

***Inside* the Metamodern Era: Bo Burnham and Comedy for the Pandemic Generation**

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If the past hundred and fifty years have witnessed different cultural or artistic movements, from modern to postmodern to, more recently, metamodern, the “comedic” arts are no exception. Charlie Chaplin achieved international acclaim by his arguably modernist portrayal of his iconic character, the “Tramp,” in silent films made by Keystone Studios. Jerry Seinfeld shot to fame by introducing the American heartland to what can be considered postmodern comedy through his eponymous television series — often described as “a show about nothing.” Bo Burnham deserves credit for bringing metamodern comedy to America’s mainstream, most prominently through his masterpiece *Inside*, a pandemic Netflix Comedy Special released in 2021. Burnham has been recognized as one of America’s greatest new comedians. A breakthrough Youtube star, Burnham built an extraordinary fanbase hungry for the songs he composed and performed in his bedroom. As his career progressed, his fans have become considerably more diverse, ranging from young digital natives to established comedians with decades of traditional experience performing comedy in clubs and on television specials. Analyzing *Inside* through a metamodernist lens reveals how Burnham deploys metamodern strategies to express sincerity and earnestness within a contemporary culture of unabashed cynicism. In an increasingly digital world, metamodernist theory proves useful in understanding how performers make authentic connections over a screen.

To appreciate how the principles of metamodernism animate *Inside*, one must understand the two cultural phases that preceded this new movement — modernism and postmodernism. Modernism can be characterized by naive idealism and belief in universal truths (Khachaturyan). Postmodernism represents a cultural backlash to modernism and is characterized by cynicism

and deconstruction of certainty (Khachatryan). The dramatic shift from modernism to postmodernism was catalyzed by the death and destruction that defined much of the 20th century — millions of lives lost as a result of two world wars and a global population living in the shadow of the development and deployment of nuclear weapons (“Postmodern Art”). The modernist search for a utopian future that dominated the pre-war era was incongruent with the horror and tragedy witnessed during the wars and their aftermath. As a result, a radical shift emerged into a postmodern sensibility (“Postmodern Art”). The ethos of this new epoch was epitomized by Friedrich Nietzsche’s famous declaration, “God is Dead” (Ward).

The shift away from postmodernism began at the dawn of the 21st century, with metamodernism as one early potential successor movement (Yousef). The term “metamodernism” and the cultural sensibility it describes was first popularized by Dutch cultural theorists Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker in their 2010 essay, *Notes on Metamodernism*. They proposed that metamodernism “oscillates between the modern and the postmodern...it oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony” (Vermeulen). This cultural epoch can best be understood through “as if” thinking — metamodernism accepts the postmodern idea that humanity is doomed, but simultaneously commits to acting *as if* positive change can be achieved (Vermeulen).

Metamodernist theory has been increasingly analyzed and expanded upon as cultural theorists attempt to refine their understanding of contemporary culture. In a 2018 essay, American author Greg Dember highlighted several metamodern techniques that artists used “to protect the solidity of felt experience against the scientific reductionism of the modernist perspective and the ironic detachment of the postmodern sensibility” (Dember). Metamodern artists like Burnham re-enforce the “solidity of felt experience” by employing distinct techniques

such as self-reflexivity, oscillation between sincerity and irony, and double-framing (Dember).

Burnham uses each of these three metamodern techniques in *Inside* to engage with his audience, establishing an intimate and authentic connection that would not be possible otherwise.

Burnham's self-reflexive openness about the inherent artifice of his performance evokes authenticity and enables him to express genuine emotions. Whereas postmodern self-reflexivity aims to distort and question any meaning the viewer might take from the work, metamodernist self-reflexivity aims both to affirm the experience of the performer and to call attention to the experiences of the audience, or those engaging with the performance. This is the heart of Burnham's performance. *Inside* is entirely self-conscious, with Burnham constantly drawing attention to the creation of the spectacle. This self-referentiality becomes evident from the first minutes. As he begins *Inside*'s opening song, Burnham sings, "Look I made you some content" (*Inside* 00:02:00). By doing so, he explicitly acknowledges his relationship to the audience and insists that they become his partner in the performance. He is aware of the viewer and aware that the viewer is aware that he is aware of the viewer. While drawing attention to the transactional nature of his performance would normally undercut its sincerity, the honesty of Burnham's acknowledgment instead gives the performance a special authenticity. Burnham's transparency about his position as content creator allows him to center his performance on his own lived experiences while simultaneously advancing the metamodern position that representing reality is impossible. The closest a person can get to representing reality is representing his authentic self, which is what Burnham seeks to accomplish in this special. Through the simple statement that he made content for the audience, Burnham uses self-reflexivity with the metamodern purpose of moving past postmodernism in order to enable authentic representation.

Burnham expands on the self-referentiality he establishes in the opening of *Inside* during his performance of the song “Unpaid Intern.” This performance opens with a black and white close-up of Burnham’s face as he sings an amusing short jazz song about being an unpaid intern: “the coffee is free, just like me! I’m an unpaid intern” (*Inside* 00:26:20). The song ends abruptly, immediately cutting to a video of Burnham reacting to the song that he just performed. In a moment that highlights his role as the video’s creator, Burnham reveals his intention had been to write a song “about labor exploitation of the modern world” (*Inside* 00:27:10). After repeating the song a second time, however, the video cuts to Burnham reacting to his previous reaction. Reflecting on his intention of writing a song about labor exploitation, Burnham reveals to the audience, “I’m being a little pretentious. It’s an instinct I have where I need everything I write to have some deeper meaning, but it’s a stupid song” (*Inside* 00:27:50). The reaction loop begins one last time as Burnham reflects once again on his prior reactions and criticizes his earlier reaction as “being pretentious which is honestly a defense mechanism. I’m so worried that criticism will be levied against me that I levy it against myself before anyone else can” (*Inside* 00:28:40). By acknowledging that he is aware that he is being judged by the audience, Burnham establishes a new level of sincerity and authenticity within the viewing experience. Rather than revealing his true thoughts fully in any single reaction, they are revealed slowly, one layer at a time. The first two reactions — where Burnham articulates the meaning of his song and then subsequently rejects that meaning — represent a postmodern understanding of self-referentiality. The final reaction reflects Burnham’s move past this postmodern sensibility into the metamodern. He accepts the possibility that his art doesn’t have meaning but finds value in exploring his own emotional experience. The metamodern self-referentiality of “Unpaid Intern” is what enables Burnham to express his authentic struggle.

Moreover, Burnham is only able to suggest this authenticity because of the medium of his art — the flexibility of video editing allows Burnham to create these self-reflexive moments where he interacts with different versions of himself. Video lends itself to metamodern techniques because of its ability to communicate subjective truths that could not be shared otherwise. While online performances might seem inherently distant and artificial in comparison to their live counterparts, using metamodern techniques like self-reflexivity allow Burnham to take advantage of the digital medium in order to form an intimate connection with his audience

The self-reflexivity of *Inside* extends beyond Burnham's words to include his use of the camera to signify the presence of an audience. By reminding the audience of their essential role in his performance, Burnham is able to create a stronger connection with the viewer. Throughout the special, Burnham records himself alongside the camera in a mirror. These scenes show Burnham at his most natural — sitting in his room, addressing the audience, without costumes or props. In these documentarian-style shots, the positioning or inclusion of a camera makes the viewer aware that this, too, is a performance. In fact, the camera slowly becomes the subject of the scene, for as the image of the camera expands, Burnham's image is pushed to the side. In one of the final scenes of the special, Burnham appears to have an emotional breakdown. Alone in a dark room, he looks towards the ground and tells the audience "I am...um...not well," before dropping his head offscreen into his hands and beginning to weep (*Inside* 01:11:23). His sobs continue in the background as the camera slowly zooms in on itself, until the lens fills the screen entirely. These shots are some of the most raw and emotional depictions of Burnham. While spotlighting the camera in such a manner might normally undermine the power of the scene by highlighting the artifice of the performance, Burnham instead uses this moment to turn the camera on the audience. Burnham confronts his viewer, forcing his audience to acknowledge that

they are complicit in his pain. The highlighted presence of the camera reveals that Burnham's breakdown is simply another piece of content deployed to satisfy the cravings of his audience. Here, again, Burnham uses metamodern self-referentiality to focus on the experience of the audience and insist that they acknowledge their role as consumer. This awareness, in turn, deepens the viewer's empathy towards Burnham, consequently strengthening the bond of shared experience between performer and audience.

In addition to using self-reflexive techniques to express genuine emotion, Burnham uses irony to highlight the sincerity of moments in the special. Switching between irony and sincerity is a defining feature of the metamodern sensibility. Embracing the contradictions between irony and sincerity allows Burnham to connect with the audience and express his own genuine emotions. This oscillation is first explored during Burnham's performance of "White Woman's Instagram," a catchy parody song that pokes fun at the shallow images found on a White woman's Instagram feed. The screen is edited into the square format of an Instagram photo as Burnham recreates these pictures: in one shot, Burnham films himself exaggeratedly laughing while wearing a shirt that reads "May Contain Wine," and in the next, he's lighting a pumpkin-shaped candle and wearing a fuzzy robe. The beginning of the song brings Burnham and the viewer together as they mock this stereotypical White woman — trying to appear like she's having fun, demonstrating poor fashion judgement, lacking self-awareness, and tone deaf to humor.

Towards the end of the song, however, the content suddenly and dramatically shifts. The cropped square display slowly widens as Burnham sings a hypothetical caption written by the girl to her deceased mother where she opens up about the grief and loss she's experiencing. Burnham ends this interlude by singing, "Your little girl didn't do too bad. Momma, I love you.

Give a hug and kiss to Dad” (*Inside* 00:23:10). The judgmental tone from the beginning of the song is completely abandoned, as Burnham humanizes the nameless woman. Far from vacuous and empty-headed, the woman is now portrayed as genuine and vulnerable. The display shrinks back into a square and Burnham reverts back to the humorous tone of the song, singing about goat cheese salads, hammocks, and getting married. The audience’s insight into her past gives her silly posts new meaning as attempts to recover from loss and find new sources of human connection and joy. By switching the tone from mocking to heartfelt, Burnham turns the spotlight back on to the audience, forcing viewers to reflect on why they were so willing to laugh at this woman. The visual display widening from the cropped Instagram square reveals the hopeful possibility that even in an isolated and artificial technology-dominated society, anyone is capable of sincerity and vulnerability. Burnham skillfully transforms his postmodern ironic treatment of the White woman’s Instagram into a moving metamodern piece about heartbreak and hope.

Burnham harnesses the power of video technology to achieve this metamodern oscillation between irony and sincerity. This song would not be as meaningful if it were performed live or in person. The different clips of Burnham faithfully depicting cliché instagram posts juxtaposed with the heartfelt lyrics sung by a woman missing her late parents create the metamodern tension in his piece. Burnham uses technology to create metamodern moments and these metamodern moments then enable Burnham to develop an intimate connection to the audience.

Burnham turns this same metamodern technique — using irony to express earnestness — on himself in an effort to communicate his own mental state with his audience. Burnham deploys this metamodernist technique when discussing the rapid decline of his mental health due to the social isolation he endured during the pandemic. The scene opens on a shirtless Burnham sitting

in the center of his dark room, illuminated only by the light coming from behind his window blinds. Visibly restless and disheveled, Burnham tells the audience, “my current mental health is rapidly approaching ATL. Which is an all time low” (*Inside* 00:55:40). The absence of humor in this segment provides a stark contrast to the light-hearted tone in most of his other scenes, creating the appearance of sincerity and his open discussion of a taboo subject invites empathy from the audience. Burnham continues to open up to his viewers, letting them know how he’s feeling throughout the day. In this authentic setting, he’s able to discuss his positive feelings, but as soon as he attempts to express any of his negative emotions, the screen hard cuts. The next shots show Burnham the performer describing a feeling of intense anxiety and unhappiness in a very light-hearted, bubbly manner. The image of Burnham sitting alone in a dark room is replaced by a close-up of his face, illuminated by stage lights against a backdrop of colorful party lights. Directly after, the shot cuts back to Burnham in his original setting, reinforcing that idea that Burnham uses irony as a defense mechanism to help him express his genuine, negative emotions because they are too heavy for him to express in any other way. A metamodern analysis that focuses on Burnham’s use of irony and sincerity therefore reveals how Burnham is able to express earnest emotion and intimately engage with the viewer, even without the ability to form an in-person connection.

The juxtaposition between irony and sincerity within individual songs, a key aspect of metamodernism, is also echoed on a larger scale by the title and structure of *Inside*. The title itself is a play on words. On the one hand, it suggests quite literally that the show is about Burnham’s experience of being housebound during the pandemic. On the other, the title suggests that the show is about the mental health consequences of his enforced isolation — what’s going on *inside* Burnham’s mind. The tension in the title echoes throughout the rest of his special —

the metamodern fluctuation between polarities serves to reinforce the sincerity of the specials' more intimate moments. Burnham juxtaposes highly-produced music video segments with more minimally-produced ones that have a more intimate feel. Burnham's extravagant and indulgent music performances are filled with humor. In them he uses props and lighting in creative ways as he weaves his clever, over-the-top stories. These visually and audibly loud moments contrast sharply with the quieter, more subtle moments that are interspersed throughout the performance. In these softer scenes, the use of wide angle shots, more subdued natural lighting and ambient noise suggests that Burnham is pulling back the curtain and offering a glimpse of the reality behind the scenes. The shots of Burnham turning lights on and off, setting up his camera, and editing his work betray a feeling of vulnerability. The addition of the overtly produced scenes starkly contrast the more minimally produced scenes, which grants these quiet scenes a greater sense of authenticity. By making certain scenes so visibly extravagant, Burnham seems to acknowledge the artifice of his performance. This admission invites a greater sense of trust between Burnham and the audience, leaving the viewer primed to believe the intimacy he displays in the more minimalist moments.

Burnham also uses the metamodern technique of double framing in order to force the audience to take the hopeful attitude of a believer instead of the skeptical attitude of a seeker of truth. The double frame is a concept proposed by Raoul Eshelmen as a method deployed by artists with the purpose of moving beyond postmodern irony in favor of metamodern positive values, such as faith, intimacy, and authenticity. In his book *Performatism or the End of Postmodernism*, Eshelmen defines double framing as the process of "framing readers or viewers in such a way that they have no choice but to accept the external givens of a work and identify with the characters within it" (Eshelman). According to Eshelmen, a double frame consists of an

“outer frame” made up of a fictional reality and an “inner frame” made up of the actual characters and their experiences (Eshelmen). He proposes that once the viewer has committed to engaging with the fictional reality, they are liberated from the irony of contemporary society and able to experience the authentic, subjective experiences of the characters.

Within the special, Burnham uses this metamodern technique of double framing as a method of highlighting his emotional reaction to isolation. Burnham creates a double frame by parodying a Twitch gaming stream in which he plays a video game where he is the main character (*Inside* 00:51:00). Burnham the player controls the actions of Burnham the character with the goal of getting him through his day. The character’s only options are to cry, escape isolation through a locked door, pick up a flashlight, or play the piano. In this segment, the outer frame is the fantastical reality of the video game while the inner frame consists of both Burnham the player and Burnham the character. After the audience buys into the reality of the video game, they are able to understand the sincerity of his depression. The humor in the scene comes from the clever concept of Burnham playing himself in a video game. However, once the viewer accepts the situation as reality, the scene stops feeling funny, and starts feeling tragic. Burnham the character spends his day crying and only experiences any sort of happiness when he’s playing the piano. But that happiness is short lived — immediately after he stops, he starts crying again. The gaming scene ends with a screen that reads “another night approaches” before cutting to a new scene of the real Burnham inside his bed staring at the door, reinforcing the idea that the video game represents Burnham’s daily life (*Inside* 00:53:22). Burnham uses the metamodern technique of creating a double frame through the video game which enables him to portray his genuine feelings of depression.

Indeed, the entire special is itself a double frame. Burnham uses double framing to create a narrative focused on his own subjective experiences outside the bounds of the external reality. In the very first scene of *Inside*, Burnham opens a door, steps into a small room fitted with a dresser, piano, and single window, and then closes the door. He doesn't open this door again until the end of the special suggesting that he's been confined inside for over a year. The audience is abstractly aware that Burnham does not actually remain in this single room for the entirety of the creative process. He has a larger house, a dog, and a girlfriend, to whom the special is dedicated. The story of Burnham trapped inside for a year becomes the outer frame of the narrative. It is the acceptance of Burnham's fantastical representation of his quarantine that allows the viewer to understand his subjective experiences. The outer frame represents both Burnham's physical and mental isolation. Physically, Burnham is stuck inside his house and mentally, Burnham is stuck inside his head. Inside is an outer frame that encapsulates total isolation and dependence on the digital world. The inside frame is Burnham and his experiences navigating depression, anxiety, and fear. At the end of the special, Burnham plays with the framing he has established. In the final scene, Burnham walks outside the same door he entered at the beginning, only to turn around and realize he's on stage, illuminated by the spotlight pointed at him. An audience begins to laugh at him and a panicked Burnham turns around, desperately trying to re-enter the room he had just left, only to find the door locked (*Inside* 01:25:45). The transition outside the outer frame depicts Burnham's anxiety at reentering the outside world, dealing with expectations that he performs, and leaving the comfortable misery of confinement. When Burnham, the inner frame, leaves his house, the outer frame, the audience, goes back to being trapped in the irony of contemporary society and unable to grasp the performer's true emotions. Burnham's use of the

outer metaphor allows the viewer to experience his claustrophobic confinement as if it were authentic, which ultimately enables the viewer to understand his genuine emotions.

In the sweep of cultural history, every new artistic movement builds on those that precede it, redefining the roles, expectations and ultimately the relationship between artist and audience. The brilliance of new artists — from painters to musicians to actors and, yes, comedians — comes from their ability to match their art to the zeitgeist of the times — and create something new and fresh in the process. Chaplin and Seinfeld captured public imagination by establishing an extraordinary, personal connection to the audiences at a particular historical moment. Bo Burnham's work falls squarely in that tradition. His 2021 Netflix Special *Inside* redefines comedy for the metamodern era, building on the foundation established by the comedy greats of the modern and postmodern eras. Demonstrating mastery of the conventions of these previous eras, he engages the audience in a manner that seems both natural and authentic, rather than cloying or manipulative. Effectively deploying techniques of self-reflexivity, oscillation between sincerity and irony, and double framing, Burnham delivers a virtuoso performance on the high-wire of emotional connection, creating a relationship that is certainly self-aware, and may even be genuine. It is fair to consider him the Charlie Chaplin of the metamodern era — though unlike Chaplin's Tramp, who built empathy with his audience because of his universal humanity and everyman experiences, Burnham builds it by creating a remarkable authenticity and self-awareness. In the metamodern era, Burnham's character is . . . Burnham himself.

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