowering the

weak and procuring shelter, stability, and civilization through acts of force. Over the past two thousand years, however, Nietzsche estimates that the slaves and their notions of morality have cunningly taken over.

The concept and practice of mercy, for instance, did not resonate with the Spartans, who practiced infanticide if a newborn should be deemed physically unfit. This is obviously harsh by our standards, but there is no doubt that such hardened hearts created powerful armies. Given that the greatest empires of all time have done so much warring to create “civilization,” it’s amazing that more peacefully intellectual values ever came to pass.

Meekness, altruism, and love of one’s neighbor are what Nietzsche considers slave moralities. Nietzsche’s estimation is that the weaker classes propagated their own value system in order to counteract the fact they lacked the physical strength to overcome the warrior class. The priestly castes overthrew the warrior class slyly and with intellectual rigor. Mercy, forgiveness, and altruism are all characteristics that the priestly class touted as “noble” and “good” precisely because these traits were advantageous to their own futures. Through the intellect, the slave classes were able to change the moral landscape, shifting moral impetus away from physical prowess. As Nietzsche sees it, the history of Christianity and its values is a history of the slaves finding a cunning way to rule their masters and the civilizations that had been built by brute warrior strength. It’s hard to argue with Nietzsche. After all, we don’t send lawyers and priests to fight wars. They only come in after the dirty work has been done.

So, how has Klosterman come by his power? By Nietzsche’s estimation, Chuck has cunningly taken it from the artists. After they’ve made their art, the critic focuses all his wit and wile into an attempt to exhibit his own intellectual prowess. Somewhere along the way, Klosterman found a way to uniquely articulate an artistic opinion. Our continued support of Klosterman is partly because we’re either amused by his opinions or we share in the opinion with him . . . or both. If we share his opinion before reading, it’s probably the case that he articulates our own opinions far better than we can ourselves. He gives a litmus of reasons to love or hate a band. In some ways he’s philosophic about his opinions in that he provides reasons for believing a certain aesthetic.

As Klosterman fans, we identify with his sentiments, and we laugh at them. He's so adept at what he does, we're willing to pay to read his spectating. With his talents, he can explain and re-create the initial artistic inspirations through his commentary. He manipulates words in a way that explains the significance of a pop event, like a song, band, or athlete. Chuck's power chord is the G—the people's chord. He's in good company in G—he shares it with both "Sweet Home Alabama" and Don McClain's "American Pie." Chuck's whole career depends upon the art that the artists make. We're the lowly spectators, and we would prefer to possess the power of artists, but agreeing with critics is the best we can do.

Art occupies a more primary place than art criticism. Without art, there is no *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*. Deep down we know this is where Chuck stands in the scheme of art experience. I think Chuck knows it, too. Klosterman hovers around this subject in his Lloyd Dobler essay, albeit in a sexual context, when he says that Woody Allen made it possible for nerdy intelligent guys to score with women who are actually out of their league. See "This Is Emo" in *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*. I'll argue that Sartre was way ahead of Woody Allen's game. Sartre preceded Allen, was far uglier, and was a master of seduction. Even without the aid of motion pictures, Sartre seemed to be doing fine with the ladies.

Art and sport (and the artists and athletes themselves) occupy a more powerful rank than commentary that critics apply to them. This is why both Wilt Chamberlain and Mick Jagger (and probably any other NBA basketball player or rock star) will have more notches on their bed post than Klosterman. One's ability to attract mates is just another manifestation of power. It is infinitely more powerful in the Nietzschean sense to be on the court, or on the stage, than to be intellectualizing and typing away in one's La-Z-Boy. But even typing away and intellectualizing can get you three to four hundred fans (half of those being women) on a Tuesday night in New York, if you're Klosterman.

I watched VH1's *Behind the Music* on the Red Hot Chili Peppers. The band had just played a concert in tighty whiteys. Some female fans had made their way backstage after the concert, only to find a lone roadie. The roadie tells them the band's gone, but that they left one piece of Chili Pepper parapherna-

lia: Flea's sweaty stage underwear. In an act of frenzied inspiration (Plato might say), one of the girls takes the drenched draws above her head, wringing out the sweat in her mouth so she could "have a piece of Flea inside of her." Lovely. Now, this incident probably indicates a whole host of pathologies that I haven't the time to go into, but I would say with confidence that this type of thing only happens to artists. Rest assured, this will never, ever happen to Chuck Klosterman, because he's a critic and not a rock star; critique of art will never be as inspiring as art itself. Klosterman's underwear are safe. Just ask Nietzsche. He spent a good deal of time courting Cosima Wagner, who was married to the great composer, Richard Wagner. Nietzsche even tried composing music for Cosima. Sorry, Friedrich, I'd be surprised if any composer in history could have written a piece of music that could have stolen or even impressed Wagner's wife. Nietzsche's moustache was so gargantuan that it was most definitely a haven for all kinds of leftovers, which is an insurmountable hygienic foible to overcome in courtship.

Artists may become artists and athletes become athletes because it's the only way they can gain any power. That is, all sport and art could be primarily motivated (consciously or subconsciously) by the possibility of empowerment (and the choice of mate).

## Stay Alive

I'm on the podium now, only three people between me and Klosterman. It's too late to bow out, and by now, I've discerned that it might be good for Luke Dick to be emasculated a bit. Maybe these Nietzschean notions of power are a bit too brutal. After all, a Spartan warrior had a life expectancy of around forty. I'd prefer to stick around Earth a bit longer than that. I'm all for the slaves making laws and taking over civilization after the killing is done, so long as it means a more comfortable existence where I don't fear for my life on a daily basis. I listen as the fellow in front of me puts in a quarter and asks The Klosterman if NYC is better off without LeBron, while formulating what I'm going to say.

I often find it difficult to talk to people who I find even remotely famous, especially if I like their work. After all, I

know so much about them, and they know nothing about me. In the worst cases, you try to find some way to set yourself apart from other fans by saying something, like, “I REALLLY like your work. I mean, your critique of Billy Joel was absolutely brilliant.” In the end, you end up feeling like another sycophant. Well, I’m at the front of the line. Fuck it, here goes:

**LUKE:** Hey, Chuck. Dig your books. I’m writing an essay about you for a book called *Chuck Klosterman and Philosophy*.

**CHUCK:** What’s your essay about?

**LUKE:** Nietzsche and Wagner and the social role of the critic . . . blah, blah, blah . . .

**CHUCK:** Oh, yeah. Nietzsche and Wagner kinda had their interesting back-and-forth.

**LUKE:** Yup.

*Awkward pause. Chuck hands book to Luke and blinks a few times.*

**LUKE:** Welp, thanks.

*Luke walks out to the exit music of Journey, wondering if a literary device was worth the trouble.*

Nietzsche is right about one thing—there is some aspect of power to all of our interactions. Unlike Nietzsche, I’m quite sure that I prefer the slave’s world to the master’s. Nietzsche might call it a weakness, but I like the idea of getting old and not fearing the effects of warrior conquests. Weird, right? Most sane people with a spouse or a kid would agree.

I’m sure there’s plenty of art and writing that’s at least partially motivated by the sheer joy of creating it, rather than any power that comes from it. Klosterman’s writing is a good example. Chuck is much more endearing when he’s back to being sixteen and in love with a song. Great works of art are similar. I’m sure Picasso loved the fame (and the women) his art brought him, but I’m also sure that he loved to get lost in it and enjoy the creative process. On the other hand, I know that everyday I wake up, I’m out in the world trying to procure my place in it,

attempting to distinguish and empower myself. This is the case with most people to some degree. It is absolutely the case with Klosterman. Power is how we stay alive. We make a buck and buy groceries, pay rent, and live to fight another day. If we are strong enough, creative enough, or cunning enough to find some way to really get ahead, we've empowered ourselves further than most other human beings. Chuck has sold plenty of books, but even he's still fighting. With every line I write, I'm enjoying the process, but I'm also trying to make a living.

As I walk out of Barnes and Noble, I crack the pages of my new book to page viii. Right there, in large, un-serifed typeset reads the name:

CHUCK KLOSTERMAN

The pecking order of power is ever-so-clear. Here I am, writing an essay for a book that only exists because of Klosterman's work. It's pretty clear who has the upper hand. I have many more lines to write before I can sleep easy, knowing rent is paid. I'll be taking the train home to a five-story walkup flat. Chuck's probably taking a cab home to an elevator building. Klosterman's name at the front of the book is both a reminder of my status in the world as an unknown, as well as a good, Nietzschean voice of encouragement. Beneath his name, in much smaller, un-serifed sharpie scribbles, it reads: "To Luke: Stay Alive!" Indeed.

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## Writing Poetry about Pushpin

JOHN R. FITZPATRICK

Either Chuck Klosterman grabs you or he doesn't. When I read the following passage in *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*, it certainly captured me. After telling us he never expects to be in love, he offers this reason:

It appears that countless women born between the years of 1965 and 1978 are in love with John Cusack. I cannot fathom how he isn't the number-one box-office star in America, because every straight girl I know would sell her soul to share a milkshake with that motherfucker. For upwardly mobile women in their twenties and thirties, John Cusack is the neo-Elvis . . . And these upwardly mobile women are not alone. We all convince ourselves of things like this . . . We will both measure our relationship against the prospect of fake love. (p. 2)

This concept of fake love strikes me as a tool that could allow us to better inform ourselves on a whole host of issues. Klosterman is using it for the purpose of showing how characters in movies are more appealing than real people. First dates would be easy, if we could stop time and contemplate our next moves like characters in the movies, puppeteered by screenwriters, do. Screenwriters take months to provide John Cusack's characters with brilliant repartee. The idea is that women are not falling in love with the actual John Cusack, but rather with some character.

As Klosterman explains:

They don't love John Cusack. They love Lloyd Dobler. When they see Mr. Cusack, they are still seeing the optimistic, charmingly loquacious teenager he played in *Say Anything*, a movie that came out more than a decade ago. That's the guy they think he is; when Cusack played Eddie Thomas in *America's Sweethearts* or the sensitive hit man in *Grosse Pointe Blank*, all his female fans knew he was only acting . . . but they assume when the camera stopped rolling, he went back to his genuine self . . . which was someone like Lloyd Dobler . . . which was, in fact, someone who *is* Lloyd Dobler, and someone who continues to have a storybook romance with Diane Court (or with lone Skye, depending on how you look at it). And these upwardly mobile women are not alone. We all convince ourselves of things like this. (p.2)

But this also explains what's wrong with male performances in porn and male characters in romance novels; real people cannot be expected to meet the needs of others as these mediums depict. Few women have or want Pamela Anderson's augmented breasts or platinum blond hair; few men have a Brad Pitt allure, which women are unable to resist.

We can apply this insight to other media too. Reality and TV reality are not the same thing. And, as Klosterman's discussions of media illustrate, Reality TV is often less real than fictional films or TV dramas. Klosterman finds that *Saved by the Bell* and *Roadhouse* work by using fiction to present useful archetypes; *The Real World* works by presenting non-actors who can easily be flattened into a limited number of representative personality types, the Puck, the Pedro, and others. But if we measure ourselves against reality as represented by either TV and movie fiction or reality TV, we come up short. Real men cannot rock the Tommy Lee look without looking like disingenuous copies; Real women are not incarnations of an insatiable Pamela Anderson, although sadly some try to be.

Chuck Klosterman, in his low culture manifesto *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*, tells us early in the preface that while he believes that high culture philosophy could well be a source of enlightenment, he would rather spend his time exploring low culture. He is unequivocal in this declaration. The "elite thinkers" spend oodles of time looking at great philosophers, well regarded classical musicians, and the great books of literature.



These intellectuals have little interest in exploring what everyday people are spending their time consuming. This seems odd, to Klosterman, because what the many find of value, should be of interest to the intellectuals. After all, if some intellectuals are interested in policy in a democracy, then understanding what the many believe should be of great importance. Similarly, intellectuals who respect the values of pluralism and diversity should welcome Klosterman's rigorous attempt to explicate, evaluate, and examine low culture. If it is a liberal truism that no one has a monopoly on truth and if intellectuals believe that both the elite few and the not-so-elite many can benefit from exposure to those supposedly great philosophers that make up the Western Canon, why would it seem strange if a serious examination of popular culture would yield fruitful results?

Klosterman's work is a tribute to the idea that pop culture can produce intellectual fruits healthier than Chuck's Fruity Pebbles. And I tend to accept this idea too. As Aristotle argued over two thousand years ago, we might well begin our inquiry by looking at the opinions of the wise or the many, and then try to find if the many have any important contribution to make. However, while Aristotle is willing to consider the opinions of the many, ultimately he would suggest that this project is on a hopeless track.

### **Cocoa Puffs, the Meaning of Life, and Some Things Aristotle Thinks Are True**

The relationship between pleasure, happiness, and the meaning of life has been part of Western Philosophy since its inception in Ancient Greece. Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is an attempt to find the form of happiness that is most conducive to a complete human life. Aristotle arguably finds some usefulness in crude pleasure and low culture telling us that the philosopher Anacharsis is correct in asserting that "we must rest, and play is a form of rest" (Book X, Section 6). However, ultimately Aristotle thinks a successful human life cannot be simply one of amusement.

Klosterman would hardly disagree. After all Klosterman is married, holds down a job, and has published several books. Klosterman is hardly some mindless seeker of pleasure. He is

hardly a crack addict, even if he makes it clear that he is not opposed to the recreational use of alcohol and drugs, documenting periods in his life where his drug and alcohol use seem excessive.

And at times these episodes seem more than excessive. At one point in *Killing Yourself to Live* he discusses “Midwestern Power Drinking.” He tells us that folks in the other parts of the country don’t match this: “people in the Midwest drink differently from everywhere else.” These are not “recreational drinkers,” but rather they “stay focused,” “work fast,” and “swallow constantly” (*Killing Yourself to Live*, p. 160). In my mid-twenties I had a good friend from Iowa, and he was definitely a Midwestern Power Drinker. A night out with my Hawkeye pal Robert often ended in a worship service to the porcelain goddess.

In *Fargo Rock City* Klosterman tells us that heavy drug and alcohol users value their substance of choice for two main reasons. The first is rather mundane—they like getting “fucked up.” The other reason is more interesting:

It’s not just fun to be high; it’s fun to smoke pot. It’s fun to score dope and put ice cubes in the bong and put on boring reggae records and talk with other stoners about idiotic stoner topics. It’s fun to browse through liquor stores and mix drinks on the coffee table and tell memorable puke stories. There is an appeal to the Abuse Lifestyle that exists outside the product. (*Fargo Rock City*, p. 61)

In *Chuck Klosterman IV* Chuck tells us that while he is skeptical about the concept of “guilty pleasures,” he finds it pleasurable to “snort cocaine in public bathrooms,” which always makes you feel guilty. Drinking “more than five glasses of vodka before (or during) work” is also a technically guilty pleasure, according to Chuck (pp. 277–78).

But for Aristotle, a happy life must be centered on the elevated pleasure of high culture philosophical contemplation. Chuck is skeptical of this position, and his attack on the concept of a guilty pleasure, in the non-technical sense, demonstrates this. Chuck thinks people who consume popular culture, from *Saved by the Bell* re-runs to *Real World* episodes, call these activities guilty pleasures as if they would be curing cancer or just reading *War and Peace* if they did not give in to

these supposedly guilty pleasures. But Klosterman's beef aside, most Americans do not use the term "happiness" as Aristotle intended. Cocoa-Puff-munching, pornography-watching, heavy-metal-listening Americans tend to equate happiness with pleasure, guilt-inducing or not. Aristotle is not opposed to pleasure, but a complete life is much more than this. It's a life of human flourishing. A life of Aristotelian happiness is a life "well lived" or a life of "deep satisfaction." We might think of this as a "successful life," but one where success is not only equated with material wealth. Having a successful life is not simply getting rich.

Surely, Klosterman would have no objections at this point. Chuck does not just nosh sugar cereal daily; instead he reflects on the subliminal premises of sugar cereal ads and their relationship to our cultural concept of coolness and exclusivity. Perhaps it's pleasurable to eat Cocoa Puffs, but maybe it's part of a flourishing life to think about the iconography of consumer products in an intelligent way. I say Klosterman is no mindless lover of pleasure. He lives *some* sort of intellectual life. However, Aristotle argues that a happy life has much more intellectual rigor than Chuck is willing to exert—the guy suspects that he secretly hates reading, for crying out loud.

Aristotle tells us that "the human activity that is most akin to the gods' activity will more than any others, have the character of happiness" (Book X, Section 8). Klosterman's obsession with tribute bands such as Paradise City probably doesn't mirror the activity of the gods, but I don't know the activity of the gods with any certainty. If it turns out that the gods have little interest in rock'n'roll, they may well have less interest in Guns N' Roses, and even less interest in a sophisticated (or pseudo-sophisticated?) examination of the importance of a Guns N' Roses tribute band. It would be hard to see an Aristotelian defense of devoting yourself to being a copycat of low culture, let alone elevating them to heights of cultural achievement.

After all, if Aristotle would find listening to the music of heavy metal bands a waste of time, devoting your efforts to an analysis of tribute heavy metal bands would seem like a an insane waste of time. Aristotle's teacher Plato thought that all art was third removed from truth. Art imitated things in the material world, which imitated their true form, which was eternal, pure, and changeless. There is a. the beautiful itself, the

form or idea of beauty, b. the beautiful entities we find in the world such as beautiful celebrities like Pamela and beautiful North Dakota farms which participate in the form of beauty, and c. artistic depictions of nature that are copies of the beautiful entities. Paradise City actually imitates the imitation of the imitation, copies the copy of the copy. How sad.

### **Play Pinball or Write Poetry? Cocoa Puffs or Vegan Casserole?**

This argument about the relationship between pleasure and happiness touches on one of its most interesting debates in the history of ethics—between John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham. Both men believed in hedonism, which is the view that the good life is devoted to pleasure. Bentham thought that all things being equal, more pleasure is better than less, that what we wanted in life was a greater quantity of pleasure. When Bentham finds quantities of pleasure to be equal, he tells us that poetry is not superior to pushpin. (Pushpin is the nineteenth-century equivalent of pinball).

Klosterman tells us that the rock critics love country acts like Uncle Tupelo and Lucinda Williams. But for every rock critic and hipster who loves alternative country, there are a thousand Wal-Mart customers buying Toby Keith. Keith “seems like a troglodyte,” writes about fake cowboys, but Klosterman finds him to have genuine “middle-class importance.” He writes with great clarity about a “completely imaginary . . . nineteenth-century Lone Ranger fantasy.” But fake cowboys are the cowboys America fantasizes about; nobody would want to be a real cowboy (*Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*, pp. 175–76).

All this makes Keith’s work look phony, and his popularity then becomes somewhat troubling. But Klosterman is hunting different game. Chuck rejects the concept of “guilty pleasure” as a needless category. For Klosterman and Bentham, there are only pleasures—watching *Saved by the Bell* and reading Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*—and one is no guiltier than the other. On this matter Bentham writes in *An Introduction to the principles of Morals and Legislation*:

Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we

ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. . . . They govern us in all that we do, in all that we say, in all that we think . . . (Chapter 1, paragraph 1).

There are times when Klosterman seems to echo this viewpoint. The episodes of drug and alcohol abuse reinforce it, as do the tribute bands, and the reverential treatment of heavy metal music. But I am inclined to think that this is not the end of the story.

### **Eating Peaches and Being Happy**

The story I've heard about the naming of the Allman Brothers Band album, "Eat a Peach," released after the death of Duane Allman is very dark. Supposedly Allman, riding his motorcycle, died in a collision with a peach truck. Klosterman, in *Killing Yourself to Live*, thinks finding the exact location of this accident is important; thinking about this death is important. But is this worth doing? One way of evaluating this question is through the moral philosophy of utilitarianism. Both Bentham and his friend's son John Stuart Mill, were utilitarians.

Do the ends justify the means? The utilitarian answers yes; right actions are those that tend to promote happiness, produce the greatest good for the greatest number. What utilitarians disagree about is how to evaluate the ends. Bentham and Mill have a serious disagreement. Evaluating whether Klosterman's writing has value might not involve determining which of these philosophers is correct, but it may be crucial in order to decide how important Klosterman is. Is examining the lives of dead rock stars as Klosterman does in *Killing Yourself to Live* mere sensationalism, or is it telling us something about the human condition that might help in the pursuit of a life of happiness? Does this examination merely titillate us, or does it tell us something of value?

### **Brooks and Twain, Dylan and Phair, and John Stuart Mill**

Bentham would find Klosterman's work of value even if it is mere sensationalism and titillation, since these give pleasure. But can we place Klosterman's work on a higher plane than

this? I believe that the utilitarianism of John Stuart Mill may very well allow us to do so. Mill suggests that there must be both qualitative as well as quantitative elements to happiness. He tells us he would rather be “a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied, better to be a Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied,” thus rejecting Bentham’s *quantitative* hedonism in favor of a more Aristotelian definition of happiness, which places emphasis on the *quality* of the pleasures we seek.

One way to read Klosterman’s manifesto, *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*, would be to find him one-upping Bentham; all things being equal, pushpin is superior to poetry. But this strikes me as really wrong. He writes about what the listeners of Garth Brooks and Shania Twain find satisfying about their music, why he thinks these artists have been so successful, but at various times he tells us that his actual preferences are quite different. In *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs* he tells us that he regularly listens to Bob Dylan and Liz Phair, artists that high culture music critics react as *favorably* to as they react *negatively* to Brooks and Twain.

But why the *contemplative* life of low culture? Perhaps Mill can help us answer this. Mill argues that opinions can be true, partially true, or false. True opinions we will refuse to censor, because ultimately the truth is useful to us. Partially true opinions we allow because we want to dig out the truth they contain. But why allow false opinions? Mill argues in Chapter II of *On Liberty*:

. . . even if the received opinion be not only true, but the whole truth; unless it is suffered to be, and actually is, vigorously and earnestly contested, it will, by most of those who receive it, be held in the manner of a prejudice, with little comprehension or feeling of its rational grounds. And not only this, but . . . the meaning of the doctrine itself will be in danger of being lost, or enfeebled, and deprived of its vital effect on the character and conduct: the dogma becoming a mere formal profession, inefficacious for good, but cumbering the ground, and preventing the growth of any real and heartfelt conviction, from reason or personal experience. (paragraphs 42–44).

Thus we must allow purely false ideas to circulate. Mill’s explanation is that without allowing our truths to be debated, we are

in danger of reducing our truths to mere prejudices and dogma. A major part of the utility of true ideas lies not simply in understanding *that* they are true but *why* they are true. What censorship does is prevent one from engaging opposing viewpoints in a free marketplace of ideas, and Mill finds that it is only in such an environment that actual understanding occurs. Once again, understanding why ideas are true or false can be as or more useful than understanding that ideas are true or false.

Low culture is inferior to high culture in the amount of truth that it contains about the human condition, but high culture is not perfectly true, and low culture is not devoid of truth. Klosterman's insight is that low culture contains elements of truth that would be tough to discern through a study of high culture. What truths Klosterman believes we can learn from watching Pamela and Tommy Lee fornicate in public can be explicated through high culture, but might very well go unnoticed there. In any case, Mill and Klosterman would argue that without some analysis of low culture, the truths of high culture would not be knowledge for us. Their value would be reduced to mere dogma.

*Chuck Klosterman IV* is divided into the three sections: Things that Are True, Things that Might Be True, and Something that Isn't True at All. And the book has an oddly Millian feel to it. Defending McDonalds against the food police in "The Amazing McNuggets Diet" offers an unpleasant politically incorrect truth—eating junk food in moderation is unlikely to destroy your health. Strangely, eating only Chicken McNuggets for a week, if not done on a regular basis might be good for your health. Klosterman tells us that in a week he consumed as many as 280 McNuggets or forty a day, and that he gained a pound. I looked this up the calorie information at McDonalds' website and they report that a ten piece Chicken McNuggets has 460 calories; thus forty McNuggets have 1,840 calories. Most adult men would loose weight on 1,840 calories a day (the average American male consumes 2,800 calories a day). My guess is that Chuck really *lost* weight, but the 4,000 milligrams of sodium in forty Chicken McNuggets resulted in significant water retention. This is an unusual Atkins diet, but my understanding of this is that low carbohydrate diets work, though living this way over years would be really unhealthy. But spending a week doing this is harmless.

Similarly, discussing things that might be true, may well lead to interesting discoveries. But even things that aren't true can be useful, if we learn some truth by working our way through their details.

### **The Not So Amazing McDonalds Diet**

In the chapter after “The Amazing McNuggets Diet” Klosterman tells us about seeing Morgan Spurlock’s well received documentary “Super Size Me,” and having a chance to discuss the film in Klosterman’s apartment with Spurlock and his vegan chef fiancée, now wife, Alexandra Jamieson. Spurlock purportedly spent thirty days buying all his food and beverages at McDonalds, averaging about five thousand calories a day. The 6’ 2”, 185-pound Spurlock gained 24.5 pounds and had serious medical consequences including liver damage. In an early scene, we see Spurlock at his weigh-in wearing bikini briefs, and he looks like one fit dude. He has large biceps, a narrow waste, and a large chest. To realize how well conditioned Spurlock is consider Steve Nash, the world class athlete who plays point guard for the NBA Phoenix Suns point—who by the way is not a communist, but then again, neither is Spurlock. Nash is 6’ 3” and weighs 178 pounds. My own assessment is that these guys are both very fit; Nash is seriously cut, but Spurlock has larger arms and a more pronounced chest to waste V. As the Willie Dixon blues standard goes, Spurlock the actor is “built for comfort” (on the eyes) but not—as Nash the point guard is—“built for speed, but he got everything that a good [vegan chef] need[s].”

Klosterman has his doubts about this documentary. After all, he ate McNuggets for a week and may have improved his health; in Spurlock’s documentary we find him puking out the window of his car on day three. There is an element here that either might be true, or might not be true at all.

I certainly don’t believe that three days of junk food would have me puking out of car windows. I often travel and eat inappropriately at restaurants for a few days, but I have never puked out of the window of my car as a result. Klosterman’s skepticism is entirely justified. My own guess is that if Spurlock had actually done what he claimed to have done and exercised as he had done in the past, he would have gained a



few pounds, but suffered little health damage. This is what his doctors predicted. Spurlock could lose weight during thirty days at McDonalds, if he wanted to. Supersize the zero calorie coffee, or unsweetened iced tea, or diet coke and save a thousand plus calories a day. Pick the chicken or fish over the beef; Filet-O-Fish = 380 calories, Angus Mushroom and Swiss = 780 calories. After all, anyone heard of Jared “Subway” Fogle? He lost two hundred pounds on a fast food diet. Klosterman smelled a rat, but didn’t bother to follow it through to conclusion. But he did smell the rat! And my intuitions are that this is a particularly stinky rat.

But notice how this examination of the amazing McNuggets diet and a subsequent celebrity interview has high culture implications. Is the fast food industry a major villain in American health or merely a convenient target? Given our current difficulties in providing affordable health care, this is not a trivial issue. Given the costs to human freedom and ultimately human happiness that significant regulation of the food industry would entail, the issue is a serious one indeed. This highlights Mill’s point made earlier. It is only through a rigorous free market of ideas that we can discover new truths, and there is no reason to assume that an examination of low culture cannot provide some.

Ultimately this is the point of all of Klosterman’s work. Maybe Garth Brooks and Pamela Anderson have something positive to teach us. Maybe they don’t. But learning why they don’t would be a positive thing to know. If no one is willing to give a critical high-culture examination to low culture, whatever truth is there to be discovered is unlikely to be exposed by a low-culture examination. The only way to know that poetry is more valuable than pushpin, is to give pushpin the same quality of examination that poetry gets, and compare the results. So, there is much to be said for Klosterman’s high-culture examination of low culture.



# 14

## Are You Sure That's What You Want?

DANIEL R. MISTICH AND  
RYAN P. McCULLOUGH

We all want things. We all need things. We all want to need things, and we all need to want them. This is not double-talk; this is truth.

—CHUCK KLOSTERMAN, *Chuck Klosterman IV*, p. 283

The relationship between glam rock and hair metal is like the relationship between philosophy and psychoanalysis. Without glam rock, hair metal would never exist. David Bowie had to dress up as Ziggy Stardust before Tommy Lee could go on stage wearing a jock strap with suspenders. We also had to have a fundamental understanding about how we know what we know (philosophy) before we could begin to analyze others and ourselves (psychoanalysis). Psychoanalysts like Sigmund Freud had to cover Plato and other Greek philosophers just like Quiet Riot had to cover Slade's "Cum on Feel the Noize."

Chuck Klosterman's writings increase our knowledge about ourselves and the way we think. Why? His analysis of pop culture and his own personal relationships reflect major philosophical themes regarding the nature of desire. These themes help us understand his writings and make them even more enjoyable. Van Halen's "Eruption" is far more interesting to listen to if you know something about classical music. In the same way, Chuck Klosterman's work is far more interesting if you know about philosophical and psychoanalytic treatments of desire.

Klosterman articulates an understanding of desire rooted in philosophical-psychoanalytical traditions in three ways:

1. He recognizes the inability to fulfill desire.
2. He identifies how our desire either brings or fails to deliver certain social recognitions.
3. He acknowledges that pop culture informs the fantasies that frame our desires.

### **I Can't Get (or Give) No Satisfaction:**

You can't always get what you want. Seriously. You can't get what you want. Okay, we ripped those lines from Mick Jagger, but he ripped off every African-American blues musician who came before him, so our crime isn't as grave. The point ought to be well taken, though. If you've read "This is Emo" in *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*, you'll see that Chuck Klosterman is definitely picking up what the Stones are putting down. In that essay, Klosterman reflects on an important position taken by many philosophers and psychoanalysts—the fulfillment of desire is either impossible or not recommended.

From its very beginnings, the Western philosophical tradition has posed questions related to what we want and why we want it. Understanding desire is central to theorizing our human existence. Heraclitus, a pre-Internet and pre-Socratic thinker, whose works have remained in fragmentary form (sort of like Dylan's basement tape recordings with The Band), argued that "it is hard to contend against one's heart's desire; for whatever it wishes to have it buys at the cost of soul" (*The Beginning of All Wisdom*, p. 37).

Plato, arguably the most important figure in all of philosophy, also noted that desire is inherent in the very structure of our souls. In his account, desire's a good thing, as long as its aim is for something good. The situation gets ugly when desire takes over and we wind up wanting what we don't really need and not what's best for us.

Klosterman opens "This Is Emo" with a masterstroke: "No woman will ever satisfy me. I know that now, and I would never try to deny it. But this is actually okay, because I will never satisfy a woman, either" (*Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*, p. 1). From the getgo, it's clear that Klosterman is painfully aware that sometimes things just don't go our way. If we read closely, though, we see that Klosterman adds a bit of a twist to Mick

Jagger's nugget of wisdom. Certainly, you can't always get what you want, but you can't even help someone else get what they want. This sucks for you, but it also sucks for the rest of us. While we almost certainly agree with Chuck that "fake love is a very powerful thing," what is most interesting to us (and probably to other psychoanalysts and philosophers of desire) is his suggestion that, well, he *can't get no satisfaction*. If you think long enough about Klosterman's point (and trust us, we have), it's easy to see that this suggestion is more than just a simple observation about the inability to have stable relationships in our media-saturated world.

But it gets worse.

Although we think that Klosterman is disappointed (*unsatisfied*, perhaps?) that unfulfillment is our lot, Slovenian philosopher-psychoanalyst-obvious winner of any grizzly bear look-alike contest (we're serious, Google that shit), Slavoj Žižek, makes it clear that desire isn't *supposed* to be fulfilled. Owing a debt to the French psychoanalyst-philosopher Jacques Lacan, Žižek suggests that the "realization of desire does not consist in its being 'fulfilled', 'fully satisfied', it coincides rather with the reproduction of desire as such, with its circular movement" (*Looking Awry*, p. 7). Put in a way that is hopefully less confusing, we have a fundamental *desire to desire*, and, consequently, the fulfillment of our desire could lead to tragic results. For instance, George Lucas had a desire to improve the marketability of *Star Wars* merchandise during the Christmas shopping season. He tried to fulfill those desires by creating *The Stars Wars Holiday Special*. If you have seen a bootleg video of this thing, you know the results were tragic. Really, REALLY tragic.

In "This Is Emo," Klosterman wanted nothing more than to spend a weekend with a woman he liked at the Waldorf Astoria. His visions of "romantic love" included fun weekends spent in New York City at expensive hotels. However, Chuck quickly found these romantic visions difficult to fulfill because the woman he wanted to spend time with would have rather gone to see Coldplay than be with him. He ended up alone. He didn't get what he wanted. He was not satisfied. Why? Because he *wanted* satisfaction. He, or anyone else for that matter, cannot achieve happiness. According to Chuck, if we frame happiness as a "romantic weekend" or "romantic love," we will not get it.

But it gets worse.

On the surface, Žižek's point and Klosterman's experiences are disheartening. Unfortunately for those of us who think we ought to get what we want every now and then, Žižek isn't the only one to come to the conclusion that we're better off having our desires go unsatisfied. Famed American philosopher Judith Butler concurs with Žižek on this point. Butler writes:

Lacan infamously cautioned, "Do not cede upon your desire." This is an ambiguous claim, since he does not say that your desire should or must be satisfied. He only says that desire should not be stopped. Indeed, sometimes satisfaction is the very means by which one cedes upon desire, the means by which one turns against it, arranging for its quick death. (*Giving an Account of Oneself*, p. 43)

In other words, being unsatisfied by our desires is, well, sort of good for us. To have our desires fulfilled would be for desire to be foreclosed permanently. Instead, those from the Lacanian tradition would insist (as we think the Klosterman of "This is Emo" also would) that we simply accept what Butler has previously called "psychoanalytic inevitability of dissatisfaction," or, as she puts it even more poetically, "the necessary nausea of appetite" (*Subjects of Desire*, p. 15, p. 2). In this way, we might read "This is Emo" as a text that articulates a pseudo-Lacanian perspective on desire: we can't ever really get what we want. As Sean Homer writes, we have "the constant sense . . . that something is lacking or missing from our lives. We are always searching for fulfillment, for knowledge, for possessions, for love, and whenever we achieve these goals, there is always something more that we desire" (*Jacques Lacan*, p. 87). Sorry, Mick, it's even worse than you thought.

But it gets better?

We know this all sounds like a bummer. We could read the closing lines of "This Is Emo," ("I want fake love. But that's all I want, and that's why I can't have it."), get depressed, and then slit our wrists (and THAT would be emo) (p. 10). It might seem as though all is lost. It might seem as though we're continually chasing the unattainable. HOWEVER, and this is a big however, we could re-read this closing line while remembering that being unsatisfied is a good thing. That it is good to have desire. That being fulfilled closes us off to opportunities that are still

out there. If we can read "This is Emo" with a certain degree of optimism, we can realize that it's okay to not always get what we want. Although Klosterman certainly laments this inevitability throughout his essay, it's clear that he understands the point that satisfaction isn't all it's cracked up to be.

## I Want You to Want Me

Robin Zander seems really annoying. Not only does he want you to want him, but he also needs you to need him. He's really asking a lot of you. But here's the thing: We are all like the dead sexy Cheap Trick front man. We ALL want someone to want us. We ALL need someone to need us. This need for *recognition* is a major topic in psychoanalysis and western philosophy as it is in Klosterman's writings. Consequently, we would want, need, love, and beg for you to join us in our exploration of this philosophical position that is both interesting and relevant to our understanding of ourselves. (As far as we know, there's no *Cheap Trick and Philosophy*, so there's no need to bother).

Yes, Robin Zander is annoying, but he is only 7% as annoying as Billy Joel. In "Every Dog Must Have His Day, Every Drunk Must Have His Drink" (*Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*) and "The Stranger" (*Chuck Klosterman IV*), Chuck presents Billy Joel as a quasi-tragic figure, a pop music Charlie Brown who is eternally asking the question, "Why is everybody picking on me?" Obviously, Billy Joel really isn't *that* tragic by most standards. He is insanely wealthy and famous, and he has bagged some really good looking women. Most people (read: heterosexual men) would trade lives with Billy Joel in a heartbeat. However, he is tragic according to Klosterman in one very important way. (Well, it's important in that it can help us make an argument): He wants rock critics to want him, but clearly, that ain't happening.

Klosterman makes it painfully clear that most rock critics and historians of the genre will never consider Billy Joel to be "among rock music's pantheon of greats" (*Chuck Klosterman IV*, p. 168). But this is what Billy Joel craves. Given Klosterman's interpretation, Billy Joel's classical album could really be read as a boring version of the Cheap Trick hit. In Joel's case, however, he wasn't seeking the affection of a woman. He was seeking the affection of the people that write

the history of pop music. He wants those opinion leaders to view him as an important, talented, and significant figure within the genre. He openly laments *Rolling Stone* not liking him. This is why Billy Joel is the positively tragic color of “burnt orange” (p. 168). He really wants to be *recognized* as cool or important, but he has not (nor will he ever) receive that recognition.

All of this talk about Billy Joel might have you wondering what the hell it has to do with desire from the western philosophical tradition. Well, the Russian-born philosopher Alexander Kojève would say that it has *everything* to do with it. As Kojève writes,

Desire is human only if the one desires, not the body, but the Desire of the other; if he wants “to possess” or “to assimilate” the Desire taken as Desire—that is to say, if he wants to be “desired” or “loved,” or, rather, “recognized” in his human value, in his reality as a human individual. (*Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 6)

Desire might traditionally be thought of as being related to carnal appetites for sex. However, much like other philosophers who carefully considered desire in the twentieth century, Kojève “ain’t talkin’ about love,” as David Lee Roth might put it. Desire can manifest itself in the *desire for recognition*, and, a reading of Klosterman’s work from a psychoanalytic perspective would suggest that Billy Joel embodies our desire for recognition.

Thanks to Chuck, Billy Joel gives us more than just a crappy history lesson (“We Didn’t Start the Fire”). He gives a lesson about the seemingly fundamental need for recognition. In other words, we become recognized through desire and our desire is a desire for recognition. As Butler explains, desire is always directed: “Desire is *intentional* in that it is always desire *of* or *for* a given object or Other, but it is also *reflexive* in the sense that desire is a modality in which the subject is both discovered and enhanced” (*Subjects of Desire*, p. 25).

The desire to be recognized is not just a problem for Billy Joel; this is a problem for you, us, and anyone wearing a giant Motörhead patch on back of a denim jacket. Klosterman acknowledges this desire as universal by analyzing, of all things, cereal boxes, in “The Lady or the Tiger”:



The desire to be cool is—ultimately—the desire to be rescued. It's the desire to be pulled from the unwashed masses of society. It's the desire to be advanced beyond the faceless humanoid robots who will die unheralded deaths and never truly matter, mostly because they all lived the same pedestrian life. Without the spoils of exclusionary coolness, we're just cogs in the struggle. (*Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*, p. 123)

Obviously, Klosterman argues that we're all searching for that coolness, but we believe that you could easily replace the word "cool" with the word "recognized." Coolness (read: recognition) makes us unique, and separates us from the other guy or gal. If we aren't cool, we aren't being singled out for recognition. "But if we can just find that one cool thing that no one else has . . . we can be better than ourselves" (p. 124).

Chuck also takes aim at this problem when he confronts his own issues with potential mates in *Killing Yourself to Live*. Take, for example, Chuck's discussion of Diane, one of three women involved in his life during the writing of his book about death and rock'n'roll:

Diane's inability to love me makes me love her more. Without a doubt not loving me is the most alluring thing Diane (or any woman) can do. Nothing makes me love Diane as much as her constant rejection of my heartfelt advances. This is compounded by Diane's own insecurities; the fact that she can reject me time after time after time is what she finds most endearing. She knows I will never give up. She could hate me and I would love her anyway. (p. 27)

Although Chuck later admits that he is "not psychologically flawless" because the reader discovers that his relationship (or lack thereof) with Diane is as complicated as any episode from the fourth season of *Lost*, this passage highlights a few key points relevant to our philosophical discussion at hand. First, we might re-emphasize our earlier point that desire (and especially Chuck's desire for Diane's love) remains fundamentally unfulfilled or unsatisfied. As the passage shows (and the rest of the book reminds us), Chuck's love for Diane is hardly reciprocated, which only makes him want her more.

But second, and perhaps most important here, Chuck doesn't simply want Diane (not to mention Lenore or Quincy, his

other objects of desire in *Killing Yourself to Live*). Chuck wants Diane to want him. His desire is really a desire to be recognized as her boyfriend, and this is particularly evident when Chuck gives Diane three weeks to decide whether or not she loves him. Chuck's ultimatum is really just another way of expressing how, above all, he desires her recognition as her boyfriend.

We think that the desire to be cool (in the case of Joel) and the desire to be loved by another person (in the case of Chuck and Diane) are one in the same: they are both the desire to be recognized. We may not always achieve this goal, but we tend to agree with one of Kojève's major conclusions related to desire: "all Desire is desire for a value" (*Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 6).

### **It's All Part of My Rock'n'Roll Fantasy**

The quality of the sources that have inspired our section headers has significantly decreased, hasn't it? We started with the Stones, and everyone knows they are bitchin.' We then moved to Cheap Trick, and if you are reading this book, I am sure you would agree with us that "Surrender" is an amazing song. But now we have scraped the bottom of the creative barrel. We are referencing, ugh, Bad Company, a British "supergroup" which has never really done anything super.

ANYWAY, we'll start this section with yet another analogy, but this time it will come in SAT style.

#### **Fantasy : Desire**

**A. Wilco : Radiohead**

**B. Cinderella : Ratt**

**C. The Stooges : The Clash**

**D. Bruce Springsteen : Tom Petty**

If you're confused by the question, don't worry. A return to Sigmund Freud should make the answer pretty clear. He theorized that a happy person never fantasizes, only "unsatisfied" individuals have fantasies. Fantasies are the result of a wish that has not been satisfied or fulfilled, and the fantasies are created to fulfill that wish. For Freud, we create fantasies to

correct the world around us. We use fantasy to fill voids in our lives. This need to fantasize stems from our childhood, as Freud states:

As people grow up, then, they cease to play, and they seem to give up the yield of pleasure which they gained from playing. But whoever understands the human mind knows that hardly anything is harder for a man than to give up a pleasure which he has once experienced. Actually we can never give anything up; we only exchange one thing for another. What appears to be a renunciation is really the formation of a substitute or surrogate. In the same way, the growing child, when he stops playing, gives up nothing but the link with real objects; instead of *playing*, he knows *phantasies*. (“Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming,” *The Freud Reader*, pp. 437–38)

Freud noted frequently that we go through several changes in the transition from childhood to adulthood, but one of his more important points is that fantasy is a central part of our lives.

For many psychoanalysts and philosophers of desire, fantasy is that which makes desire possible. If fantasy makes desire possible, then the answer to the analogy that we posed must be C. The proto-punk Stooges made a band like The Clash possible. Iggy Pop (or at that time, Iggy Stoooge) needed “danger little stranger,” before The Clash could “have a riot of their own.” Without The Stooges, The Clash would never have happened, and without fantasy, desire would never have happened. We hope this exercise was instructive, even though Chuck Klosterman finds punk rock utterly ridiculous.

As Sean Homer writes, “unconscious desires are manifested through fantasy. Fantasy is an imagined scene in which the subject is a protagonist, and always represents the fulfillment of a wish. Fantasies are never a purely private affair but circulate in the public domain through such media as film, literature, and television” (*Jacques Lacan*, p. 85). Or, in Žižek’s words, “What the fantasy stages is not a scene in which our desire is fulfilled, fully satisfied, but on the contrary, a scene that realizes, stages, the desire as such” (*Looking Awry*, p. 6). We need fantasy in order to have desires, regardless of whether or not those desires are actually fulfilled in our “real” lives. As we’ve already mentioned, these desires often remain unsatisfied, but it’s

important to stress here that a fantasy might be thought as a condition for the possibility of desire itself.

Although we would agree with these basic claims about the role of fantasy and desire, we might also add that Klosterman is keenly aware not only of the sometimes public character of fantasies, but that fantasies are to an extent *determined and produced* by popular culture and its circulation. He contends that the production of fantasies occurs in two very important ways: 1. Our romantic appetites, and 2. our sexual appetites. With regard to the first way in which fantasies are produced, consider Klosterman's observations about John Cusack's character in the movie *Say Anything*, Lloyd Dobler and the British band Coldplay, also from "This is Emo." Addressing this issue in "This is Emo," Klosterman writes:

Pundits are always blaming TV for making people stupid, movies for desensitizing the world to violence, and rock music for making kids take drugs and kill themselves. These things should be the least of our worries. The main problem with mass media is that it makes it impossible to fall in love with any acumen of normalcy (*Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*, p. 4)

In this passage (and throughout the essay), Chuck suggests that the mass media is somewhat responsible for the conception of love that most of us operate with. The media projects (sometimes literally on a screen) a version of love that structures our desire for it. Klosterman perhaps says it best when he writes 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).

Chuck also muses on the importance of the production and circulation of fantasies in his essay on pornography from *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*, in which he gives a few shout-outs to Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, two icons of the psychoanalytic tradition. As Chuck writes, "Porn sites are the window into the modern soul; they're glimpses into the twisted minds of a faceless society" (p. 112). But Internet porn doesn't just function as a mirror that reflects our earlier established desires. Instead, porn helps constitute our desires. According to Chuck, porn even functions to change "the way people think about their own

existence” (pp. 115–16). These sexual fantasies reflected on the web structure our desires.

Chuck doesn't just have vitriolic hatred for the media-saturated world that we now live in. Klosterman also admits that the same system that created these entities also make it possible for him to have any relationship at all. “Woody Allen changed everything,” Chuck writes, “Woody 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). Instead of simply hating the media-generated fantasies that are produced by popular culture, Klosterman finds their nature mutually detrimental and beneficial.

### **This Is a Tribute**

When we read Chuck, we experience several “ah-ha” moments; moments when we feel as though Chuck is peering into our soul. His writings speak to us in a way that elucidates our common experiences and identifies why we feel or think in a certain way. We think (and we hope that you think this as well) this is a by-product of his works reflecting major philosophical themes concerning the nature of human desire. More specifically, Chuck points us to the important relations between desire, satisfaction, recognition, and fantasy, whittling down philosophical traditions of Freud, Lacan, Žižek, Butler, and Kojève to their very core, in a way accessible to the masses.

Remember the joke we made earlier about the Rolling Stones ripping off African-American blues artists? This does not mean we dislike the Rolling Stones. On the contrary, we love the Stones. Yes, they should have hung it up in 1982, but we love the Stones. The Stones are great because they stole from great artists and made the African-American blues tradition accessible to white kids.

Just like the Stones, the work of Chuck Klosterman has the potential to be transcendent, and this is significant given the speed at which our culture moves. Even though he might be elaborating on a genre of music (emo) that might be a mere footnote in the history of pop music, his work will stand the test of time because his writing reflects philosophical conceptions of

desire, which is an innate part of the human psyche. This is why the work he produces will last, and this is why we will keep reading his stuff.

But if he writes the equivalent of *Steel Wheels*, then we're out.

**My literate  
cat?**





## HYPERthetical Response #5

# My literate cat

MELISSA VOSEN

For reasons that cannot be explained, cats can suddenly read at a twelfth-grade level. They can't talk and they can't write, but they can read silently and understand the text. Many cats love this new skill, because they now have something to do all day while they lay around the house; however, a few cats become depressed, because reading forces them to realize the limitations of their existence (not to mention the utter frustration of being unable to express themselves). This being the case, do you think the average cat would enjoy *Garfield*, or would cats find this cartoon to be an insulting caricature?

—*Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*, p. 131

I know what most of you are thinking. *Garfield* is a lazy, sarcastic cat that is best known for his rotund physique and his love of lasagna. Of course cats would be offended and find this to be an insulting caricature of their species, right? Wrong.

While Klosterman suggests that some cats become depressed as a result of their new found skill, I argue that being able to read the comic strip *Garfield* would provide a sense of hope for these furry felines. *Garfield*, in many ways, becomes an archetypal image, a hero, and I believe the comic strip would reaffirm their sense of purpose. Without *Garfield*, the strip becomes much darker. Without *Garfield*, it is obvious how lonely and self-loathing the main human character, Jon Arbuckle, is. There is a reason the strip is named after the fat tabby—he is the glue that holds Arbuckle together.

I believe *Garfield* would give these cats a new perspective on life. It is clear after reading the strip without *Garfield* how

important Garfield is to Jon. With the endorsement of Jim Davis, the creator of *Garfield*, Dan Walsh published a book filled with Garfield comics—without Garfield. (You can buy it on Amazon if you are interested or check out Walsh’s website, <http://garfieldminusgarfield.net/>).

After reading only a few of these strips, a reader can easily see the existential crisis Jon is in. If the cats aren’t able to see how Garfield is the only thing stopping Jon from having a complete breakdown, they should at least be able to appreciate that Garfield’s life is far less depressing than Jon’s. And whether we like to admit it or not, we all find some relief knowing we do not suffer from the ailments of others—particularly, often taboo, mental conditions.

Garfield is clearly the glue that holds this family together. I think cats would find comfort in this. Their life is not meaningless, and *Garfield* should provide great comfort in the fact that life could always be worse. They could be Jon Arbuckle. The comic also proves what cats have been trying to prove for so long—they are, indeed, smarter than dogs.

Canines, on the other hand, might find great offense to Jon’s dog, Odie. He is often portrayed as unintelligent and outwitted by the clever, and far superior, Garfield. Really, what is there for cats not to like?