

La Vento

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inside the Platonic Cave to outside it, or at least out of the first level, one cave embedded inside another cave eternally, and then in addition to that there is the literal enlightenment, the progression from dark Romanesque churches to rose-windowed Gothics to literal electricity inside buildings and homes, and I'm sure this connection has been made elsewhere a thousand times. (Who said, who said, *I thought I had ideas once; they were all on loan* ?)

And the wind came over the hills, and all was quiet as it muffled out the sounds of villagers inspecting goods at market, and the marketeers waxing poetic on the virtues of the goods, and the hagglers trying to maximize expected utility of goods.

And a voice came over the hills, and echoed in the valley and in between the stalls, "Who said, who said... who said, who said..."

And the villagers answered in an attempted unison, "I said, I said!"

And I said,

And I said, divide the word "meaning" onto a simple grid with an X-axis of *subjective-objective* and a Y-axis of *elusive-discoverable* and then in counter-clockwise from upper-right quadrant, call it "formalist textual meaning," "reader-response (experimental)," "reader-response (implied)," and finally "classical interpretive" and just call the whole thing off, can we please move on.

And I said, In order of least to longest reach, *tongue-shot*, *touch-shot*, *nose-shot*, *ear-shot*, *eye-shot*.

And I said, In order of *Dark Ages*, *Medieval Era* ("middle ages"), *Enlightenment*, you've got a progression from

And I said,

And then there was silence.

I.

I said, I said, *Adaptation* was fine but what it really needed was more orchids.

And I said, von Trier's mother slept with an employer
— who was not her husband — in order to conceive a son with “artistic genes” (her words), and von Trier was actually only informed of this when said mother was perched precariously on her deathbed.

And I said, who wouldn't be interested in a language after hearing that it lets you improvise sentences with easy word-form modulation eg., “The sky bluens” or “Bluely the sky stretched for miles”?

POMO: *Mi selas eterne, / Sed ciu frukto / Estas granulada — / Banala (ankau) — Kompleksa, jes, / Sed gi valora lo kosto el selo?*
/ Sed gi valora pli ol sukero simpla? / Eble doni gin / “Vitaminoj”
/ Donas gin tre multo.

I said, I want to talk about the way “Hey Jude” is the most poignant mode of autobiography — an old man, I can see him now, giving advice, this sacrament of wisdom, as much an advice to a younger compatriot as a collection of personal failures, the sad songs *he* couldn't make better.

I said, I said, if you are the writer in your family, chances are you will be writing your parents' obituaries.

I said, modern interestingness of the observations of a historical text correlates inversely with these observations' correctness. Also basically true of the historical interestingness vs. modern novelty of aesthetic qualities and innovation. Strong metaphors catch on; true observations become canon. (optimistic view)

Pessimistic view: Memetic potential of ideas or beliefs correlates only weakly and even inversely with their truth value.

And I said, "Mr. Peterson" or "Learning"?

And I said, I said,

What is generic fit? The quality of being widely applicable, of being able to synergize with many different things or in many different contexts. Works of art, suit tailoring, and modes of communication are all capable of possessing high levels of genericism. This quality of wide applicability can be achieved in two different ways, *distillation* and *averaging*.

Distillation is the process of boiling away all surface, non-essential details in order to yield common ground. The essence — what's left over post-distillation — fits both well and widely because of its sweeping inclusivity and non-specificity. An example is the platitude or cliché; almost anyone can relate to *The grass is greener on the other side* as a true statement about how human perception and longing work. Platitudes in fact demand a high level of generic fit as a precondition of their survival: to become a platitude, an observation has to be so broadly applicable, or else so broadly useful, that generation after generation of humans persistently passes it down (*temporal genericism*).

Averaging is the process of finding, among a wide field of

varying data points, a meaningful middle ground, a thing entirely different from a common ground. Middle grounds fit equally widely, but less well, as common grounds: the more standard deviations from mean an individual or context is, the worse it will fit with the center. Clothing sizes are a classic example of middle-ground fitness, as are virtually all commercial products. Even personal tailoring (counter-intuitively, since “bespoke” is essentially an antonym for “generic”) frequently exploits middle-ground genericism — cuts are altered to allow flexibility for future changes in body size or else evolving cultural fashions.[1] Pop songs are an example of generic fitness in that their lyrics employ clichés and their musical choices are broadly familiar.

The acclimation process [of a song “growing” on the listener] is almost certainly due to the fact that the brain gets melodic and harmonic pleasure from anticipation: if the listener knows what’s coming at the apex of a big pop hook, knows exactly when or how it’ll drop and then ends up correct, his neurons flood him with dopamine... Hit pop records bank on this phenomenon of desirable familiarity, of established intimacy between audience and work, by using a small and powerful collection of stock chord progressions. But they also simultaneously rely on enormous libraries of obscure, never-before-heard textures and sound samples so that the subtle sonic details of a piece lend it a degree of surface-level novelty. Billboard hits are, like [David] Lynch’s films, the perfect hybrid of the familiar and unfamiliar (though they use this hybridity to achieve entirely different effects).

In other words, if dopaminergic enjoyment of an artwork or art event largely hinges on the proper ratio of familiar to unfamiliar aesthetic choices, then the most broadly applicable art will employ middle and common ground ratios in order to be enjoyed by the broadest audience base. Pop song chord progressions work off sequences and patterns of developments which humans are both innately wired to enjoy — a common ground intrinsic in the brain — and have been socialized to anticipate — a middle ground, since everyone’s individual musical socialization and background will vary.

Mass-market paperbacks and eBook romance novels work in similar ways, writing in diction which is commonly understood and about scenarios which are— in an abstract, averaged, or distilled form— commonly experienced. “Template” romance novels — the budding genre in which so-called custom or “bespoke” novels can be commissioned for \$500 or \$1000 — operate off of this phenomenon. Though authors of template novels change character names, surface details, and select passages with each commission in order to create a new and “unique” works, the core plotline of each novel stays the same, managing to be effective for so many readers because of its broad, generic appeal.

Wide appeal is the very purpose of popular art; intent is built-in to the name itself; so those who see popular art — be it a pop song, a mass-market paperback, or a Thomas Kinkade — as “failed” or unsuccessful art, the product of less-than-skilled artists, are entirely wrong. (Andrew Barker writes in his review of Nicholas Sparks’ *The Notebook*: “Those who faulted its contrivances, its

sentimentality or its heartstring tugging missed the point — in a Sparks story, those are features, not bugs.”) Execution cannot be conflated with intent, and whether or not popular art’s aims are valuable is entirely separate from the ability of a person to achieve them.

I said, Consider two quotations.

From Jeurgen Schmidhuber’s “Art & Science as By- Products of Search for Novel Patterns”:

Good observer-dependent art deepens the observer’s

insights about this world or possible worlds, unveiling previously unknown regularities in compressible data, connecting previously disconnected patterns in an initially surprising way that [...] eventually becomes known and less interesting.

And Carl Wilson's *Let's Talk About Love*, on Bourdieu's *Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*:

[Bourdieu] notes that a once-refined or highbrow piece of music, such as the 'Moonlight Sonata,' can be reassigned to middlebrow culture when it has become overly familiar.

Both the platitude and "Moonlight Sonata" are good examples of generic fitness. What's interesting about both of them is the evolution in their social or cultural currencies despite a maintenance of generic fitness. Obviously "Moonlight Sonata" has such broad appeal in part because we are socialized into its cultural context and norms. But it also became canonized *because* of its broad appeal, some inherent common or middle musical ground it capitalized on which lead it to "catch on." Consider, in the way of a middle ground, how the piece straddles the aesthetics of both Beethoven and Adele, making it a familiar enough work to be enjoyed by the audience bases of both artists. That Beethoven did not intend this straddling does not affect the reality of the piece's contemporary positioning.

It's only after others notice the generic, wide appeal of "Moonlight Sonata" that the piece begins losing its highbrow position as "fine art" and instead gains the reputation of "popular song" or "popular classical." The very recognition of hybridity and averaging decreases its cultural standing: while "resonant across class and cultural divides" seems like the ultimate marker of artistic success, cultural elitism and social signaling works counter broad appeal. The platitude arguably works a similar way — an observation is made, or a pattern compressed (as Schmidhuber would put it), which has wide appeal. Its essence resonates broadly, at some universal or near-universal human level, which causes it to spread memetically. Eventually, like "Sonata," its viral artistic success transforms its reputation into artistic failure. Important here as well is the disparity between perception and reality: consider again the template romance, and the way in which a story with high levels of generic fitness manages to appear bespoke to its reader, which helps make the story feel real and unique.

"Because the play is so stripped down, so elemental, it invites all kinds of social and political and religious interpretation."[2]
(Normand Berlin on Beckett's *Waiting For Godot*)

Since popular (generic) and high art (specific) alike have survived and thrived side-by-side in contemporary society, they must both fulfill a purpose, perhaps differing or complementary ones. What exactly are the effects of being more or less generic?

Without delving too much into the Theory Wars, it can be asserted that the more specific and detailed a text, the more self-determined its meaning. If we buy into ideas of literary indeterminacy, we might say that even the most specific, detailed of texts has an infinite range of possible interpretations or meanings — but that range is still more constrained and limited than that of a more generic text. There are more *impossible* or *improbable* interpretations, each one ruled out by clarifying and qualifying details. Common ground texts, by contrast, have gained through the process of distillation more of what Wolfgang Iser would term “gaps.” Iser in the seminal *Prospecting* compares the written word to stars in a constellation, allowing different possible interpretations:

We have seen that... the impressions that arise as a result of [the

reading] process will vary from individual to individual, but only within the limits imposed by the written as opposed to the unwritten text. In the same way, two people gazing at the night sky may both be looking at the same collection of stars, but one will see the image of a plough, and the other will make out a dipper. The “stars” in a literary text are fixed; the lines that join them are variable.

Because the positions of visible stars are arbitrary in relation to the shapes of real-world objects, they possess, like a generic text, an enormous amount of indeterminacy. As a result, we see a high level of variation in the types of constellations drawn up by different cultures. The Chinese and Greek constellation maps, for example, look entirely different: in the north-right quadrant of the sky, which the Greeks identified as Big Bear, the Chinese instead saw as a Mediator’s Court, the Three Steps, and the Honorable Old Man.

Consider the widely applicable plot points, and the enormous narrative gaps, in The Crystals’ hit “Then He Kissed Me”:

*Each time I saw him I couldn’t wait to see him again
I wanted to let him know that he was more than a friend
I didn’t know just what to do
So I whispered I love you
He said that he loved me too
And then he kissed me...*

*I knew that he was mine so I gave him all the love that I
had
And one day he took me home to meet his mom and his dad
Then he asked me to be his bride
And always be right by his side I felt so happy I almost cried And then he kissed me*

The basic plot-points here are so general that they apply to almost every happily-married couple, or every adolescent girl aspiring to happy marriage, in early 1960s America. In fact, they’re general and generic enough that they *still* apply to many adolescent romantic aspirations today. (Given the state and probable future of marriage, stripping marital developments from the lyrics might have, like a well-planned tailoring job, increased the track’s longevity — though at the obvious cost of its temporally specific fitness upon release.)

The cultural value and contribution of generic artwork is complicated, and depends on whether its genericism is derived from distillation or averaging. Generic products can ensure that everyone is covered, and without having to put the work in of discovering personal measurements. Picture the consumer of primarily popular art as the resident who, upon moving to a new town, decides

it isn't worth it to test out local eateries, and instead lives off chain restaurants as predictable sources of generic meals. This genericism comes from both distillation and averaging — the food's appeal comes both from its fitness with some near-universal human quality (the constraints and incentives built-in by our brain and taste buds) and the averaging of our personally varying preferences, be it the amount of grease in a burger or the grams of sugar in a shake.

In explore-exploit models, exploration is *costly*; no one can explore thoroughly every area of his consumption. Instead we prioritize, and generic-fitting goods allow us to get value out of unexplored, non-prioritized areas. The literary critic might, knowing nothing of fashion, simply buy extra-large shirts and 36×30 jeans at Target. The quality of “two legs of equal length” is a distilled property of pants which applies, purely and truly, to a very wide consumer base. For most people, there is no significant compromise of fitness in buying a pair of pants with two legs of equal

length. Then there is specific sizing and cut — the average of human proportions, from which most people vary (and to varying degrees). This critic could get more value out of clothing which fits him more precisely, which are more suitable to his body type or skin tone (specific rather than averaged), but has decided that cost-benefit analysis just doesn't pan out: the exploration time required to gain this marginal value (taking measurements, reading up on fashion theory, or experimenting with new cuts) isn't worth it. Nevertheless, there still exists a base value of owning pants and shirts or eating a meal: generic products provide this value without the cost of exploration. Moreover, the financial cost of a generic good is typically cheaper because of mass production, though with art this doesn't always translate: mass-market paperbacks are certainly less expensive than niche-market, small-batch academic texts, but in cases like the ninety-nine-cent song standard, price normalization often just leads to pop stars getting exorbitantly wealthy.

In a similar way, the pop song is there for almost any listener: its generic quality and meanings gaps jack up the probability that a listener will relate or resonate with it. Like stars to constellations, texts with high levels of generic fitness are able to have meanings imposed on them, perhaps even necessitate the imposition of meaning or process of interpretation to be experienced, and the specific ways in which meaning is imposed (or interpretation drawn) tells us as much about the reader as constellations tell us about their respective cultures. This makes the pop song an indispensable mirror: The way in which the listener reflects and sees himself in a song is a mode of self-knowledge. He learns his yearnings, his loves, his sadnesses; he recognizes an emotional life that is otherwise elusive, and solidifies in time an emotional state that is otherwise ephemeral. The generic work of art reflects the self — though it might be more accurate to say that the generic *in* a work of art reflects the self, since texts are obviously composites of many components of varying specificity, existing on sum spectrums rather than binaries.

Of course, all art is instrumental to self-knowledge, though it seems worth distinguishing the ways in which self-knowing occurs. The art song, if we'll call it that, is specific and detailed, typically expressive. It tells us something about the artist: we learn about an other, and this recognition of an other — the commonalities and differences, the possibilities and constraints of human experience — allow us to recognize and learn about ourselves (it also, as Pinker and Singer alike argue, expands our capacity for empathy towards others). The folk song, meanwhile, passes along tribal or social knowledge, which in turn informs the listener of his roles and heritage within a community. American slave spirituals are a good example, serving for generations to preserve heritages and important community knowledge (including how to escape north to Canada by following the North Star, or noting the growth of moss on trees).³

[1] See *Algorithms to Live By*, Brian Christian and Thomas Griffiths 2016, or the authors' [interview](#) with [Julia Galef](#) for *Rationally Speaking*, [transcript pg. 9](#):

Yeah, and Tom and I have talked about this from the perspective of buying a home, where you're in some sense trying to optimize for the happiness of your 5-years-from-now future self, who is somewhat unknowable.

I encountered the same thing recently when I bought a tuxedo. It's funny to buy something where you feel like you'll wear it 1-2 times a year for the next 7 years. How do you optimize for something that is going to look good when you take it to a wedding in 5 years?

Just to use this banal example of men's fashion. Men's pants are much tighter than they were 10 years ago, currently. When I look at the jeans that I wore in the mid 2000s, they were like twice as much fabric, or something like that.

If I'm buying jeans, which is something where the use case of jeans is that you wear them almost every day for like 18 months and then they develop holes and you just throw them out or something. If I wanted to buy jeans I should buy tight jeans because that is the style of the mid 2010s. But if I want to buy a tuxedo, then I should deliberately get something that is looser in the leg, because I'm just assuming that men's fashion is on this random walk. I don't want to nail the current trend right on the button, because I know that it's going to deviate from that later.

[2] *Godot*, by virtue of being the script to a play, is predisposed to containing more of these blanks or gaps than might other literary forms: in proportion to the scope of its plotted events, it is significantly shorter in length than most novels or short stories, and this modest wordcount is itself dialogue-heavy rather than descriptive or illustrative; that is, it leaves out many of the visual elements and other sensory details which are key to a reader's envisioning of the book's setting (and function as instruments of specificity). Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, for instance, is able to contain both Jewish and gentile identities in its central family of characters, the Lomans. Consider that trite and amateurish novelistic device in which the protagonist by the first or second page has looked at himself in the mirror, describing to himself in internal monologue his own physical attributes. *Salesman*, however, serves as a mirroring of the reader, reflecting the reader's mind and self through his imagining of Willy (revealing, that is, the reader's psychology and personal/cultural background through his unconscious filling-in of the descriptive blanks). Interestingly, Iser considers this quality of high indeterminacy evidence of admirable restraint and high artistry, though considering that those very traits which make *Godot* and *Salesman* so indeterminate (short length, scant description, stories told by way of clues and sketch) are what also lend pop lyrics their often empty genericism.

[3] For more on the art, pop, and folk classification trifecta, see Philip Tagg's 1982 "Analysing Popular Music: Theory, Method, and Practice," esp. the figure on p. 42.

* * *

And who said, *I want to put brain scan devices on and try to measure disgust reactions to art and see if it's actually triggering the part of the amygdala that responds to outgroup hate.* ?

And who said, *I like to think we're passing through a dead zone between good built-in stories and good self-made ones.* ?

And who said, *The correct steelman is, emotions are a Chesterton's Fence. If something makes you angry, but your brain tells you it shouldn't, you're ignoring millions of years of evolution in favor of a couple decades of culture-dependent conditioning.* ?

I said, He was of that age when lint starts accumulating in the belly-button, trapped inside hair follicles and cloth. It was an age when one could imagine throwing the very lifeblood on the line for a woman with the perfect cheekbones.

I said, One of the critical ideas I've found most interesting of late is a seeming contradiction: Just because it sounds like bad music doesn't mean it is bad music. "Just because it reads like a bad novel doesn't mean it's a bad novel" is also sort of true, but a bit more complicated.

The tenability of the first statement, of course, is the result of specific parameters for what it means to sound bad versus be bad. Specifically, the phrasing of "sounding like bad music" is key: it opens the possibility, when X track sounds like bad music Y, that the sonic trappings and features which X shares with Y music are not in themselves bad; that the "bad music" in question is ineffective or unpleasant for reasons separate from its overlap with track X.

If "A" is the trait which both X and Y musics share, then let's term all qualities of X but not Y "B," and all traits of Y but not X "C." Asterisks signify modification: $A * C = Y$, $A * B = X$

Though we might know Y is bad music, a negative product, this doesn't necessitate a negative identity for X. Indeed, if "C" is the negative variable, and not "A," then there's no reason from its association with Y to believe X is negative (or "bad art") as well.

Once the difference between being and sounding (or appearing) bad is cleared up, the observation seems so obvious so as to be worthless. Imagine you've never seen a picture of John Wilkes Booth, nor a photo of your second cousin Ed. You do, however, know that the two look a lot alike, and you know that J.W.B. is a bad man. On what grounds would it be rational to conclude that either Ed must be a bad man as well, or that both of them are physically unattractive? We can deduce nothing for certain about either A or X from Y: The aesthetic similarities John Wilkes Booth and your cousin share have nothing to do with the value judgment American culture has passed regarding the former.

Despite how obviously fallacious such deductions appear, cultural evaluation falls constantly victim to this thinking in which trappings and harness are confused. Bob Dylan at the Newport Festival, 1965, is a good example: Hailed by folk fans for his socially motivated lyrics and artistic authenticity at his 1963 Newport performance, he is (purportedly) booed in his 1965 return when he "plugs in" and plays electric. Overnight, critical and popular impressions of Dylan shift: folk fans who disdained rock'n'roll for its superficiality or culture, who

saw folk as lyrically and artistically elevated, responded antagonistically to Dylan's new material. And yet Dylan's lyrical quality and artistic sophistication — the grounds upon which the critical distinction between genres had been made — had not declined. The artist had merely adopted the trappings of a genre (which folk fans perceived as being) less lyrically or artistically sophisticated.

It might be useful to employ Gabriel Duquette's separation of "chords" and "maps"; though similar to the trappings/harness contrast, it's a more specific distinction: Chords are the aesthetic qualities of something, which resonate on aesthetic levels. Maps capture reality in some accurate or meaningful way. Folk fans in the 1960s often found rock songs to be ineffective or poor maps: generic, sentimental, trite, tired (or else aimed at adolescents, which is a separate issue). But, through association, these fans' disdain for rock'n'roll songs' maps quickly became a disdain for rock'n'roll songs' chords, and even a "good map" (by folk standards) such as Dylan's 1965 Newport performance became confused for a "bad map" when it featured a bad map's chords:

Map.bad * Chord.variable = Art.bad

Map.good * Chord.variable != Art.bad

* * *

I said, cargo-cult art: An amateur author who engages in all the niceties and stylistic flourishes of nineteenth century prose, believing it to be 'proper' writing. Warhol adding AbEx paint drips to proto-pop art before he gained the confidence to drop it. Analogue fetish, contemporary lo-fi, folk imitation, a capitalized Avant-Garde tradition. (Rockism, Dylan at Newport, midcult bias.)

I said, Artistic technique and approach, in the broad sense which transcends visual works, are fundamentally consequentialist; they prioritize effect and result over deontology. That there exists common strategies which are taught and ingrained in beginners and still followed by advanced practitioners as if gospel is merely a product of said strategies' reliability in achieving certain valued effects, that they can be predictably wielded toward X end.

I said, this makes cargo-cult an issue with instrument/ ends confusion, mistaking the instrumental context- based coordination of parts for ends with inherent value in themselves.

And I said, berating younger selves as inherently narcissistic behaviors — these previous selves act as contrasting Others, making such beratings not self- deprecations but self-congratulations.

And I said, *Girls* is a very good map of a territory and is successful as such. Wes Anderson makes films prone to stylistic memesis, and is successful as such. *Garden State* manages to be both a good map of a territory (at least, an aesthetic and sensibility) and prone to stylistic memesis; it's been culturally engrained as such. (And I say this as someone who doesn't like either Wes Anderson or *Garden State*.)

And who said, *Tony Soprano pining for the days of Gary Cooper set a tone for all these stories, which then echoed and re-echoed in the Louisiana swamps of "True Detective," the New Mexican borderlands of "Breaking Bad," the halls of Sterling Cooper Draper Pryce. Again and again the viewer watched a male protagonist trying to be a breadwinner, paterfamilias, a protector and savior, a Leader of Men; again and again these attempts were presented as dangerously alluring, corrupting, untimely and foredoomed. In certain ways the medieval arc of "Game of Thrones" — in which the noble-but-naïve patriarchy*

of Ned Stark gives way to the toxic patriarchy of warring kings, with Daenerys Targaryen and her dragons waiting to sweep it all away — distilled the whole prestige-drama project to its fundamental archetypes: nostalgia for male kingship, fear of bad kings, a certain satisfaction at the patriarchy's inevitable fall. On "Girls," though, something very different was going on. The fall of patriarchy had basically happened, the world had irrevocably changed ... and nobody knew what to do next. This (and many other things) distinguished the show's storytelling from the superficially similar "Sex and the City," in which the remains of the patriarchy still provided a kind of narrative order. In theory the women of "Sex" prized their freedom and their friendship more than men — but they were also oppressed by and obsessed with toxic bachelors, they still pined for Mr. Big, and they ultimately settled down with decent working-class guys or gorgeous male models or nice Jewish lawyers or Big himself. But "Girls" was a show in which any kind of confident male authority or presence was simply gone, among most of the older characters as well as among the millennial protagonists. The show's four girls had mostly absent fathers (the only involved and caring one came out as gay midway through the show) and few Don Draper-esque bosses to contend with. The toxic bachelors they dated were more pathetic than threatening, and the "sensitive" guys still more so; even the most intense relationships they formed were semi-pathological. A few men on the show (the oldest of the younger characters, most notably) exhibited moral decency and some sort of idealism, a few were genuinely sinister — but mostly the male sex seemed adrift, permanently boyish, a bundle of hormonal impulses leagues away from any kind of serious and potent manhood.

Mary Ann Doane: *Cinema confronts the ever-increasing rationalization of industrial society by preserving single, fleeting chance moments in each individual frame.*

And I said, I said, I... hm... It seems—and this is delicate— I'll attempt to misstep as little as possible— But it seems to me that what makes this rationalist and, in its own

way, the post-rationalist communities, so... predisposed to insight (if, in fact, they are) is firstly, an outsider or atypical perspective, and two, a need or deep desire to shed that positioning for an insider one. This is difficult; I'm being imprecise, but let me attempt to clarify. In the post-rationalist community, with its unique relationship to mental health and depression, I think as a result there is a heightened awareness of the self, and of what makes one... happy or content or satisfied and also existentially unhappy and unsatisfied. When this is coupled with intelligence, it yields insight into the behavioral practices which lend themselves to a sustainable, productive, satisfying life. Which, at its core, is what I perceive your writing to be about. The idea of a sustainable ritual practice, of meaningfulness systems, of eternal beauty. In a similar way, and perhaps this is a better and also more dangerous example, the stereotypically "Aspie" side of the rationalist community... There is this idea that one must step or exist outside the "invisible system" or culture for it to manifest itself as visible. In a way, for those who are born with brains which don't easily adapt, or aren't built to be neurotypically social, they must reverse-engineer these bizarre interpersonal conventions our society operates on. Break it apart,

reverse-engineer it, reconstruct it artificially. And in this way, the concepts of status... of signaling... which are natural and unconscious behaviors to quote-unquote neurotypicals... this is a very prominent part of the discourse in certain corners of the Internet.

* * *

I said, narrow applicability of context and low indeterminacy of message/position/moral as underlying most high art. (credit elsewhere)

And I said, reader completion and Iserian gaps as told by Tracy Chapman: “There is fiction in the space between.” (“Telling Stories,” *Telling Stories* 2000).

I said, the part in “Changes” where Bowie sings, “Strange fascination fascinate me” is when it goes from a good song to a great song. And I said, But parts of “Moonage Daydream” are always gonna sound like Santana (in a bad way) to me.

And I said, I know it’s trendy to think contrarianism is overrated, the usual argument being it isn’t acting anymore quote-unquote independently than conformists, and I hate to be a contrarian, but actually I think this is entirely the wrong angle to view it from and Actually, from a social perspective contrarianism is exceptionally useful. If a social circle, be it a small group of known connections or else a larger culture/subculture, isn’t diversifying its portfolio of action/thought enough, it can miss valuable routes and decisions which contrarians essentially explore and exploit. What I’m saying is, I’m pretty positive contrarianism is probably underrated by just about everyone

I said, S—— D—— is fatally innocent to the cultural baggage which his music’s trappings and aesthetic/self- representational choices carry, the way they proxy pretty strongly for not properly orienting in a historical/cultural context. There’s a conversation in music culture and right now consensus is that ukuleles are overly sentimental and shit as art, and though obviously there’s nothing “inherently” or “automatically” unartistic or “low” about ukuleles, but is there about anything? and the challenge here is in participating and demonstrating participation in existing culture-slash-discourse. (This is the point at which artists/authors start using said tropes 1. ironically
2. subversively or 3. metatextually.)

Essentially, this renders S—— D——’s music as non- participatory and therefore way less rich (narrow in/empty of cultural bandwidth/informational transfer) because pop

music is, as much as anything, a four-minute, four-chord vessel for these sorts of cultural moves/engagements/ conversations. S—— D——’s music is pretty, but in an empty way, because the implicit, fascinating arguments that pop music makes via its stylistic/cultural choices, either S——D—— isn’t making them or his engagement with existing culture/discourse is so poor that it’s impossible to see an active conversation at play. I think S—— D——s “in a vacuum” is basically good as any above-average pop music out there (lyrics included). It’s just that “in a vacuum” can only take you so far, in not just pop but in any artistic discipline.

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I said, “Modern Woman” (Tennis) perhaps more than any other song I know, manages to evoke a sense of movement while staying still, of relative change in position as the world spins on its axis. There’s something powerful about managing to stay in the same place while everything shifts around you... looping chords, iterations and variations, lives circling beautifully back around. Tennis-

the-sport is a game of loops. Most competitions and sports, microcosms of human life, turn in circles: servers rotate, point guards push the game up and back down the court again. Card games move circularly around a table, and matches are composed of rounds. Most narratives in general move in cycles, patterns of peace turning to agitation before turning to resolution once again... “Se Telefonando” (Mina Mazzini) sports a melodic pattern that never changes; instead, the chords modulate around Mazzini as she travels infinitely upwards, an ascent lifting its skinny fists towards heaven. Her climbing is what makes and keeps “Se Telefonando” so compelling: it is unceasing, determined, dignified.

And,

“If I think of somebody telling a story, I see a group of people huddled together, and around them a vast space, quite frightening.” (John Berger)

I said, It’s probably important to start off by quickly distinguishing

between a “story” and “literature,” at least in a way that is, if not universally true, at least instrumentally valuable. Literary works often include one or more stories — did, almost always, until the twentieth century — which are used as starting points to launch all sorts of philosophical investigations into language, morals, structure, society, politics, and human behavior. Storytelling meanwhile (which will be the focus of this essay) refers to that tradition passed down from campfires and Aesop and early human history, where plot is the dominant element and engagement the primary end. Parable can occur too but is secondary, something that happens along the way or is woven in with the narrative. The relationship between storytelling and literature then, at least as conceived here, is a spectrum between plot-driven and idea-driven texts, where the each tradition prioritizes one end more than the other. Some might simplify the narrative end of “engagement” to “entertainment,” but this strikes me as reductive — the Berger quote above illustrates a way in which engaging storytelling builds almost an abstract shelter for early man, an inner space in which structure engenders a desirable sensation of safety, predictability, and teleological meaning far removed from some “frightening,” meaningless, and ostensibly chaotic outer world.

Good storytelling is certainly an art, and all art forms develop principles or rules which, when followed, improve an artist’s odds of making a meaningful product. Art is consequentialist in this way — it isn’t an adherence to the rules itself which makes good art, it’s just that certain

techniques, approaches, or decisions lend themselves to higher rates of artistic success. Chekhov’s Gun is one such narrative principle, a piece of advice popularized by the playwright Anton Chekhov, which counsels that all notable objects or details in a story should somehow contribute to its plot: “One must never place a loaded rifle on the stage if it isn’t going to go off. It’s wrong to make promises you don’t mean to keep.” This is arguably part of a larger principle of compressed or economic storytelling, where every event, character — basically every word and paragraph — goes to work in some meaningful, valuable, and irreplaceable way in developing a narrative or else keeping the reader engaged. In a broad sense, even elements like character development are merely means towards shuttling the reader from the first to last page of a story:

1. Worldbuilding creates a plausible system within which a conflict can take place.
2. Antagonists create or facilitate conflicts.
3. Allies make a difficult or seemingly insurmountable conflict plausibly surmountable.
4. Since they cannot be resolved status quo behavior or events, conflicts inevitably lead to change and variability in the narrative
— which maintain our interest — as well as suspense, which piques our curiosity, the unknown drawing us onward.

5. Character development leads us to empathize with, and invest in, characters so we care in the first place whether they surmount said conflict, and will read on to find out.

Sometimes (often) good stories come with some sort of moral, psychological, or educational takeaway woven in as a secondary priority, so that they're not only valuable (as entertainment) in the short-run, but have some lasting long-term benefits. This increases their utility to users

(readers) and means they'll be passed along and prized, often, with the great stories, along generations and, if this utility is universal enough, enduring cataclysmic cultural changes. Using this expanded definition of narrative ends, we can see how characters create applicable moral/ psychological situations which can be easily extracted and extrapolated from by readers in a useful way: because they're like us (and even non-human characters are almost always anthropomorphic) their conflicts are relevant, and the ethical dilemmas they face in dealing with these conflicts are similarly pertinent. When elements of a story don't contribute to plot or parable, they're not just neutral inclusions — they can actually devalue a story by making it less engaging or demanding extra time and effort from the reader in order to extract the actually valuable bits. Economy is a pretty important and established principle of narrative, especially in mediums like film where every minute of screentime is not just an imposition on the viewer but can cost the production company tens or even hundreds of thousands of dollars. Sontag even speaks at a bit of length with John Berger on economic storytelling, though her quote, coming as it is from such an established and well-read literary mind, is a more a testament to narrative economy's importance than it is an explanation of why this might be so:

“The most powerful form of storytelling is very compact, and if its very compact, it's likely to be very economical in its details, and therefore this economy can be experienced by us with our modern ways of looking at things as something abstract and in that sense it may take on a certain universality.”

One of the things we know about rules, of course, is that they're not always followed. And in fact, it's at the very instant when a rule is broken that meaning is created. The reason for this is three-fold.

For one, rule-abiding is, to the experienced artist, the default mode of production. If an artist or author is breaking a rule, there is always a reason for it. In deviations and transgressions, we find areas of deliberate, reasoned aesthetic or artistic choices, in which, if the artist or author is worth his salt, something very interesting is likely to be happening. Most works of art are running primarily on default decisions, on following tradition or the rules or the norm — there are simply too many infinite possibilities and decisions to be made for this not to be true. Most books are written on paper, with black ink, professionally published, and if an author has specified otherwise there is bound to be a rationale behind it. If we know this rationale is purely artistic — that is, it was chosen only for artistic reasons, rather than done out of limited technical ability or financial funds or commercial incentives by the author — then this transgression of norm is bound to be artistically interesting. We can say the same about paintings done on materials other than canvasses, or with materials other than standard paints; we can say this about the first deviations from realism and mimesis, both literary and visual; about any active straying from the temporal, ideological, or artistic status quo.

Two, consuming a work requires some degree of orientation on the part of the consumer. Largely because users know the above properties of a work — know, that is, that they should pay attention primarily to the odd or original qualities to extract value — they're left dizzy and disoriented when too many elements are subverted or upended from status quo by the creator, and when there's nothing familiar to cling to in getting a bearing on surroundings. Where to pay attention? Why is the creator doing what he's doing and what does it mean? What am I even looking at right now, and what should I be looking at? No, all works are on strict rations for how much artistic deviation and transgression they can pull off effectively. This means all the more than when a

creative is choosing to deviate from the rules or norms, they're going to maximize its impact; use it on something important.

Three, users/readers/viewers aren't consuming a work in a vacuum. They've likely consumed many similar works before, of a similar school, culture, or era, of the same medium or by the same artist. This means they have all sort of expectations for what's going on, and in a narrative, what's going to happen. Even if they can't explicitly vocalize them, good readers are, from repeated past exposure, aware of narrative rules like Chekhov's Gun, which help them stay oriented and make predictions. Transgressing rules, then, can be incredibly powerful and effective — in fact, transgression can only be significant in the first place because a rule or expectation exists. The red herring, itself a valuable narrative tool, only exists because readers expect narrative economy, expect Chekhov's Gun, expect that every element pulls weight in a plot. In almost dialectic fashion, surprise, the subverting of expectation, requires expectation to exist; misdirection requires the directing of a user. This is why a series of books like Knausgaard's *My Struggle* couldn't very much have red herrings: it's understood by readers that compressed storytelling à la Chekhov's Gun isn't a law of his fictional landscape. The books are intricately detailed and based on Knausgaard's real life, on the external, "vast space" of the external world, a world which we know doesn't abide by the same predictable, meaningful structure of a good narrative teleology. It's true that Knausgaard curates the details he includes in the books, but not nearly to the degree of a good, economic story (this is because *My Struggle* is literature, not just a pure plot-and-parable narrative, which means it has all sorts of ends beyond engagement and instruction: it's trying to do things like explore the mundane and ordinary; it's undertaking an almost documentarian, voyeuristic project about the author's life; it's asking philosophical questions

about death and intimacy in ways that go beyond the typical bounds of pure narrative). By the time Knausgaard (the autobiographical protagonist Knausgaard, that is) goes to the birthday party of his young daughter's friend, early in the second novel, we know the rules of *My Struggle*'s project; we bear no expectation that his extensive descriptions of children at play will contribute in some meaningful way later in the book or series. We're not surprised by its lack of contribution to the plot, and so we aren't trying to figure out how it'll tie in later on, or in which way a newly discovered personal habit of his daughter will end up being her fatal flaw, her final undoing. Misdirection isn't possible because we aren't expecting to be directed. It makes sense then that in novels which veer closer on the spectrum to storytelling than literature; novels which carry with them reader expectations of narrative compression (Agatha Christie novels, perhaps, where the primary intended effects of a work are thrill, anticipation, surprise, and suspense) red herrings will be more powerful (and desired) devices

Beyond red herrings, which are ways of making a plot more interesting by making it less predictable, deviating from the principle of Chekhov's Gun doesn't happen in pure storytelling for obvious reasons — why would something nonessential to the plot be included in a work where plot is the primary or only end? But when readers go into a work of literature expecting mostly a story, expecting that plot is a dominant end, and this expectation is subverted, the reader starts trying to track down why. What is this long digression, or this

seemingly unrelated (from a plot perspective) parallel storyline doing? If not to drive plot, why has it been included? And it's then that this end user is driven to discover why, and in turn extract whatever non-narrative, literary utility the passage might contain.

(And by the way, William Cobbett's *Political Register* 1802

[source of term red herring]: *When I was a boy, we used, in order to draw off the harriers from the trail of a hare that we had set down as our own private property, to get her haunt early in the morning, and drag a red-herring, tied to a string, four or five miles over hedges and ditches, across fields and through coppices, till we got to a point, whence we were pretty sure the hunters would not return to the spot where they had thrown off.*)

I said,

II.

The mask stares out, eyes appalled, black and glassy. He is anonymous and intensely personal; he sees the opiate addicts and the basement dwellers, the alienated-enfranchised; all the darkness of the developed world, so that it dominates his view and is reflected in his eyes and slowly suffuses his corneas. From here it overtakes him; the pressure causes pockmarks in his face like lunar craters; dead skin sloughs off at an accelerating rate; and soon it will destroy him entirely, infiltrating the calcite of his skeletal system.

Often we imagine such figures as mouthless, blank-faced, eyelids fused shut (Dali's *Mother of Time*) but this mask and his anguish are all too inextricably human. His eyes the mask's themselves are caverns; no; or craters and pupils lakes. Their shores recede; if ships were parked in docks they would have long been beached and scuttled. The lips are childlike, downturned, and this youth makes image all less heartened. What will tomorrow be, and will it ever be enough? A nation's psyche is malformed. It does not know what it wants. It raises perpetually its water level of expectation. If this is not utopia it is our own doing. To expect any other such thing was an element of our very malformation.

If there was ever expectation of an end to suffering, then the expectant were maliciously informed.

* * *

And yet. Off in the distance, the machine waits, and it casts its shadow back through time. Already we can see it glinting when we squint our eyes. Some fear this machine is more Moloch than man. Some fear this machine is less loom more Moloch. I for one fear the loom.

There are two categories of existential threat: those which threaten our existence, and those which make us existentialists. In other words, there is sickness of the body and cancer of the mind. *Odum*.

We are shuttling toward singularity faster than our mortal march. If it saves our bodies will it save our minds? When we can no longer work, can any amount of money buy prosperity? Already religion is vanquished — what when Protestant preoccupation itself is obsolete? When we are made extraneous?

“Dreams are all I have, I don’t know how it got so bad, / I do nothing. Just existing. /”

* * *

There is a special scare for the category of human we call *artists*, and for the category of human activity we call *art*.

Already we are being replaced. They are writing our pop songs and our poetry. They are rendering sublime images of invisible worlds. The pattern is the same: first, we identify illegible symbols for them; then, our information is used to train *machina* into comprehension of their own; soon they are better at this task than any of us individual or combined.

On one hand, the central essence of art, its humanity — a false premise but one which is self-fulfilling (*hyperstition*) — is already under siege. Can we separate an essence from its container? Will we care for essence when we have perfect forgeries? If ever there was a belief in art as ontologically sacred or categorically autonomous, that too will vanish as soon as symphonies are revealed to work like streetlights.

What of intention? What can a computer care? What can it hope to say, try to say, imperfectly? Can it ever mean? Can we?

There is no doubt it will have our sense of beauty — it will share our eye, our ear. It will work commercial and artistic wonders from any objective point of view. It will educate its viewers’ vantage — improve them, correct a retina’s intuition when it can. (Commercially it will not be enough to simply cater. Eventually, the sameness of the static desirable will itself become undesirable. It will grow, and we will grow with it, and such computers will likely need to work into its product quantities of mediocrity, irritation, boredom for interest. Yet will this either be enough? Perhaps for many, perhaps it will seem enough, but I am asking a question of essence, not appearance.)

Two we are looking at the end of art's maker. Who is, after all, the artist in an era when machines make art? Not only execute the plans of makers, as is already possible, but make the plans themselves, as is not much further off. Are our next makers trainers of intelligence, feeding ever better data? Are they designers of computers? If so, what of when these designers are themselves computers, sexually self-propagating? Even granted this is good for audience, art does not exist solely for consumption. The creation of art has essential psychological and cultural benefits, benefits so self-evident they need not be named. Moreover these benefits are tied inextricably to the created's consumption. In computerspeak, sever the connection and all nodes are diminished to the point of impotence.

“Yes,” they say, “*machina* have always threatened the arts. Photography conquered the portrait. Cinema challenged the theater.” Yet both traditions still survive.

All the soft imperfections of old media we today hold dear. Film cameras are fetishized. The limitations inherent in set-pieces of a play are seen today as charming. Bugs became features. This will not be the case in twenty-five, thirty-five, or fifty-some years. If we love imperfection — human imperfection — computers will simulate it better than a human ever could.

Once, the Turkish hunchback sat beneath a mirrored chessboard, feigning as automaton. Now, the automaton begins to feign as Turkish hunchback. We are not looking toward the end of a medium. We are considering an extinction event.

* * *

Along the way, it is the small losses that I fear. What is more intangible than essence or soul? Will it diminish our lives without us ever realizing? Without being able to tell the difference? Without us ever feeling spiritually impoverished at all, and yet being impoverished still the same?

For so long we have prioritized a small set of values in technology and design, and always we have underestimated the intangible cost of improvement along these axes. All optimization is a trade-off, even if small; perhaps especially if small, since there will be no compensatory attempt. There is cost even if a trade-off is “worth” it. The process does not restart; sacrifices stack and build. This is a truism, and yet easily or accordingly forgotten. In exchange for realism, we surrender our hope for the future. In exchange for rationality, we lose our sense of magic.

What of anticipating the crackle as needle drops onto dust-covered vinyl? The act of cleaning itself is trade-off. The CD-ROM is permanent and enduring in comparison with the cassette, yet this fact is its very trade-off: it is not ephemeral. It will not walk with its listener to their end time. But a cassette can, magnetic tape stripping and corroding with every press of the Play. We gain technology; we lose a class of mortal companion. Again, it is our psyche which puts us where we are, which not just cost us garden but prevents us from return.

* * *

A small handful of disciplines work expressly to ward off such entropy. Bryan Caplan, economist at George Mason University, wrote recently:

“Confirmation bias, herding, and Social Desirability Bias account for over half the post-1900 art in museums. Subtle aesthetic merit? Bah.”

Subtle aesthetic merit is exactly what I am championing, yes, but Caplan and his disciples continue, praising bland, high-definition craft, digital drawings requiring strong technical ability and yet utterly lacking life or spark. It is Caplan who is blind to subtlety, who can only prioritize capitalist value hierarchies against a discipline — art history — which for all its flaws and shortcomings is to be lauded for struggling against such priorities; for preserving exactly the sort of intangible, unquantifiable qualities which a world public would exchange wholesale and in a second for more graspable traits. Proof is in the expression of Caplan and cronies’ metrics. In the same digital breath he writes of his previous assertion, “Verifiable in principle. Imagine experiments that claim scribbles are ‘great art’ and see how many agree.” Arguments were at hand that the most uninspired image of a showering woman, photorealistic and in greyscale, would be, in such an experiment, correctly hailed as superior to Rembrandt.

(It is not, it need be reiterated, “indoctrination” which exposure to canonical art brings — it is a way of seeing, and seeing the soul, the intangible and indispensable essence, even if it not exist, and seeing it in a word, a clip, a canvas.)

Intuitive interface, portability, access, efficiency, economy, capacity — the list of prioritized optimizations continues seemingly endlessly and yet it is almost certainly too small; they are all, at the end of the day, close synonyms for ease. I will not — cannot — argue against the justice-based applications of ease and access, but will always within a first world society, and do so clearly: it is this very set of priorities to which the mask holds silent witness, and which makes him suffer, and which makes us suffer in turn.

* * *

I am watching a concert with Foxygen in Midtown. The openers are undergrads playing dress-up. An *Oklahoma* t-shirt, black tie, and pin-striped pants on him; for her, a skin-tight sequined dress and platinum hair, dark shock coming up from the roots. I cannot imagine what an act in 2017 that looks like 2017 looks like, instead of 1982. *Costumerock*: Rock which plays dress-up. Perhaps this is the only way rock *can* be played in 2017.

Foxygen is similar except more bored; the singer meanders, adventures with his voice to kill time; wanders off pitch (perhaps the ultimate sign of too long performing, too long performing the same things the same way). This man is one of the luckiest in history and yet he is supremely and ultimately bored. When one is bored, one dresses up in costumes. *Pretend to be somewhere else for one night*. When one is bored with oneself, one also dresses up in costumes. *Pretend to be someone else for one night*. The contemporary backslide is always temporal. What does 2017 even look like? Is anyone aware?

But costumes are not so bad. Civilization is born from the act of costuming.

* * *

On opiates there is relief. On opiates one does not need to date, or marry. Opiates cure at least one of the existential threats, along with loneliness and boredom — these being things which pull two people together.

In the basement too there is relief. Ignore an outcast status long enough and one forgets of being an outcast at all — after long enough. It is effort and optimism which prove draining, even murderous.

Can an essay change lives, change minds, change habits? Or can it merely record things thought now passed?

At the very least, it is crucial we do not put an end to impermanence — putting an end to impermanence being one of our most consuming cultural aspirations. The inherent impermanence of all things scares us, and yet it also keeps us company, continues the sacrament. It would be an exceptionally lonely world alongside electronic monoliths lasting millennia at a time. Yet creating such a world is a common goal.

* * *

Yes: on opiates there is relief. I remember winter: it is the coldest I've ever known. The kind of cold that, with frost, mattes bricks, freezes them dusty, shifts their tone from summer's dark, fleshy red to healthy soft pink (*like gums, like gums*, I'd said). *I fled withdrawals in sleep*; except when I saw it, with blankets and no pillows, withdrawals strafing the body like wildfire, it was more the equivalent of curling into silica shelters and praying for swiftish passage.

I remember the opiate's antihistaminic qualities wearing off as the drugs began to gradually purge from system, forming tears around the eyes and causing sniffling nostrils, uncontrolled and unconscious, animal-like. The constraint of a corpus, the inherent, inescapable condition of pain, and the excruciating sickness of the mind. *Dimension-hoppers get very patriotic about their timelines...* I remember her saying. *I'll get drunk and have to shout one of them down from time to time, sick of hearing about their boring, utopic 21st centuries.*

* * *

And then they took the image of the mask and superimposed it onto the album cover from *The Bends*, and drew a Wayne teardrop on its upper cheekbone and said, well. Well.

* * *

I said,

The plains are not dead and gone, they've simply migrated — from Montana to L.A., Nebraska to the Five Boroughs, the buildings like tall, unruly blades of grass towering above their populace hordes and unrestrained by grazing beasts. The crowds flock out in droves — into Grand Central and Port Authority and Penn Station, then to taxi cabs and subway stops which shuttle them in start-stop commutes between the stems and spikes of pasture, pouring them at nine a.m. onto street corners and freshly-opened businesses; then at night, flying and whizzing down Broadway and Amsterdam and 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, down to Meat Packing and St. Marks, Sheridan and SoHo, East Village and Alphabet City. The cab drivers know this, and they circle the herds, nipping at their heels and isolating outliers, chasing down young women slowed by miniskirts and high-heels or swooping in on families with children the way hawks descend onto prairie dog young.

Across the East River, however, over the Williamsburg Bridge or Interstate 495, past Greenpoint to the north end of Brooklyn and just south of Queens, there are fewer cabs. Around half the residents are foreign-born. The Puerto Ricans live there and the Dominicans, the Mexicans and the Italians and the German-Jewish old-timers, and there are sometimes street festivals or parades celebrating one Latin holiday or another. Housing prices and rental rates will become more expensive in coming decades as Greater Brooklyn rapidly gentrifies, as the New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development exerts its great force onto the community with something called the “Bushwick Initiative,” but in 2003 rental rates are cheap and for that reason my family has decided to move here, decided to live in a flat on Halsey Street.

Our lower-class apartment is on the ground floor, street level, and in the summers this is cause for benediction: though we lack the breeze of the upper floors, we can feel the heat dissipate upwards, sense the more oppressive vaults and bays of the ceiling that signal less fortunate realities for the tenants above us. The blinds and curtains are drawn closed in hotter weeks, but otherwise kept open by my parents, who love the natural light allowed by the low surrounding buildings. Each day, after twilight's last pastels subside, this light slowly switches from pouring into the house to steaming out of it, exposing our front rooms to easy voyeurism by casual

passerbys. When this happens, my mother, if we are gathered around the table for dinner at late hours, will tug at the window blinds or else motion me and my brother to do so, saying only, “un- aquarium us.” And yet, I do still feel trapped, at least for

the few months living there, as if in a child's fish tank. I am too young and too cautious to venture far out of the house on my own very often, except for trips to school, and with no hills or fields or rural roads as I was so used to, I feel deprived of open space and clean air.

When I am ten, my brother, born seven years before me, manages to secure an expired ID from an of-age cousin, in order to purchase malt liquor under our parents' noses: while at first he treks out to nearby neighborhoods out of caution, soon he becomes comfortable with simply buying from the cornerstore nearest our apartment. There is never a real risk of being caught, of an odd word by a cashier to my parents: since the store is frequent host to needle users trying to haggle over twenty-four-ouncers or slipping Nikolai nips up shirt sleeves or airing general worldly grievances, my father never brings us there with him; we as his children are thus entirely unattached from our parents in the shop-owner's mind.

Perhaps it was from the desperation of the destitute that my brother first learned and began trying his hand at haggling as well, only a few years after we move to New York. It seems in retrospect his own attempt at integration, even acceptance. When he ventured out and my parents were not home, he would sometimes bring me along to the shop; each time I mutely observed their routine. The cashier at first sized him up like he sized up all new customers, asking four dollars for a forty-ounce. But my brother, quickly realizing he was being taken advantage of, began to enact counter-measures; soon when he walked up to the check-out stand he would preemptively ask, "two-fifty?" to which the shop-owner acquiesced "three." The fact that the owner's capitalistic spirit was open and old-school, that if my brother ever missed delivering his line — which was rare — the owner would insist on a four dollar charge — lent a certain mutual understanding, a sacredness even, to the transaction. At least that was

how I saw it then, desiring deeply to be a part of this system that I could only observe. It was on a hot summer Saturday, I remember, that I came with my brother to the cornerstore for the last time. He'd gone there earlier on his own, around ten, and in the afternoon he decided to make a second trip, and told me to come with him. I remember because that day was the start of a long heat wave and the far-off buildings were like blurry television sets, and Bobby Womack's "California Dreamin'" was rippling loudly from a portable speaker system in front of a one-car garage, and my brother on the way back from the store gave his cousin's expired ID to an officer and I had to wait home alone for an hour while my parents picked him up.

When I grew old enough and had lived in that house long enough that I felt comfortable going out regularly on my own, of that time I remember especially a large chapel under restoration a few blocks from our home, its scaffolding's gaunt cheekbones and enshadowing mesh looking dark and ghostly from the exterior. The church's stone facade and dirty rose window spoke of something far, far from the wood-panelled townhousing or barren brick apartments of our neighborhood, of an emaciated ancestor mourning its temporal weathering whom I, in my youth, could not reach across the long years to understand. Our only attempt at equivalence was the warm, yellow stained glass in the above-ground metro stations, decorating their pavement ambulatories and trembling with the approaches of coming trains.

Our reason for moving to the city had been by no means exceptional: my parents wished to capture and be imbued with the historic spirit of the place; Bushwick because the outer boroughs were the only option they could afford. My parents had had my brother very young, and inevitably capitulated some of their desires in order to rear us. Now that looking after my brother and me was

no longer a full-time job, I think they likely wanted more time for old dreams. They were caricatures in that regard, but everyone is a caricature in New York when it comes to their relationship with the city. To my eyes, the move meant that the world became diverse in every way; I felt there, even as I aged, as does a very young child. Wandering across the borough yielded to events rather than familiarity, cart vendors selling seasoned mangos like blossoming flowers, a concrete building enveloped in towering fire, hispanic men in traditional hats running rented Ali Babas, bounce houses, or inflatable slides at a street carnival. And the foods: yellow rice and plantains, unidentifiable meats soaked in gravies, helados, all unknown, to be tasted and tried and the knowledge of them slipped into a gustatory repertoire. That was in the neighborhoods just west of us — around our home, there was instead the persistent smell of bread; whether the result of some large commercial bakery nearby or an odd, analogue aroma, I do not know.

It could feel claustrophobic at times for my brother and I as well though, having moved from Midwest to mid- metro, and sometimes, on such days, we would summit inaudibly the central staircase of our apartment complex and he would slide a thin cardboard cut-out up and down the interstice between door and frame until the loose latch bolt became pliant and slipped inside its plate. There on the roof, lying on our backs above a weatherproofed lift- shaft, I felt as if I had broken through some suffocating surface, could fill starved lungs with open air. The sky was less a flat ceiling supported by steel and more a stretching, arcing, expansive dome, not only over but past the man- made structures, even the skyscrapers of Manhattan, beyond Wall Street and Midtown and Alphabet City, and in those hours, the roof and our view past the parapet and the passing of the sky would transform psychedelically from the real to the hyperreal.

* * *

And it said, No New Ideas.

And it said, And there will be a sadness in your heart. And it said, over the pit, out over vast areas and volumes

of suffering, Ordered 4oz bottles of pine oil, eucalyptus, and tea tree. Will likely place them first on a cloth and then inhale. This past summer was addicted to the smell of Excel concentrate and Lysol. Worked in an animal shelter and it's too closely associated with cleaning dirty cages. I used a lot in the mornings to get through.

And who said, it isn't me who's writing. Modesty? Metaphor? Post-structuralism? No. A strictly technical description of how this body has been used as a meat puppet for channeling uttunul signal. It's only when the writing is bad that 'I' have produced it. When it's good 'I' am just a space through which Lemuria speaks. The writing is already assembled on the plane and all 'I' can do is bodge it by introducing subjectivist fuzz. Schizophrenia? Religious mania? Well, what makes these things dangerous is the thing that make drugs dangerous — i.e. it is not the state of ego-loss itself but the imprecision of the art of maintaining it, the fact that the organism might resume its rights at any moment, crashing you into psychic mini-deaths and melancholy catatonia. The problem with drugs is that they

only put the Alien Parasite Entity (= His Majesty the Ego = the thing that calls itself you) to sleep. Their dissolution of the APE is temporary, all-too temporary. And after a while, the neuronal battleground — what you are fighting over AND what you are fighting with, i.e. the only resources you have — is itself damaged. APE has its way as you are dragged/drugged into permanent low-to-deep level depression. It is only as part of a Cold Rationalist program that you can begin to permanently dissolve the APE. It's a lifelong struggle, it'll always lurk in the shadows and in your reflection and photographs, waiting for another opportunity to drag you back down into the looking glass world of personalised misery.

* * *

American sociologist Lewis Mumford distinguishes between two types of utopian thinking. One he calls the “aimless utopia of escape,” a sort of daydreaming which distracts the dreamer from a productivity which might better his life. The other is a “purposive utopia of reconstruction,” which animates man into action. Mumford references pragmatist philosopher John Dewey in further distinguishing between the two:

Suppose that a man is denied intercourse with his friends at a distance. One kind of reaction is for him to “imagine” meeting his friends, and going through, in fantasy, a whole ritual of meeting, repartee, and discussion. The other kind of reaction, as Dr. Dewey says, is to see what conditions must be met in order to cement distant friends, and then invent the telephone.

The purposive dreamer builds (and leverages his imagination into his building); the escapist dreamer wastes away. Daydreaming to Mumford is a pejorative which prevents progress: while a short-term solution to happiness, it saps at the will and when practiced on a large scale precludes the sort of technological and social innovation capable of actualizing such dreams into reality. Barring a Great Filter scenario, there are many generations and many billions more human beings yet to come; if we’re being at all optimistic about humanity’s future, explore- exploit optimization [1] ethically compels us to invent better telephones instead of imaginary friends.

Indeed, purposive utopian thinking is self-fulfilling: the belief that one can make the world a better place appears, as a motivator, to be a significant catalyst of human progress. Richard Rorty (an intellectual descendant of Dewey) makes a similar argument for patriotism —that without a certain level of national self-esteem, some deep-seated belief that America can and should be better, there can be no motivation for trying.[2] Here’s Christopher Lasch, a contemporary of Rorty, in the watershed *True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics*. Lasch is writing in the late eighties and early nineties; whether sociopolitical conditions have changed since is a worthwhile question.

Political pressure for a more equitable distribution of wealth can only come from movements fired with religious purpose and a lofty conception of life. [...] Popular initiative has been declining for some time — in part because the democratization of consumption is an insufficiently demanding ideal, which fails to call up the moral energy necessary to sustain popular movements in the face of adversity. The history of popular movements, including the civil rights movement of the fifties and sixties — the last such uprising in American history — shows that only an arduous, even a tragic understanding of life can justify the sacrifices imposed on those who seek to challenge the status quo.

In other words, action requires belief in both the possibility of desired outcomes and in some ethical mattering which makes such outcomes worth striving for

— a “tragic understanding” of the value of human life. Belief here is instrumental: Mikhail Epstein writes that “utopia endows the individual with a more significant and a wider horizon,” motivating him to make an effort in its general direction. Though by definition the attempt will inevitably fall short (the etymology of “utopia” is Greek, from “ou” and “topos” meaning “no” and “place” respectively), when utopian thought is shared among many individuals, it will result in the construction of a society which looks more like their ideal vision than it did before. As soon as (but only as soon as) the possibility of utopia has been opened, as soon as new locations are visible on the horizon-line, navigational instruments can be reoriented, courses set. It’s often argued that political

progress is largely the result of expanding political conversation — of marking new issues on the map which, once marked, can be explored.

At some point, however, we hit a brick wall: to 21st century readers, Mumford's dismissal of private daydreaming, and his idea that technological progress *on its own* is capable of creating a utopian society, increasingly appears naive. It's worth pondering the degree to which modern Western society might resemble historic conceptions of utopian living: Rutger Bregman imagines in *Utopia For Realists* how 21st century Western society would have looked to medieval humans:

'To the medieval mind,' the Dutch historian Herman Pleij writes, 'modern-day western Europe comes pretty close to a bona fide Cockaigne. You have fast food available 24/7, climate control, free love, workless income, and plastic surgery to prolong youth.' These days, there are more people suffering from obesity worldwide than from hunger. In Western Europe, the murder rate is [forty] times lower, on average, than what it was in the Middle Ages, and if you have the right passport, you're assured an impressive social safety net.

A plethora of possible explanations for modern-day discontent (and our continued longing for some far-off utopia) gets tossed around in response to Pleij's implicit challenge; this essay will restrain itself to touching on a select few. One such possibility is that technological and social progress have been historically designed to optimize lower-level needs in Maslow's Hierarchy — better access to food and shelter, a safer and less violent world — which, once taken care of, merely allow us to shift our unhappiness onto higher-level needs like social belonging and self-actualization. It's only when humans finally have leisure time, for example, that they can feel the deep existential despair of ennui and angst, or “being unhappy about being unhappy” as Venkatesh Rao puts it for Ribbonfarm.

Sarah Perry takes this argument further; in her seminal “Gardens Need Walls: On Boundaries, Ritual, and Beauty,” she argues that material and resource-based solutions are not just sought instead of higher-level solutions, but often come at the cost of overall life satisfaction:

The lower levels of Maslow's pyramid reflect material well-being. But material abundance is not itself the cause of anomie and angst. Rather, ancestral, evolved solutions to lower-level problems tended to contain solutions to higher-level problems as well. As these ancestral solutions are made obsolete by solutions that are more efficient on the material level, the more ineffable, higher-level problems they solved present themselves anew. Simple abundance of food is not the cause of obesity, but rather the loss of carefully evolved ancestral diets. Our ancestors found it easy to get to sleep because they were tired from intense physical activity; we often find it a challenge to get to sleep because modern solutions to material problems do not include physical

activity. We are lonely and bored not because of material abundance simpliciter, but because the specific cultural patterns that have reproduced themselves to produce material abundance have whittled away the social and psychological solutions that were built into old solutions to material problems.

(Another example of this overlap might be tribalism, which fulfills lower level needs like safety, resource stability, and improved ability to hunt game — but in the process contains higher-level, more abstract solutions like community, companionship, and social belonging.)

Religious and teleological narratives arguably fall under a similar category as the issues listed above. That we have moved past a religious model of the universe and of human

existence has proved enormously valuable materially, technologically, and scientifically. It has also allowed Western society to move past the oppressive constraints of religious moral codes and expand civil liberties; this clears the path for previously marginalized groups to climb Maslow's hierarchy towards self-actualization. But further down the road, religion's demise also causes blockage. Joseph Wood Krutch, in 1929's *The Modern Temper*, draws a parallel between the life of an individual and the lifespan of human civilization: "As civilization grows older it too has more and more facts thrust upon its consciousness and is compelled to abandon one after another, quite as the child does, certain illusions which have become dear to it." One of these major disillusionments is the realization that morality and ethics have no ultimate, religious, or cosmic truth to them. Like Rousseau on "noble savagery," Krutch agrees we cannot "return to a state of relative ignorance," but is unsure how else to proceed. Many of his intellectual contemporaries, most prominently Bertrand Russell, argue for an ironic practice of teleology; William James makes a case in "The Will To Believe" for the necessity of belief in ultimate morality as a means of ensuring social order and welfare.

The loss of a teleological narrative, meanwhile, of cosmic mattering and meaningfulness, comes at a high cost to the collective psyche. Krutch's argument runs that as man gains an increasing technological ability to manipulate his physical environment, he simultaneously loses his ability to, through the imagination, "mold the universe" into "what he would have it." Haley Thurston *The Sublemon* defines sacredness as the quality of a thing being "so important that in order to preserve it, you're willing, consciously or unconsciously, to not examine it." (While the examination of one's beliefs is certainly a part of many Abrahamic traditions, the conclusions always seem built-in to the exercise; by never transcending an Abrahamic worldview, such examinations are themselves ritualistic

and arguably act more as reinforcement than serious skepticism.) One wonders if religious meaningfulness, let out of the box and now evaporating into thin air, is a belief which should have been held more sacred.

"The mind leaps, and leaps perhaps with a sort of elation, through the immensities of space, but the spirit, frightened and cold, longs to have once more above its head the inverted bowl beyond which may life whatever paradise its desires may create."
(Krutch)

What follows is an attempt at capturing the standard, Lit-101 narrative of twentieth century literary and popular sensibilities. There are conspicuous exceptions, contradictions, and epistemic fault-lines to such a narrative, but it's nevertheless valuable to spell out here because it happens to be the particular narrative so many writers today cling to, and because its presence as a narrative at all it helps us make sense of our world:

Religion increasingly on the decline, the sheer scale of human tragedy in World War I heightens existing feelings of void-like meaninglessness and nihilism. In response, inter-war creatives desperately attempt to reconcile this emerging world with old

understandings, and to prevent (via art) such atrocities from being committed again. Post-Auschwitz, Stalingrad, Nagasaki, much of this moral hope and urgency fades among (white) Americans and Europeans, giving way to Cold War liberalism's resigned moderation. Escapism takes preference to responsibility: *The lone artist did not want the world to be different, he wanted his canvas to be a world* (Rosenberg). Language games are often prioritized above moral seriousness, and post-modern philosophers dive fully into deconstruction. Some increasingly see their existences as arbitrary; empty determinism replaces ideas of destiny and fate. By the eighties and nineties this consciousness has seeped into popular culture, and irony's ubiquity gains academic

notice. *Infinite Jest* is published in 1996 [3] and theories of a new sensibility begin to bubble up to the surface, one which eventually gets called metamodernism. In 2011, Luke Turner writes the movement's informal manifesto, later made famous by a Shia Labeouf plagiarism scandal.

This manifesto reads as follows:

1. *We recognise oscillation to be the natural order of the world.*
2. *We must liberate ourselves from the inertia resulting from a century of modernist ideological naivety and the cynical insincerity of its antonymous bastard child.*
3. *Movement shall henceforth be enabled by way of an oscillation between positions, with diametrically opposed ideas operating like the pulsating polarities of a colossal electric machine, propelling the world into action.*
4. *We acknowledge the limitations inherent to all movement and experience, and the futility of any attempt to transcend the boundaries set forth therein. The essential incompleteness of a system should necessitate an adherence, not in order to achieve a given end or be slaves to its course, but rather perchance to glimpse by proxy some hidden exteriority. Existence is enriched if we set about our task as if those limits might be exceeded, for such action unfolds the world.*
5. *All things are caught within the irrevocable slide towards a state of maximum entropic dissemblance. Artistic creation is contingent upon the origination or revelation of difference therein. Affect at its zenith is the unmediated experience of difference in itself. It must be art's role to explore the promise of its own paradoxical ambition by coaxing excess towards presence.*
6. *The present is a symptom of the twin birth of immediacy and obsolescence. Today, we are nostalgists as much as we are futurists. The new technology enables the simultaneous experience and enactment of events from a multiplicity of positions. Far from signalling its demise, these emergent networks facilitate the democratisation of history, illuminating the forking paths along which its grand narratives may navigate the here and now.*
7. *Just as science strives for poetic elegance, artists might assume a quest for truth. All information is grounds for knowledge, whether empirical or aphoristic, no matter its truth-value. We should embrace the scientific-poetic synthesis and informed naivety of a magical realism. Error breeds sense.*
8. *We propose a pragmatic romanticism unhindered by ideological anchorage. Thus, metamodernism shall be defined as the mercurial condition between and beyond irony and sincerity, naivety and knowingness, relativism and truth, optimism and doubt, in pursuit of a plurality of disparate and elusive horizons. We must go forth and oscillate!*

Some points which might clarify and/or contextualize the above declaration: By “modernist ideological naivety,” Turner is ostensibly referring to the post-World War One generation. By its cynically insincere “antonymous bastard child,” post-World War Two post-modernism. (This regardless of historical accuracy.) It's also worth mentioning that the New Sincerity movements, encompassing both the early-00s literary and late-80s Austin folk scene, are frequently grouped together with metamodernism in

conventional narrative, though this has always seemed to me misguided: the music of Daniel Johnston is far too unawaredly bright-eyed to be considered metamodern, lacking an aforementioned “oscillating” quality; the alt- lit of Tao Lin always seemed more interested in sincerely describing life’s meaninglessness than in doing anything about it.

To borrow a phrase, standard disclaimers apply. Reality is messy. The above is a reductive, highly simplified narrative which has been drawn retroactively with some combination of curative and impositional leeway. But it’s worth being aware of.

Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, two philosophers often credited with crystallizing the current metamodernist movement, argue that there is more a longing for hope than there is actual hope in metamodern society: the desire is one of utility, where sensibilities are used instrumentally in the service of an end — happiness (if delusional) and progress, made possible only by belief (believing providing the grounds for actualizing). This is their “out” from the dilemma Krutch describes, where society cannot go back to blissful ignorance, nor can it continue forward with a philosophy of nihilism and cosmic meaninglessness. While it embodies a sense of “renewed hope, of renewed urgency, to create something, go forward,” modern society, Vermeulen and van den Akker write, is still very much “tied to the postmodern distrust... this doublebind” of “we cannot do that anymore, we cannot be as pure as the modernist avant garde... but still we want to do so. You want to go forward, you want to be optimistic.”

It cannot be stressed enough that this quality of oscillation is key to the idea of a metamodern sensibility. The American writer Andre Dubus became consumed near the end of his life with the idea of “sacraments” — completed, ritualistic acts of devotion which imbue daily living with meaning — but can’t really be considered a proto-metamodernist given the decidedly Catholic nature of his belief, the fact that he perceived these sacraments as, once performed, inherently meaningful, rather than tools towards creating the sensation of meaningfulness. Oscillation and conscious choice are the outs not just to Krutch’s double-bind but the solution to the dilemma, the hellish trade-off, central to his thesis on morality and meaning: “As time goes on... the universe becomes more and more what experience has revealed, less and less what imagination has created, and hence, since it was not designed to suit man’s needs, less and less what he

would have it be. With increasing knowledge his power to manipulate his physical environment increases, but in gaining the knowledge which enables him to do so he surrenders insensibly the power which in his ignorance he had to mold the universe.” It is a way to mobilize knowledge in order to imagine (and thus create, both in actuality and in perception) a more meaningful reality. It is a purposive rationality which allows and encourages daydreaming in the service of a better world.

Of course, all of the above is a form of teleology-building, a crafting of narrative in a way which transforms (the perception of) chaos into (the perception of) order. Turner notes that “Today, we are nostalgists as much as we are futurists... emergent networks facilitate the democratisation of history, illuminating the forking paths along which its grand narratives may navigate the here and now.” Implicitly, we understand that his *Metamodernist Manifesto* is operating in the exact same vein by creating and continuing the “grand narrative” of literary progress and development.

It has to be a narrative accurate enough to convince a reader of its plausibility, compelling enough to argue for its adoption, and instrumentally valuable enough that it improves, if only marginally, the lives of its adopters by making the world that much more

meaningful, that much more a combination of what “experience has revealed” and “imagination has created,” so as to, out of our “increasing knowledge,” once again gain the power to “mold the universe.”

Willing ourselves into belief is easier said than done. Once we become aware of our own atheistic aloneness, once we learn our lives are not teleological but arbitrary, we know too much. How, then, to proceed? Is it possible to unlearn such discoveries? Is it desirable? How might we be able to entertain a cognitive dissonance in which

we both acknowledge our inherent meaninglessness and champion our inherent meaning, if this truly is the metamodern sensibility?

What we know is this: it appears to be both necessary and impossible to believe in some cosmic significance; Beckett's "can't go on; must go on" comes to mind, though with energy now instead of resignation. Without belief we lack a sense of purpose; we give way to nihilism; we become existentially enraged and perpetually discontented. Compartmentalize Turner; *this* is one of the central and most urgent problems of the umbrella known as metamodernism. It is an outlook centered around instrumental rather than absolute truth; it is a sensibility dedicated to reconstruction instead of deconstruction

— though the former is possible only after performing the latter; it is a movement concerned with imbuing daily life with meaning — imaginary and impossible as it is. It wishes to do this to the point that distinctions between illusion and reality blurs, until the human being is liberated by a system created for his benefit; it wishes to establish means for hacking into the mind [4] and exploiting the sensation of meaningfulness, even while the term's value in any vacuum sense has been entirely discarded. The "how," of course, remains frustratingly elusive.

Judith Butler via Maggie Nelson:

The bad reading [of Gender Trouble] goes something like this: I can get up in the morning, look in my closet, and decide which gender I want to be today. I can take out a piece of clothing and change my gender: stylize it, and then that evening I can change it again and be something radically other, so that what you get is something like the commodification of gender, and the understanding of taking on a gender as a kind of consumerism ... When my whole point was that the very formation of subjects, the very formation of persons, presupposes gender in a certain way—that gender is not to be chosen and that "performativity" is not radical choice and it's not voluntarism ... Performativity has to do with repetition, very often with the repetition of oppressive and painful gender norms to force them to resignify. This is not freedom, but a question of how to work the trap that one is inevitably in.

Butler notes as well the "instability wrought by the simile" in Aretha Franklin's lyric "You make me feel like a natural woman"; it seems only *natural* to point out Franklin's "Day Dreaming" given the Lewis Mumford quote which opens this essay. Contra Mumford, daydreaming might be essential to the actualization of (or at least, limit- approach towards) utopia, but it would be an advanced sort of daydreaming, structured and premeditated in a way which tricks the dreamer into believing he is awake.

Sarah Perry — previously quoted as decrying the ways in which solutions to "lower-level" problems can in turn create higher-level problems like social alienation

— writes frequently on ritual; her overarching thesis at its most distilled comes near the end of “Ritual and the Conscious Monoculture” when she analogizes the practice to vitamins (“we have need of them, our ancestral cultures provided them for us [naturally], and we suffer a kind of [spiritual] malnutrition without them”). Perry defines the ritual in terms almost identical to Bataille’s conception of the sacred — a behavior in which resources (eg, one’s own time or the lives of conscious beings) are sacrificed without an obvious and/or material gain in return — with the additional quality of being an inherently social activity. To some degree, a suspended belief in the meaning-generating power of such a ritual is self-fulfilling, so long as this belief is a requirement for a person to kick free of the inertia and participate in (or create/facilitate) group rituals: after sacrificing something in a ritualistic context, the brain reverse-engineers a justification for said sacrifice, which generates meaning where there

previously was none. It's not quite true that ritualistic sacrifice is without incentive — just that its incentives are less quantifiable, more invisible to a surface gaze: Flesh transforms into teleology, belonging, mattering with the mere sacrifice of a lamb. Moreover, the shared experience of sacrifice or general hardship creates social cohesion and unity; ritual is a practice which, like ancestral diets, simultaneously solves low and higher-level human needs (safety in numbers and social belonging, respectively).

Of course, these are mechanisms inherent in all ritual, whether or not belief is present (for example, if participation in the ritual is the result of social pressures); indeed Perry argues frequently that belief is by no means a prerequisite for ritualistic meaning generation. If standard human decision-making looks something like “X matters so I will do X,” then ritualistic reasoning goes, “I did (and we all do, regularly) X, so it must matter.” (Of course, there are limits on how far human justification can go without “snapping”; see language’s “elastic band” quality at end of section)

It helps Perry’s case here that (as she herself extensively argues) ritualistic behaviors can induce “altered states of consciousness” and hack into the brain at a chemical level. In some cases, this is especially so. Sex, prolonged eye contact, and rhythm are all rituals or elements of rituals capable of causing pleasure centers to flood; Perry (who dances around Butlerian theory throughout her writings on ritual) notes that the former two activities are acts of “performance” which simultaneously “evidence” and “create belief.” Belief in the process or power of ritual can still play an important role (the sort of faith in possibility which leads near-strangers to go out on a date), but sometimes the ritual is undergone merely out of habit and can work on us almost unconsciously (such as handshaking as a traditional means of introduction, which through physical touch builds trust and intimacy).

Earlier, there was writing in this text on genericism and artworks, on the way in which an awareness of Iserian gaps and indeterminacy transform the reader/viewer’s project of himself onto a work into an opportunity for self-discovery. Saying that the reader imposes himself upon, or enters the world of, the text, however, isn’t the full story. The text enters the world of the reader in arguably equal measure. Media consumption trains the consumer to see and think a certain way, and in this perhaps is salvation: if it can effectively transform the often arbitrary and disheartening events of our lives into some larger teleological narrative, perhaps we as well can learn to view our own existences in a similar way. To read Eggers on Egyptian weather — “living under that sun made me lighter and stronger, made of platinum” — is to learn a new way of seeing, of experiencing, and of therefore living. A previous evil, or at least inconvenience — high temperatures, an overbearing sun — has been transformed into something supernal, divine.

Earlier this summer, I spent a weekend holed up and working my way through all of *Twin Peaks* and *Eraserhead*. Afterwards, as if stumbling out of a trance and still half- way intoxicated, I felt my perception radically altered. The standard perceptive filter, the one

that shapes our daily realities by discerning what to pay attention to and how we interpret signs, had been replaced by a distinctly Lynchian system of signification. The rattle of old pipes and the ambient hum of an AC unit — sensory inputs which would have normally been relegated to “white noise” and ignored — became ominous, surreal soundtracks; hallways fish-eyed and distorted; finger-snaps triggered images of Audrey Hornsby slow-dancing in the Double R Diner. Daily activities became infused with suspense and aestheticized gravity. It seems entirely possible that intense and prolonged (or even ordinary) exposure to narratives (via television,^[5] film, and literature) might

similarly create a “meaningfulness” or “teleological” filter of perception, curating and distorting (signifying) ordinary events in a way which adds up teleologically and feels chock-full with meaning. Essentially, a narrative identity informed by the consumption of narrativized media.

Mark Richardson, editor-in-chief of *Pitchfork*, notes a similar sensation in his 2012 essay “I Wanna Live: Two Songs About Freedom”:

When I’m walking around New York City listening to music, sometimes I start to feel so good about the world and my place in it that I can hardly believe it. Then I wonder how often the difference between “feeling good ” and “feeling bad ” can be bridged merely by playing a song at the right moment.

Music, for a multitude of reasons, is capable of generating meaning even outside of its (potent) ritualistic contexts. When I tweeted “Moving towards a new Theory of Existential Happiness facilitated by ‘Father Stretch My Hands Pt II,’” I was only partially kidding. The mechanism here is hazy — perhaps, because background music is associated with film soundtracks, ie content portraying characters who bear teleological, meaningful narratives, this meaningfulness is transferred onto any given listener, imposing drama, suspense, climax, or any number of narrative sensations onto banal activities. Albums, meanwhile, have their own inner cadences and logics, a story-like tendency to build into climax and then recede. If “Ultralight Beam” is the slow, suspenseful creep-up which says “something important is about to happen,” then “Father Stretch My Hands” is the explosive “something important is happening.” (See also: *This Is Happening* or *This Is It* or *Is This It*.) One of the most powerful songs of the new century, Jamie XX’s “Gosh,” is essentially a ritualistic, rhythm-driven song whose

primary lyric is one of shock (the titular “Oh my gosh”) and whose central purpose is the aforementioned signifier, “Something important is happening; holy shit; something important is happening.” It’s no surprise that its original music video is of planets turning, and that its follow-up short film has been hailed as a crystallizing moment of the modern era, a sign of gears beginning to churn, of some strange communal power beginning to stir.

Bernstein on Beethoven:

Call the opening of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony “Fate Knocking at the Door,” or “The Morse Code Call to Victory,” and you still have three G’s and an E-flat. That’s all you have. Through some freak in the human animal, these four notes, in their particular rhythmic pattern, have the power to produce a substantial effect on us.

Any kind of shared or guided processing of events operates as a form of narrative-crafting: this looks like anything from conversations with friends and family to media consumption and punditry. Consumption of a Noam Chomsky narrative of

modernity and human progress yields vastly different results than following a Steven Pinker narrative à la *Better Angels*, and while a narrative's accuracy is instrumentally valuable towards discovering solutions or predicting future events, it's also instrumentally valuable to work off a narrative which incentivizes, mobilizes, or catalyzes productive action à la Mumford. Because both Pinker and the like-minded German stats brain Max C. Roser believe in the truth of their narratives, rather than merely harnessing their instrumental power (though whether these two qualities are actually separable is admittedly complicated), it wouldn't be right to call them metamodernists — though it does seem correct to label the active, conscious pursuit of optimistic narratives by their followers as having a decidedly metamodern sensibility.

What's important to point out about the power of texts, language, or media pundits to shape personal and collective narratives is that this power is limited: Imagine an elastic band anchored to the Objective Sequence of Events, and the narrative-shifter as a tugging force pulling on that band in a desired direction. At a certain point, if the tension between truth (or a person's pre-existing conception of truth) and an outside representation/narrative is too great, this elastic band snaps in two: words ring hollow; readers grow skeptical or switch publications. When we share our own stories with others, there's a reason we frequently embellish but rarely fabricate from scratch: this storytelling is a way of re-narrativizing our own lives, of pulling personal events into a more dramatic teleology but delicately, so that the elastic band doesn't break. The speed in which we process, re-process, and rewrite new memories is a testament to just how important control over personal narrative is.

& ————— * band at rest (no tension)
 & ————— * stretched band (medium tension)
 & —X— * overstretched/snapped band (high tension)

& = anchor
 * = object
 — = band
 X = rupture/break

* * *

I said, was recently in an accident which put me in horrific, near-constant pain for some 72 hours. I'd re-read *Hotel Concierge's* "We Need To Sing About Mental Health" a few weeks prior, which outlines the case for the communication of pain (via therapy, liveblogging, and conversation) as an effective palliative step (though a treatment to which one quickly develops drug-like tolerance). The effect certainly resonated upon reading,

but it was only after this accident that I was aware of feeling such a strong urge to reach out to others and share this pain, and aware as well of a palpable feeling of pain relief upon doing so. While there's no doubt that the article had introduced a new level of self-awareness, it seemed equally possible that it had unlocked a new tool, or strengthened an existing one, for pain relief. Believing in a causal link, that is — especially when it came to something as subjective and prone to placebo as pain — essentially strengthened said link. We can imagine a set of benevolent, or malevolent, social scientists capable of deliberately shaping our subjective realities and consciousness by the effective deployment of the right narratives (cf. Plato's *Republic*), narratives which tug us in certain directions but which are (or feel) true enough that the elastic band of belief never breaks. Indeed, this very mechanism seems to undergird the influential legacy of figures like Freud or Butler. Perhaps it will be the mechanism that sets us free.

I said, Endnotes:

[1] “Explore-exploit” here refers to the idea that successful response to a challenge or circumstance is a two-step process of exploring potential solutions and then exploiting the best known option. If a person lives in a foreign city for a year, and wants to eat the best meals possible while there, he must first try out different restaurants in order to discover his favorites. Only then can he know which spots to return to later in the year. Of course, there is a trade-off between exploration and exploitation: The longer he spends trying out different restaurants, the more certain he is that he’s found the best (to his taste) eateries in the city. But he also has less time to exploit this information — if he spends eleven months sampling, he’ll only have one month remaining to return to his favorites. On the other hand, if he spends

too little time sampling, he might settle on mediocre food too early. Getting in the highest percentage of enjoyable meals during the year abroad is a matter, then, of optimizing the time spent respectively exploring and exploiting his options. For more, see the Wikipedia entry on multi-armed bandit problems.

[2] Obama has addressed this on the issue of voter disenfranchisement: to believe one's vote doesn't matter, or that the democratic process is fundamentally broken and rigged, is a self-fulfilling prophecy. To see one's vote as powerless, and avoid the ballot box accordingly, is strip one's vote of all power.

The President's 2008 acceptance speech into the White House, moreover, demonstrates the power and prevalence of metamodern thought: while empowerment of voters and reaffirmations of American potential is inherent in many political speeches, the rhetoric and argument seems especially strong and, dare I say it, distinctly "metamodern" in sensibility here. The new President-elect notes that Americans have been told "for so long by so many to be cynical and fearful and doubtful" about the future, and that this victory is a step in the ability to "bend [the arc of history] once more toward the hope of a better day" (he also notes that the generation of young people, born in the eighties and nineties, are a group who "rejected the myth of their generation's apathy" in service of political optimism). The tone of personal, individual mattering is here too, one which is far-removed from postmodernism's many subdisciplinary theories of man as trapped inescapably in structural forces —the ability to "bend" the arc of history rather than be bent by it is one immediate example; so too is his opening that "If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible... who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer... It's the answer told by... people who waited three hours and four

hours, many for the first time in their lives, because they believed that this time must be different, that their voices could be that difference."

It's worth pointing out that Obama *really thinks this way* too. Here's his explanation in *The Audacity of Hope* for the rise of evangelicalism in contemporary American politics: *Each day, it seems, thousands of Americans are going about their daily rounds — dropping off the kids at school, driving to the office, flying to a business meeting, shopping at the mall, trying to stay on their diets — and coming to the realization that something is missing. They are deciding that their work, their possessions, their diversions, their sheer busyness are not enough. They want a sense of purpose, a narrative arc to their lives, something that will relieve a chronic loneliness or lift them above the exhausting, relentless toll of daily life. They need an assurance that somebody out there cares about them, is listening to them — that they are not just destined to travel down a long highway toward nothingness.*

And just pages later, on his own embracing of the Christian faith:

I was drawn to the power of the African American religious tradition to spur social change... I was able to see faith as more than just a comfort to the weary or a hedge against death; rather, it was an active, palpable agent in the world. In the day-to-day work of the men and women I meet in church each day, in their ability to “make a way out of no way” and maintain hope and dignity in the direst of circumstances, I could see the Word made manifest.

To Obama, these passages are a way out of an entirely different sort of double-bind: appealing to both religious and readers in an autobiography designed to leverage political support.

[3] David Foster Wallace’s writing has become shorthand

in the literary world for the end of postmodern literature and the beginning of metamodernism, so much so that it's both drearily cliché and intellectually obligatory to mention his influence.

[4] Of course, chemical hacking can be performed more directly than repeated ritual or behavior modification; man has been using substances for millennia to discover (read: generate) meaning. Here's Ann Shulgin discussing a 2C-T-4 trip in the infamous *PiHKal*:

I stopped in the road and looked at Sam and looked past him, and around and up at the grey sky and I knew that everything in the world was doing exactly what it was supposed to be doing; that the universe was on course, and that there was a Mind somewhere that knew everything that happened because it was everything that happened, and that, whether I understood it with my intellect or not, all was well.

If I had the psych credentials to toss my hat in the ring on MDMA's therapeutic power, I'd attribute it largely to the ability, while on the drug, of patients to reframe their inner narrative of traumatic events in a way that reinforces self-love rather than fear and shame. I have little more to contribute on either of the above mechanisms, so I'll leave the rest to reader speculation.

[5] See *Hotel Concierge*'s [writeup](#) on changing television viewership, binge-watching, and serialized vs. procedural narrative.

* * *

Who said, who said, *Why is not a soldier's question: Tennyson at least got that part of the Charge of the Light Brigade right: "Theirs not to reason why." Yet the soldier assumes — must assume — that if he did ask that question, if he were allowed to ask it, there would be a rational answer, that what he is doing and suffering makes sense to someone farther up the chain of command. On occasions when it becomes clear that the answer isn't rational, or doesn't exist, the soldier's response is anger and bitterness.*

And who said, who said, *For my own part I can only say that I enjoyed life more whilst on active service than I have ever done since... What is it exactly, that war lovers love? Not the killing and the violence, I think, but the excitement, the drama, and the danger — life lived at a high level of intensity, like a complicated, fatal game (or a Wagnerian opera).*

And who said, who said, *"So much noise and expense. Why did we do it?" "For you." "For me?" "So you wouldn't have to spend your whole life selling insurance.*

And who said, who said, *It is estimated that more than a million bushels of human and inhuman bones were imported last year from the continent of Europe into the port of Hull. The neighborhood of Leipzig, Austerlitz, Waterloo, and of all the places where, during the late bloody war, the principal battles were fought, have been swept alike of the bones of the hero and the horse which he rode. Thus collected from every quarter, they have been shipped to the port of Hull and thence forwarded to the Yorkshire bone grinders who have erected steam-engines and powerful machinery for the purpose of reducing them to a granularly state. In this condition they are sold to the farmers to manure their lands.*

* * *

Who said, who said, *The first error of the Westerners was to compel the faithful to fast on Saturdays. I mention this seemingly small point because the least departure from Tradition can lead to a scorning of every dogma of our Faith.*

Who said, who said, *Hyperstition is a positive feedback circuit including culture as a component. It can be defined as*

the experimental (techno-)science of self-fulfilling prophecies. Superstitions are merely false beliefs, but hyperstitions – by their very existence as ideas – function causally to bring about their own reality. Capitalist economics is extremely sensitive to hyperstition, where confidence acts as an effective tonic, and inversely... Abrahamic Monotheism is also highly potent as a hyperstitional engine. By treating Jerusalem as a holy city with a special world-historic destiny, for example, it has ensured the cultural and political investment that makes this assertion into a truth.

Who said, who said, As time goes on, the universe becomes more and more what experience has revealed, less and less what imagination has created, and hence, since it was not designed to suit man's needs, less and less what he would have it be. With increasing knowledge his power to manipulate his physical environment increases, but in gaining the knowledge which enables him to do so he surrenders insensibly the power which in his ignorance he had to mold the universe.

Who said, who said The contemporary crisis in marriage and the family is a consequence of the crisis of freedom as responsibility, its decline into a self-centered self-realization, its identification with individual self-gratification, self-sufficiency and autonomy, and the loss of the sacramental character of the union between man and woman, resulting from forgetfulness of the sacrificial ethos of love. Contemporary society approaches marriage in a secular way with purely sociological and realistic criteria, regarding it as a simple form of relationship — one among many others — all of which are entitled to equal institutional validity.

And I said, most of this essay is terrible and makes wildly irresponsible jumps, but some of the aphorisms are out of this world: “Hierarchy is the basis of order”; “You are projecting your brokenness onto the world”; “As a primate species, humans are incapable of leaving each other alone... Their endless virtue signaling, hooting, prancing, and predatory behavior provokes... They crave conflict

and will manufacture drama where there is none”; This is a species whose basic nature is the verbal equivalent of flinging feces.

* * *

The only west left is the north. Tom Waits For Death By A White Man's Fire Built From The Crossties Of An Abandoned Railroad, He Has A Handle Of Old Crow, Half In His Bag And Half In His Gut, And He Has A Gun, Eighteen Rounds For The Bears, One For The Heartache, And One For The Sky. God if I have to die you have to die...

The only west left is the north, and the gold is really what the poets said in song, black and corrupting and bubbling up from hell, it pollutes more than men's souls. The miners will rush, and they'll come in chains, they always come in chains, slaves selling themselves for a chance to own slaves, they always come in chains. The aspen will tremble and the snow will melt, ants keep slaves and orangutans

can paint, the aspen will tremble and the snow will melt, we're the only apes that kill ourselves. The west was never the west and what an idea to build myth from direction, but the north hasn't been paved yet and wilderness lives in the cracks of eastern asphalt and the stucco palaces of the west will crumble into film and song.

The West Was Never The West And Tom Waits Patiently For Death By The Embers Of A Fire He Watches The Stars Slowly Get Dressed And Tongue Kiss Him Goodbye With A Red Sunrise, You Go Your Way And I'll Go Mine, I've Been Following The Highway West And It's Worked For Me So I'll Go Where It Curves With A Quarter Handle Of Old Crow And A Gun With Nineteen Rounds. The only west left is the north.

* * *

And who said, *A generation is fashion: but there is more to history than costume and jargon.*

And who said, who said, *By the end of the sixties, the dominant culture would embrace both Shakespeare and Ginsberg, literature and movies, Beethoven and rock.*

And who said, who said, *The Greek filmmaker Yorgos Lanthimos builds a stunning world with The Lobster, and much of its success stems from the inherent mechanics and the less-is-more storytelling that drops empty spaces for the mind to paint.* (Michael Roffman, “The Lobster: Review”)

And I said, is it possible to combine and then embody the characteristics of *True Detective*’s Rust Cohle and *Twin Peaks*’ Agent Cooper?

I said to Mabel, I said, Partly I bring up Owen because *A Moon Shaped Pool* starts off sounding like an Owen Pallett record, with cloudy staccato string chords and kind of Arp-y synth drum sounds. Although, if someone were shouting, “Burn the witch!” on an Owen record, there would be literal witches involved. And that project strikes me as infinitely more interesting than some one-to-one metaphor by which Radiohead comment on the current cultural moment or something. And I say this with all due respect to Radiohead.

Haley Thurston, Sublemon, April 10 2017:

Fiction has two modes: the imaginative and the speculative. The mode that has to do with pure, unbridled invention and the mode that tries to think logically about rules and consequences. So the imaginative parts of Lord of the Rings have to do with the whole-cloth contrivance of things that don’t exist: ents, hobbits, dwarves. The speculative parts have to do with how, given the rules of Tolkien’s universe,

his characters might behave. What would it take for a homebody hobbit to leave home?

This principle goes for stories that lack ‘fantastic’ elements as well. The imaginative part of Huckleberry Finn is Huck and Jim and their life circumstances. The speculative part is what it might take for Huck and Jim to bond and run away. Imagination is Jim finding a dead body. Speculation is Jim preventing Huck from seeing it.

(That good speculation requires a good imagination is a given. But it is still different, for my purposes, from the act of creating something from nothing.)

*In order for speculation to be concerned with what might happen though, it has to be concerned with what is. Every act of speculation speaks as much about what rules a writer thinks govern a fictional world as it does about how those rules might manifest. And if a writer is trying to speculate about how reality could go, as many writers are, then they are proposing hypotheses about the way reality is. In a third season storyline of *The Wire*, for example, the show imagines that Baltimore establishes a zone for the legal use and exchange of drugs. It then speculates how the government, police, and citizens would react—revealing general principles about what motivates these people and why.*

*But fiction is weird. Fiction usually isn't concerned with either a fictional reality or a real reality—but both, simultaneously. So in a satirical movie like *Election*, the story is at once attempting to distill a supposedly real phenomenon (what happens when unscrupulous people butt up against cowards and innocents) and be consistent within a necessarily heightened movie reality. Which means that fiction, in order to feel 'correct,' has to scan according to both realities. If you don't think that automatons of ambition exist, or you don't think that they succeed in the end, or you*

think using Tracy Flick to depict that kind of person puts unrepresentative blame on the heads of teenage girls— the speculation doesn't track for you. On the other hand, based on what the movie establishes about Tracy Flick, we would also consider it 'illogical' or bad speculation if she suddenly behaved selflessly.

Interestingly, the more metaphorical or satirical a work is—in other words, the more it is attempting to have meaning—the more, I would argue, it becomes concerned with 'real' reality. The more, that is, its implications about reality affect whether or not it works...

What am I getting at? I want to set aside the definition of 'speculative fiction' that acts as a euphemism for science fiction. And I want to examine what makes good or bad speculative fiction, and what counts as 'speculative fiction' in the first place. Right now, the terms 'science fiction' and

'speculative fiction' are a confusing conflation of three different genres:

- 1. Fantasy with tech or futuristic trappings. Star Wars, Transformers.*
- 2. Speculation about the consequences of a scenario that doesn't exist (a technological innovation, a social innovation, a crazy circumstance). Looper, A Handmaid's Tale, Asimov, Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, Contact.*
- 3. A technology or a fantastic setting as a metaphor for a real world phenomenon. The Forever War, Metamorphosis, Frankenstein, Xenogenesis.*

There are good and bad executions of all of these genres. And of course they tend to overlap. But in order to talk about whether a given work is failing or succeeding, we have to talk about which realities the works are trying to make claims about (or take as a given), and therefore whether or not the claims are accurate or convincingly depicted.

The first category mostly only needs to scan according to its fictional reality. When this kind of story makes a claim about real reality, it usually tends to be a claim about human emotion or human values (what is tragic, what is virtuous, what is cool). The questions you ask about Star Wars are things like "Is this fun?" or "Does it make sense that Luke is sad here?" The last category, in turn, mostly needs to scan according to its real reality. Something like Xenogenesis makes you ask questions like "Is this effectively evoking the conflicted, shell-shocked experience of cultural assimilation?" Frankenstein is more of a story about hubris rather than a story primarily about the actual consequences of reanimating the dead. Stories in this category can be tremendously complex on the narrative level, and care about being consistent and exciting on that level, but the speculation part tends to exist primarily in the service of a concept rather than itself.

I think of it this way: speculation in service of a concept will be closed, rather than open. The Wire's Hamsterdam storyline is open because there was no way it really had to go, other than the way that the writers thought logically sprang from the state of

Baltimore's citizens and civic institutions. But something like District 9 is trying to convey a pre-established position about the mechanics of prejudice and othering. District 9 is more effective if its narrative logic is sound, but there was also no way District 9's plot was going to depict any fallout from alien contact other than xenophobia. Top-down rather than bottom-up storytelling. Evidence-based versus theory-based. This isn't inherently a good or bad thing, for the record, just a distinct difference in genre. In metaphorical stories, the logic of something is considered more or less known to the author; the problem is how to get other people to internalize the logic.

And I said, There's a difference between watching and seeing, and then a whole strata of seeing types beneath.

Alex Perry Ross in his review of Refn's *Neon Demon* when he said, *I saw this film and people who will view it later at home will watch it. There are UFO sightings. People go bird-watching. The distinction is obvious.* And of course, Shklovsky would say that the whole point of art is seeing the object in order to change how you see the world — defamiliarization. It's what makes you really /see/ the thing once it's presented in an artistic medium, and also because there's an element of distortion, a framing. It let's you /really see/, to recognize instead of just perceive.

I said, I said, Want to experience some extreme defamiliarization? Watch a film of one genre as if it were of another. That is, seriously pretend, no, behave and think as if, a drama were a comedy. Treat it fully and committedly. And watch as the most serious, sincere moments become hyperbolic comedy, farcical drama, self-aware cliché. The effect is astounding. Simply switching the category we assume something is in switches the thing itself. Of course, this is a truism: expectations affect experience. Or, wait, just change your desktop settings so that a film plays in black and white. That will change everything.

* * *

And I said, I said, town squares à la Green World are crucial because they allow conflict to happen away from subcultural sacred grounds, meaning less people get threatened/defensive/irrational (in theory) and more people opt-in constructively as part of a mutually beneficial low-risk/high-gain system.

And I said, Scott Alexander, "Less Wrong More Rite":

Atheists are kind of in a rut when they want to build community. It's really easy to be notreligious without identifying as an atheist, let alone becoming part of some atheist group. There are lots of obstacles preventing atheists from joining communities – most atheists are individualist by nature, atheists are very scattered geographically, atheists differ wildly in all their other beliefs from libertarian to Communist – and there is no a priori reason why atheists should want to get together.

The few raw materials they have for communitybuilding just aren't good enough to overcome these obstacles. I feel less akin to an atheist Marxist than I do to a politically centrist Reform Jew. And I feel less akin to an atheist basketball player than I do to a Methodist doctor. Even though there are some traits typical of atheists that I want in my social interaction partners – intelligence, rationality, interest in science – there are already pretty good social sorting mechanisms for finding those people that have nothing to do with religion – and atheism is far from a perfect guarantee of these traits anyway. In other words, the outgroup separation that Mormons and Scientologists enjoy – "I could never associate with a member of the out-group, there would just be too big a gulf between us" – is entirely absent, and with that absence vanishes any strong "patriotism" for the ingroup. [...]

First, [...]

Second, making atheism appear unpopular and persecuted. In areas where atheists are unpopular and persecuted, this is easy. In other areas, it seems to involve a lot of effort: exaggerating how religious everyone else is, bringing up every available example of atheist persecution a hundred times, and conflating distant areas where atheists are persecuted with one's own situation. If everyone else is a raving creationist loony who believes in alternative medicine and ancient aliens and wants the Ten Commandments put up in all public places, atheists have their outgroup separation right there.

Third, dialing the atheism up to eleven until it becomes

genuinely unpopular. If saying religion is bad doesn't work, say that religion is responsible for nearly all the world's problems, that all religious people are culpable without exception, that every single vaguely religious public monument or institution needs to be torn down. Congratulations, you are now unpopular with the out-group.

Fourth, linking your atheism to another belief that is much more specific than atheism. For example the atheist movements in favor of transhumanism, social justice, and rationality (libertarianism and efficient charity may or may not qualify). These submovements have been quite successful within atheism, to the point where to many atheists they are much more important than the atheism itself. Each has its own complicated vocabulary, each makes much broader critiques of mainstream culture than basic atheism, and each is at least somewhat unpopular (rationality and social justice are not unpopular per se, but most people wouldn't be on board with the way we handle them).

* * *

One of the ideas Venkatesh Rao has been promoting the most on his blog of late is this concept of “weirding” — that the world is getting stranger and less predictable at an increasing rate. This immediately sets off some warning alerts for the “Atypical Present” cognitive bias, where onlookers or commentators perceive their own, present era as deviating from the past in some significant way, rather than as a logical continuation of a sociocultural pattern thousands of years old. It's not that such arguments are always wrong — it's just that they often get made out of gut-level feeling or bias instead of actual evidence. While there's no doubt that Venkatesh proposes a lot of interesting ideas related to “weirding,” I find a lot of his observations on this topic dubious. It's worth acknowledging that there are a number of confounding factors which would make the world appear weirder today than in the past, even if this were not the case, including:

1. Hyperconnectivity, allowing literally billions of people to self-publish “weird” or shocking content who never could have in the past.
2. Easy access to, and critique of, strange phenomena by end users.
3. Increasingly rational and scientific mindsets among liberal, coastal elites, making less educated, less intellectually interested people's actions appear stranger by contrast.

A lot of what he and fellow Ribbonfarmers propose as examples of weirding, such as the rise of Trump or the accusations of Clinton body doubles, have clear historical precedents — Trump's rise echoes eerily Andrew Jackson's campaign of 1828; Elvis-Morrison-McCartney body double claims have been made for decades. Rao and Ribbonfarm are decidedly ahistorically minded in general,[1] and I think this is an example of how such a blindspot can lead to “Atypical Present” fallacies.

The steelman of Rao's weirding thesis is that accelerating technological innovation, coupled with cultural fragmentation ("subcultural melancholy"), can lead to a less predictable future which is in a sense "weird." I think it's hard to deny the former claim; Wait But Why gives an entertaining, if somewhat pop-sciencey, take. But to posit that this is the strict scope of Rao's argument seems like a motte-and-bailey, because his examples of weirding have included Harambe, the 2016 election, and emoticons. Considering ancient societies have cannibalized their first-borns, used leeches as a serious medical cure, and worshiped cats, teenagers making bad jokes about a dead gorilla feels fairly tame, rational, and predictable. Moreover, there's an question of whether

subcultural fragmentation is in fact the dominant, instead of just a dominant cultural trend. American-dominated mainstream monoculture has been taking over the planet for a long time now. Globalization and increasingly standardized global education systems are possibly making the world more conforming than ever. Indeed, not only does the list above contain good examples of biases which might lead to pundits overstating the effect of “weirdness,” there are also some factors which directly contradict such a narrative. These include:

1. The possibility of weirding as a state of transition (bell-curve, instead of steadily increasing, entropy) towards a gig and AI economy.
2. The rise of predictable, algorithmic AI doing much of the world’s decision-making, leading to a higher predictability of future events.

It’s not impossible that the world is getting increasingly weirder, and at a faster and faster rate. But I’d like to see some hard stats and a counter-argument accounting for possible biases and exceptions before I jump on board.

(And I said, Moore’s Law is not a natural one; it is the result and bursting evidence of technological <<read: social>> priorities.)

* * * And the wind said,

1. Intimacy is a trap which ought be avoided, if it were not so necessary a part of the human condition.
2. Intimacy is a drug, which means one will inevitably build a tolerance upon prolonged exposure. It also means one will go into withdrawals after prolonged absence, and can overdose if seeking intimacy too lightly.
3. Intimacy, like community, emerges from exclusion as much as from inclusion. It is the difference between public and private, something relative rather than absolute. One can err by giving too little to everybody, but equally doomed are those who give too much and too freely. They turn the intimate disclosure into impossibility.
4. One’s opinions more than facts, and unpopular or dangerous opinions more than one’s accepted and conventional views, build intimacy. The innermost consists more of orientations and sensibilities, less of trivia.
5. One-way intimacy is merely vulnerability. One must raise the stakes slowly and together, a mutually assured destruction.
6. No, this metaphor will not do on its own. A complement: Intimacy is the process of mutual disarmament, performed as an incremental but very real lowering of defenses, boundaries, walls.
7. If one wishes to up levels of intimacy, one must be brave. All escalation begins with an individual action, which begets an equal or greater degree of response.

8. One must also make it easier for a partner to be brave in return. If intimacy is mutual self-disclosure, *the making of the innermost known*, then it requires one to be generous in interpretation. We wish to understand and be understood; this cannot happen unless we meet disclosure with open-mindedness.
9. Project generosity. Perform generosity. Eventually one will possess generosity. Miller's Law adapted: *Accept a partner's narrative of self as true, and from there derive those ways which it might be the case*. Sometimes these narratives will be destructive, and especially self-destructive, and one must know when to challenge and question the other in turn.
10. Once we can no longer bend a partner's self-

narrative to the world, we must begin bending the world to a narrative.

* * *

The piece of writing I hold closest is taken from a collection of essays called *Broken Vessels* by Andre Dubus II, a devout Catholic. His ideas of sacredness in the everyday mean more to me than anything else, and the intentionality/ deliberateness/conscientiousness implicit in his ideas of sacredness allow it to serve as a feasible solution to contemporary, postmodern-descended culture.

And the wind said, *So many of us fail: we divorce our wives and husbands, we leave the roofs of our lovers, go once again into the lonely march, mustering our courage with work, friends, half pleasures which are not whole because they are not shared. Yet still I believe in love's possibility, in its presence on the earth; as I believe I can approach the altar on any morning of any day which may be the last and receive the touch that does not, for me, say: There is no death; but does say: In this instant I recognize, with you, that you must die. And I believe I can do this in an ordinary kitchen with an ordinary woman and five eggs. The woman sets the table She watches me beat the eggs. I scramble them in a saucepan, as my now-dead friend taught me; they stand deeper and cook softer, he said. I take our plates, spoon eggs on them, we sit and eat. She and I and the kitchen have become extraordinary; we are not simply eating; we are pausing in the march to perform an act together, we are in love; and the meal offered and received is a sacrament which says: I know you will die; I am sharing food with you; it is all I can do, and it is everything.*

* * *

Films which capture this brand of sacrament: The end of *Ordinary People*, when the mother has left home and the father and son stand outside in the cold; neither makes

a move to go inside because both are aware that keeping the moment unbroken (spiritual eternalism) is eternally more important than physical comfort. And it is the mutual acknowledgment of sacredness which builds and intensifies sacredness, perhaps even acts as a prerequisite for the sacred or spiritual's existence. Scenes throughout Ashby's *The Last Detail*, eg the sacrament of the last meal for the young sailor (Meadows) about to spend years behind bars: the barbecuing of hot dogs in the middle of a snow-drenched park, with frozen, wet, green wood and no buns. The very difficulty of the task, the fact that they are rebelling against the circumstances opposed upon them, also lends much of the meaningfulness of the event. When Mule and Baddusky set out for Meadows' mother's home, despite having no assurance that she'll be there; and, after she is found to not be home, when they shiver outside her door, awaiting the chance that she might come home early — these acts are clearly sacred. And obviously the sacrament of a cold beer.

This sort of sacredness arises from sort of shared consciousness, a mutual agreement — an agreement to stay silent, to stay out in the cold — which arises spontaneously rather than conventionally and out of an occasion of gravity, spawning an occasion in turn of deepest beauty.

One quote that keeps me up at night: *The very simplicity of the leap — the fact that it is a bodily, athletic achievement, not a mental one — makes it a perfect metaphor for Trilling's sense that the allure of art has more to do with energy than with intellection.* That's Adam Kirsch on Lionel Trilling, and the “leap” is an ecstatic act committed by a “cuckolded shepherd” named Di Grasso in an Isaac Babel short story. This leap becomes a metaphor for an entire worldview, a creeping, portentous terror — that the intellect of criticism is diametrically opposed to, and negates the ability of the critic to practice, creative achievements. Well.

(And who said, 1. *Sincerity scripts are outcompeting ritual scripts, eg love for a partner over a proper proposal*; 2. *I like to think we're passing through a dead zone between good built-in stories and good self-made ones.*)

There's a sensation/effect which emerges with prolonged exposure in front of Ryder Ripps' oil paintings, or embedded within the Catholic morality of Andre Dubus's essays, that doesn't arise from other contemporary artists/ writers.

(giant oil of a woman in a gray sweater and white underwear, swirled and marbled but still so beautiful I can't break my gaze; but then I see in the corner this ugly logo, this corporate sticker which feels cheap and trendy and everything this painting isn't and shouldn't be—timeless and beautiful and monolithic—and even though maybe this juxtaposition is the point I feel welling up in me this strange desire to get brown paint and a brush and cover it all up, blend it all over so the logo disappears, this compromising and intrusive and violating image that is dragging it all down with it and I see myself doing it—it wouldn't be overly difficult, just brushing the paint on the canvas and the security grabbing me and me kicking until it's all covered)

Building off this, a thought experiment:

Suppose X literary/art movement/practice/style from Century 1 produces (predominantly) X effect on readers/ viewers.

Y movement/practice/style from Century 2 produces Y effect on viewers.

Z movement/practice/style from Century 3 produces Z effect on viewers.

Except effects X, Y, and Z are all desirable effects, and the presence of all effects X, Y, and Z would all enrich a society. What are the citizens of Century 3, if they want the richest lives possible, to do?

(Another example: Postmodern lit does a lot of interesting things with language, technique, self-reflexivity, textuality, etc that fascinate and intellectually stimulate readers. It does, not however, always achieve the same effects as or convey similar information to or pose the same questions as Dante, or 19th C realism, or even modernism with its frequent sense of moral urgency. If one were to only read the celebrated writings of the postmodern era, one could see an artistic equivalent to vitamin deficiency developing.)

Some options for citizens of Century 3:

1. They can practice Greenberg's Alexandrianism, imitating past movements and styles to achieve X and Y effects for citizens of Century 3 (in addition to effect Z, which is achieved by the current en vogue movement).

2. Citizens of Century 3 have a rich archive which they interact with frequently, and which (maybe) allows them to get effects X and Y as well. Today, this looks a lot like museum culture in visual arts and canon-culture in literature.

3. Citizens of Century 3 only get the effect Z.

("Predominantly" is implied when talking about effects and movements. Obviously contemporary literature has plenty of elements of, or replicates the effects/stimuli of, early/mid 20C existentialist lit. But because existentialist philosophy isn't the main thrust of exploration in contemporary literature, in that it isn't the primary source of reading material for contemporary readers, or a subject of primary interest for most prominent contemporary authors, this means the general contemporary public will engage less with both the ideas of existentialism and with the effects of its specific atmosphere and mood than did their mid-century predecessors.)

(Sontag writes similarly, "To emphasize style is to slight

content,” and one can easily see an era in aesthetics in which artistic or literary production stresses one or the other at the cost of depriving consumers of its partner.)

Costs and benefits of the potential solutions to this dilemma:

Option 2, the archive, is (competing with Option 3 maybe) the option that contemporary society has chosen, but it has some major flaws. Authors and artists create in codes which are tailor-made to the intended audiences of their time and geographical location (the symbols and referents Greenberg refers to). This can include, at the most basic level in literature, the language a book is written in, but it can also mean that when Shakespeare makes some puns, you’ll never catch them without a reference guide in your hands. This has the potential to make old art/literature less powerful or less effective. If Century 3 viewers don’t understand, because the code and references have been lost, the literature/artwork X of Century 1, they probably won’t get X desirable effect out of it and this potential is wasted

At a larger level (and this is especially true of visual language, which is in some ways less stable than literary language since so much of it is highly culturally assigned and contextual) the effects (as much as meaning) of a work or movement is unstable, and will change enormously depending on the era it is received (Barth talks about this in “Literature of Exhaustion” re: Borges and Pierre Menard). An obvious example is that much of the power of avant-garde work is lost when its techniques or subjects become incorporated into accepted practice. In this scenario, Century 3 viewers cannot get effect X out of practice X, because X’s effects are just too unstable.

With Option 1, Alexandrianism (the most reviled of options among cultural elites), it’s understandable why we wouldn’t want an art/literary tradition that just yields more of the same and repeats the same motifs. It’s also understandable why we would see such production as lesser in value, skill, or vision. At the same time, modern updates of a tradition which still seek to achieve X past-era effect have the potential to communicate better, and achieve X effect better, with their contemporary audiences. This is true partly because it can update subject/technique according to contemporary context. We could also see a quasi-Alexandrian practice which basically reverse engineers the process and attempts to achieve effects X, Y, and Z however best works with contemporary society. I’d argue that these works might look more different than similar to past eras’ art/literature. At a cognitive level, this might look like some authors, in a period saturated by idea-driven novels, doing something which stimulates the same part of the brain, or stimulates the same thoughts and ruminations, as a plot-driven novel (whether this involves actually writing a plot-driven novel, or whether contemporary society is so changed that they won’t get similar benefits out of a plot-driven novel as 19C readers would have, is logistical/who the fuck knows).

(And I said, of course, *Horace and Pete*, episode seven midway: Louis pours himself, woman a glass of scotch. Glasses of scotch are one of the better preserved contemporary sacraments, though those have been fading out of everyday life since at least the mid-century.)

* * *

I said, Sports as live-action autogenerated narratives. And I said,

One of the things I have learned most from author and art critic John Berger is his generosity: his commitment to listening and taking seriously others' ideas. That and

a seemingly imperturbable patience. What follows are some of Berger's best talks, and those for which I feel a personal affinity. In one film, he is joined by radio show host and renowned reader Michael Silverblatt (interviewees include Maggie Nelson, Don DeLillo, and Karl Ove Knausgaard) for a discussion of Berger's oeuvre. "About Time" sees the author sharing folk stories in a video essay about time and mortality. And in "To Tell a Story," Berger's endless patience and deference to others' perspectives is on display throughout.

When I listen regularly to Berger, especially over a short period of time, I find myself adopting his cadence, his care, his searching for the most precise word or statement possible... This being a precision not so much factually indebted but rather, expressively interested.

Berger and Silverblatt both sit generally under the umbrella of the extractive critic. They are not so much "critical" critics in the sense of evaluating or passing judgment, nor are they "translator" critics, focused on giving cultural, historical, or biographical context to open up a text's "true" or "original" meaning. Instead, they approach their work with humility, generosity, and painstaking patience; from here, they are able to share those approaches, ideas, interpretations, and ways of seeing which might bring out additional value from a given work.

I said,

III.

I've recently started to suspect that bragging about cultural omnivorousness has become its own form of snobbery, and that the new face of music-nerd elitism is not the High Fidelity bro but instead the Twitter user who would very much like you to applaud him for listening to Ke\$ha and Sunn O))) and Florida Georgia Line and Gucci Mane and...

If pluralistic, omnivorous fandom (what Hal Foster argues is a relativistic and undiscerning post-critical outlook in *Bad New Days*) has become such the norm, then why the

Camera Obscura's breakthrough *Let's Get Out of This Country* was released ten years ago this June. Had I known of the record at the time, it would likely have been relegated to the category of guilty pleasure: something to be listened to but not shared; something enjoyable but not *worthy*. Rock music, especially after a nineties-alt makeover, was still seen as one of the few genres worthy of critical seriousness. *Let's Get Out of This Country* was a hybrid pop record low on existential angst, with a penchant for cute sentimentality in place of masculine affect.

Except it's currently 2016, the so-called popoptimist war waged and won, and some part of me still feels the same way as I would have then: reticent to endorse this album, conscious of social judgments against it. It is, today, entirely acceptable within circles of music snobbery to commend the merits of Beyoncé, Britney, and Bieber; positive reviews by traditional tastemakers from *Rolling Stone* to *Pitchfork* asserts as much. Cheesiness, cheeriness, and the cliché (if ironically attended to) are in vogue, and fandom of pop acts serves as a signifier of democratic discernment, of unbiased and open-minded opinions. As Lindsay Zoladz writes in her self-introduction as music editor to *Vulture*:

discomfort at admitting that I have a soft spot for "Dory Previn" or "Country Mile"? After all, the subculture of self-proclaimed, music-listening elites is fully onboard, for instance, with Taylor Swift's *1989* and its surface-level lyricism, its teenage angst and subordination to hook, flash, and production value. We accept, with *1989*, that it is a record crafted out of conscious awareness of its commercial and popular appeal; moreover, that the qualities it chooses to prioritize like "listenability" or accessibility are of equal, if different, value as abstract priorities like "authenticity of affect" or "listener-challenge." Why then, when these same characteristics (both short-comings and strengths) are identified in Camera Obscura's records, do we shun them for it?

A potential explanation for Camera Obscura as an individual exception to popmusic's current swell in critical standing:

Twee as a subgenre of pop is distinct enough from non- twee pop so as to miss out on the wave of recent, pop- embracing pluralism. There is inherently cynical and self- aware quality in Billboard-chartered records, regardless of lyrical subject matter: whereas twee believes in some lost innocence or honesty of youth (culturally and personally), and hopes to channel some of that virtue

by replicating youth's aesthetic trappings, Billboard-pop has long given up on believing in these qualities. Theirs instead is the music of capitalism and cogs, of conscious artificiality and inherent plasticness (most prominently autotune, arpeggiators, the entire studio process, and an army of third-party songwriters). Corporate pop factories and their artists hold no illusions about this, certainly not to the degree that banjo-picking or fifties-prom-throwback twee acts traditionally might. There is a sort of postmodern baring of phoniness in corporate pop which brings with it its own brand of transparent honesty. If this is the distinguishing factor which excludes Camera Obscura from popoptimist re-evaluation, the argument would be that the music-listening elite in 2016 is no less cynical than in the past — holds no less interest in shunning the bright-eyed as foggy-eyed and the naive as delusional, intellectual lessers. Rather, popoptimism's paradigm shift lies in a changing and expanded idea of what constitutes cynicism and transparency, a definition that today includes Billboard big-hitters but not necessarily the child-like twee-pop of C.O.

(Another essay could be spent on the following digression, but it's worth mentioning superficially here anyways: The cynical awareness required to be accepted by music-listening elites isn't necessarily about artistic intentionality so much as it is the discrepancy between fact and presentation. Regardless of whether specific Billboarders are transparent about their process, the fact that the hit-machine as a whole has been exposed automatically lessens the fact-presentation discrepancy in the minds of savvy listeners. This makes some sense in discerning why stadium-folk acts are so much more critically reviled than comparable-quality, chart-topping R&B or electronic acts. There's an ignorance, willful or not, on the part of Mumford & Sons listeners as to how honest the band's music is being about its commercial motivations, an honesty which serves as a basis, to said listeners, for holding the band above the supposed artificiality of more traditionally corporate Billboard peers.)

None of this fully works in explaining the phenomenon of Camera Obscura though. Twee acts aren't the only ones who fall into a weird dead-zone of exception from popoptimism's blanket protection plan, nor is this zone limited to folk acts peddling a similarly bushy-tailed narrative. The pop-leaning Brit rock of the Arctic Monkeys, to name one example, falls into this area (whose rough heuristic is "acts that I'm not fully comfortable vocalizing support for, but would argue have defensible qualities"), as does the music of The Killers and Coldplay. Meanwhile, plenty of nostalgic acts which believe (somewhat similar to twee's fetishization of youth) in some lost cultural honesty of the 1960s or 70s aren't themselves subject to the same judgments of being naive-and-therefore-bad. If cynicism vs. naiveté plays a role in popoptimists' taste judgments, it's not the entire story.

Perhaps the larger cogs at work have less to do with the music itself and more to do with the music's function as a social signal. If we think about music cultures and subcultures as nesting inside one another (see graphic above), where the "nested" subculture rebels against whatever dominant thinking is at hand in the larger, nesting culture, a clear pattern emerges: X mainstream listener embraces Billboard-pop, Y Williamsburg-type hipster (the nested subculture most immediately below the mainstream) rejects it, and then Z music-listening elite (a group consisting partly of trendsetters, record store owners, labelheads, and critics nested within the Brooklyn/alternative-lifestyle culture) re-embraces it as "poptimism." It's a way of signaling a more advanced level of taste than those who surround you, of differentiating oneself from others and therefore projecting a specialness of self. It says, "my aesthetic discernment is more sophisticated than the mainstream's," or, one level of nesting further down, "more sophisticated than that of the casual indie-kid next-door." Clear signals of belonging in the nested subcultural in-group are ones which directly oppose, or are rejected by, the immediate "nesting" culture. Celebrating Billboard pop is a clear signal of differentiation from the authenticity fetishizing, indie-rock centered Williamsburg community, a subculture which tends towards the ignorance of rockism. It's a well-understood "I'm better than them" self-empowerment message, or a signal to other music-listening elites that "I'm sophisticated in the same way you are."

Camera Obscura, then, and the many bands which fall within its inner-ring deadzone of support, are a casualty of mixing genre and ambiguous social signals. *Let's Get Out of This Country* is certainly pop music, with musical characteristics and fortes of the type embraced by poptimists, but it's also sufficiently "indie" — a Brooklyn act starting on a smaller label, working with largely acoustic instruments — to be embraced by the

Williamsburg, lifestyle-alternative crowd as well. When one endorses the group, it's unclear which social group ze belongs to, and, moreover, on which grounds they're praising the act. What *lens* does this signaler look at the record with, and (one informs the other) what lens should I look at the signaler through? eg: Is ze a poptimist who recognizes a degree of lyrical superficiality to Camera Obscura's music but is celebrating the band's melodies and lush sound on its own terms? Or is ze a more casual, less sophisticated rockist listener who sincerely believes the lyrics to contain depths they clearly do not, or else finds the band "authentic" or "honest" in some similarly shoddy critical evaluation? In other words, when one admits to liking Camera Obscura, it's almost impossible, without elaboration or further discussion, to determine whether said person has discerning taste or not, why they find the band's music appealing, and therefore which in-group they are a part of. Without a clearly attached social identifier or critical framework employed, Camera Obscura is an incredibly poor signal. This is a problem critics don't face, for example, in acknowledging the worth of *1989*, a case where only the ignorant (ie, the outermost ring, likely not reading reviews to begin with) would mistake a rock critic's support for the album — written almost entirely behind the scenes by producers Max Martin and Shellback — for an endorsement of its artistic authenticity. Certainly no fellow music critic or insider would make such a mistake, which makes supporting *1989* not some radical or dangerous move by rock publications but, in fact, an incredibly safe statement to make. If or when

Let's Get Out Of This Country is eventually praised, that, I think, will be a far more interesting statement, or at least an indication of changing subcultural boundaries.

* * *

And I said, I said, As of 10/12/16, the most interesting living thinkers alive I know of are: @peligrieter, @

sarahdoingnothing, and @gwern. And I said, isn't that a kind of sad?

And I said, I said, For Miserable Chillers' *Super Paradise*:

25mg 3-meo-pcp, zip drive of: album/google maps views/ panoramas of edgewater/essay/recording of essay/map of locations.

And I said, I said, Artist as translator allows us both clarity and admiration of: economy, excellence of compression; we can marvel at and appreciate the beauty of efficiency and heaviness, at richness.

And I said, *The half-life of a pop song is forever.*

And I remember, Butler Stacks, D454, hollowed-out *Tess of the d 'Urbervilles* in between *Agadir to Armageddon*, Ninkovich's *Modernity and Power*: DarkEn applications on maybe 70 or 80 lb. soft cream paper. Abstracted eagle logo on front cover of each application.

And she said, *For me — a city kid, always confined by apartment walls — the museum was interesting mainly because of its immense size, a palace where you the rooms went on forever and grew more and more deserted the farther in you went. Some of the neglected bedchambers and roped-off drawing rooms in the depths of European Decorating felt bound-up in deep enchantment, as if no one had set foot in them for hundreds of years. Ever since I'd started riding the train by myself I'd loved to go there alone and roam around until I got lost wandering deeper and deeper in the maze of galleries until sometimes I found myself in forgotten halls of armor and porcelain that I'd never seen before (and, occasionally, was unable to find again).* And I said, eh, *Goldfinch* was entertaining but pretty much trash as a literary work, and I say that as someone who really appreciates *Secret History*.

And Bassiano, Bassiano said, a common complaint against post-structuralists: *His reasons are as two grains of wheat hid in, two bushels of chaff: you shall seek all day ere you find them, and when you have them they are not worth the search* (*Merchant of Venice*, Act I Scene I).

I said, essay idea: What was indie rock? What are its formal attributes of high indie?

Childhood/adolescence/nostalgia as lyric subject
matter

Combination of traditional instruments with four- man rock arrangement

A certain baroque impulse

New Sincerity

High Indie/low indie

Canonical: The Decemberists, The Shins, Arcade

Fire, GBear, Spoon

Baroque Variant: Beirut, Andrew Bird

Garage Variant: The Strokes

Origins: Neutral Milk Hotel, Pavement

And I said, theory about Dewey: Dewey is the center; without him, Happenings never Happen. Connections with Joseph Albers (German translation of *Democracy & Education*, comes out 1916 great chance Albers would have read it) plus Rice, Black Mountain College, inspiration for Kaprow in that, as written in *On the Blurring of Art and Life*, Kaprow's possibly most marked-up book of all time is *Art as Experience*... I said, all roads lead back to Dewey. Albers: *We do not always create 'works of art,' but rather experiments; it is not an ambition to fill museums: we are gathering experience.* Or elsewhere: *Through some kind of art experience... the student can come into realization of order in the world.*

I said, That brand of sincerity which takes the appearance of irony: the mobilization of exclamation marks; the performance of sincere comment as melodrama.

I said, Perhaps I should blame the Puritans, who raised me intangibly into their culture of virtue; who prized observance and control; who quelled all hedonistic tendency at young ages and who prevented all possibility of the Blakean in exchange for a predominance of the Wordsworth. Who encouraged a stability of self-checking and overqualification, and who, squiring away an upbringing of passionate resistance, committed the most devastating act of them all — to commit this cultural imprint with an invisible tattoo, a curation and enforcement across centuries so that I would think every such development my own, an identity, a chosen outcome. It was determined from the first settling of the New England colonies, from their establishing of a eugenicized breed and culture, of their umbrella philosophy of so-called Protestant work ethic — to others an unknowable abstract; a discussion topic at dinner parties in its dictive form; but a reality of the seasons and sense for those within its clutching power, those who embody it in its physicality, whose old-fashioned conservatism rises out inevitably to meet all radical opposition and incentive, external, internal, all the same at the outer wall, and with the added mentalities of practice and quiet-souled labor. One attempt in England and some centuries later...

I said, Poetry as serviceable ideas on which to hang combed-over language, and the essay as combed-over ideas conveyed through serviceable language.

I said, Great art writing is primarily about works; it often derives ad hoc principles or greater observations, but these take the form of a curious ponderer trailing off his sentences. Great aesthetics writing, however, is more solidly about principles theories and histories; though it can dip into works as illustrations or evidence this is somewhat secondary. The line between the two modes is smudged but real.

* * *

I said, everyone focuses on compressive optimization for the reader, but a lot of aesthetic choices get made because they're easy for the writer, and why we're ignoring that inevitability I'm a little unsure about. Words are not just read but must also be generated, recorded — in the case of oral poetry remembered — and these will demand specific optimizations which will remain vestigially in literature's DNA for centuries and millennia afterward.

I said, perhaps it adds clarity to what I mean by “reader optimization” and “author optimization” by way of analogy. To write in cursive is to optimize for the writer; it is quicker, and less labor intensive. But to write in roman print is to optimize for the (at least, modern) reader, taking longer to create something which is more clear-slash-legible.

I said (and yet even this attempt falls short of what I envision; even I omit; even I fail):

He looked at the cattle, blurred in silver heat. Silvered powdered olive trees. Quiet long days: pruning, ripening. Olives are packed in jars, eh? I have a few left from Andrews... A cloud began to cover the sun wholly slowly wholly. Grey. Far. No, not like that. A barren land, bare waste. Volcanic lake, the dead sea... Brimstone they called it raining down: the cities of the plain. (Ulysses, 4.200-221)

The mobilization of *Ulysses* and *Earnest* is purposefully audacious and inevitably missteps. The overarching tone, and parts of the analysis, I would characterize as “understandably wrong.”

I.

Ideas of optimization and economy are often seen as

incompatible with art, a discipline historically resistant to attempts at quantification.[1] Critic Haley Thurston, citing the work of Jürgen Schmidhuber, argues otherwise: that art is frequently successful on the basis of its ability to compress reality in an economic fashion. If reality is incomprehensibly complex, and the human brain a “hard drive with limited amounts of space,” then art is a technology which condenses reality, eliminates noise, and orders chaos via pattern identification. We appreciate compressive art because it eases our storage burden, and because it is through art’s patterns — among others — that we can best interpret, navigate,[2] and learn about the world around us.

There is precedent for this model of compressive learning. Schmidhuber writes:

A long time ago, [Jean] Piaget already explained the explorative learning behavior of children through his concepts of assimilation (new inputs are embedded in old schemas—this may be viewed as a type of compression) and accommodation (adapting an old schema to a new input—this may be viewed as a type of compression improvement)...

And a natural extension of this theory follows that, if art is effective at shaping and updating our worldview, then compression is the primary mechanism by which it occurs:

Good observer-dependent art deepens the observer’s insights about this world or possible worlds, unveiling previously unknown regularities in compressible data, connecting previously disconnected patterns in an initially surprising way...
(Driven by Compression Progress,
9)

Patterns, however, are only one type of artistic compression, acting in the service of a single scarce resource (cognitive storage). It is equally true that words are not just read but generated and recorded; in the case of oral tradition they require memorization. Literary optimization would likely take place for all these processes and scarce resources; our cultural assessment of it should take, in theory, these optimizations unconsciously and vestigially into account. We can apply Thurston and Schmidhuber’s compressive concept to literature but then take it further still. Are not the pages upon which a book is printed, and the time which readers spend absorbing them, also scarce resources which successful texts would theoretically optimize for?

Approaching literary value in terms of utility or benefit can initially appear coldblooded, but it holds up if we stretch the definition of “utility” and “benefit” to their broadest boundaries — the utility of interestingness and intellectual engagement; the benefits of emotional rendering, personal recognition, sensory awe, or moral examination. A thing is valuable in that it adds value human life,

and there can be no doubt that literature's essence is in just that. A work's degree of value, then, is the degree of economy between benefit and cost, between utility gained and scarce resource spent. A novel which does many beneficial things at once, which has a desirable ratio of cognitive stimulus (interestingness, emotional engagement, visceral or sensory prompting, etc) to materials used in its creation, or time spent in its consumption by the reader, has a naturally high value on the basis of its economy.

If economy is an ends, then compression is its means. This is a compression not just in the service of "capturing reality" — we can move beyond this definition, and reclassify it as subcategory — but as a general compacting of many cognitive stimuli and bits of information so as to maximize the economy between utility gained

and resource spent. When it is done well, there is an unmistakable intensity which surges through the prose.

Let us for the moment focus only the cost of a text's reproduction — the expense per word and page in man hours and material — as a primary denominator for judging the relative value of a literary work:

Such a system of aesthetic judgment makes sense given literature's oral, scribe, and early-printing histories, when textual creation and preservation required either Herculean efforts of memorization or else costly and labor-intensive processes of production. Language of artistic economy is most common today in film, where costs of production are so high, and we can envision a much more affordable film tradition centuries hence still retaining vestigial structures of critical assessment and perceived value. Perhaps likewise should we perceive literature.

Moving away from a concept of compression as reality condensation is especially important here, in responding to Wilde's *Earnest* and Joyce's *Ulysses*, since both works focus primarily on creating "effect" versus "representation"; they are each "first and foremost a structure for eliciting responses and thereby engaging its readers." We can refer to "effect," from here on out, as cognitive stimulation in all its forms, be it emotional, intellectual, moral, sensory, or philosophical.

II.

We would do well here to clarify what an economical, compressed work of literature looks like or means. It is easily confused as synonymous to economical storytelling, but the latter is only a subset of the former.

Well-compressed literature at its most rudimentary is merely doing many somethings simultaneously or within the confines of minimal material. We might theorize that there are, broadly, story-driven and idea-driven novels; *Ulysses* is the latter. It uses narrative as canvas, landscape, and bedrock — almost as medium or material itself — upon which to compile ideas and explorations be they stylistic, psychological, linguistic, or moral etc. Narrative is the very terrain upon which Joyce builds vertically as if constructing a cityscape — he is not attempting to pack as much landscape, or narrative event, into *Ulysses*' pages as possible, but to build upwards, densely, to maximize cubic footage per narrative square foot. This analogy is vital since it resolves the intuitive dissonance between *Ulysses*' monumental size and its description as a compressed work.

As in building a city, some terrain will inevitably be better adapted, more able to handle the load of compressed, compact, compiling, than other terrain: Manhattan schist is the sturdy bedrock which supports the borough's upward development, but where the schist disappears underground briefly, circa Washington Square, suddenly the buildings cannot be packed as tall; the landscape will simply not support it.[3]

To illustrate the distinction between economical storytelling and compressed literature, it's worth comparing the opening pages of "Calypso" to a summary from Stuart Gilbert's *James Joyce's Ulysses*:

With this episode Mr. Bloom's day begins: June 16,
1904; this date is esteemed, I am told, by certain advocates of a reformed calendar, a holyday styled

Bloomsday. It is 8 a.m. Within the residence of Mr Bloom, 7 Eccles Street, there is still cool twilight but, outside, the streets are already warming up, and there is a hint of thunder in the air. As Mr Bloom Gilbert is.

III.

moves softly about the basement kitchen... kidneys are “in his mind,” for he eats with relish “the inner organs of beasts and fowls.” The cat requests and receives milk on a saucer. The cat and Mr Bloom are on excellent terms.

This example does not quite replicate economical storytelling, since its compression only prioritizes narrative event and setting, lacking all the layered stimuli for anticipation, suspense, empathy, etc which are to be found in good storytelling. Nevertheless, we can ignore these features in order to see what is lost in the process Gilbert’s narrative-prioritizing compression, for information and stimulus alike are missing indeed. To say the cat “requests and receives” milk from Mr. Bloom misses the way the ambiguous female pronouns, which in the original text alternate referent between Molly Bloom and the cat, create the sensation in the reader of a general feminine presence to which Leopold Bloom is subservient (reinforced by the parallels between the mkgnao-ing cat and the commands of Bloom’s wife). The cat’s relationship with Leopold is described as being on “excellent terms,” and yet, the relationship which is illustrated in the chapter opening goes beyond, is more ambiguous and complex, than can be summarized by “excellent.” If art achieves the general through the instantiation of the particular, then Joyce is here capturing through illustration a complex psychology between pet and human (for “master” is not quite the right word here either given Bloom’s character), a psychology arguably ineffable through any other form. It is in part this dynamic — as well as the characterization of Bloom through his interaction with his pet — that Joyce is prioritizing, is compressing for — not the narrative plotting and advancement of events as the synopsisist

At the most broad and general level, we might say that there are two types of compression: *pruning* and packing; subtractive or eliminative versus additive compression. Though density and economy are, by some definitions, largely synonymous, the connotations of the two are very different. The former implies condensation into heaviness, is thus representative of an additive sort of compression, in which layers are compacted by enormous pressure. The latter, inversely, implies a certain lightness, a lack of burden, a result of being freed from extraneous and bulky information which might otherwise weigh it down.

Typically the compressive process works with both types of compression and in strict order: first, by clearing out and eliminating information through signal-to-noise [SNR] optimization, through symbol, signification, or metaphor (naming and analogy), and

through pattern recognition. Then, these many signals are compacted together through additive to create density, and in combination create economical literature (“economical” here in the denoted sense of efficiency and optimization as opposed to the connoted sense of lightness).

A type of eliminative compression, symbolic compression, exists at the very core of language and thus literature; the novel in any conceivable permutation cannot exist without it. Complex objects and subjects, composed of billions or trillions of particles, are grouped together and given names, reduced by symbols which stand in for their indescribably complex entireties and thus allow us to discuss them. Next comes patterns, actions, and interactions; the process is similar to the *deflate* algorithm’s compression of a .zip file. Wilde’s “Bunburying” is an

advanced example of *deflate*-style symbolic compression. First the concept of Bunburying must be described, but from then on out, once the reader understands the concept behind the referent, it can merely be mentioned in passing — an entire phenomenon, behavior, and way of life has been compressed economically into a single word. At the most basic level of *The Importance of Being Earnest* even being able to achieve “artistry” or “literary value,” the reader must be spared the indescribably dull (unstimulating) experience of having the phenomenon described in an abstract entirety each time it is brought up — since such a practice would dilute the ratio of cognitive stimulation per minute of play (or in the case of a text, per word/sentence/paragraph/page of material). This essay engages in symbolic compression — not just in the obvious sense of using language but by describing phenomena and patterns, naming them, and then using the given names as stand-ins for the phenomena.[4]

In depictions of the real world, eliminative compression might also look like the leaving out by the author of details which do not achieve some desired effect, or which do not achieve the effect as well as another detail might. Other, more abstract forms of eliminative compression exist, in which information is eliminated which the reader would self-generate through context anyway. This includes taking advantage of shared knowledge, cultural connotation, and reader (default) assumption. Overlap between the information a book attempts to present, and the information already understood by the reader, is a type of redundancy which is ripe for eliminative compression:

At left, the actual text and information presented on the page. At right, the reader’s existing knowledge base and the results of his/her cultural/personal contexts. Where there is predictable overlap, information can be eliminated or “pruned.” Since personal contexts vary, the author can only capitalize on cultural contexts in his/her compression.

An audience’s impression, culturally established, of how reality operates will affect his default assumptions about the fictional world if it at all parallels the actual world. At the most basic level, this involves simple assumptions about reality — noting that Buck Mulligan is “stately” and “plump” is essential since the reader will not assume it as a default. Noting that Mulligan has two legs is redundant since it is assumed (implicitly conveyed) unless information to the contrary is presented (that Mulligan walks around the Martello tower further conveys, rather than contradicts, this default assumption). At a somewhat more complex level, Joyce mentioning that Bloom carries a potato as he leaves his house is information which the reader will not assume; carrying a key is, however, default behavior which the reader will self-generate and which needs not be mentioned; it can be accordingly pruned. That Joyce does, in fact, draw attention (spend material

resources of type and paper) to Bloom checking for his key — and failing to find it — is a deviation from the typical model of compression we would assume from an author of Joyce's ability. Via this deviation, we can evaluate why this detail is included; we might even note it in our minds; and when later in the novel, Bloom, in a parallel scene, wonders where his hat went, and hypothesizes that perhaps he "hung it up on the floor," we notice a pattern of behavior which is working to characterize him. It is not the having (or not having) of a key which is important here — it is that Bloom has nearly forgotten his key, having left it in a trouser pocket, and that this says something about him as a human being.

The presence of predictable reader connotation in a given audience also allows for eliminative compression. Consider the opening lines to *The Importance of Being Earnest*:

Algernon: Did you hear what I was playing, Lane? Lane: I didn't think it polite to listen, sir.

Algernon: I'm sorry for that, for your sake. I don't play accurately—anyone can play accurately—but I play with wonderful expression. As far as the piano is concerned, sentiment is my forte. I keep science for Life.

There is no narratorial intrusion to comment on Algernon's statement (partly inherent to the play's format), nor does Lane or any other character offer anything in the way of contradiction or support. The lines stand on their own at the opening of the play, and therefore are only effective at characterization — effective at all as an opener, really

— because of their implicit asceticist connotations which would have been perceived implicitly by the play's contemporaneous audiences. The characterization of Algernon — what it means about him that he is saying these lines — is generated from the audience's cultural

and personal contexts applied to evaluate the character's statement; adverbs, engaged interlocutors, or intrusive narratorial comment are all unnecessary, superfluous, in creating this effect; they are inefficient uses of the page; they lack artful grace in that they eliminate subtlety and come off as too on-the-nose.

Once signals have been cleared out of extraneous data through curation and symbol, they can be packed together — additively compressed — so that single words or sentences accomplish many things, and transmit multiple, complex pieces of information, at once (this involves, essentially, compacting many eliminative compressions together). To say "joggerfry" instead of "geography" in "Calypso" locates Bloom temporally and, yes, geographically in Ireland of the era, where the former was established gradeschool slang for the latter. It characterizes Bloom, as a man who would use such slang, and as still somewhat childish, or at least a nostalgic, for using the language of a young Dublin student. For an Irish reader, it creates a solidarity between reader and character; for the non-Irish

reader, it gives the story an appealing exoticism. And, perhaps chief among the author's priorities, it allows Joyce to further his experiment (or play) with the nuances of language and linguistic representation.

Ambiguity is a product or type of additive compression, in that it refers to the coexistence of two or more diverging narratives or meanings in a single text. Its mere presence certainly creates a valuable or useful effect: it pushes readers and critics into debates about reality, about psychology, about philosophy, which can all stem from what on the surface appears to be the simplest of sentences; essays, dissertations, and five-hundred page analytical texts can all be spawned from a half-dozen words if dense enough, where density refers not just to how much information has been packed by the author into a text (intentionality) but by the potential the text holds

to spawn new, unintended information (in a way similar to theories of reader-completion in reader-response theory). Nowhere is this truer than the enormously dense and ambiguous *Ulysses*.

Here subtlety and the subterranean — so often seen as markers of successful art — are, moreover, byproducts of skillfully layered, additive compression. A lack of subtlety will inevitably correlate with one-dimensional text, inefficient and uneconomical for the space it takes up on a page. When this layering form itself — its hidden, subterranean quality — mirrors content — say, the suppressed emotion or sexual impulse — and here again *Ulysses* comes to mind — then the compression itself becomes symbolic, adding an additional layer at the meta level.

Additive framing is, as its name implies, a sort of compression. Joyce's titular decision with *Ulysses* creates two sets of possible interpretations for essentially every event, character, and interaction which takes place in its pages — the literal event itself and the event in relation to the *Odyssey*, either as symbolic of, or modified by, the epic. Gilbert alone dedicates half-a-dozen pages to the various intersections and parallelisms between the two works in "Calypso" alone. We are given an easy, though imperfect, analogy for additive framing in "Calypso"'s pages: as Bloom walks across town after getting his kidney, he has a romantic vision of Israel — until a cloud covers the sun, and he sees it anew as a wasteland. Whereas these two interpretations are temporally separate, additive framing allows for simultaneous, divergent or supplementary readings, which, packed together, respectively enrich the text through either the number of significations or the depth and fullness of the individual signification.

Credibility itself can be potentially seen a type of framing compression (which in turn is a subset of multivalence-as-compression) — it shifts the cipher of how a reader will read and understand the text. But whereas the effect of framing compression is that both meanings or significances are visible, coexisting and thus increasing the text's density, a reader does not read a text as if it was both by a noncredible author and by a credible one. Instead, I think it more accurate to understand credibility as a tool by which compression can be maximally unpacked, a catalyst or incentive for the process. Unpacking itself often takes sizeable cognitive effort, and the reader will not exert that necessary effort unless he has faith that the unpacking will yield a useful, beneficial result (that the use of his time will be economical, valuable). This is perhaps why some texts are only revealed as dense and compressed, and celebrated critically accordingly, decades after their publication, when a leap of faith is finally taken and the necessary time taken to decompress the work. New Critics would likely argue that the text should argue its credibility on the surface in order to encourage subterranean exploration, but in practice many of the great texts benefit from established authorial reputations; they receive the benefit of the doubt not in the judgments they receive but in whether their audiences and critics will put the work in to explore the text at multiple, complex levels. Often, this effect is unconscious. Close reading obviously renders a dense text more effective since the reader is more open to the effects of its stimuli, to the reception of its ideas and the entertaining of its

explorations. Credibility challenges reader to apply a number of different decompression algorithms, thereby allowing for the text's actualization from flatness into multidimensionality.

IV.

Compression, however, while a hallmark of effective and successful art, has its inevitable sinkholes. This is especially true of eliminative compression, since it so

often relies on a distinct audience's cultural in order to avoid informational redundancy. As an audience's context and knowledge shifts, key information is lost, and texts become increasingly impenetrable. This decay (in meaning, effect, understanding) happens both temporally and subculturally — in any scenario in which a reader is not a member of the group which constituted the book's original intended audience; a reader, therefore, for whom the compression algorithm was not optimized.

Some decayed compressions are less problematic than others. There is a difference, for example, between Joyce's "joggerfry" compression and the opening lines to Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The former is a known unknown: while it may interrupt the transmission of effect and information between text and reader, it is still accessible through annotation or research by the reader. Moreover, it will not likely misread; merely skipped-over or clarified externally. It still retains value as a literary puzzle in the sense outlined by Sarah Perry in her seminal "Puzzle Theory" — and judging by Joyce's remarks on the subject, a literary puzzle is not far from how he intended *Ulysses* to work. "Got a short knock," or the book's many Dublin-specific allusions, works similarly.

Algernon's comments on expressive piano playing, however, are an unknown unknown to the contemporary reader. The language and references are all familiar; even the character that Algernon is being presented as is familiar — we recognize this trope. We have seen it in the teenaged troubadour who, at a house party, playing an acoustic in front of his objet du désir, gaffes publicly and in order to save face, expounds a personally philosophy of expressiveness over ability. To the contemporary reader the declaration is adolescent, it lacks self-awareness. And yet to the contemporaneous reader — a historical peer to Wilde, familiar with the general philosophy of asceticism and perhaps Wilde's particular identification with the outlook — this exchange would come off an entirely different light. Again, we think of Bloom's meditation on Israel and the changing cloud, with the readership of the contemporary and contemporaneous era only able to see Algernon's dialogue in one cast of light — the former, Algernon to adolescent gaffe as Jaffa to abandoned wasteland; the latter, Algernon to high ascetic sensibility. Neither aware of the other and therefore unconsciously extracting entirely different bits of information, noticing entirely different patterns in the text, experiencing entirely different effects — the former, revulsion.

V.

The critic, then, in the absence of cultural continuity, is perhaps the best chance of preserving the old, complicated, highly compressed idea-texts for contemporary relevance — and for ensuring that future texts, which will be similarly compressed for specific audiences and eras (perhaps even more compressed, as cultural fragmentation increases and cultural change accelerates as a result of technological advancement and cultural liberalism); since this compression is necessary to creating a stimulating work with "literary value" of economy, the only way texts will retain their accessibility in the future is through translation. This need not necessarily involve issues of interpretation since the critic need only provide the necessary context — the connotative judgments, the default

assumptions, the average knowledge bases — of the work's contemporaneous readers in order to simulate or reenact the conditions in which the work was written and published. *Ulysses* has, and should continue to, retain some (relative) accessibility through this process.

One wonders, however, if there is a more serious threat to *Ulysses*'s longevity.

As critical ideas about a novel's reading have shifted from author and text models to reader-completion, one wonders if, given the low material cost of contemporary texts, reader time and energy will emerge as a more dominant denominator, a far scarcer resource in need of consideration. The compression techniques and strategies which maximize information and effect per material diverge meaningfully from those which maximize information and effect in a given minute of a reader's attention. Obviously, the ability of the individual has a bearing on absorption over time, but one can see how a single dense text, requiring laborious unpacking and decompression through meticulous readings and re-readings might hold less utility and value to the reader than multiple, less dense texts which are paragons of clarity and which complement one another. The trade-offs between the two ends are represented in the diagrams above; thus are the perils of multitasking.

In this model, informational density in proportion to material expenditure might merely be a vestigial concern; clarity and ease of comprehension, meanwhile, saves previous reader time. The additive layering of *Ulysses*, while compressive in the sense of information/effect per book and line, is far from optimized for the resource expenditures of reader effort; almost all its value relies on costly, lengthy extraction. Indeed, high culture has long been synonymous with the complex, difficult, and demanding. Mass culture, in contrast, bends over backwards for legibility, for ease of comprehension; it works so that its consumer does not have to. If generous, one thinks of the reader-optimized model of literature as akin to an assembly line — the texts work in conjunction, and are valued for how they contribute efficiently and skillfully certain valuable effects or transmissions of information. Mass paperbacks need not be bad; they need only the attention of the skilled authors and of skilled audiences. We are already seeing a marked shift away from the postmodern doorstops of the twentieth century, which themselves were arguably attempts to reclaim this vague, ineffable “seriousness” of art through difficulty — an attempt which began with Joyce, *Ulysses*, and his high-modern peers. Whereas material-optimized literature is about richness and density, reader-optimized literature might prioritize clarity for quick transmission — eliminative compression in the service of one clear signal, rather than the additive layerings of many signals on top one another. Non-academic, non-“serious,” so-called middlebrow or lowerbrow readers have always chosen their literature for ease of comprehension; mass culture has always presented itself in accord.[5]

But we might also argue that this difference between high and mass-culture — its disparity in difficulty, so to speak — is not arbitrary but tied inextricably to differences in function. In explanation, let us mobilize Shaw and turn a turn of phrase. If, *The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man.*, so too can we understand art. Only literature which imposes itself on the reader can effect transformation either personal or cultural, and thus those who look to the arts for more than leisure and pastime must seek out only unreasonable works. It is readily apparent why this would be true in matters of

content and subject: works which are perfectly agreeable ethically and philosophically, which do not confront and therefore require the reconciliation of the reader, cannot transform — can only reaffirm consensus. It less clear, however, whether difficulty in comprehension similarly hosts transformative powers or whether it merely acts as a proxy for ethical/philosophical provocation. We can, however, hypothesize a scenario in which a reader, forced to grapple with a difficult text at length, better integrates and stores its informational content. Linguistically (and ethically, philosophically) difficult texts featuring both additive and eliminative compression are in this model optimized for their *transformative power* over the reader (and in aggregate, over the culture). Highly compressed texts, that is, are optimized for optimization.

I said, endnotes:

[1] (though developments in the digital humanities appear promising)

[2] To identify a pattern is to be able to predict what comes next in a sequence; reliable prediction of, and preparation for, the future carries obvious evolutionary benefits.

[3] It would do good to clarify that both story-driven and idea-driven novels are working towards cognitive stimulation; it is merely that the type of stimulus is different. In the former, narrative is a direct means of engaging the interest of the reader; his attention piqued by teleological significance, suspense, and anticipation; he is invested in outcome due to character development in their lives. These are the many simultaneous effects which economical storytelling achieves. In idea-driven literature, narrative is an indirect means, which facilitates the development of other, varied cognitive stimuli separate from the narrative drive.

[4] Books themselves — complex, seemingly irreducible works — can be compressed into symbols. Consider the structural and stylistic features leading to what we refer to as a “Joycean” work, or the pattern of mood crystallized into the label of the “Kafkaesque.”

[5] One popular explanation is economic: the so-called masses have less leisure time, and less energy in their leisure time, than cultural elites (this is the hypothesis favored by Macdonald in his paradigmatic “Masscult and Midcult”). And yet increases in leisure time since Macdonald have not witnessed corresponding increases in demand for dense, difficult art.

* * *

And I said, whew.

And I said, whew, I always mix up where the denominator goes when calculating percentages, which only costs me a split-second and I'm sure if I dedicated even a minute amount of cognitive effort to remembering it I wouldn't have an issue, but still.

* * *

And who said, who said, *Computational aesthetics, super- short. Jürgen Schmidhuber's Theory* Jürgen Schmidhuber, an AI theorist and theoretical computer scientist, has proposed a computational account of aesthetic judgments. In his view, a stimulus is judged to be beautiful or attractive by a subject *T* to the extent that the stimulus is compressible for *T*. Schmidhuber's notion of compressibility is taken from algorithmic information theory, but concerns actual rather than ideal compression: it refers to the actual # of bits in *T*'s mental representation of the stimulus, bounded and fallible as *T* may be. Beholden to the limitations of *T*'s computational resources, two kinds of stimuli should be the most compressible: stimuli with evident internal structure (e.g. fractals or a chessboard), and stimuli with noticeable similarities to stimuli already stored in *T*'s history (e.g. English words or a the sight of a friend 's face). Experimental psychology supports both a preference for stimuli with internal patterns and a preference for stimuli with a similarity to past stimuli. (Peli Grietzer, Amerikkkkka)

Compression in Schmidhuber's formulation is achieved primarily through pattern matching, identification, and structure, but it can be more generally understood as the practice of "packing in" — of increasing a work's ratio of information to bit, effect to resource, benefit to cost.

Though to state it as such borders on tautology, understanding compressive acts as being, therefore, either additive or subtractive is essential. That is to say, compression must involve either an increase in information conveyed (at a proportionally lower cost in bits) or else a decrease in the number of bits (at a proportionally

lower cost in information). The specific types of literary compression theorized below fall somewhere along the spectrum of additive and subtractive acts; they are described along with some acknowledgment of what is potentially lost through compression.

Symbols: Symbols stand-in for complicated systems, ideas, and things; they are a sort of conceptual and mimetic shorthand. This category includes names (concept-handles, crystallized patterns), visual symbols, and motifs. All language can be understood as compression: 7*10²⁷ atoms — so many elements in flesh and blood and abstract consciousness — become a “human.” When we iterate this compressive process, we increase the informational density of a text beyond the ratios of everyday speech. Of course, for information to be properly conveyed, audience and author must share a vocabulary, must have a general consensus about what any given word means. When this type of literary compression is executed poorly, or else exposed to an inappropriate audience, we call it “jargon.”

Signal-to-noise: The elimination of details which contribute minimally either to message (communicative/ informational intent) or to effect (emotional/intellectual cognitive stimulation). Mysterious trade-offs inevitably occur: we often prefer buried artistic messages to overt ones, and compositions which are too on-the-nose suffer in quality (in fact, are sometimes decried as not being art at all). This is perhaps because we are hardwired to appreciate puzzles, and because a general obscurity of message allows a range of conflicting interpretations, stimulating in turn a cultural-philosophical conversation.

Double-duty/Multitasking: Using compositional elements which achieve multiple effects (or else convey many pieces of information) at once.[2] Often, a multitasking, “Jack-of-all-trades” element executes its individual tasks less well than would a devoted, single-purpose element.

Nevertheless, its work’s overarching economy is improved.

Assumption (Capitalizing on shared knowledge bases): One step beyond signification and symbols. More than merely sharing the name of a thing, and relying on the audience to understand relationships between referent and reference, this compressive technique eliminates (vs. condensing) information. It operates off the assumption that certain information is implied by a work’s artistic, cultural, or historic context; a remark in a contemporary novel about the “melancholy of September 12, 2001” takes for granted that its reader is familiar with the World Trade Center attacks, and may refrain from mentioning them entirely. In technique #1 (*signs and symbols*), when an author writes that a character has been diagnosed with cancer, we trust we are familiar with the medical phenomenon which “cancer” refers to. In technique #4, however, the author might describe said character vomiting in the bathroom, and assume we readers have the existing knowledge base necessary to identify chemotherapy as the culprit. All texts also operate off the shared knowledge base that is “information thus far gleaned by the reader from inside the text.”

* * *

What should an unsupervised intelligent agent, be it a human baby or an artificial agent, what should it do? How should it deal with data that is streaming in through the input centers in response to the actions that it's executing?

First of all, and this is a very trivial thing to do in principle at least, you should store all the data that is coming in. You shouldn't throw away any of the data, if you can. And it makes sense because within a couple of years we will be able to store one hundred years of lifetime at the resolution of a high-definition TV video. And maybe human brains can also store one hundred years of human lifetime at a rate -- I once made a rough calculation --

comparable to a low-resolution MPEG video.

So in principle that is not a problem, but with that by itself you cannot do anything. You have to find regularities in this history of inputs and actions that you store and, in other words, you have to compress it. You have to compress that history.

Whenever there's a regularity, a symmetry, whatever, then you can write a program that needs less bits than the raw data and still encodes the entire data. So that's what compression's about. Now let's define the simplicity or the subjective compressibility or the subjective beauty of some data point X , given some subjective observer O at a given point in his life, T . And that is just the number of bits you need to encode the incoming data -- the X -- at this point in time with the given limited compression algorithm that you have.

For example, most of you know a lot about human faces, and that's because you saw so many of these faces. Now you are carrying around with you some sort of prototype face which allows you to encode new faces in the visual field, but just encoding the deviations from the prototype. So whenever a new face comes along and it looks very much like the prototype face, then you just need a few extra bits to store that new face. And your lazy brain likes that because it doesn't want to waste a lot of storage space. The more the face looks like the prototype face, you could assume the fewer bits you need to encode it, and the prettier in a certain sense you find it.

This is just a word. We just count the bits we need to store the new incoming data. For example, a face that is very regular doesn't need a lot of bits to be encoded.

The important thing is not the compression by itself, but the first derivative of the compressibility. Because what's really going on is that, as new data is coming in, your compression algorithm improves all the time and becomes a better predictor of the data. Whatever you can predict, you can compress, because you don't have to store as extra what you already can predict.

So prediction and compression are almost the same thing, and to the extent that your learning algorithm is improving the predictor such that it becomes a better predictor on the observed data so far, you are saving bits. You can count this progress in bits you are saving. That's the only interesting thing which signifies that there's a novel pattern in the inference stream where you still have some learning progress.

So what you're interested in is, what is the interestingness of some data X ? Well, it's not the number of bits that you need to encode the data. It's the first derivative, the change of the number of bits as your subjective learning algorithm based on your subjective previous knowledge is improving the compressibility. So you have to count the number of bits that you're saving.

Once you have that in place and you can formally nail it down and implement it in computers and robots, you just need an additional learning algorithm: a reward-optimizing algorithm. Whenever you save a few bits, it means you have a novel pattern and you count how novel it is by counting how many bits did you save and that's an internal reward signal, an intrinsic motivation. That's what you want to maximize for the future. You want your controller that is directing your arms and your actuators to move such that you get additional data from the environment where you can still get additional compression programs of this type, where your compression algorithm can still make this type of progress.

There are many reward-maximizing algorithms and reinforcement learning algorithms that in principle can do this. This is the basic principle. I'm going to explain the rest of my talk only [in terms of] how this explains art and science, and whatever.

Again, in discrete time, the formulation without derivatives, if you don't like that. The simplicity or compressibility -- or

beauty, if you want -- of the data is the number of bits you need to encode it given what you already know about the data. The interestingness of the data is the change in the number of bits. So you get the data, you learn a little bit on it which means you can now compress it a little bit better. So the raw data is like that. The compressed data is like that. Then you improve the compressor a little bit. It learns something. It becomes a better neural network that predicts the data. And now it takes so many bits, and this is what you save, and that's your internal reward signal because you have a novel pattern which you didn't know yet. And that's why you find it interesting. You can just subtract the number of bits you needed before from the number of bits that you need afterwards and there you go. So that's the reward signal.

Let me give you a very simple example: a robot sitting in a dark room. The input doesn't change. It sits there and no matter what it does it's always black, black, black. So it's extremely compressible input, because it already can predict that very easily because the next frame is exactly like the previous one. You can totally compress the input and it's totally boring because there is no compression progress because you don't see a pattern that it didn't already know.

Now let me give you another extreme example which is just the opposite. Suppose you are sitting in front of a screen with white noise. There are all these black and white pixels coming with equal probability at you, conveying maximum traditional Shannon information or Boltzmann information. And still this stream of inputs is totally boring again because, yes, it's very uncompressible. You cannot find a short pattern and you cannot improve your current description of the signal, which again means that there is no compression progress, so this is also boring. The only thing that is interesting is stuff like certain types of music which you didn't know yet but which was maybe a little bit similar to what you already knew about music, and whether there was a new little harmony in there which you hadn't heard just in this way, and there you have a little pattern where you save a couple of bits. That's what motivates you to listen to the same song again.

Again, here we have boring white noise and no internal reward for things like that. So a discovery in physics for example is just a very large compression improvement. Suppose you have one million videos of falling apples and they all fall in the same way. It's always the same way they fall down. You can extract the rule behind this behavior and it turns out it's a very simple program that describes gravity, essentially. It's always a very short program that you can use again and again for all these many different videos of falling apples to greatly compress these orange blobs that are falling down.

You cannot compress everything. There are random fluctuations and noise and whatever that you can't compress, but there is a substantial aspect of the incoming data that you can compress. And there you can make a lot of compression progress and suddenly save a lot of bits.

The same is true also in the arts. Suppose there's a guy who figured out a way of drawing Obama with just five lines, such that everybody says, "Hey, that's Obama." You have an artist who's somehow extracted the essence of the face such that you have the same impression as you're looking at this face as you get when you are looking at a high-resolution photograph with a million pixels. Somehow there was a compression progress in the artist as he was trying many times to come up with a convincing caricature, and there is a similar thing happening in the observer when he sees that for the first time.

So the scientist and the artist have something in common; they always try to make new data which is compressible in a new, previously unknown way. A new pattern, a novel pattern means yes, it's compressible, but in a way that I didn't know yet, such that my compressor can make this learning progress and save a couple of bits.

* * *

And it said, A Singerian effort to eliminate speciesism, and Baileyesque respect for the Earth as an end in itself, is essential to the existence of the ecocity or ecotopia. It is embedded in the idea of an ecocity, which seeks “the health and the vitality of humanity and nature.” And it said, that is enough; the health of nature is not instrumental to the health of humanity; otherwise it would need no mentioning. Instead it is an equal end, an equal priority, one which at an object-level may occasionally or even often clash with human interests, but in the larger view, is essential to preserving and uplifting a human soul, a sense of natural transcendence (an alternative view of the standard framing that is human progress).

And it said, Central Park is a place that we designed so that tourists could walk in circles (longest distance between two points) and stay occupied so no one else has to deal with them. And it said, similarly, progress is a concept the universe’s demigods invented so we —

And it said, most people assume progress is the carrot but it might be more accurately viewed as the stick.

And it said, do you even know the difference between copper, brass, and bronze? Cork and fiberboard?

And it said, you will see the woman of your dreams in every silhouette, every brown-haired figure, and there will always be a split-second of something before you realize it isn’t her.

And it said, If anyone has ever listened to Joanna Newsom’s *Ys* before they’ll think you’re bullshitting an entire trip to Maine.

Abstract

Background

The biological origin of music, its universal appeal across human cultures and the cause of its beauty remain mysteries. For example, why is Ludwig Van Beethoven considered a musical genius but Kylie Minogue is not? Possible answers to these questions will be framed in the context of Information Theory.

Presentation of the Hypothesis

The entire life-long sensory data stream of a human is enormous. The adaptive solution to this problem of scale is information compression, thought to have evolved to better handle, interpret and store sensory data. In modern humans highly sophisticated

information compression is clearly manifest in philosophical, mathematical and scientific insights. For example, the Laws of Physics explain apparently complex observations with simple rules. Deep cognitive insights are reported as intrinsically satisfying, implying that at some point in evolution, the practice of successful information compression became linked to the physiological reward system. I hypothesise that the establishment of this “compression and pleasure” connection paved the way for musical appreciation, which subsequently became free (perhaps even inevitable) to emerge once audio compression had become intrinsically pleasurable in its own right.

Testing the Hypothesis

For a range of compositions, empirically determine the relationship between the listener’s pleasure and “lossless” audio compression. I hypothesise that enduring musical masterpieces will possess an interesting objective property: despite apparent complexity, they will also exhibit high compressibility.

Implications of the Hypothesis

Artistic masterpieces and deep Scientific insights share the common process of data compression. Musical appreciation is a parasite on a much deeper information processing capacity. The coalescence of mathematical and musical talent in exceptional individuals has a parsimonious explanation. Musical geniuses are skilled in composing music that appears highly complex to the ear yet transpires to be highly simple to the mind. The listener's pleasure is influenced by the extent to which the auditory data can be resolved in the simplest terms possible.

Go to:

Background

“Entia non sunt multiplicato praeter necessitatem.” The Lex Parsimoniae, otherwise known as the Law of Economy or Occam's Razor (1288-1348).

“I apologise for the length of this letter, but I didn't have time to write a shorter one.” Blaise Pascale (1623-1662).

“Everything should be made as simple as possible, but no simpler.” Albert Einstein (1879-1955).

Succinctness is admired.

Economical arguments - made with the minimum of assumptions - are the bedrock foundation of philosophy, mathematics and science. Indeed, the highest achievements of the human intellect are widely considered to be the Laws of Physics. These Laws subsume a vast multitude of complex observations - in the case of Newton's Laws of Motion, everything from falling apples to planetary orbits - into concise, universally applicable mathematical expressions.

It appears from exploring the history of Science that the deepest insights elucidate the “real simplicity” that underlies the “apparent complexity” of a set of observations. The larger the set of observations that can be explained simply - and therefore the more succinct the level of comprehension - the more certain one feels that some fundamental “ground truth” has been unearthed. Thus, Einstein's General Relativity is considered a more fundamental theory than Newton's Universal Gravitation because it explains observations that deviate from Newton's predictions, with the minimum of extra assumptions.

In this hypothesis, I will start by briefly exploring Schmidhuber's idea [1-3] that artistic beauty shares a common cognitive process with scientific insight. That common process is the successful encoding and decoding of compressible patterns. By

compression I refer to the information theoretic concept of reducing the number of bits needed to encode a given representation. What relevance does data compression have to science and art?

For science the answer is reasonably transparent. A scientific law can clearly be seen as a compression of observational data [1] (Table (Table1).1). For example, Einstein geometrized space-time. He told us that mass governs how space-time curves, while space-time governs how mass moves. In so doing, Einstein ‘compressed’ a host of observations (planetary orbits, the bending of light) that exist over enormous spatial scales into a single conceptual framework.

Table 1

Table 1

Example compression algorithms from various scientific disciplines.

How might the cognitive compression abilities of someone like Einstein evolve? To answer this question

- and what I believe is the related one on the origin of musical creation and appreciation - I will briefly digress into sensory biology. After all, it is our five senses that provide our direct connection to the world - and thus to both Scientific insight as well as Artistic beauty.

In determining the importance of information compression, it is useful to consider the vastness of a typical human's lifelong sensory stream. As Schmidhuber has previously pointed out [1] we live approximately 3×10^9 seconds. Encoding the entire stream of sensory information at a rate of 105 bits second⁻¹ (i.e. the demands of a film run at reasonable resolution) over this time frame results in a colossal amount of data, although not more than a human brain is capable of storing in its entirety given a reasonable set of assumptions [1]. Irrespective of the exact storage requirement, it has to be true that an effective cognitive filing and retrieval system will free up 'brain space' otherwise consumed by sensory information, thereby liberating it for competing neural processes - surely a desirable outcome.

With this information storage and retrieval problem in mind, it seems plausible that information compression primarily evolved as an economic solution geared to

- 1) help interpret and
- 2) help store the most pertinent sensory information.

Successful information compression would yield an understanding of the world that was simultaneously efficient as well as useful.

Go to:

Presentation of the Hypothesis

One way to favour the realisation of adaptive behaviours

- such as information compression - is to connect them to the physiological pleasure and reward centre. In sophisticated mammals this is the nucleus accumbens of the limbic system. With this linking between information compression and pleasure in mind, I hypothesise that

information compression - originally an evolved trait to make better sense of the world - was subsequently 'parasitised' by our sensory systems. This presumably became possible - perhaps even inevitable - once successful data compression had been connected to a subjective sense of pleasure.

I contend that a seminal point in human history must have occurred when the act of compressing sensory patterns became intrinsically satisfying in its own right. As brain complexity and consciousness led to greater sophistication in the sensory stream's interpretation and reward system, a multitude of compressible sensory inputs could become increasingly pleasurable.

This drive for intrinsic pleasure could culminate in the emergence of music and poetry for compressible sound, and sculpture and painting for compressible sight. Thus, I hypothesise that the evolution of pleasurable information compression paved the way for not only philosophy, mathematics and science but also art, music and sculpture, sensu [1].

To provide the conceptual foundation for this hypothesis I will briefly explore the existing evidence for a link between information compression and musical beauty. I will focus my analysis and discussion primarily on music because 1) the enigmatic nature of its origin has been the subject of much recent research and debate [1,4-14] 2) because it transcends cultures and 3) because it yields well to mathematical analysis [4,8]. However, as Schmidhuber has pointed out [1-3], the compression principle is deep enough to apply well to other art forms.

My hypothesis builds on Schmidhuber's insights by 1) its particular focus on music 2) the intriguing possibility that enduring musical masterpieces are "losslessly" more compressible than other "less sophisticated" pieces (that is,

the most beautiful music has low Kolmogorov complexity despite initial perceptions of apparent high complexity) and 3) by framing the origin of the compression algorithm in the context of a possible parsimonious evolutionary sequence, thereby grounding it in biology.

Information Theory and Data Compression

This principle - deceptively simple rules explaining apparently complex data - can be defined and explored within the framework of Information Theory. This is not a new concept, having been thoroughly explored by Schmidhuber [1] among others. Within this information theoretic context, data compression - otherwise known as source coding - is the process of encoding information using fewer bits than the original unencoded representation; a bit referring to the fundamental unit of information.

Information has a specific meaning in Information Theory. Thus, when comparing an encyclopaedia to a random sequence of letters of the same length, from our perspective as human consumers the encyclopaedia contains more 'useful information.' Yet from an Information Theory perspective it actually contains less total information because regularities and patterns in the data make it more compressible.

There are a number of methods for understanding and quantifying complexity within an Information Theory framework. The Minimum Description Length Principle is a formalisation of Occam's Razor in which the best hypothesis for a given set of data is the one that leads to the largest compression of the data [15]. The fundamental idea being that any repeating patterns in the data can be exploited to compress it. The length of the shortest program that outputs the data is called the Kolmogorov Complexity, the Descriptive Complexity or the Algorithmic Entropy.

A few simple examples suffice to illustrate the principle. The regular data stream "101010101010101010" can be easily compressed to "10(10 times)." On the other hand, a truly random sequence of numbers, say "57622390136573928476" is barely compressible at all, and has to be described in full. Meanwhile, the enigmatic π ("3.1415926535897932384"), an irrational number comprising an infinite - apparently random - stream of digits, actually contains only a few bits of information because a short program can fully recreate it. Thus, π possesses the interesting conceptual property of being 'apparently' complex but 'really' simple. I believe this same dual property lies at the heart of artistic as well as scientific beauty. The rest of the hypothesis will explore the evidence for this proposition.

Lossless versus Lossy compression

In Information Theory there are two broad forms of data compression, “lossless” and “lossy.” Lossless compression algorithms exploit statistical redundancy thereby retaining the entire information content of the message faithfully despite using fewer bits of information. Einstein’s quote (“things should be made as simple as possible, but no simpler”) is a fine working definition of Lossless compression, and reciprocally, lossless compression is a fine ultimate goal of science.

On the other hand, Lossy compression algorithms reduce information content via “acceptable” losses in fidelity. What is considered “acceptable” is subjective. It may depend on the intended use of the message and the opinion of the receiver. Lossy compression is certainly common in the visual Arts where the basic concept of a complex 3D object can be clearly, but not perfectly, represented by relatively few lines. Between December

5th 1945 and January 17th 1946, Pablo Picasso famously explored the extent to which a bull could be “lossy compressed” through visual art (refer to [16]), although in conveying the ‘essence’ of a bull it is doubtful he explicitly considered his work in formal information theoretic terms.

During information transfer, compression refers to the process that encodes the original representation using fewer bits of information, and decompression refers to the decoding process used to recreate the original representation.

Pattern recognition

We understand the world through patterns. However, not all patterns are born equal. I will argue the case that we find particularly pleasurable those patterns that are neither too simple nor too complex, *sensu* [17]. There is little point in encouraging the resolution of problems that are either trivial or insoluble. It seems plausible that evolution would reward the solution of high pay-off problems that are challenging but soluble, and achieve this by endowing them with a particularly strong sense of pleasure. The relationship between these parameters may take the form I have represented schematically in Figure Figure1.1. I borrowed the phrases “The Edge of Order” and “The Edge of Chaos” from [18].

Figure 1

Figure 1

From a compression standpoint, highly ordered patterns are boring because they are too simple while random chaotic patterns are boring because they are too complex. On the other hand, intermediately complex patterns - those that promise a chance of compression ...

Given that compression ability likely varies between individuals, across development and based on experience, the location of the computational ‘sweet spot’ is elusive. This highlights the extent to which even an ‘objective’ measure of beauty can still manifest in a manner suggestive of subjectivity.

Competing hypotheses on the Biological Origin of Music

All cultures make music, though no one knows why; it is not obviously useful in the way cooking or language are [4]. Thus, the origin of music continues to mystify scientists. According to [7] throughout human history, on every part of the globe, in every extinct and extant culture, individuals have played and enjoyed music. According to Oliver Sacks we turn to music because of its ability to move us and induce states of mind - and that we have all had the experience of being transported by the sheer beauty of

music [19]. Arguably the most intriguing question about music concerns its evolutionary origins: how do we reconcile its cross-cultural ubiquity on the one hand, with a lack of a clear adaptive story on the other?

Of the evolutionary hypotheses that have been posited, some emphasise a deep relationship between music and language [6,7]. Alternatives include Pinker's "cheesecake hypothesis" [20], Darwin's sexual selection hypothesis [21], Dunbar's group "grooming hypothesis" [5,22], Storr's social cohesion hypothesis [23] and Trehub's caregiving model [12,13]. Other evolutionary possibilities, reviewed in [24] include perceptual development, motor skill development, conflict reduction, safe time passing and trans-generational communication.

Here, I subscribe to Schmidhuber's Theory of Creativity [1], which unifies a range of artistic and scientific cognitive processes with the information theoretic concept of data compression. Links between beauty and information theory have also been explored by Abraham Moles and Frieder Nake [25,26]. These viewpoints are broadly in line

with the philosopher and mathematician Alfred North Whitehead who claimed “Art is the imposing of a pattern on experience and our aesthetic enjoyment is recognition of the pattern” [27].

The intense degree of pleasure associated with listening to music is a mystery closely related, in my view, to its biological origin [11]. According to [11] there are no direct functional similarities between music and other pleasure-producing stimuli: it has no clearly established biological value (cf food, love, sex), no tangible basis (cf. pharmacological drugs and monetary rewards), and no known addictive properties (cf gambling and nicotine). Having said this, some very recent progress has been made into identifying the organic basis of musical appreciation. Using Positron Emission Tomography, [28] discovered that minor consonant chords activate the right striatum (reward and emotion) whereas major consonant cords activate the left middle temporal gyrus (orderly information processing).

Caveat

Before I explore the relationship between information compression and musical beauty in more detail I wish to head off a source of possible confusion. Music (and indeed other Arts) can have an ‘extrinsic’ emotional appeal entirely separate from what I view as its ‘intrinsic’ cognitive value. This is by 1) representing a certain sub- culture or belief system that the receiver strongly relates to, for example female submissiveness and male violence in hip hop music and/or 2) stimulating the receiver through historical association.

For this hypothesis I am exclusively interested in a particular aspect of intrinsic cognitive value - that is, the pleasure derived from appreciating the information contained in the art form. Clearly, there are other intrinsic influences on musical beauty - such as rhythm, pitch and timbre - but these have been purposefully ignored to simplify exposition of the hypothesis.

Musical Patterns

Music is clearly full of patterns. Some patterns relate to harmony, the vertical stacking of notes - and some to melody, the horizontal spacing of notes. The most delightful compositions balance predictability and surprise [8]. This appreciation “....rests on our ability to discern patterns in the notes and rhythms and use them to make predictions about what will come next. When our anticipations are violated, we experience tension; when the expectation is met, we have a pleasurable sense of release” [4].

Is beautiful music highly compressible?

Schmidhuber's Theory of Creativity states that beautiful Art is influenced by the extent to which unexpected information compression progress is possible [1]. This Theory builds on an earlier paper which outlined the appeal of low Kolmogorov complexity visual Art [2]. For example, drawings utilising - although not in any immediately apparent way - basic geometric shapes look appealing [2]. I am interested in the power of these insights to elucidate the biological origin of music and shed light on the nature of its beauty. Therefore, to seek confirmation of Schmidhuber's hypothesis in the context of music, I elected to compare the ability of Lossless compression algorithms to compress different pieces of music; a concept previously voiced, but not explored, by [9].

Ranking musical compositions by beauty is clearly a task fraught with issues of subjectivity. Nevertheless, I believe it to be the case that most reasonable people would accept

Ludwig Van Beethoven to be a greater musical genius than, say, Kylie Minogue. But what is it about Beethoven's Art that supports such a viewpoint?

At some level it must reflect a prevailing belief that his music is more beautiful than Kylie Minogue's. With this view in mind, one can make a baseline assumption that a Beethoven Symphony represents a higher level of beauty than a range of "less sophisticated" compositions. Along these lines, I was interested to see whether enduring musical masterpieces, such as Beethoven's Symphonies, might be more compressible than other musical compositions.

As a small initial first step towards this goal, I examined a web page where comparisons had already been made in the ability of a range of lossless compression algorithms to compress various test audio files [29]. The purpose of the website was not a theory of musical beauty, but rather a practical exploration of compression algorithms in a range of circumstances. In brief, a range of lossless algorithms (Waveform Archiver, LPAC, Audiozip, Monkey's Audio and RKAU) were run on musical compositions from the following genres: Classical, Techno, Rock, Pop, and random noise. (A caveat: the five compression algorithms assessed were discovered [29] to produce higher rates of compression than other programs, although that does not imply they are universally better. Different algorithms work best on different kinds of music.)

The smallest file size was determined in megabytes and expressed as a percentage of the original file size. Intriguingly, based on these (albeit very limited) pilot data it does appear to be the case that the representative compositions from Pop, Rock and Techno music are less compressible than Choral and Orchestral masterpieces. Pink noise stereo representing random noise, was highly information-rich as expected, being compressible to only 85.8% of original.

For example, Beethoven's 3rd Symphony was strongly compressible to only 40.6% of the original file size, whereas the Techno piece "Theme from Bubbleman" by Andy Van, the Pop piece "I should be so Lucky" by Kylie Minogue and the Rock piece "White Wedding" by Billy Idol were considerably less compressible, compressing to 68.5%, 69.5% and 57.5% of original file size respectively. Therefore, Beethoven's 3rd Symphony is a better example of low Kolmogorov complexity Art [2] than Kylie Minogue's "I should be so Lucky."

But there is a further interesting observation. The relatively low compressibility of the Pop pieces is at odds - at least with my perception - that they appear on the surface to be simpler and more ordered than their Classical counterparts. Furthermore, the disparity cannot easily be attributed to the presence or absence of human vocals. Gothic Voices version of Hildegard von Bingen's 12th century choral masterpiece Columbia aspexit compresses very strongly to 34.7%.

Therefore, a surprising feature of Beethoven's 3rd symphony is that - somewhat analogous to the numerical properties of Π - despite having a very short algorithmic description in reality, it appears on initial perception to have a very long algorithmic description.

One might say - at least from an information theoretic perspective - that Classical music is apparently complex but really simple, while Popular music is apparently simple but really complex.

The lasting impression that Classical masterpieces have had on human culture, and the high esteem that composers such as Bach, Beethoven and Mozart are held in, may reflect an intrinsic appreciation for successful

information compression that is held below our conscious awareness.

I speculate that when we appreciate music, a major influencing factor is the release of pleasure that comes from performing a surprisingly profound audio data compression. By this logic, one would anticipate the level of pleasure to scale with the mismatch between the apparent complexity initially perceived by our ears and the real simplicity subsequently resolved in our minds.

This overall compression ‘epiphany’ is more dramatic in Classical masterpieces because the extent of the mismatch - or put another way, the magnitude of the successful information compression - is that much higher, and therefore our sense of pleasure that much more acute. This argument exactly mirrors Schmidhuber’s concept of compression progress influencing individual perception of beauty [1].

The mis-match between perceptual complexity and cognitive simplicity is schematically illustrated for two musical pieces of similar length and original file size, Beethoven’s 3rd Symphony and ElBeano’s Ventilator trance techno. These two pieces compress to very different extents (Figure (Figure2).2). My personal perception is that Beethoven’s 3rd Symphony sounds more sophisticated (complex?) than ELBeano’s Ventilator trance techno, and yet it actually compresses more strongly. It therefore must be the case that Beethoven’s piece contains more information regularities, but the skill and subtlety with which they are woven into the composition makes them less readily apparent. The simplicity of their message - as reflected by compressed file size - only yields on repeated listenings. This learning curve - or compression progress [1] - may explain the phenomenon of a piece of music “growing on us” over time.

The appreciation of music is a function of information compression. From our perspective as human listeners, this reflects the mismatch in complexity between what our ears initially perceive, versus what our brains ultimately interpret. This hypothesis ...

Listening to enduring Classical music elicits such a strong sense of pleasure for most listeners because their information complexity is cleverly situated in the computational sweet-spot; that is, the compositions are neither so simple that they are trivial to compress nor so complex that they are impossible to compress. Like all the best puzzles, they are challenging but doable. If Politics is the Art of the Possible, and Science the Art of the Soluble [30], then Music may be the Art of the Compressible.

By this hypothesis, it is not low Kolmogorov complexity per se that is a feature of musical beauty, but rather the mismatch between how much information a piece appears to contain on first hearing, versus how much information it actually contains once the data has been compressed. One might say that enduring Artistic masterpieces possess ‘concealed’ low Kolmogorov complexity - and thus entice us with the promise of what has been termed ‘compression progress’ [1] only after sustained effort.

Go to:

Testing the Hypothesis

How might the “audio compression” hypothesis be put to a rigorous test. First of all, it is imperative that a formal, exhaustive and statistically robust comparison of different musical compositions is undertaken and matched against some measure of subjective human pleasure, perhaps using the data outlined in [11] as a test set. The analysis would be strengthened by a wide range of compression algorithms. The output will obviously highlight individual human variation in taste, but may also allow the detection of an additional signal relating pleasure to information compression. Of particular interest will be whether the

most enduring and beautiful pieces, from all musical genres, relate to those that are subjectively perceived as being complex but turn out to be highly compressible in practice.

It will also be important to establish the extent to which the compressibility of the different musical compositions of a given duration reflects differences in 1) amount of silence versus bona fide differences in the statistical redundancy present in the melodies and harmonies themselves and 2) differences in overall tempo, as presto pieces will contain more information than adagio pieces, all else being equal.

At this juncture, it is appropriate to flag an important distinction between compressibility versus change in compressibility. On the one hand, running a formal compression algorithm on an audio file provides an ‘objective’ (notwithstanding the stated limitations) measure of pure ‘compressibility.’ However, on the other hand the subjective perception of a human listener, and their ability to compress the music cognitively, may change over time and with experience, including experience with that particular piece of music. Thus, the human sensation of pleasure that we are trying to explain may well be influenced by a perception of a change in compressibility, as opposed to just compressibility.

Along these lines, it is not clear whether the subjective experience of music growing on us over time represents 1) a pre-existing cognitive algorithm whose compression potential is only gradually accessed, or 2) an entirely new compression algorithm developed through the challenge and experience of understanding that particular piece of music.

The argument I have presented partly rests on accepting my subjective assessment that Beethoven’s 3rd symphony is initially perceived as being more complex than ELBeano’s Trance Techno. Although beyond the scope of the present Hypothesis, this argument could be formalised via Schmidhuber’s “before-and-after effect”, and interested readers are directed to his research in this area.

One further means of trying to get a handle on compression progress and its impact on musical appreciation could be through the field of artificial intelligence. For example, recurrent neural networks can ‘learn’ to improve their problem solving ability e.g. [31]. The compression progress achieved by recurrent neural networks could be assessed on particular pieces of music and related back to the subjective quality attached to those pieces by human listeners. The relevance of this approach would depend on the extent to which the behaviour of the artificial recurrent neural network resembled the cognitive performance of a real human brain.

The biological origin of the compression and pleasure connection

Accounts of major scientific breakthroughs (i.e. powerful and novel information compressions) clearly suggest that insight is rewarded by a visceral thrill. Consider the following quote from Garrett Lisi following his discovery of the proposal for an E8-based unification model for all the particles and physical forces “...my mind exploded with the implications and the beauty...” [32].

It appears to me from reading this account, and many others like it, that much of the pleasure associated with a scientific breakthrough is largely intrinsic (“...the beauty”). That is, it relates to the satisfaction associated with a successful computation, rather than being extrinsic (a potential award ceremony in Stockholm). Why is scientific insight accompanied by a thrill?

Science first, Art second

This hypothesis for the evolutionary origin of music composition and appreciation is predicated on a pre-existing connection between pleasure and successful information compression. This defers the question to why might this link have evolved in the first place? As Schmidhuber [1] points out, the concept of daylight is a useful compression of the repeated observation that the sun rises regularly every morning. This sort of compression ability would presumably underpin a more manageable and predictive understanding of the environment, thereby increasing fitness relative to rivals with poorer cognitive performance, and thus being potentially subject to selection.

Compression clearly forms the foundation of science. After all, scientific insight tends to relate - admittedly at various levels of abstraction - to some sort of predictive understanding of the environment, where environment can mean something as little as a sub-atomic quantum state or as large as the entire universe. The most profound scientific insights (Universal gravitation, General Relativity and so on) compress vast numbers of apparently diverse environmental observations into concise Laws that can sometimes be expressed using nothing more than a handful of symbols.

Obviously, adaptive data compressions may not always be held in our conscious awareness, but that is beside the point. All that is required is that the successful compression process is rewarded physiologically. Once the compression and pleasure connection has been forged by evolution, it opens up the possibility for compressing all sorts of subsequent sensory information sources. That is, the joy of compression can then be pursued for its own sake, simply for the release of intrinsic pleasure associated with the process. Skill at information compression is a parsimonious explanation for the coalescence of musical and mathematical talent sometimes observed in some exceptional individuals. The sub-conscious nature of the information appraisal is quite consistent with our difficulty in clearly articulating why we find a piece of music beautiful, even though we know it sounds beautiful.

The Encoder and the Decoder in Art and Science

In information theory, the compression process involves an encoding step performed by the sender, and a decompression step performed by the receiver. From a certain perspective it can be seen that Art and Science differ fundamentally.

In Art the composer performs the compression (e.g. from landscape to painting) and the viewer or listener performs the decompression (e.g. from painting to landscape). In Science the Laws (information compressions) that govern the Universe's behaviour pre-exist,

leaving the scientist with ‘only’ the task of reverse-engineering them. This reverse-engineering emerges from cognitive processes that sift through the sensory data.

The path to the most profound scientific compressions seems to depend on the cognitive style of the individual scientist, there does not appear to be a unique winning recipe. While the end result is a profound information compression in all cases, the actual cognitive exploration that yields the insight seems to differ widely. According to Nambu [33] the cognitive style of eminent theoretical physicists falls predominantly into one of 3 major styles: heuristic, bottom-up and inductive (e.g. Heisenberg), axiomatic, top-down and deductive (e.g. Einstein), or abstract, revolutionary and aesthetic (e.g. Dirac).

In any case, there is a sense in which artists are fortunate;

they get to create the potential for compression, while scientists merely discover the potential for compression.

A different perspective, emphasising the commonalities between Artists and Scientists can be found in [1]. This argues that Scientists invent experiments to create data that allows for further compression. This may be true, but unless the Law has some external reality it will not be discovered, no matter what set of experiments is undertaken. Thus, it appears to me that there is a limitation imposed on the compression progress a Scientist can make that does not exist for the Artist.

Go to:

Implications of the Hypothesis

This hypothesis, if supported by the recommended experiments, will shed new light on the open question as to the biological origin of music. Musical appreciation may be influenced by a deep cognitive process relating to information compression. Musical beauty may have a more objective basis than is commonly accepted, relating to the complexity mis-match between initial sensory perception and ultimate cognitive resolution. Musical masterpieces may share an information compression property that transcends composer, era, instrument and style. Musical geniuses are skilled at composing stimulating auditory data that possesses deceptively low Kolmogorov complexity. The link between mathematically and musically-talented individuals may have a simple, parsimonious explanation relating to the exercise of a single cognitive skill. Information Theory may help unite the Two Cultures [34] of Art and Science.

Final Conclusion

As with all generalisations, a frank discussion of the presence of both supporting examples and counter-examples will illuminate where and why the musical information compression hypothesis breaks down.

With this caveat borne in mind, I contend that musical beauty - like the deepest scientific and mathematical insights - is that which according to our senses is apparently complex but according to our minds is really simple.

* * *

I said, rock lyrics as the rare and imperative expressions of the less-than-hyperarticulate.

I said, “ideological CDO”: when you bundle a bunch of shitty examples together and then give them serious evidential and rhetorical weight because they’re “diversified” or numerous.

I said, slope of graphed attendance at (of) a social function is as or more important to group psychology than actual attendance numbers at any one moment.

I said, emergent property of the (otherwise generally net-good practices of the blogosphere): by citing a blog articles citing blog articles citing academics (or often not citing at all, and just passing along or refactoring ideas without crediting), a hidden back-end of academia- generated ideaspaces builds up that is entirely hidden from the average blog reader. This breeds an underappreciation among blog-only (or blog-heavy) readers for the degree to which academia is the lifeblood of so many of their ideas. When comparing their highly filtered, simplified/clearly refactored versions of (ex-academic, now filtered) ideas to the massive pile of writing that is academic production, a certain in-groupy conceit develops, alongside (and concurrent with) a general underappreciation of the very lifeblood source that their beloved blogosphere is

vampirically drinking from.

(And I said, yes, this back-end exists in all academic production too, and all ideaspaces, and is just an inevitable result of inheriting ideas second- or third- or fourth-hand, but when ideas pass across [social] group boundaries, the in-group problematically underestimates the role of the out-group in their [the in-groups] very ideaspaces.)

I said, Because I loved her, and because her appearance was dwindling by the week and month, and because I knew this imbalance, was unsustainable; and because I loved her, and because I knew temptation wears; I disfigured my own face in turn, so we were both ineligible to the world.

I said, the tyranny of round numbers: arbitrary differences in valuation based on hitting or missing numeric milestones — in other words, features in the map determining our understanding of the territory. Sub-4:00 mile, stats lines, years, decades, centuries, millennia, above and below six feet, anything base-ten related.

And I said, Two kinds of scholarship: Pattern-matching/ “connective” vs. “analytical”:

Pattern-matchers connect dots to form narratives and make arguments regarding underlying similarities, undergirding concepts, shared phenomena, recurrent themes, Eternal Human Manifestations, contemporary dominants, socialization etiquettes. “Notes on Camp” is the epitome of connective writing, as is Lasch’s *True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* or Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts* (or *Bluets* but that has an organizing principle of its own and it’s unclear whether even its author thinks there is a meaningful meta-pattern at hand beyond a cute concept as an excuse to explore a hundred different interesting ideas and observations).

Analysts dive deep on, well, analysis — textual/close readings, historical and/or philosophical analysis, all these become ends in themselves. Most academics are analysts.

What’s important, though, is that pattern-matching relies on understanding of its connected items, which therefore requires analysis. Great pattern-matching has as a necessary prerequisite great analysis, or the patterns its identifying may make a good map but have little relation to the actual territory and therefore Big Picture insight.

* * *

And I said,

The smaller a town, the more powerfully poignant each of its locations in the ex-pat's memory.

I understand that there are many varieties of town, even within America, and even within the Western coastal states. I can only make claim to truly speak for one of them, inasmuch as anyone can truly speak for anything at all. But this at least seems true: That every small town incubates, compacts, and layers meaning. This country road an old gathering point among friends; that stuccoed building the site of both a romantic beginning and of an end. A park bench may simultaneously serve witness to the worst news of one's life and also one's best. In a small town (which feels constricting or suffocating at the time perhaps, but warms into fondness over time and distance) there is a contained accumulation of significance, a controlled burn in reverse.

Metal becomes monument; silhouette statue. Each return to a hometown yields new depths, not just through additional time spent but through additional angles of

approach which can be gained only through travel and outside experience. Puck, that magical brass sculpture which turns if pushed, suddenly transforms, after a proper reading of Shakespeare, into Puck, shrewd sprite of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. That old fluorescent inn sign, four moving horses and a carriage all neon pink and blue, transfigures into an old stagecoach stop, elegant beyond camp.

There is the saying that once one spends enough time outside a system, upon re-entry said system's invisible structure becomes suddenly, vividly, visible. This is the mechanism which has informed many of the anthropological critiques of the Western world.

So too does the small town's always-already poignancy, having become over years of exposure boring and banal, transform again a-loft upon abandonment and return. The conic abstraction of a pine tree, mounted upon the hilltops on the outskirts of town around Christmastime, is seen from up-close, inside, and afar (inside, outside, and all the problems of the world issuing from the space between).

So too can one understand literature, which in many ways replicates, simulates, or incubates lived experience. It allows multiple layers and levels of entry, degrees of dissolution into its pages, its worlds. It allows inscriptions and reinscriptions of the self and of itself, inscriptions dictated or else chosen.

This is, in the cases of both literature and small towns, a matter of investing time, of the ratio between time spent and artifact lived. Simply writing a shorter story will not achieve the full effect of compression in literature, just as a city dweller passing through a georgic plaza will derive little import, even or especially in contrast with the dispersed sites comprising his own urban system of significance. This is partially because he will lack the understanding of the county town's undergirding logic, its system of cause and effect which produces a sort of meaning (for if a cause's meaning asks the "why?," the cause's effects provide an answer). But it is also, much more than this, not unlike the hours spent in parks or cult-de-sacs as an adolescent: it is the lifetimes spent in words, the turnings and the returnings, which slowly build a work or space's value.

* * *

And the wind said, the hill is not unlike the valley; all of it is earth to me. And the wind blew, and it blew, and it said, echoing over the landscape, repeating some of my words and some of the words of the shopkeeper-merchants and of the street-hagglers and of the stall-shoppers too, it said,

Who said, who said, who...

