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“Montero” and Zizekian Philosophy

Lil Nas X, who burst onto the music scene after his song Old Town Road, only released on YouTube, gained massive virality and became the longest running number one single on billboard of all time (Unterburger). Lil Nas X came out as gay soon after he gained his fame, and while he was open about his sexuality on social media, his songs did not directly address his being gay. This all changed in 2021 when Lil Nas X released his long awaited single “Montero (Call Me By Your Name).” The song’s overt exploration of homosexuality and its depiction of Lil Nas X giving Satan a lapdance made it incredibly controversial, to the point that even a governor commented on it (Coleman). When viewed through the philosophical lens of Slavoj Zizek, the music video and Lil Nas X’s reclamation of gay people going to hell uses and explores a lot of interesting philosophical ideas. “Montero” exemplifies both the idea of Kynicism in contrast to Cynicism through allusions to Greek philosophers and Zizekian views on Kantian ideas of evil through its use of Genesis imagery In order to make an effective criticism of conservative Christian homophobia.

Lil Nas X is clearly critiquing homophobia, gender conformity, and Christianity as a colonizing force in his video. The Montero character seems to be inspired by the philosopher Socrates. A scene in the music video shows him being judged by a Greco-Roman inspired theater, which seems like a reference to the famous trial of socrates. The trial involved Socrates being tried by Athens for corrupting the youth and moral impiety. Socrates defense was to admit

that he committed the crimes and refuse to apologize for them, saying “Therefore, O men of Athens, I say to you... either acquit me or not; but whatever you do, know that I shall never alter my ways, not even if I have to die many times” (Plato). Plato then goes on to go to prison and refuse a chance to escape, truly accepting his execution. This is the direct inspiration for the middle part of the music video. Lil Nas X’s trial by the stone men in the Greco-Roman theater by the five blue wigged judges mirrors Socrates being judged by the orators Lycon, Anytus, and Meletus in front of a similar large jury that decides his fate. Lil Nas X’s lines during the trial are openly embracing being gay, saying “I wanna sell what you’re buying, I wanna feel on your ass in Hawaii, want that jail life for fucking and flying, shoot a shot in your mouth while I’m riding” (X). This is a clear homage to Socrates admitting and embracing his “corruption of the youth.” Lil Nas X goes on to sing, “I wanna fuck the ones I envy,” as he is stoned to death by buttplugs, just as Socrates was killed by execution via poison.

The death by stoning has specific allusion to the stoning of Lycides. Stoning actually was very uncommon as a form of execution in ancient Greece. Stoning was recognized as a type of execution but was not commonly practiced, and was seen as “repulsive” (Rosivach 236-237). The most famous Greek stoning was that of Lycides, which was seen as a mob killing that was so lawless and repulsive that it was rewritten as a legal execution (Rosivach 238). The Greek stoning is something that is extremely emotional and hateful, so Lil Nas X synthesizes it through quilting with modern day homophobic hate crimes. The stones are replaced by butt plugs, and the stone figures seem to be connected to the Medusa myth. Medusa has symbolically been reclaimed as a symbol against patriarchy as she was turned into a monster due to her being raped. Having the stone people be the homophobic mob connects them to being enemies of Medusa, or perpetrators of misogyny and toxic masculinity, and as a result homophobia.

Returning to Zizek's critique of the Kynic, is Lil Nas X himself maintaining the mask or destroying it? Lil Nas X is clearly using ad hominem to attack homophobes through the stone crowd and the blue judges. Perhaps the Cynical Lil Nas X would be him proving to the crowd that he is not the deviant they say he is. That homosexuality is not to be feared and can exist in this society. This idea of queer assimilation states that society is flawed on the lines of homophobia, toxic masculinity, and gender binarism, but we must amend and fix this society rather than reject it.

William H. Barnes views the modern idea of the cynic through the lens of the "Liberal Cynic" or what many colloquially call it the "Doomer Leftist." He states that "for the cynic, hopelessness may be preferable to hope. The grief associated with the lack of justice, equality, and freedom in the world and vulnerability of these ideals to critique compounded by the fact that their achievement requires global cooperation, culminates in an unbearable grief. Hopelessness is the manifestation of the repression of this trauma" (Barnes). Is Lil Nas X's lack of hope in societal acceptance of queerness a manifestation of Cynicism?

Or, is "Montero" an act of Kynicism? According to Sloterdijk, "Kynicism represents popular, plebian rejection of the official culture by means of irony and sarcasm: the classical Kynical procedure is to confront the pathetic phrases of the ruling official ideology – its solemn, grave tonality – with everyday banality and to hold them up to ridicule, thus exposing behind the subtle noblesse of ideological phrases the egotistical interests, the violence, the brutal claims to power" (*Sublime Object of Ideology* 29). Lil Nas X is confronting very specifically the phrase of "If you are gay, you are going to hell," with the banality of saying that ok, if that is the case I will go to hell, and I will enjoy it. The message is presented in a very ornate music video, but the core

message is very banal and simple. Thus, Lil Nas X plays the role of the Kynic rather than the Cynic.

Zizek states that the Kynic is “more pragmatic than argumentative: it subverts the official proposition by confronting it with the situation of its enunciation; It proceeds ad hominem” (*Sublime Object of Ideology* 29). Lil Nas X clearly revels in the ad hominem when it comes to the homophobes he is criticizing in “Montero” and in his social media surrounding the music video. His Twitter dunks on conservative homophobes and the video itself is not arguing for the value of homosexuality or even the acceptance of homosexuality. He is just, like the Socrates he emulates, criticizing and poking fun at his opponents.

The connection between “Montero” and Socrates and “Montero” and Kynicism is compounded with how Greek philosophers practiced Kynicism. Peter Sloterdijk states that an early example of a Kynic is Diogenes, who “refutes the language of philosophers with that of the clown” (Sloterdijk 103). An example of this is when Plato defined human as featherless biped and Diogenes mocked him by bringing a chicken with no feathers and saying that it was a human. He was called by Plato a “Socrates gone mad (Socrates mainoumenos)” (Sloterdijk 104). Lil Nas X may be connecting himself to Socrates, but in many ways he is also emulating Diogenes through his Kynicism.

This is exemplified by the lapdance scene, probably the most controversial part of the video. After Lil Nas X rejects heaven and chooses to pole dance to hell, he gives the devil a lap dance before killing him. The vulgarity of this scene mirrors the vulgarity of the early Greek Kynics. According to Sloterdijk,

“In kynismos a kind of argumentation was discovered that, to the present day, respectable thinking does not know how to deal with. Is it not crude and grotesque to pick one's nose

while Socrates exorcises his demon and speaks of the divine soul? Can it be called anything other than vulgar when Diogenes lets a fart fly against the Platonic theory of ideas-or is fartiness itself one of the ideas God discharged from his meditation on the genesis of the cosmos? And what is it supposed to mean when this philosophizing town bum answers Plato's subtle theory of eros by masturbating in public?" (Stolerdijk 101).

Similar to these Greek examples, Lil Nas X's overt sexual lapdance and pole dance is crude but also a pointed and sharp critique of homophobic hypocrisy. The crudeness even serves to add to the point Lil Nas X is making. He wants to enrage the homophobes while exposing the flaws in their logic. Just as Diogenes wanted to expose how flawed Plato's definition of a human is while also enraging him and his followers, Lil Nas X is enraging conservative homophobic Christians while also showcasing a flaw in their logic. Reclaiming the idea of gay people going to hell by showing Lil Nas X having fun in hell in a provocative way showcases how flawed the idea of gay people going to hell as punishment is. The overt sexuality of Lil Nas X seeks to further his point by further angering his critics.

While Zizek believes that the Kynic is superior to the Cynic, others disagree. An article by Menachem Feuer says:

"To be sure, Zizek explicitly notes kynicism's dishonesty when he says that kynicism deliberately uses ad hominem arguments to mock the 'ruling culture' (which includes the culture of the Enlightenment). Kynicism doesn't argue. It attacks and it knowingly tells lies. But, and here is the question, does it do so while holding up a mask? Do the kynics sarcastically mock the ruling ideology while acting as if they are 'right,' 'true,' and 'just'? If they do, then they are also wearing a mask and they too are cynical" (Feuer).

This is an interesting point. Is Lil Nas X putting on a mask and acting as if he is just? His music video suggests otherwise. Lil Nas X does not ever argue that he is right, he simply provocatively makes fun of his opponents. His tweets are never about defending homosexuality through the Bible or even saying that homosexuality is inherently just or valid. All he does is accept and flip the framing of his homophobic opponents. By not acting as if he is just, Lil Nas X is completely avoiding Cynicism and accepting Kynicism.

The “Montero” music video and the discussion around it also deals with the Kantian idea of evil, specifically the difference between “radical evil” and “Impuritas”. Radical evil is innate subconscious evil, while impuritas is acts that are technically legal and allowed, but still evil, like someone ruthlessly climbing up the corporate ladder. According to Matthew Sharpe, “As shocking as this may sound, neither Timothy McVeigh, Osama Bin Laden, George W. Bush or Dick Cheney, nor Adolf Hitler is particularly ‘radically evil’ in the Kantian sense. This is not to say that they weren’t really bad people, even great criminals” (Sharpe 7). Instead, they are examples of Impuritas, in that they committed evil but under the laws and norms of their societies. This idea can be extended to the conservative critics of Lil Nas X and of homosexuality. They commit the evil act of homophobia and get sick pleasure from attacking people who deviate from cisgendered heterosexual norms, but as this is the dominant societal ideology their actions are to an extent allowed and even encouraged. Radical evil, on the other hand, is “the precondition of the adoption of maxims other than those that come from the moral law” (Sharpe 7). Zizek rejects this idea:

“The claim is that, on Kant’s own terms, that the originary Act wherein human beings allegedly opt for evil as the subordination of moral Law to their pathological self-conceit—an Act that Kant’s teaching concerning radical evil posits as underlying all

subsequent pathologically motivated acts of evil—can only have been an act of evil for the sake of evil. In other words, it will have been an Act untainted by the lure of any pathological gain to self. The uncanny thing is that this means that this Act would seem philosophically indistinguishable from the morally good Act as Kant defines it” (Sharpe 12-13).

Zizek is saying that, by Kant’s idea of radical evil, radical evil and moral good are philosophically the same, as both exist outside of any external needs or factors. Lil Nas X plays with this Zizekian idea masterfully. He is reclaiming the demonization of homosexuality as an evil, by portraying it as a radical evil. Just as homosexuality is something inherent, radical evil and moral good is something inherent since homosexuality is inherent, untainted by the lure of any pathological gain to self, In Zizekian terms it would be neither a good nor an evil.

However, homosexuality criminalized as a radical evil by society, while The Impurities of the Homophobe is rewarded. Lil Nas X’s use of Genesis imagery in the beginning of the video, equating his first homosexual encounter with original sin, makes these connections in a poetic way. Sharpe explores the questions of Genesis through Kant and Zizek by saying:

“If we give the standard response to this dilemma: viz. that our first representatives were ‘lured’ by a ‘third agent’ (viz. the serpent), so that the responsibility in no way belonged primarily to them, a first problem arises. This is the problem of why it is that God has punished human beings with the fall for a fate whose ‘prime mover’ was not human? However, if we therefore postulate that in fact Adam chose for evil in Eden, a second problem arises. This is the problem that if Adam were truly innocent before the fall, how could he ever have exercised his prelapsarian freedom to choose evil? Surely, a wholly

good or innocent being— by definition— would have had no truck with the serpent’s wiles?” (Sharpe 10).

Lil Nas X addresses this issue in a Zizekian fashion. He says that the evil stand-in of homosexuality was actually a good or neutral act that was falsely categorized as a sin, which Zizek extends to all Kantian radical evil. Note how the serpent in Lil Nas X’s genesis is portrayed by Lil Nas X, while the devil is played by another actor. The devil is the only character in the whole video not played by Lil Nas X. This could be written off as just a creative way of making a video during the COVID-19 pandemic (especially as his earlier music video “Holiday” similarly had every character played by Lil Nas X); however, since there was an another actor cast as the devil the choice to have Lil Nas X only play the serpent was a conscious one. It frames homosexuality as distinct from evil. Montero is even given the chance at heaven for being openly and unapologetically gay, from an angel played by Lil Nas X, but he rejects it. Lil Nas X does a great job at blending these philosophical discussions of evil with the popular cultural ideas about homosexuality.

Lil Nas X’s “Montero” is a fascinating work of art that, whether by accident or on purpose, deals heavily with Zizekian Philosophy. It deals with the Zizekian and Sloterdijkian idea of Kynicism through both the main message of the video, Lil Nas X’s attitude towards his critics around the music video, and his use of vulgarity and sexuality. It also has a lot of connections with Zizekian views on Kantian evil, specifically the idea of “radical evil.” The controversy around the video may have taken away from discussion of how rich and layered the video is, but In a way it served to highlight Lil Nas X’s point about homophobia and its hypocrisy. Just as Zizek is seen as a provocative “academic rock star” (Feuer), Lil Nas X is growing to be one of the most provocative actual rock stars of his time. Whether he will continue

on this track or go back to his older style is yet to be seen, but the “Montero” music video and its backlash will be remembered as a cultural moment for a long while.

notes:

https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1027&context=phil_etds

Structuralism and the Devil:

<https://search-proquest-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/docview/2314032115?accountid=8285&pq-origsite=primo>

Semiotics, Chritianity and the devil, Montero and the snake, Montero and the Mob, othering of Montero

https://www-jstor-org.proxyau.wrlc.org/stable/24464969?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents

Quilting of the Satantic hell idea, flipping the hell idea

<https://zizekstudies.org/index.php/IJZS/article/viewFile/200/200>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hg7qdowoemo>

“Love for me is an extremely violent act... love is not I love you all, it is I pick out something...even if this something is just a small detail, a fragile individual person, I say I love you more than anything else. In this quite formal sense, love is evil.

Semiotics and the hell satan reclamation song, what differentiates Montero from All the good girls go to hell, Take me to church.

“Zizek notes that what we have today is a battle between cynicism and kynicism:

“Cynicism is the answer of the ruling culture to this kynical subversion: it recognizes, it takes into account, the particular interest behind the ideological universality, the distance between the ideological mask and the reality, but it still finds reasons to retain the mask”(29).”

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