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Consumed:

1. to absorb; engross; to fully engage; filled up *consumed with curiosity*
2. to be gutted; to waste or burn away *the fire consumed several buildings*

*"The basic opposition on which the entire liberal vision relies is that between those who are ruled by culture, totally determined by the lifeworld into which they are born, and those who merely "enjoy" their culture, who are elevated above it, free to choose it." Slavoj Zizek, Violence*

It's not that I think Popular Culture is God's gift to humanity. But I do think that it's man's gift to humanity. It's a common vocabulary that anyone can engage in, so long as she is willing. It's a lexicon of water cooler moments, and I am convinced I'd love those if I worked somewhere that had a water cooler (or if I worked somewhere where people have conversations instead of tell jokes). Now, sure, it's not always easy to say, "Thank you" for these gifts. I take the bad with the good—the *Juno* with the *Clueless*, if you will—but just because one sixteen year old who is brilliant in everything except birth control abuses the system ("I'm sorry, I can't hear you. I'm talking on my hamburger phone.") doesn't mean that the system is broken ("Why would I listen to you anyway? You're a virgin who can't drive."). We speak in awe and disgust about the potential for adaptation within capitalism, but all the shape shifting and nooks-and-crannies architecture of popular culture are what make it viable (and amazing). They are of the same breathable cloth, and that's OK.

So, I love those scenes in movies where one of the protagonists (because, let's face it, there's generally two even though it first appears that the main characters are practically mortal enemies and could never, ever fall in love) suddenly has a newspaper article due that allows an outlet for exposition, an opportunity to translate all those raw emotions from the pair's last encounter into something that makes sense: a moment to set things straight even though almost all hope is lost that it will make any difference. A lot of those scenes take the chance to scapegoat popular culture in a way that makes it seem like the character is taking responsibility for himself but isn't. It's sneaky. Especially recently, the Zach Braff-y meta-monologue prototype even conjures the image of a bumbling guy, standing in front of a girl, holding a stereo over his head because that first time in the '80s it had seemed so pure. The characters (The writers? The directors?) go 'big' and try to relate to the 'real' people in the audience instead of the other 'fake' person on the screen. And that's really a different debate, and it's one that misses the point, which is, I think, that the beauty of the formula is that there is no need to go 'big' because even the 'smallest', 'simplest' platitudes and declarations can be understood allegorically. That's more ironic than any t-shirt. And it's not a bad thing. It's debatable, obviously, but I'll argue that it's a type of currency that allows for barter (and banter) outside the realm of the colder, harder exchanges of an entertainment-free world. Jamal and Latika had M.I.A. as their soundtrack through poverty; I had cable.

Anyway, this isn't one of those moments. I can't take this opportunity to castrate popular culture. It's not entirely got to do with biting the hand that rocked my cradle. I have a critical eye (and mouth). I see the flaws, or at least have my theories on what they are (*Survivor*, I call you Patient Zero in this Reality TV epidemic.) I've actually spent about a year fleshing out my ideas on how popular culture can stunt individual and collective growth. (That's also titled *Consumed!*.) And before that, I spent a few years in therapy basically doing the same thing. But at the end of the day, I don't think that Rome is burning. I don't think a smirk brined in whiskey that's been around longer than I've been able to drink can offer any more insight into the state of my (dis)content than my own smirk can. And it's certainly not because I was born too late to see the Stones...where ever... or the back entrance at Studio 54... whatever. I'll happily leave the Dylan-Warhol debate to Edie Sedgwick, and I'll assume that she'd agree that Disney didn't warp our perceptions of romance and love any more than our own relationships did.

Whether it's for acceptance or rejection, we all look to society (as a neutral space) and then to ourselves as we act according to what we need. I'll be honest, sometimes I do worry that I'm wasting my life in front of a screen, but then that rollercoaster/popcorn/please be quiet clip starts to play, and the

lights go low, and the biggest question stops being, “Is this Matthew McConaughey character a stoner or a lawyer?” and becomes, simply, “How will this unfold?” It’s not always Shakespeare, but sometimes it’s Sondheim, or Soderberg. Sometimes it’s fluff. And sometimes it doesn’t matter because it’s the middle of the night and the volume is down and the screen is doing its job just by being on.

Complexity and profundity have been conflated in academia just like fame and significance have been conflated in popular culture. None of these dyads actually have anything to do with the other. If there are signs that Americans bow to the gods of advertising, there are equal indications that people find the gods-- and sometimes even Don Draper-- ridiculous. That’s as much a part of the lexicon as any of the rest of it. And that’s why I can’t take my swings at Popular Culture. It’s too big. It’s too easy. And it’s kind of like telling a race joke: I don’t buy into the premise, and even if it gets a laugh, I’m going to feel dirty about it afterwards.

Sure it’s disheartening that the Kardashians have had twice as many seasons on television as *Arrested Development*. And, yes, SPOILER ALERT: Spoiler Alerts are a #firstworldproblem. But we are all in this together, and that is not a bad thing. In fact there are many positives to it, and the best part of all is that it’s not a trap. It just isn’t.

I used to talk about myself as a pop culture implosion. But that’s not fair, to me or to popular culture. Sure, I’m a product of my environment. I might even be a target audience, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to buy into anything. I can surely be sold on something I can’t afford but not on something I don’t want. Just because my default is being programmed at 160 characters, it doesn’t mean I’ll lose the ability to expound on my ideas (or status) outside the frameworks of a text message. And just because I’m big on symbolism and small on subtlety, I don’t think it can be entirely blamed on the close-angle shots on television. I wouldn’t trade my sponge for a filter *because I don’t have to*. They’re not mutually exclusive. That white cord around my neck is not a noose. (And it’s not a wePod.) Culture, especially popular culture, is as much about choice as it is about acceptance. And we’re in it together.