

TECHNOLOGY

Young Men Have Invented a New Way to Defeat Themselves

Rawdogging is a search for purity that cannot be achieved.


By Ian Bogost



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It was time to buckle up and face the void. I was going to “rawdog” this flight, a new trend in extreme air travel. Rawdoggers, according to the dubious lore of social-media virality, overcome the longest of long-haul flights (New York to Hong Kong, say, or London to Sydney) by means of nihilism. They claim to spend the entire journey, perhaps as many as 18 hours, doing nothing other than staring at the flight map on the seat-back screen—no movies, no books, and, for the rawdoggiest, not even any meals.

My flight was an embarrassingly modest 78 minutes long, but I didn’t last even 15. A purebred rawdogger might call me weak—unable to endure even the length of one *Perfect Strangers* before leaning on the artificial crutch of Spotify downloads, *Fast & Furious* films streamed via in-flight entertainment, young-adult fiction inhaled from an e-book reader, the lure of laptop work, or the foaming head of a Diet Coke poured from the rolling cart. Such is the sorry state of contemporary culture, they might lament, that these temptations of the flesh cannot be relinquished even temporarily.

Rawdoggers seem to believe they have invented a new form of meditation, and who am I to say they have not? Whereas the Buddhist might accept the captive circumstances of a long flight as an invitation to let go of worldly snares, the rawdogger seeks to overcome them through refusal and its public performance. He rejects the movie. He rejects the frail crinkle of the plastic airline-refreshment cup. He rejects the tender sorrow that cruising altitude somehow always amplifies. Having ascended thanks to the ingenuity of humankind, the rawdogger now rises above the very idea of ascent. And then he publishes a TikTok as proof, which perhaps millions of people view.

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Thanks to its success as a meme, rawdogging has now been applied to deeds well beyond air travel: One can rawdog subway rides, cinema screenings, office work, mental illness (no meds!), meals (no sauce!), sports (no betting!). Most of these are jokes, and that's sort of the point: Rawdogging is an aspiration, not an act. It is a fantasy of returning to a supposedly pure prior circumstance (which likely never really existed anyway), undertaken for symbolic exchange on social media, not as lived experience, let alone enlightenment.

The practice evolved from the broader rise of asceticism, especially among (young, very online) men. To be alive on Earth these days is to suffer the barrage of constant lures—sex, substance, gambling, sloth—so widely available and easily accessed that one must fight constantly to avoid their seduction. That state of affairs has diluted asceticism from the actual, if difficult, rejection of indulgence into a fetish for that abstinence. Rawdogging a flight is surely a fictional act—few would really, actually spend a transcontinental plane ride blinkered like a draft horse to the flight map. But talking about the idea—there's a subreddit for that, surely.

When *rawdogging* first appeared as a popular cultural concept, some rawdogging critics connected it to contemporary sexual slang—raw (as in unprotected) sex, or “No-Nut November,” an abstention from sexual gratification for people who need to touch grass. But that's wrong; rawdogging is about purity in a more general sense. It is

about *living* raw in some ideal, natural state unsullied by cultural decline. And that has always been impossible.

Human culture has always struggled to accept this fact, and “rawness” finds itself at the center of that struggle. The structuralist anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss proposed a “culinary triangle” that described three phases of food—raw, cooked, and rotten. Raw food is unadulterated by either human or natural processes. Cooked food subjects raw food to human preparation; rotten food subjects it to natural decay. Rotten is also relative; a ripe, smelly cheese in one culture might seem rotten in another. Roasting or grilling performs less processing on foods than sautéing or souffléing them. Enough cultural manipulation—engineered, prepackaged foods, say—can make food seem rotten, stripped of both nutritive and social value. This circumstance made rawness, once seen as primitive, flip into a new ideal for the civilized. That’s why some see raw sugar as better than refined or artificial ones. Raw materials such as wood or leather seem closer to nature and therefore more pure. Cocaine or heroin are raw when they are uncut, the narcotic delivered at full strength.

Rawdogging takes this sense of rawness and attaches it to an actor, the *dog*—a bloke, a dude, an homme—who would enact rawness by becoming its agent. But just as today’s raw foods are highly processed *culturally*—packaged, sold, and ideologized as green or organic, for example—there is nothing pure about a rawdogged flight. What is natural, after all, about being hurtled through the troposphere in a pressurized metal tube burning petroleum distillates refined from dinosaur debris? And if rawdogging just involves abolishing frills, the airline industry stripped flying of most of its previous luxuries long ago—even, in some cases, the very seat-back screens that might display a flight map at which a rawdogger might rawdog.

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We cannot reverse time on social progress, even when that progress feels regressive. Regression can also be a kind of progress. The cinema was degraded by smartphones, but smartphones also built tiny theaters into everyone’s pocket and purse. The impersonal, modernist thrill of watching strangers on the crowded subway has been

eroded, but those strange leers have also been replaced by actual fellowship on group text chats. Nothing in life is ever just better or worse, purer or more sullied. Nothing in life is ever just one thing or the other.

But to pursue a state of purity—even a fictional one; even a made-up, obviously impure one—still feels righteous. To act on an attempt to become closer to nature, or some imagined state of unadulteratedness, also makes one feel as if one is getting the best of it. As a metaphor for one-upmanship, it is fitting that air travel became the top dog of rawdogs. Purification rises up, and the rawdogging flier is closer to heaven already. Can't he get just a little higher? Instead of dancing the skies on laughter-silvered wings, better to stare them down.

Alas, every time one feels that one has overcome something, another, seemingly purer way to conquer it materializes. After abandoning my own, modest attempt at rawdogging my flight by pulling out my laptop, I found an even purer version: Rawdog Simulator, a rawdog flight-sim video game. After buying a virtual ticket from New York to Singapore, I piloted my rawdog avatar down the jet bridge and took my virtual seat for the 18-hour, 40-minute flight to nowhere. The software uses a laptop camera for eye tracking, to ensure that players gape into the virtual flight path, or else it's game over.

Staring down the pretend map on the seat of the pretend plane from the real seat of my real plane, a familiar, sickening taste rose up my throat: ironic detachment, the unadulterated flavor of purity's momentary success. The joke's on you, meatspace rawdoggers, actually flying to Singapore like twits. I was rawdogging rawdogging itself.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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