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Stumbling Across an Infinite Horizon

Finding Bo Burnham was, quite simply, a mistake. To clarify: I love his content, but I found it only by accident. I was clicking through Youtube's endless list of recommendations when my cursor hovered over an hour-long video titled *what*. Among the plethora of long, descriptive, hyperbolic titles screaming for my attention, this one gave me just enough pause to click. Thus began my first foray into the world of stand up comedy or, as it is often referred to now, the comedy special. In *what* and his second special *Make Happy*, Burnham treads right up to the edge of what constitutes a comedy special. He blends humor with a kind of musical theater, delivering his jokes through song and audiovisual interactions rather than simply a stage and a microphone. His performances are choreographed to perfection, and I have often wondered whether they could really be considered stand up at all. His third "comedy special" *INSIDE*, however, finally bends the definition of the term so far it breaks. Though Netflix may be content to label it so, Bo Burnham's *INSIDE* is, plain and simply, not a comedy special.

But what constitutes a "comedy special" in the first place? The answer is not as clear cut as it first seems, and shockingly little scholarly writing even attempts to define the term. A first inclination would suggest that it simply refers to a recorded version of a performed "stand up comedy" routine. What, then, is stand up comedy? Ian Brody, in his article "Is Stand-Up Comedy Art?" offers a long list of defining characteristics. To him, stand up must be a spoken, verbal performance by a sole individual in front of, to, and in collaboration with an audience

with a clear demarcation between said performer and audience. It is delivered in prose, is largely autobiographical, deliberately aims at evoking laughter from an audience, and does so without musical accompaniment, conspicuous staging, costuming, or props (Brodie 404). Translating this definition directly to the concept of a comedy special, however, makes it obvious that *INSIDE* does not fit the bill. Using the definition would even exclude the likes of Hannah Gadsby's *Nannette* or Hassan Minhaj's *Homecoming King* which contain elements clearly not aimed at evoking laughter from an audience. Thus a broader definition of a comedy special is required, both to capture the differences between it and "stand-up comedy" as well as to provide a basis for the notion that *INSIDE* is not, in fact, part of the category. After analyzing the list of characteristics above as well as shared elements between Burnham's first two specials, Hannah Gadsby's *Nannette*, and Hassan Minhaj's *Homecoming King* – which seem to represent a wide range of the genre – a better definition for a "comedy special" emerges. Excluding obvious format requirements (a single performer, verbal delivery, 45+ minute runtime, etc.) a piece must fulfill the following criteria in order to be considered a comedy special: it must dedicate its runtime primarily to producing humor, must allow its audience to become immersed in the content itself, and must at some point produce humor as an end in itself and not solely as a means to accomplish other objectives. Unfortunately, even with this more lenient definition, *INSIDE* still cannot be considered a comedy special.

First, Burnham does not dedicate the majority of the piece to producing humor. Though what exactly constitutes "humor" is still a heated debate, author Noel Carroll offers a believable picture through his presentation of the superiority, incongruity, release, and play theories. To Carroll, humor comes from, "the pleasure of finding oneself superior to others," or "an anomaly or an incongruity relative to some framework governing the ways in which we think the world is

or should be” (Carroll 17) that is non-threatening. It is a release of tension, a way in which humans play. Though none of these definitions offer a complete picture of humor on their own, and each of them depend heavily on qualifications and context, they provide a useful metric for determining what parts of *INSIDE* are truly funny.

Using these definitions, it would then be possible to pick apart the runtime of *INSIDE* to pinpoint exactly how much of it is dedicated to these manners of humor. That exercise, however, would be tedious and unnecessary. Instead, one may look to the critical halfway point of the piece to come to a proper conclusion. “From this point,” writer Cahal McQuillan notes, “the template for the special fades and we find ourselves watching a conflicted and overly self-aware creator at odds with himself, struggling to piece together a special that that he cannot help but over-analyse” (McQuillan 1230). Though McQuillan himself uses the term comedy special, he points out that after the halfway point of the film, the humor largely drops out. Though jokes occasionally brighten the otherwise serious content in the second half, the focus has clearly shifted. And for every joke in the “serious” second half, there exists a serious moment in the “funny” first half: like the very first song of the piece where Burnham questions, “Should I be joking at a time like this?” or about 25 minutes in where he rants about many people’s tendency to express online, “every single opinion that they have on every single thing that occurs all at the same time” (Burnham). Without having to split hairs, it is clear that *INSIDE* dedicates less than half of its content to producing humor.

One may also look to public perception of the piece to determine whether it is largely humorous. In many reviews, comments about its messaging and severity dominate ones about its hilarity. Critic Eleanor Schifino writes that, “While moments of the special are notably hilarious, the bulk of the piece is focused on the eerily familiar depressive attitude and mental illnesses

caused or exacerbated by quarantine and isolation through the course of the pandemic” (Schifino). Rather than commenting on the side-splitting comedy, reviewers focus on how the piece addresses, “...the effects of isolation and [Burnham’s] deteriorating mental health,” (McQuillan) and “...the timelessness, mundanity, loneliness, forced introspection, and frustration that embedded themselves into our lives” (McQuillan). One reviewer goes so far as to say that, “I felt seen” (Culotta). These are not necessarily the comments one would expect to see from a piece that dedicates its runtime primarily to humor.

But humor, and thus the time it takes up in this piece, is perhaps a subjective matter. However, even if one entirely disregards the above argument, *INSIDE* still cannot be considered a “comedy special” because it does not fit either of the other two tenets required to dub it so. It does not, for example, allow for the audience to immerse themselves in its content. Why this is a requirement of a comedy special is a matter of focus. No matter how much humor a piece presents – and no matter for what purpose it does so – if the audience’s focus waivers from that humor, the comedy is lost entirely. After all, one cannot laugh at a joke they do not pay attention to.

Though obvious, this point becomes particularly important when analyzing *INSIDE* because this iteration of Burnham’s work is multilayered. Unlike his previous specials, *INSIDE* not only presents “primary content” – isolated songs or sketches or bits – but a plethora of “secondary content,” highly meta additions that focus on both the audience watching the piece and the process it took to create the piece. From his frequent interjections between songs to talk about how he feels as he creates them, to a sketch where he conducts a live reaction to content just shown to the audience, to an uncomfortable scene of him staring directly at the camera while waving a knife, the fourth wall breaks so many times that the audience cannot help but feel

watched. This culminates in the song titled “Don’t Wanna Know” performed at around 49 minutes into the piece, where Burnham questions whether the audience he seeks to captivate are even paying attention to him, “Am I on in the background? Are you on your phone? / I’d ask you what you’re watching but I don’t wanna know” (Burnham). These interruptions may not entirely prevent an audience member from laughing at the piece’s jokes, but as they increase in frequency throughout the special they draw more and more attention away from the humor and even from the primary content itself.

But the piece goes even further in preventing immersion in its content by simultaneously offering glimpses of how demoralizing the process of creation is for its creator. Whether that be a cut after a song to Burnham staring blankly at his work on a laptop screen, or a musical piece that questions whether it is even possible to be funny in his current situation, or the almost total breakdown that happens at about an hour and ten minutes into the piece, barely a moment passes where the audience does not recognize both the pain that the creator feels and the effort it took to create the content being watched. Just like the fourth wall breaks, these emotionally-charged interjections root the viewer’s attention not on the content itself, but on the world surrounding it. It puts the focus not on the jokes but on the pain it took to create them.

The final nail in the coffin for *INSIDE* as a comedy special, however, comes from the fact that it only uses humor to serve other purposes. There exists no humor produced for humor’s sake. Instead, the jokes serve to embellish the plethora of political and social commentary that characterizes the entirety of the piece. In the span of a single song, “Burnham cynically highlights the inherent corruption of capitalism, the systemic oppression and prejudice of colonialism’s past, and even mocks the selfish insincerity of many so-called woke individuals who contort being progressive into the myopic lens of their own self-actualisation” (McQuillan).

It does not take a particularly critical viewer to understand the commentary made in songs such as “How the World Works” or “Problematic,” and the laughs interspersed within them only serve to heighten the focus on the message or commentary to follow.

Even songs that on the surface seem dedicated purely to laughs eventually utilize those laughs to convey a message. The ridiculous song “Facetime With My Mom (Tonight)” uses humor to comment on the sometimes desperate attempts one makes to reconnect with loved ones during times of isolation. The hilarious bit about brand marketing at the 18 minute mark criticizes companies that co-opt social movements to maximize their own profits. The devious song “Welcome to the Internet” even criticizes the very reason why I happened to find Bo Burnham’s content in the first place: the endless, scrolling recommendation lists of social media. These songs, these sketches, this piece as a whole operate with distinct commentary and messaging in mind. The humor acts merely as a means to embellish it.

But *Nannette*, *Homecoming King*, *what*, and *Make Happy*, what I would call prominent examples of comedy specials, do not fit these tenets perfectly either. What differentiates them from *INSIDE*? Ultimately, the cases must be addressed tenet by tenet. When it comes to whether a runtime is primarily dedicated to producing humor, *Nannette* stands out as perhaps the most contentious example. After all, by the end of the special, Gadsby stops joking entirely. The majority of reviews skew towards the analytical rather than hysterical. Wouldn’t that disqualify it as a comedy special in this case? Perhaps it would if those humorless segments lasted for more than a combined 6th of the special. Ultimately, the humor only really drops out for short periods of time. Meanwhile, jokes pervade nearly the entirety of the rest of the special. The same goes for *Homecoming King*, *what*, and *Make Happy*. The humor may drop out for brief moments to build tension or to end on a bang, but it never leaves for long. *INSIDE*, on the other hand, drops

its humor halfway through its runtime and returns to it only in a very small number of exceptions.

In *Homecoming King* and *what*, the audience is also rarely, if ever, distracted from the primary content being presented. *What* does break the fourth wall through a bit where Burnham makes prolonged eye contact with a member of the audience, and it does feature a song at the end commenting on how fans erroneously claim to know him well. *Homecoming King* does make brief calls out to the audience. *Nanette* even makes direct and critical commentary towards its male viewers. However, unlike *INSIDE*, these comments towards the audience and the fourth wall breaks serve as the exception and not the rule. While a viewer may be made aware of themselves for a moment, distracting from the primary content temporarily, that awareness passes as soon as the next bit begins. With *INSIDE*, it not only lingers but is repeatedly reintroduced.

Make Happy is perhaps the only arguable exception to this tenet: towards the end of the special Burnham monologues about the differences between himself and his audience, turning on the house lights and remarking, “Let the artifice fade away, now we’re all the same” (Burnham). Here the audience is indeed made painfully aware of themselves. And that awareness continues into the final song of the special where Burnham goes on to sing directly to his audience that, “A part of me loves you, a part of me hates you / A part of me needs you; part of me fears you” (Burnham). He even goes on to say, “Look at them; they’re just staring at me like / ‘Come and watch the skinny kid with the / Steadily declining mental health, and laugh as he attempts / To give you what he cannot give himself” (Burnham). The special ends on a biting piece of commentary aimed at the audience that does in fact prevent them from losing themselves in the content presented. This comes, however, only at the end of the special.

But all of these specials also have messages to convey and in many cases they use their humor to do so. Where lies the distinction in this case? For all of the commentary they make, the four aforementioned specials also include elements of humor meant purely for humor's sake. In *Nannette* Gadsby jokes about the special being named only because she met a woman who she figured she could write a comedy special about. In *Homecoming King* Hasan Minhaj creates laughs about the dads who always take things too seriously. Almost the entire opening segments of *what* and *Make Happy* are dedicated purely to humor. In *INSIDE*, however, there is not a single song without a deeper message behind it.

So, if *INSIDE* cannot be considered a comedy special, then what is it? Some may call it a “musical movie” (Renfro), or an “ambitious experimental film” (Culotta) or even a “deeply personal documentary” (Culotta) but all of these labels – including satire, which I’m inclined to believe is the best term among those currently available – fail to encompass everything that *INSIDE* represents. Perhaps, then, no label exists to classify this piece because it merits the creation of a new one. A term to describe humor mixed unrecognizably with pain, a beautiful yet crude work of art, a portrait that perfectly matches the reality within which we live today. After all, with the advent of the internet and social media – itself a theme that plays prominently in *INSIDE* – we can no longer escape or ignore the grief of the world. It is not so easy to retreat into the comfort of a comedy special. We are not only constantly bombarded by social and political criticism but also made to feel painfully aware of ourselves and our roles in the world. Very little space exists for humor in that reality. Bo Burnham’s genre defining *INSIDE* may then serve as the beginning of a special kind of content defined by the era of instability within which we live. An age unlike any other, and an art form unlike any other. What a time to be alive.

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