The Boothe Prize Essays

2009

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Introduction to the Humanities Program

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FOREWORD

Thanks to the generosity of the late D. Power Boothe Jr., his wife Catie, and their son Barry, the Boothe Prizes recognize and reward outstanding expository, argumentative, and research-based writing of first-year students in the Program in Writing and Rhetoric (PWR) and the Introduction to the Humanities Program (IHUM). Each quarter superior student work from courses in both programs is nominated and submitted to Boothe Prize committee judges. Winning papers are then collected for publication, and Boothe Prizes are awarded at a celebratory ceremony each spring in honor of these talented student writers and their instructors. As this collection of essays from spring and autumn 2008 and winter 2009 indicates, the selection process is no easy task at any of the judging stages. The essays represent the broad range and reach of many of Stanford’s first-year writers; they often are remarkable in their analytic power and sophisticated rhetorical skills, as well as their personal engagement with a topic or text. Their papers additionally reveal the varying kinds of research opportunities available to Stanford’s first-year students, and the quality of work students are able to do in a short period of time, usually on fairly unfamiliar material, all the while managing the difficult work of their other courses. We take particular pleasure, then, in honoring these superior young scholars. Our special thanks go to the Boothe family for their support and encouragement of Stanford’s first-year PWR and IHUM students in offering the Boothe Prizes and making possible the publication of these essays. We also thank the Boothe Prize Selection Committees for PWR and IHUM and the Project Committee, a collaborative venture among faculty and staff from both PWR and IHUM who planned, edited, and produced The Boothe Prize Essays 2009. Most of all, our thanks to the many talented first-year writers whose essays were nominated for the Boothe Prize and, especially, to the students and instructors whose exemplary work now takes its place in the intellectual life of Stanford’s first-year programs.

—JOHN BRAVMAN
Freeman-Thornton Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education
ESSAYS FROM THE
Program in Writing and Rhetoric
STANFORD UNIVERSITY

Boothe Prize Winners & Honorable Mentions
INTRODUCTION

First-year writing, one of Stanford’s oldest traditions, has been taught since the founding of the University. Current courses in the Program in Writing and Rhetoric (PWR) provide a setting in which students new to the University can focus their intellectual energies intently on the art and craft of writing. PWR’s small seminar/workshop classes offer students the opportunity to develop their writing abilities in analysis and research-based argument with the careful and consistent guidance of an experienced writing instructor.

The PWR requirement at Stanford currently consists of two courses. While the second-level PWR 2 course emphasizes oral and multimedia presentations of research, PWR 1, the first-year course in which students write the essays nominated for the Boothe Prize, centers on various forms of analysis and substantial research-based projects. The essays selected as the Winners and Honorable Mentions for the Boothe Prize represent the best of students’ work in these areas; it is our pleasure to share them with the larger Stanford community.

The PWR curriculum aims to lead students toward strong performance in all elements of writing, including crafting a persona that will effectively appeal to a particular audience, developing a compelling argumentative thesis drawing on primary and secondary sources, putting forward cogent proofs with persuasive evidence and reasoning, and writing with power and grace. Each of these essays demonstrates the ways in which PWR courses guide Stanford’s first-year students in presenting their ideas with the intellectual rigor and stylistic force expected of University students.

As Directors of the Program, we have the privilege of reading all of the essays nominated for the Boothe Prize each year. We have been impressed over and over again by how well these newest members of the University community have met the challenges of first-year writing. We value the intellectual curiosity, freshness of thought and expression, and engagement with the ideas of others represented in the essays published here, and we offer our heartiest congratulations to these writers as well as to their instructors.

—ANDREA A. LUNS福德
Director, Program in Writing and Rhetoric

—MARVIN DIOMENES
Associate Director, Program in Writing and Rhetoric
As a student, how do you conceive of the work you do in school? What role does it play in your world, and is what you have to say important? These are the sorts of questions, I imagine, that Anna was grappling with when she wrote her paper. When you read it in this anthology, you’ll be reading words that have been worked over again and again. I’m not sure exactly how many drafts Anna produced, but there were at least ten, and probably more like fifteen. You’ll easily be able to pick out her topic and her argument, but what might be more difficult to see, after all the revisions, are the questions that caused Anna to choose this topic in the first place.

I remember a day in class, early in the quarter, probably before the first assignments had been handed in. We were having a discussion about what makes a good argument, and one of the ideas I put forward was that originality is central to a good essay. This is a vague idea, but it’s one I take for granted. If what you have to say is self-evident, or if any number of bright people can easily come to the same conclusion, then what’s the point in saying it? As soon as I had made this point, Anna frowned. After about half a minute, she shot up her hand, and asked, “does that mean we should sacrifice saying something right for saying something that’s controversial or different or,” and here she really skewered me, “just plain weird?”

Of course it doesn’t, but it can be hard for anyone to see how their writing can say something both insightful and right. What Anna was hitting at, I think, is that fundamental need we all feel to know that our work is righteous. When you write for a class, you’re often just writing for a few select people: your fellow students, perhaps, and certainly your professor. PWR essays aren’t presidential addresses or Supreme Court decisions. For the most part, they won’t be read by thousands of people. At best, I think, student essays are written in a subjunctive mode. You’re best served by writing as though you were able to reach an audience of millions, as though your words were able to change the world. There’s a quiet dignity to this, to writing with purpose while developing your craft before you unleash yourself upon a broader audience, and this is what Anna does particularly well, I think.

She chose a topic that she’d heard about in an intro psychology class and she researched the bejesus out of it. Anna’s the sort of student who, when I mentioned that Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was a book that would be worth reading for her essay, bought and read it in a matter of days. Most importantly, though, she didn’t take on some nagging issue, but one of the most important and problematic psychological studies ever performed. Some students would be overwhelmed by a topic such as the Milgram experiments, but what pulled Anna through was what I like best about her work, a desire to engage the world upon first principles, to cut to what matters most.

—Stephen Osadetz
In Defense of Human Agency
Protection of Self-Image in the Milgram Obedience Experiments

Anna Grummon

Picture the following scenario: Gerald Braverman, a thirty-nine-year-old social worker from New Haven, CT, is going to participate in a psychology study at Yale. Braverman, who, with a furrowed brow and graying hair, looks older than his years, read of the experiment in the local newspaper. A psychologist at Yale, Stanley Milgram, is recruiting participants for this study on learning and memory, and promises them $4.00 for participating. Gerald drives to the Interaction Laboratory on the university campus, enters the lab, and quietly observes the impressive electronic equipment lining the rooms, the heavy curtains draping the windows, and the stern researchers striding through the halls. He is greeted by Mr. Henry Williams, a stony experimenter donning a gray technician’s coat. The atmosphere is one of efficiency, of experiments being conducted by prestigious researchers, and Braverman feels repressed, his eyes darting to take in the scene, his speech attempting to affect composure.

Williams introduces Braverman to another participant in the study, Mr. John Wallace. The man appears to be in his late forties; he wears thick glasses and a striped tie, and smiles warmly at Braverman as they shake hands. Williams begins his instructions to the participants. He is intense, his voice confident, his speech articulate and harsh. “Psychologists have developed several theories to explain how people learn various types of material. Some of the better-known theories are treated in this book.” He points to an impressive looking volume, *Teaching and Learning Processes*, which rests on the table behind him. “But actually, we know very little about the effect of punishment on learning, because almost no truly scientific studies have been made of it in human beings. We want to find out just what effect different people have on each other as teachers and learners, and also what effect punishment will have on learning in this situation. In this study we are bringing together a number of adults of different occupations and ages, and we’re asking some of them to be teachers and some to be learners” (Milgram, *Obedience*, 34-6). The experimenter explains that the learner will attempt to memorize a series of word-pairings; the teacher will both help him with this task and punish him with an electric shock for incorrect answers. The teacher will increase the voltage of the shock with each incorrect response.

Williams continues, “Please draw a slip of paper to determine which duty you are to perform.” He pulls out two slips of paper from his coat pocket and offers them to the gentlemen seated before him. Braverman reaches for a slip. What he doesn’t know is that the entire experimental set up is a fake, a cover story to hide the true intent of the study. The two other men are both trained actors, and the lab equipment is merely a set of stage props, carefully crafted by Milgram to look and feel real. Wallace will not actually receive
any shocks—but he has recorded a tape of himself feigning agony, which will be played at specified intervals in the experiment. The drawing has been rigged so that Braverman will be the teacher and Wallace the learner.

Following the drawing, the experimenter leads the pair into a nearby sparsely furnished room with a large, eerie electric apparatus set up on a table near the wall. He straps Wallace into a chair in front of the machine and explains that these straps are to prevent excessive movement during the shocks. He applies a paste to Wallace’s arm, explaining that this will help avoid blisters and burns from the shocks. Wallace, looking nervous, asks if the shocks will hurt him. “While the shocks can be extremely painful,” Williams curtly replies, “they cause no permanent tissue damage.” Braverman’s eyes sweep the room several times, taking in the scene, before he is led into an adjacent room by the experimenter.

The next room is separated from the first by an opaque, partially soundproof wall; Braverman can no longer see the other participant, but can speak to him through a microphone system. Upon entrance to the room, Braverman is introduced to a shock generator, an impressive construction, complete with 30 different levers, each with a corresponding voltage and a qualitative label ranging from “slight shock” to “danger: severe shock” (figure 2). The last two levels simply read: XXX. Braverman receives instructions on how to use the machine, and receives a mild sample shock so that he understands the pain the learner will experience. Throughout, the experimenter speaks rapidly and with a chilling austerity.

Braverman agrees to deliver the painful shocks to the stranger in the next room. And so the experiment begins. At first, Wallace answers all the questions correctly, and his teacher continues through the procedures almost mindlessly. When Wallace gives his first incorrect answer, Braverman quickly delivers the first shock, and when he continues to deliver wrong responses, Braverman thoughtlessly increases the voltage. Then he administers the 75V shock and, through the semi-soundproof wall, hears his victim grunt. The cycle continues: more incorrect answers followed by increasingly painful shocks. Soon, Wallace is crying out in agony: “I can’t stand the pain! Let me out of here! ...
Experimenter! Get me out of here! I’ve had enough!” Braverman hesitates, asking if he should continue. He begins to laugh nervously, his hands now clenched, now rubbing his forehead. The experimenter responds immediately. “The experiment requires that you continue,” he prods, repeating as necessary when his participant stalls.

What will Braverman do—break off the experiment, saving his fellow participant from this torture, or continue to obey orders despite the tormented pleas? According to Milgram, if Braverman is anything like the majority of Americans, he’ll obey the experimenter’s orders. In the early 1960s, Milgram recruited forty men like Braverman to participate the study described above. A startling 62.5% of his participants administered what they thought were painful and potentially lethal shocks to a complete stranger, simply because they had been ordered to do so.

From the moment Milgram first published his results, writers in all arenas—from the popular press to professional and academic journals—gave considerable attention to the studies (Fer naglich, 108). Many of these writers were horrified and disturbed by the intense suffering the participants were willing to inflict when they were ordered to do so by an authority figure. Some even saw Milgram’s experiments as evidence of mankind’s inherently evil nature. However, many scholars have published convincing accounts rejecting this notion and instead arguing that participants in Milgram’s studies were obedient not because they were sadistic, but rather because they were influenced by a number of aspects of their particular setting. Factors such as the participant’s politeness and a desire to uphold his initial promise to participate in the study acted as “binding forces” that locked the participant in the situation, making it difficult to disobey (Milgram, Obedience, 7). Scholars supporting this view argue that the setting itself drove the participants to obedience; this phenomenon is typically referred to by social psychologists as the “power of the situation.” This stance has dominated the discussion of Milgram’s experiments for decades; indeed, this study is often considered the classic example of how profoundly the environment can influence behavior. What’s more, this notion is a crucial assumption of the entire field of social psychology, which is typically defined as the scientific study of how our thoughts, feelings and behaviors are influenced by the presence of real, imagined or implied others—in short, the study of how our social environments shape how we act (Allport, 1985).

Even so, in the case of Milgram’s experiments, this power-of-the-situation explanation is incomplete, lacking a unified theory that explains how the situational elements exert their influence. This gap can be filled when one understands that humans desire to protect their self-images and will put this need above the needs of others. Egoism provides a framework to explain the effects of the various “binding factors” in Milgram’s experimenters. Indeed, we can wholly understand the obedient behavior of Milgram’s participants as a means of protecting their self-images. Put differently, on the most fundamental level, the driving factor behind obedient behavior in the Milgram experiments was the participants’ desire to maintain a positive self-concept.

Viewing Milgram’s participants’ behavior as egoistic, rather than simply the result of situational factors, has frightening implications for how we are to interpret their behavior, and consequently for our understanding of human nature. The power-of-the-situation argument is an important component of any explanation of the experiments. It asks us to direct careful attention to Milgram’s experimental design and to take seriously its potential influence on subjects’ behavior. Yet committing to an explanation based solely
on situational factors yields difficult implications; if we strip agency and choice from the participants in Milgram's experiments, must we similarly remove responsibility from all who commit violent or destructive acts under the orders of an authority? What are we to make of the horrific instances of violence that taint the world's history—of Abu Ghraib, Nazi Germany, and My Lai? It is here that the traditional power-of-the-situation explanation distorts the reality of human behavior. When we place all of the blame for participants' obedience on the situation, we ignore the fact that humans have free will. But with a framework of egoism, we can restore responsibility to the participants: we see that the situation has power only because it interacts with a fundamental human obsession with self-image protection. If we view Milgram's experiments though this lens, it is clear that man's inherent tendency toward evil is still at stake, and that we must consider the participants' complicity in the horrifying events of experiment.

The Experimental Design

"The experiments of Stanley Milgram on obedience to authority have achieved a truly remarkable visibility, one that is rare in the social sciences."

The scene above detailed the first of twenty-four variations of the obedience studies Milgram ran in the 1960s. Each variation differed in certain aspects—the distance between the teacher and the experimenter, for example—but all followed a general pattern. The experimental design described here relates the general pattern, and is drawn from Milgram's initial (1963) publication of the study. (Descriptions of other variations, as well as a more detailed account of the first variation, can be found in Milgram's [1974] monograph *Obedience to Authority*).

In the experiment, a male participant between the ages of 20 and 50 entered a Yale laboratory, believing he was participating in a study of learning and memory. Participants varied in occupation (ranging from postal clerks to engineers to salesmen) and educational background (some had not completed high school and others had doctoral degrees). As in the scene above, this was merely a cover study invented by Milgram to hide the real interest of the study: obedience to authority. In each trial, the subject was "randomly assigned" to be the teacher (the assignment was rigged); the other man in the room, an actor and accomplice of Milgram's, was made the learner. Following assignment, the subject and the learner were led into separate rooms for the remainder of the experiment (*figure 3*); the rooms, they were
told, were separated by a “partially soundproof” wall. The subject was then introduced to a shock-generator and instructed to deliver shocks of increasing voltage each time the learner answered a question incorrectly.

As in the opening scenario, when the testing began, the learner gave a set of pre-determined responses to the questions, beginning with mostly correct answers, but gradually lapsing into a long streak of incorrect responses, prompting the subject to give him increasingly painful shocks. He remained silent until 75V, when he groaned. As the voltage increased, the learner began to verbally complain of the pain, eventually demanding that he be let out of the experiment. By 300V, he stopped responding altogether. If at any point the learner’s ostensible suffering made the subject pause or ask to discontinue, the experimenter prodded him, urging, “please continue” or, if necessary, “you have no other choice, you must go on” (Milgram, Obedience, 37). Like the learner, the experimenter was also an actor, trained by Milgram to be impassive and stern (Milgram, Obedience, 16), to loom threateningly over the participant and verbally pressure the participants to continue their task.

Milgram’s Findings

“Obedience rather than disobedience can be understood as the expected outcome.” —John M. Darley

“Such an experimental result … ought to give each us of pause as no other single bit of research has.” –Philip Zimbardo

In reporting his results, Milgram focused on three issues. First—and foremost—he was interested in the maximum shock each subject administered before he actively refused to continue and exited the experiment. He deemed that the subjects were “obedient” when they administered shocks through the highest voltage level; those who broke off at any point before the highest level were “defiant.” He reported 26 of his 40 subjects (65%) were “obedient,” 14 were labeled as “defiant.” As a second point of interest, Milgram argued that the subjects were convinced of the reality of the experimental set-up—that is, the subjects were deceived by his cover story. Finally, Milgram noted the extreme emotional distress the participants endured. He described the subjects’ “bizarre nervous laughter, uncontrollable seizures, sweating, trembling, stutters, lip biting, and groaning”—in short, the subjects exhibited a “degree of tension…rarely seen in sociopsychological laboratory studies” (375). According to Milgram, this visible emotional stress reveals the tension the participants felt between their desire to be obedient and their wish to avoid harming innocent people.

To scholars and lay people alike, this obedience was disturbing, and entirely unpredicted. For example, prior to the experiment, numerous groups—including college students, psychiatrists, middle-class adults of various occupations, and graduate students and faculty in the behavioral sciences—cast predictions about the subjects’ behavior. Together, these groups predicted that about one subject in one thousand would administer the highest-level shock (Milgram, Obedience, 31). These predictions are understandable—to obey, participants had to glaringly breach what Milgram argued was a fundamental ethical proscription; as Milgram writes, “of all moral principles, the one
that comes closest to being universally accepted is this: one should not inflict suffer-
ing on a helpless person who is neither harmful nor threatening to oneself” (Obedience, 13). But what are we to make of this surprising tendency to abandon morals? Some have argued that the Milgram experiments are evidence of a dark conception of hu-
man nature. Milgram himself noted that, “A commonly offered explanation is that those who shocked the victim at the most severe level were monsters, the sadistic fringe of society” (Obedience, 5). Likewise, the popular press, for example, frequently portrayed the obedient subjects as patently wicked, describing Milgram’s experiments with article titles such as “Experiment Found Plenty of Sadists” (23).

This explanation falls under a general human tendency to attribute evil behavior, such as that displayed by Milgram’s obedient subjects, to evil personalities. Humans intuitively believe that an evildoer must contain some element of evil, a certain “qual-
ity of evilness” or “kernel of evil” almost like a physical characteristic (Darley, 202). A headline for an article in Science Digest, for example, asked its readers if Milgram’s study demonstrated that “the seeds of such slavish inhumanity exist in all of us?” (qtd. in Fer-
maglich, 109). But is this popular view correct? If it were, one would expect that we could see some sort of measurable personality differences between the obedient and defiant participants—specifically, that the obedient participants were more malevolent than their disobedient peers. However, when Milgram and Alan Elms compared par-
ticipants’ scores on a series of standardized personality tests, they found no differences between defiant and obedient individuals (282). Likewise, many scholars have argued that evildoers are by no means necessarily evil people (e.g. Staub; Milgram, Obedience).

Political theorist Hannah Arendt, for example, raised the question of whether evil acts are simply the result of the tendency of ordinary people to mindlessly obey orders. Arendt reported for The New Yorker on the trial of Adolf Eichmann, a high-ranking Nazi and influential architect of the Holocaust; her articles evolved into a book in which she argues that Eichmann’s evil acts were utterly banal: “The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal” (276). Scholars like Arendt discredit the idea that evildoers—from Nazi criminals to Milgram’s participants—were sadistic and somehow different from common people.

Rather than arguing that a “kernel of evil” within an individual produces horrifying behavior, many of these scholars take a power-of-the-situation stance, arguing that evil deeds such as those of Milgram’s participants are not the volitional products of sadistic individuals, but rather the result of the convergence of social and environmental factors. Scholars have frequently applied this power-of-the-situation argument to Milgram’s ex-
periments. Thomas Blass, for example, notes that, “The findings of the obedience studies have been held up as examples, par excellence, of the controlling power of the situation” (1991, 399), and researchers have identified a profusion of environmental factors be-
lieved to have contributed to the high levels of obedience Milgram achieved. Scholars have argued the importance of various features of the lab setting such as the ambiguous nature of the situation, the prestige of the laboratory, the ostensible legitimacy of the experimenter, and the physical and psychological proximity of the learner to the teacher. Indeed, Milgram demonstrated the importance of such factors by manipulating them—Milgram was able to obtain obedience rates as low as 10% and as high as 100% simply by altering a single variable of the experimental procedure (see Milgram, Obedience, for
descriptions of all 24 variations of the obedience experiments). Simply put, the power-of-the-situation argument goes a long way toward explaining the behavior of Milgram’s participants. Yet this framework lacks a unified theory of precisely why obedience occurred. Why were the features of Milgram’s experiments able to influence participants? What fundamental psychological process or processes underlie the effects of these elements of the experimental environment? I argue that we can answer these important questions if we understand the participants’ behavior as primarily motivated their desire to protect their self-images. Below, I will describe how the general human desire to maintain a positive view of ourselves mediated the influences of each of the most important environmental factors. I will show that, at the most fundamental level, efforts to protect one’s self-concept caused obedience in the Milgram experiments.

Defining the Situation: The Role of Role Models

“Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. The virtue in most request is conformity.” —Ralph Waldo Emerson

Among the most influential situational factors at play in Milgram’s experiments was the sheer newness of the experimental setting—participants had never been in a similar situation; the experimenter was novel, strange, confusing. Scholars refer to this newness and confusion as the “ambiguity of the experimental situation” (e.g. Lutsky, Nissani). This ambiguity caused participants to initially struggle to define the scenario playing out in front of them, a difficulty that led directly to their obedience (e.g. Nissani, Kelman & Hamilton, Blass, 1991). We engage in this process—of defining the situation in which we find ourselves—virtually all the time, often without even thinking about it. In fact, doing so is necessary for functioning in daily life. In each moment, we must define the scenario in front of us in order to know how to appropriately act (Smith & Kosslyn, 148-151)—no definition, no action. When participants entered the laboratory, they encountered an unfamiliar situation (Lutsky, 59), brimming with a multitude of alien objects and procedures. The situation evolved quickly from a tame experiment on learning and memory to an intensely stressful scenario, augmenting the ambiguity (Lutsky, 59; Milgram, 1965, 375). Because of this ambiguity, when the subjects tried to define the situation, their best course of action was to look to the experimenter as a role model—after all, he seemed like a credible authority and was an expert in this setting. When the participants looked to the experimenter as a guide for appropriate action, they did not find any reason to worry, but rather saw a calm, stern face, a face that looked neither anxious about the learner’s condition nor pleased with the victim’s pain. The experimenter was impassive, but not evil. As Neill Lutsky notes, “Thus, even though subjects have sufficient reason to believe the learner is being harmed by the procedure, the absence of both concern and malevolence on the part of the experimenter undermines a clear definition and ethical evaluation of the situation” (60). Thus subjects, confused about this strange situation, conformed to the experimenter’s definition of the situation and believed the learner was fine. The subjects continued delivering the shocks, not out of malice, but because the ambiguity of the situation led them to believe the experiment was morally sound.
Why did the participants model their behavior after the experimenter, rather than, say, decide for themselves how to act? In general, when individuals find themselves in an ambiguous situation, they tend match their behavior to that of those around them. This conformity often occurs because of our innate desire to be “right” (Aronson, 37)—humans intrinsically wish to act in a manner we believe is appropriate, just, and correct. When the behavior of others is our only guide to suitable action—as is often the case (Aronson, 28)—individuals will conform, believing that following the example of others increases their likelihood of being right. We tend to conform the most when we perceive the available role model as having expertise or trustworthiness, which is exactly how participants in Milgram’s studies viewed the experimenter.

The desire to be right certainly contributed to obedience in the Milgram experiments. Because the experimental setting was ambiguous, the participants stood the best chance of defining the situation correctly—of “being right”—if they accepted the definition of the expert in the scene: the experimenter. Because the participants (like all humans) had a desire to be right, they obeyed. But wanting to be right was not the most fundamental desire at play. Rather, the participants’ desire to be right stemmed from an underlying force: the need to maintain a positive self-concept. Satisfying our desire to be right necessarily protects and improves our self-image. Intuitively, believing we are right is universally rewarding and inherently beneficial to our self-concepts—we like to see ourselves as acting appropriately and holding correct attitudes and beliefs (Aronson, 37, 138). When we do not have the necessary experience to know how to act appropriately in a given situation—to be “right” in that setting—we conform to the behavior of others to ensure that we do not appear foolish or act improperly; in short, we conform to ensure that our self-concepts won’t be damaged. It was the participants’ desire to maintain a positive self-image that caused them to imitate experimenter, and thus to obey.

Re-defining the Situation: The Challenges of Cognitive Conservatism

The ambiguity of the experimental setting, which made it difficult for participants to define the situation, was one environmental factor that contributed to obedience. Closely related to the difficulties in forming an initial definition of the laboratory situation is the challenge of redefining the scene once a once has formed his initial judgment. Many have argued that this difficulty led Milgram’s participants to continue to obey the experimenter despite the obvious indications that they were harming the participant (e.g. Nissani; Kelman & Hamilton, 138; Saltzman, 135). Moti Nissani offers support for this claim with an empirical example of the difficulty of redefining the situation. In his study, participants were given an instructional manual and told to review it for several hours. In one section of the manual, the participants encountered a false formula for the volume of a sphere. Upon reaching this section, subjects were asked to use both this formula and a water-displacement method to estimate the volume of a spherical object they had been given. The empirical measurements contradicted wildly with the estimates from the formula, yet the participants stuck with the first thing they learned. Even when the subjects held PhDs in science, one hundred percent continued to use the “observationally absurd formula” throughout the four-hour experiment (Nissani, 1385).
Nissani argues that these results demonstrate that humans find it difficult to discard pre-existing beliefs; that is, the participants failed to reject the false formula because they initially believed in the reliability of the instructional manual and avoided abandoning this belief, even in the face of obvious contradictory evidence.

Like Nissani’s participants, Milgram’s subjects brought to the experiment may beliefs about scientific research, beliefs they later struggled to overturn. When subjects entered Milgram’s experiment, they knew that scientists work under various legal and ethical constraints. They believed the researcher, a scientist at a prestigious institution, was a trustworthy individual. They had no previous experience with inhumane experiments, no reason to believe a study on learning and memory would be sadistic. To disobey the experimenter, participants had to allow an enormous conceptual shift—they had to redefine an ostensibly ethical situation as frighteningly immoral, a presumably trustworthy experimenter as irresponsible and inhumane (Nissani, 1385). As Kelman and Hamilton write, the participants could challenge the experimenter’s orders “only on the claim that the demands were illegitimate—that, contrary to the way in which the situation had hitherto been defined, the authorities were not entitled to make these demands and the citizens, therefore, were not obligated to obey them” (138). But because humans tend to cling to their first interpretations of a situation, redefining the experimental setting proved too difficult a task for the majority of Milgram’s participants. Without this reinterpretation, the inevitable result was obedience.

Participants struggled to re-define the experimental situation because of a psychological tendency known as “cognitive conservatism.” According to this theory of behavior, humans try to preserve already established knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and stereotypes (Aronson, 157-160). Cognitive conservatism is a direct result of our desire to maintain a positive self-concept: preserving our initial assessments allows us to perceive of ourselves as consistent, stable individuals, and believing we possess these qualities clearly benefits our self-esteem (Aronson, 158 & 179). Thus, participants avoided redefining the situation because doing so meant they could no longer view themselves as consistent individuals. Here, again, egoism drove obedience.

**Cognitive Dissonance, Self-Justification and the Sequential Nature of the Task**

![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

*Figure 4.* Cognitive dissonance is also depicted in the popular press (Adams).
In addition to our tendency to preserve our beliefs and assessments, another important psychological phenomenon called “cognitive dissonance” likely contributed to participants’ difficulties in redefining the situation and therefore to obedience. Cognitive dissonance is, in essence, an uncomfortable state of tension that occurs when an individual simultaneously holds two conflicting cognitions (see Festinger). These cognitions can be ideas, attitudes, beliefs, opinions or simply memories of an action or event. As the comic above nicely depicts, dissonance is uncomfortable simply because holding two contradictory ideas simultaneously is absurd and humans dislike being absurd (Aronson, 184). Thus, we try to reduce cognitive dissonance when we experience it.

When participants in Milgram’s experiments attempted to reduce dissonance, obedience was the likely result. While it seems that most participants did not have the cognitive resources necessary to make the conceptual shift needed to redefine the experiment as immoral (e.g. Nissani, see above), that a substantial number of participants (though still the minority) were disobedient demonstrates that reinterpreting the experimental situation was certainly possible. However, even if participants were able to change their understanding of the scene, their desire to reduce cognitive dissonance made them unlikely to act on their new definition. As soon as a participant understood the situation as immoral, he recognized that his complicity in the experiment was also immoral. This created uncomfortable dissonance: the belief “I am a decent, humane individual” was dissonant with the participant’s knowledge that “I am violating a universal moral code by inflicting pain on this harmless stranger.” To reduce this dissonance, the participants had two options. First, they could either engage in self-justification, convincing themselves that shocking the victim as a justified and not immoral. One participant, for example, justified his behavior by viewing it in the larger, benevolent context of a psychological experiment, describing his thoughts during the experiment as, “I’m a nice person, I think, hurting somebody, and caught up in what seemed a mad situation... and in the interest of science, one goes through with it” (Milgram, Obedience, 54). The second course Milgram’s participants could take to reduce dissonance was to disobey the experimenter and cease their horrifying actions. While the latter option may seem like the most efficient choice for dissonance reduction, it also required admitting all previous behavior in the experiment was immoral. Because the participants would still have to deal with their complicity in the first portion of the experiment, dissonance could only be partially reduced. As Milgram notes, for the subject to disobey he must say to himself, “Everything I have done to this point is bad, and I now acknowledge it by breaking off” (149). Consequently, participants tended to opt for the former, more effective method of dissonance reduction—deciding to view their obedience as moral—and as a result continued the experiment through the very end.

Yet even before participants had to choose between acknowledging their complicity in an immoral experiment or attempting to reinterpret their behavior as justified, cognitive dissonance was at work preparing participants for continued obedience. Specifically, after each decision the participant made, he engaged in dissonance reduction that ultimately prevented him from viewing his actions as immoral. In general, we experience dissonance almost every time we make a decision (Aronson, 195). This dissonance occurs because decisions are seldom black and white—the unchosen alternative almost always has some positive qualities, causing us to experience dissonance between the cognitions “I did not choose this particular alternative” and “This particular alterna-
tive had X desirable quality.” We tend to reduce this post-decision dissonance through self-justification: we emphasize the positive aspects of the option we have chosen and derogate the alternatives.

The sequential nature of the teacher’s task meant the participants in Milgram’s experiments repeated this self-justification many times: every time the learner gave an incorrect response, the participants had to decide whether to shock him. When the participants chose to administer the shock, they reduced dissonance by devaluing the alternative of not shocking the victim. At first, these self-justifications were very easy to make: even though the participant knew the shocks were painful, the learner did not offer any negative responses to the milder shocks. Moreover, the participant believed the experiment was contributing to useful new scientific knowledge. Participants’ initial justifications set the stage for later obedience: if a participant justified an increase of 15 volts early in the experiment—say, from 45 to 60 volts—shouldn’t he also see a later increase of the same magnitude, such as from 300V to 315V, as reasonable? Once an individual starts down this slippery slope of self-justification, it becomes increasingly difficult for him to draw the line between a moral and immoral voltage level (Aronson, 201). John Darley, describing destructive obedience in general, explains this phenomenon, known as the foot-in-the-door-effect, this way:

The essence of the process involves causing individuals, under pressure, to take small steps along a continuum that ends in evil doing. Each step is so small as to be essentially continuous with the previous ones; after each step, the individual is positioned to take the next one. The individual’s morality follows rather than leads. (208)

By the time a participant gets to the second highest level, the final voltage level hardly seems different than the shock he has just administered. Justification for previous shocks provided rationalization in advance for complying with later, more demanding commands. There is evidence that the foot-in-the-door-effect was indeed at play in Milgram’s studies: if this sort of justification were taking place, it follows that the sooner in the course of the experiment a subject shows notable resistance, the more likely it is that he will eventually discontinue the study. Andre Modigliani and Francois Rochat reanalyzed the data collected from one variation of Milgram’s experiments and found that this hypothesis held.

In addition to devaluing the alternative course of action each time they administered a shock, participants could also reduce dissonance by disparaging the learner. Many psychologists have noted that individuals tend to derogate their victims, even when they only harm the victim under an authority’s orders. For example, in an experimental situation similar to Milgram’s, David Glass induced participants to deliver a series of electric shocks to others. Glass measured the participant’s attitudes toward the victim before and after the shocks were delivered. He found that individuals had more negative attitudes of the victim at the end of the experiment, suggesting that the aggressors derogated the victim to justify their cruelty towards him. Derogating the victim of the shocks maximized his culpability, thereby justifying immoral treatment of him—in essence, allowing the participants believe the learner got what he deserved (Aronson 226–7). Milgram notes that participants often made comments such as “He was so stupid and stubborn he deserved to be shocked” (Obedience 10). Milgram sums up the process well, explaining that once the subjects had harmed the victim, they “found it necessary to view him as an
unworthy individual, whose punishment was made inevitable by his own deficiencies of intellect and character” (10). Because the participants had to decide again and again whether to shock the subject, they would have greatly devalued the learner by the time he even started protesting. This process ultimately led the participants to view their behavior as perfectly moral, thus eliminating dissonance and ensuring obedience.

Attempts to reduce cognitive dissonance played a significant role in shaping participants’ behavior—and this dissonance reduction was, at its core, motivated by the participants’ desire to protect their self-image. When participants decided to shock the victim, they chose to devalue both the victim of their cruelty and the alternative course of action, a process that set the stage for continued obedience. If they had not engaged in this self-justification, they would have had to view their behavior either as immoral (because the victim did not deserve to be shocked), threatening their self-images. So participants justified their actions, and the result was obedience. Likewise, if a participant managed to realize his initial assessment of the experimental situation might be wrong, and internalized a new interpretation that deemed his behavior immoral, his view of himself would suffer. Alternatively, obedience allowed the participant to implicitly reject such situational definitions, and thus to walk out of the experiment with his self-esteem intact. In sum, when participants attempted to protect their self-images—both after they administered each shock, and when they recognized immoral definitions of their behavior—obedience resulted.

The Constraints of Social Norms

“As social norms rigidly constrain how we live, and individuals who transgress the limits can expect trouble. We may think that our personal life-style represents our own free choice, but that belief is often mistaken.” —Geoffrey Rose

As discussed above, many scholars have noted the ambiguity of Milgram's experimental situation. Yet there were also characteristics of the laboratory setting that were simply unmistakable. Specifically, many researchers have noted how social norms, codes of behavior that are by definition unambiguous, influenced behavior in the obedience experiments. Specifically, social norms constrained the interaction between the experimenter and the participant, ultimately leading to obedience. Breaking off the experiment meant breaching his initial, implicit promise to aid the experimenter, and norms of interpersonal etiquette constrained the participant’s freedom to disobey (Milgram, Obedience 149). In the experiments, participants had to find a socially appropriate way to disobey—simply mustering the will to disobey was insufficient (Collins & Brief 89). Collins and Brief found that American teenagers preferred participants who politely disobeyed to those who defiantly disobeyed (99), suggesting that society expects us to disobey in an appropriate way, even if obedience means breaching universal moral codes. To disobey without facing social rejection, participants needed cognitive resources and social adeptness often beyond their reach, especially considering the extreme stress they experienced. Moreover, the experimenter employed adaptive interpersonal strategies to further hinder the participant’s attempts to disobey (Lutsky 61). For example, when faced with a worried participant, the experimenter in Milgram’s study consistently redirected the focus of the interaction from the condition of the learner to the experimental
procedures (“The experiment requires that you continue,” he might prod). To disobey, subjects needed the cognitive resources to both direct the focus of the interaction back to the learner and to reject the experimenter’s prods—all without treating a man of authority in a socially unacceptable way. When participants lacked the necessary verbal skills to do this, or could not access them due to their emotional stress, the result was obedience (Lutsky 61).

In essence, the participants’ decision to obey societal behavioral codes was intimately linked with their desire to protect their self-concepts. Humans have a universal desire to be liked—to gain social acceptance, to belong to a community. Satisfying this desire is clearly beneficial to our self-concepts: our self-esteem increases when we gain peer approval (Aronson 378-80). But in the Milgram experiments, disobeying all but guaranteed the experimenter would dislike the defiant participant. Indeed, to disobey, participants had to “disrupt the established social order and the smoothness of social interaction and to suffer the consequences of such a disruption” (Kelman & Hamilton 138). Disobedience meant forfeiting the possibility of gaining the experimenter’s approval, and was therefore an unattractive—and unpopular—course of action.

Conclusions

Scholars often use a power-of-the-situation explanation to understand the otherwise unsettling obedience of the participants in Stanley Milgram’s experiments. Yet at a more fundamental level, it was not simply situational factors that led to obedience, but also the subjects’ motivation to protect their self-images. Such efforts were the driving force behind participants’ obedience. Because they desired to be right, participants modeled their behavior after the experimenter, relying on the authority figure as a guide for appropriate action. Later, because they wished to view themselves as individuals with stable beliefs, they could not conceive of their own actions as immoral, and thus lacked the motive to disobey. When participants justified their behavior, they avoided confronting their own immorality and were unable to accurately understand their own behavior. Finally, because they desired social approval, which was sure to bring boosts in self-image, participants entered the laboratory with a propensity for obedience. The participants subscribed to social norms of interpersonal interaction, increasing the likelihood that the experimenter would bestow his approval—and that they would obey his malevolent orders.

A “power-of-the-situation” explanation for participants’ obedience takes responsibility off the shoulders of the participants—it is the situation itself that controls outcomes, not the individuals involved. While this interpretation has been well supported by many scholars, it is frustrating. If we are always to blame the situation, is no one accountable for his or her wrongdoings? Where does the power of the situation end and free will begin? And perhaps most importantly, if situations can be so powerful as to cause ordinary people to commit atrocious acts—acts incompatible with fundamental standards of morality—if normal individuals can become agents of terrible destruction simply because they happened to end up in a particular situation, what can anyone do to avoid the possibility of perpetrating horrifying acts?

A new look at the experiments can resolve these troubling questions. When we reinterpret the behavior of Milgram’s participants as not simply the result of the controlling
power of the situation, but also a result of the human tendency to protect our self-images, we restore to the participants responsibility for their actions, while still giving fair attention the influence of situational factors. Under this interpretation, the experimental situation encourages obedience, but it is ultimately up to the participants to decide whether to obey, or to shake off concerns about their self-images and end the experiment. We, too, can escape the pressures that lead to destructive obedience, but only if we are willing to confront our mistakes and abandon our need for a flawless self-image. This reinterpretation is more than another way of making sense of the participants’ behavior; it is a way by which we can reclaim our own ability to act morally, it is a lesson in our flaws and instruction for improvement. With it, human agency and responsibility alike are recouped. This reinterpretation has an undeniable power: we hold close our beliefs about free will, and are deeply unsettled by the thought of losing our agency; under my argument, no situation can force us to commit destructive acts—we always have a choice.

Milgram saw broad significance in his experimental findings. From the outset, his work was driven by a desire to answer some of the most profound questions about human nature that were begged by the Second World War. Why do people commit such violent acts against innocent others? Do each of us have a kernel of evil lurking within us—are we really so different from Eichmann and Hitler? Would we, too, kill another human being at the order of an authority? Milgram’s experimental findings extend far beyond the walls of his laboratory—they force us to question our most deep-seated assumptions about human nature. My contentions with Milgram’s claims are borne out at this level, as well. In Milgram’s studies, we have seen how the fundamental desire to view oneself positively can lead to glaringly negative results. However, we cannot wholly condemn the participants for attempting to protect their self-images, as there are circumstances in which high self-esteem is desirable. For example, when we view ourselves as sensible and good human beings, we are sometimes less likely to engage in immoral behavior. Researchers have found that students with higher self-esteem are less likely to, for example, cheat to win money (Aronson & Mettee). Self-esteem is also powerful motivator—when an individual believes in himself, he is more likely to work harder and more persistently toward a goal, and such diligence is a necessary pre-requisite for the most important human advancements, and for helping society function at the highest possible level. Such hard work leads to life-saving scientific discoveries, to more competent doctors, teachers, policemen, civil servants, and political leaders—in short, all of society can benefit from an individual’s high self-esteem. But even so, we cannot forget what the Milgram experiments have taught us: attempting to protect one’s self-esteem often leads one to hold a dangerously distorted perception of the world and oneself. Milgram’s participants disparage the innocent victim of their shocks, and came to believe that inflicting severe pain on a harmless man was appropriate. So on one hand, having high self-esteem can lead to many desirable outcomes; but on the other, the things we sometimes must do to maintain this positive self-image can be horrifically destructive and simply inhumane. This fundamental aspect of human nature is a double-edged sword, one that we must each decide how to wield.
Endnotes


2 This attribution falls under the category of a more general tendency to assume that another’s behavior can be explained by their personalities. This phenomenon is known as the “fundamental attribution error.”

3 Arendt did not totally agree with this interpretation. Rather, she insisted that we always have moral choices, even under totalitarian rule. She was careful to point out that even in ‘powerful’ situations like that of Nazi Germany, there are some people who did not comply.

4 See, e.g., Darley, 204; Milgram, *Obedience*, 6; Zimbardo, 566; Blass, 1991, 399

5 High rates of conformity have been found even when participants knew the appropriate course of action in a given situation without the guidance of others. Asch (1951) offers a powerful demonstration of this tendency. In a famous study, the overwhelming majority of Asch’s participants matched their peers’ incorrect responses on a simple perceptual task. The task was truly unambiguous: when the participants answered in private, they never failed to offer the correct responses. Even so, the participants repeatedly conformed to their peers. If many participants will conform even in unambiguous situations, it is no small wonder high levels of conformity occur in situations that are more difficult to define. Sherif (1937) offers the classic study of this phenomenon. In this study, a point of light in a dark room seems to move while actually remaining stationary. Participants were to estimate the distance the light moved. When the participants responded individually, answers were erratic. When participants responded in groups, on the other hand, participants conformed to one another and answers converged around a single measure. This convergence was not due to a desire to be liked: individual participants continued to report the converged measure even when the other group members were no longer present.

Works Cited


SPRING 2008 HONORABLE MENTION

Kylie Tuosto

INSTRUCTOR’S FOREWORD

Kylie Tuosto’s “The ‘Grunt Truth’ of Embedded Reporting” has its origin in a deceptively simple pun: journalists “embed” themselves with military units in order to report on the experience of war. As Kylie demonstrates, however, this term also “helps illuminate the transgressive and incestuous quality of the media-military relationship.” Her intellectual curiosity and sensitivity to the multivalent qualities of language combined to transform this detail into a fascinating argument about the challenges of war correspondence, the nature of journalistic subjectivity, the sensationalization of news, and the problematic relationship between American news media and the government and military.

Perhaps the most impressive aspect of Kylie’s work is the originality and sophistication of her argument. She articulates a methodological approach to understanding the biases at work in war correspondence by identifying and discussing personal experience bias, reader-response bias, editorial bias, and sacrificial bias. Ultimately, Kylie uses these analyses “to suggest more broadly that the effect of embedded reporting on the American public is distraction of and desensitization to war, as well as a perpetuation of American overconfidence in military ability.” She goes on to address both the politics and economics of journalism and war correspondence: the embedded reporter has become, she argues, a heroic icon in the “dramatization of the military experience” which in many ways relies on “the war imagery used in film production.” Embedded reporting thus creates audiences for its “compelling human-interest pieces” that distract people from the essential developments of war. Like all good scholarship, Kylie’s work poses difficult questions to readers and to herself; as her instructor, I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to work with her as she explored them.

Kylie develops her argument by drawing on an astonishingly diverse range of sources. She engages with government documents, scholarly journals, periodicals, documentaries, radio shows, television interviews, and journalism websites. For many writers, such a wealth of material would become unwieldy. Kylie, however, remains in control of her ideas, research, and prose. Her argument is multilayered and complex, but her style throughout the essay is accessible and clear. Consider, for example, the lucidity and the force of the following passage: “What we are beginning to see with embedded reporting is a de-secularization of American enterprise in favor of an increasing fictionalization, militarization, and politicization. Where once we were looking to the first amendment to separate the powers of media and government … we are now allowing the media and military to become accomplices in the creation of a Hollywood-esque dramatization of war in Iraq used to propagate pro-war sentiment at home as well as justify America’s presence in overseas conflict.” Even at her most critically astute and powerful moments, she is deliberate and restrained.
Kylie is an accomplished writer with a sophisticated mind. Helping her articulate, develop, and polish her ideas about the problems of embedded reporting and war correspondence was a rewarding experience for me. The curiosity and enthusiasm with which she approached both her work and my course were extraordinary.

— Ryan Zuroski
The “Grunt Truth”
of Embedded Journalism

Kylie Tuosto

“We didn’t want to be in bed with the military, but we certainly wanted to be there.”
– Marjorie Miller, editor for the Los Angeles Times

American journalism generally connotes three things: freedom of the press, yellow journalism, and sensationalism in the news. With the current war in Iraq, we can now add “embedded reporting” to the list of terms coined and used to represent both the cooperation and the mistrust between the American government and the American news media. In times of war, there is a delicate balance between government censorship of war correspondence and the right of the press to produce unregulated news. In essence, both rely on each other for propagation of war sentiment, and both have the power to destroy the other’s credibility with the American public. As Naval Reserve Commander Jose L. Rodriguez puts it, it is “a mix of cooperation and tension” (Rodriguez).

In Vietnam, the lack of an official declaration of war prevented the U.S. military from making any formal regulations, and thus it was forced to request that correspondents practice voluntary censorship. In 1971, to control the media, the military created the Wartime Information Security Program, which quickly became obsolete as technology developed and there was no longer a need for field censorship. Without a formal contract between the military and the press, correspondents reported critically on the effectiveness of U.S. intervention. Editors at home, however, reflected only military reports of success in Vietnam, and while some newspapers criticized military tactics, few, if any, questioned U.S. policy. In 1968, however, the Tet Offensive changed the media’s perspective on war, and as American troops began to lose significant battles for the first time, the public and press began to challenge America’s decision to continue to fight in Vietnam. Ultimately, as journalists began reporting on the futility of sending more troops, the military began to blame the press for lack of pro-war sentiment and, ultimately, for the stalemate of the war. Similarly, the press blamed the military for lying about the situation in Vietnam and trying to mislead the public. The mistrust between the military and the media that was established in Vietnam is a sentiment that continues to be felt by both sides today (Newseum).

The military in the first Gulf War was able to effectively control press access in response to mistrust during Vietnam. Though the media now had high-tech tools at their disposal, the military could regulate what they could see and what they were told. The military then established a pooling system in which a small group of journalists covered an event for the entire press corps. This system, however, encountered several problems such as lack of cooperation, in-fighting, and the struggle between the needs of different media outlets (Newseum).
In the current war in Iraq, the media and military continue to look for a balance between censorship and a free press. Whether to alleviate tension or to gain political and militaristic control, the Pentagon has decided to be proactive about setting up a safe means for the media to report on the war in Iraq. Unlike previous attempts to keep the press away from the battlefield, the Pentagon has now established a system of “embedded” reporters in which “a media embed is defined as a media representative remaining with a unit on an extended basis – perhaps a period of weeks or even months” (“Public Affairs…”). In contrast, the term “unilateral” defines any un-embedded journalists who are not associated with a military unit, but are independent journalists, freelance journalists, or journalists associated with a media organization. According to the ground rules established in an official, unclassified government report from 2003, the purpose of embedding the media is “to facilitate maximum, in-depth coverage of U.S. forces in combat and related operations” (“Public Affairs…” Sec 2.C.). However, policy 2.A. of this document reveals a military interest not only in in-depth coverage, but in public perception:

Media coverage of any future operation will, to a large extent, shape public perception of the national security environment now and in the years ahead. This holds true for the U.S. public; the public in allied countries whose opinion can affect the durability of our coalition; and publics in countries where we conduct operations, whose perceptions of us can affect the cost and duration of our involvement (“Public Affairs…” Sec 2.A.).

This declaration of strong U.S. Military interest in public perception of war reveals a) an obsession with the interaction between media and military, and b) a dedication of both sides to cooperate in order to “tell the factual story—good or bad—before others seed the media with disinformation and distortions, as they most certainly will continue to do” (“Public Affairs…” Sec 2.A.). Both the media and military claim to strive for truth and fact: “[T]he public demands objectivity and journalists strive to achieve it, even though critics say they miss the mark. Even if the traditional notion of objectivity as an absolute standard is often unattainable, to abandon the concept altogether would open the door to undisciplined, irresponsible journalism” (Fox). And in order to effectively and efficiently relay “the factual story,” the Pentagon has chosen to embed media representatives, a practice which, while appearing to be a perfect solution to the unsolved problem of unbiased and in-depth war correspondence, creates several unprecedented difficulties for both journalists and their readers.

The argument I will develop here is two-fold. First, I will argue that embedded war correspondence magnifies four specific types of bias inherent in all journalism: personal experience bias, reader-response bias, editorial bias, and sacrificial bias. I will then use this analysis of the limitations of objectivity to suggest more broadly that the effect of embedded reporting on the American public is a distraction of and desensitization to war, as well as a perpetuation of American overconfidence in military ability. Moreover, as the sexual tension inherent in the word “embed” implies, the intimate nature of the media-military relationship is fundamentally incestuous, insofar as it is an illicit transgression of the principle of freedom of the press. Though it attempts to propagate pro-war sentiment and alleviate American apathy, embedded reporting has actually given birth to an unprecedented hyper-dramatization of war.
“Experience is one thing you can’t get for nothing.”

Personal Experience Bias in the American News Media

Every journalist begins a story or an investigation with a predisposition to the topic. Whether it is his childhood fear of heights or her being a woman, the journalist carries a vast number of life experiences that shape not only his or her view of the world, but the story he or she is covering. In addition, such life experiences contribute to a multiplicity of viewpoints from which the same story, the same unbiased truth, might be written. We might otherwise disregard the effects of such bias, as it cannot easily be alleviated, if it were not for the fact that war correspondence dramatically magnifies personal experience bias. Under war conditions, in which life is at risk and the fear of death is insurmountable, human emotional response inevitably determines a journalist’s experience. This emotion does not necessarily translate into an emotionally appealing story, but, rather, exemplifies the extent to which a war correspondent’s previous life experiences affect his reporting.

In the case of embedded reporters, I am particularly concerned with three demographics: veteran status, nationality, and gender. All of these strongly contribute to diversely biased stories. Previous military experience, be it in Vietnam, the first Gulf War, or in the current war in Iraq, can create a strong sense of camaraderie with the troops, which can, in turn, strongly affect the tone, rhetoric, and even content of a journalist’s story. Nationality plays a large role in reporting on the war in Iraq for several reasons: not only do the citizens of most European countries look unfavorably upon American involvement in Iraq (Gallego), but their reporters are also less likely to gain authorization to embed with American troops. American journalists have a monopoly over the embedding market, causing resentment among non-American reporters and implying that a relatively univocal view of the war emerges. Finally, a journalist’s gender has a profound impact not only on the way he or she perceives the emotional turbulence of war, but also on the rhetoric he or she uses to describe the conflict. While there are an unlimited number of demographics and personal experiences that affect reporting, embedded journalism significantly magnifies veteran status, nationality, and gender; by exploring the effect of each, we can better understand the role of personal experience bias in war correspondence.

Journalists who are war veterans seem automatically predisposed to a sympathy for and camaraderie with their colleagues. This predisposition causes not only a predetermined bias towards their units, but also affects the rhetoric and content of their stories. In order to see the effect of veteran status, we can compare the stories of Michael Fumento, veteran of 27th Engineer Battalion, Gordon Dillow, former Army sergeant in Vietnam, and Mercedes Gallego, a non-veteran Spanish reporter. Quickly, we recognize the difference in content. Both Fumento and Dillow focus their reports on either soldier human interest or combat, while Gallego is forced to write a first person account of her own experiences because she lacks a military background.

In Fumento’s article, “The New Band of Brothers,” his bias immediately becomes apparent as he writes, “I preferred to be with the 82nd Airborne—which had only recently arrived and which is my old sister unit[ [...]].” Fumento’s language of possession and intimacy reveals his inherent predisposition towards a fondness for the soldiers of his
new unit (Fumento). His recent war experience not only predetermines a natural affection for his troops, but causes a unique lack of scope associated with his narrow-minded fixation on one set of soldiers with whom he shares common ground, his old sister unit. Dillow’s article, on the other hand, presents another problem associated with veteran status. As a veteran, Dillow understands the pressures of war and the threat of death and, as such, is not only predisposed to camaraderie, but is inherently protective of the young men with whom he is embedded. This protectiveness takes the form of content filtering, as Dillow admittedly makes the marines sound “much more like choirboys…than they really are” by censoring expletives and roguish humor; he knows that, unlike himself, the people back home cannot and will not understand the crude nature of soldiers fearing for their lives. “I’d been an Army sergeant in Vietnam, an ancient, almost mythical war to the grunts, most of whom are nineteen or twenty.” Here Dillow assumes a paternal role, feeling obligated to put his story “in the context of sweet-faced, All-American boys,” in order to sanitize the truth for the naïve, yet critical, American public. As veterans, both Dillow and Fumento have this in common: their stories inherently lack objectivity because each veteran possesses such an in-depth understanding of and vested interest in his subject. Consequently, neither can differentiate between personal experience and an objective eye-witness account of events.

In contrast, non-veteran Mercedes Gallego has to compensate for her lack of understanding of the subject. Without war experience, she seems baffled by the realities of war and, as a result, can only report on what she feels and how she reacts to a given situation. Thus her reader is left not with an eye-witness account of events, but minimally factual and unduly emotional piece of reporting. Both lack and excess stem from her inability to comprehend the soldier’s story. In addition to her non-veteran status, Gallego’s internalization of war experience is supplemented by both her gender and nationality. “On the day he [a fellow journalist] was killed,” she recalls, “I spent the night crying until I fell asleep.” Gallego then continues to discuss the hardships of sleeping on the ground and writing on paper rather than a laptop: “It’s very tough though because you’re not in a hotel and personally, I was always more worried about losing a leg or something like that than being killed.” She goes on to discuss car bombings and shootings, all of which were anecdotes of extremely dangerous situations, in an attempt to elicit sympathy from her readers. “For women, this was a tough place anyway,” she says as she introduces her story. Gallego not only calls attention to the fact that she has no war experience, but attempts to gain even more sympathy from her readers for her status as a female journalist. Not surprisingly, this strips her article of much objective credibility, weakens her authority, and places her story among the hundreds of human-interest pieces looking to elicit the same emotional reader response—demanding pity for embeds, rather than for soldiers.

As an embed associated with the press in Spain, Gallego’s nationality is also a factor contributing to her overall bias. Unlike Fumento and Dillow, who as Americans are more likely to glorify the American soldier, Gallego and Canadian correspondent Paul Workman respond quite differently to the use of embedded reporters. “Spain had the largest anti-war sentiment of any country in Europe—ninety-one percent of the population was against this war—and so it did affect my coverage,” writes Gallego, who admits she approaches the subject with a disapproval of American involvement in Iraq (Gallego). Workman, a non-embedded Canadian correspondent, criticizes both American involvement and the unfair use of embedded reporters. “The embedded
program in writing and rhetoric

jornalists… sound like cheerleaders,” writes Workman. “There is no question the pictures coming out of the war zone are spectacular, the red, swirling sandstorms in the western desert, the tanks and armored vehicles shooting their way into the heart of Baghdad,” he says of the embeds’ ability to create wonderfully dramatic war images. However, “Americans have succeeded in reducing independent reporting of the war. You’re more likely to see a glorified view of American power and morality, in a war that much of the world considers unnecessary, unjustified and just plain wrong…” (Workman). Workman’s point is an insightful one. Not only do European reporters like Gallego harbor distaste for and are subsequently biased against the American military, but other non-American reporters like Workman point out that even being an American embed causes an inherent nationalist bias in support of American troops. Not without his own faults, however, Workman admits that his criticism of embeds is biased as well, since his is just “the humble opinion of one frustrated, ‘un-embedded’ reporter.” Workman’s bitterness towards embeds, Fumento’s desire to embed with former units, Dillow’s intimacy with and protectiveness of his marine grunts, and Gallego’s emotional appeal to self-pity all contribute to a skewed perception of war reality established through the convolution of journalists’ previous personal experiences.

“There are no facts, only interpretations.”

Reader-Response Bias in the American News Media

Journalism is not simply investigative reporting for the sake of finding truth; it is a capitalist enterprise with a market and consumers to which it must cater. Based on a newspaper’s, magazine’s, or television station’s audience, a reporter will alter content as well as rhetoric in order to best serve that audience’s needs. In war correspondence, then, considering audience means a journalist will inevitably censor the reality of war at his/her discretion. War correspondence is particularly conducive to censorship not only because it exposes the arguably naïve American public to the brutality and ruthlessness of war, but also because the families of soldiers have a right to learn of their loved one’s death in a respectful, tactful, and formal way. This means that embeds not only practice self-censorship, but also receive limited information and are denied intimate details for the sake of secrecy and military strategy. Because “unit commanders may impose temporary restrictions on electronic transmissions for operational security reasons,” (“Public Affairs…” Sec 2.C.) an additional layer of censorship evolves, which is essentially out of journalists’ control. Similarly, the bias inherent in an embed’s inability to see the larger picture of war contributes to a stratified filter of information which exemplifies the limitation inherent not only in the biases explored here, but in the restrictions placed on embeds as well. Despite necessary militaristic regulations, journalists, wary of their audience and public opinion, practice self-censorship; this constitutes not only an inherent lack of objectivity, but also serves to create a fabricated version of reality.

Ultimately, self-censorship distorts reality by depending on the eyes of the reporter, which diminishes the truth-value of the reporting itself. Embedded war correspondent Gordon Dillow writes, “The discomforts and dangers of the war were easily dealt with; accurately conveying the reality of it to the readers back home was not.” He continues
to justify his lack of objectivity by rationalizing that omitting soldiers’ routine expletives “was unavoidable” and that “it wouldn’t fly in a family newspaper [and] neither would the constant jokes about sex and bodily functions.” Dillow’s article reveals not only his paternal over-protectiveness, but also demonstrates a level of censorship that eventually leads him to equate military personnel to singing schoolchildren: “The result was that the marines sounded much more like choirboys in my stories than they really are.” While he concedes the point that his stories did not accurately convey reality, he also claims, “I didn’t hide anything. For example, when some of my marines fired up a civilian vehicle that was bearing down on them, killing three unarmed Iraqi men, I reported it—but I didn’t lead my story with it, and I was careful to put it in the context of scared young men trying to protect themselves…and sweet-faced, all-American boys hardened by a war that wasn’t of their making.” Dillow’s strong connection with his soldiers, as well as the fact that “some things are simply too gruesome to describe in detail,” allows him to take liberties with censorship, writing only what he deems necessary and proper for a family audience. The problem thus becomes an inherent lack of objectivity that is paradoxically disguised by Dillow’s openness and honesty with his reader: in admitting a lack of objectivity, Dillow gains credibility with his reader, who might then mistake his honesty for a truth-value that his story largely lacks.

Dillow’s argument is in itself a contradiction, as he states that he both omits nothing and censors expletives and gruesome details for a family audience. This paradox emphasizes the fact that his reporting is in no way representative of objective truth; this is not to say, of course, that his article does not contain truth. In fact, he states that “the point wasn’t that I wasn’t reporting the truth; the point was that I was reporting the marine grunt truth—which had also become my truth” (Dillow). With respect to the reader-response bias, we find that his “marine grunt truth” is in fact the “marine-grunt-truth-as-is-appropriate-for-an-American-family-audience.” Dillow’s blanket justification for a lack of fact-based truth and his hasty relativization of truth opens the door to irresponsible journalism. If journalists abandon the pursuit of objective truth in favor of relativized truths grounded in personal experience and edited for audience consumption, then who will provide the audience with that necessary degree of objectivity? The question, then, quickly becomes one of truth value in which truth is measured by an arbitrary and subjective gradient. It is unreasonable and illogical merely to generate truth labels in order to compensate for a lack of fact-based truth value in one’s reporting.

Dillow’s obligation to objectivity forces him to fabricate not necessarily a story, but a truth value, for the sake of catering to an audience which only wants to hear the censored “marine grunt truth.” This suggests that the opinion and naïveté of the American public have a strong effect on how accurately the war is portrayed: journalists’ self-censorship for the sake of catering to an audience skews the necessary reality of a story, making it subjective to and reliant on the people who, in reality, know nothing of the war itself. Embeds, however, are not the only ones attempting to cater to war sentiment at home. News media editors must also take into account the reaction of the American public and, as such, impose their own opinions on the stories received from embeds. Editors alter both content and scope in the hope of providing what they feel to be a larger and more balanced perspective.
“There is more than one way to burn a book.”
Editorial Bias in the American News Media

All journalists must be wary of the opinion of their editors because they are employed by and accountable to someone. This is important in political journalism, where reporters must be cautious of how their own political views measure up to those of their editors. War correspondence, however, has an entirely different effect on the reporter-editor dynamic. With the advent of technologies like satellite-phones and lightning-speed digital imagery, war reporting in Iraq not only produces real-time correspondence, but a large volume of information which, for many media outlets, is sent home to editors and rewrites before it is presented to the American public. Both the relative speed of relayed information and the use of rewrites create an unprecedented problem of convoluted subjectivity.

In a panel discussion called “The LA Times Goes to War,” Marjorie Miller, editor of The Los Angeles Times, speaks to the success and value of embeds as well as to the responsibility of editors in organizing their information. “The embeds,” she says, “were valuable as mosaic pieces. But they could only see as far as they could see and it was up to Tracy and Tyler [rewrites] to begin the process of putting some of those little pieces of the puzzle into perspective” (Miller). While the initial purpose of embeds was to provide up-close and personal war coverage, the media seem to rely still on two second-hand observers sitting in their comfortable L.A. office chairs both to rewrite stories and to put them into perspective. Unlike past wars, in which correspondence was telegraphed from military commanders, we now rely heavily on American citizens, who have not experienced war at all, to relay valuable information to the American public. In the case of embedded correspondence, as information is relayed in real-time, the use of rewrites is comparable to having embeds jot down notes and send them several thousand miles away to be written into a story and then fed to the American public. Clearly, liberties are taken with the information relayed through embedded reporters—liberties that are rather deceptively represented as an unavoidable balancing act. As Miller states, “What you were getting from the military, from Iraq, from allied countries, from other unallied countries was going into a main bar in L.A. And we were trying to balance the relative weight of all of that information” (Miller). This approach may attempt to cover all ground as objectively as possible, but the mere use of a central editing hub narrows the scope of all incoming correspondence and filters it through the eyes of L.A. Times editors like Marjorie Miller, a process that introduces significant problems of editorial subjectivity.

The politics of war correspondence, however, is not only present in written news media. After all, nationwide polls found that 86% of viewers received their news about war from television (Ewers) and 70% received war news from cable television specifically (Sharkey). From the beginning of the war, television stations tended to choose a particular stance on the conflict and continued to feed each report into an editing filter of patriotism, jingoism, or in rare cases, objectivity. According to Julia Fox and Byungho Park’s statistical analysis of objectivity in embedded war correspondence, of the three largest cable television networks—Fox, CNN, and MSNBC—CNN was “more objective in its coverage of the Iraq War... [and] attempted to bring different viewpoints to viewers with segments such as ‘Voices of Dissent’ and ‘Arab Voices.’” Fox and Park even quote S. Johnson of the Chicago Tribune who “criticized Fox [News] for its subjective
reporting of the war [saying], ‘We deride Fox News Channel for saying “us” and “our” in talking about the American war effort, a strategy that conjures images of gung-ho anchor Shepard Smith, like Slim Pickens in Dr. Strangelove, riding a Tomahawk straight into Baghdad.’” Johnson then continues to criticize rival MSNBC who “like Fox, goes so far as to include a waving U.S. flag on its cluttered screen and to use the government’s official ‘Operation Iraqi Freedom’ as its blanket coverage title” (Fox). Columnist Clarence Page also disapproves of Fox “for embracing the language of the Bush administration in its newscasts. It calls suicide bombers ‘homicide bombers’ and refers to the war to unseat Saddam Hussein as America’s war to ‘liberate Iraq’” (Page). Statistics from viewer polls support these findings, as even viewers say that Fox had a great deal of media bias 43% of the time compared to CNN, for which viewers saw a great deal of media bias only 27% of the time (Fox). These comparisons are only examples of the wide range of bias created by the media editing filter. Simply by watching Fox as opposed to CNN, one is more likely to gain a biased understanding of the war in Iraq; with respect to my argument, the stories fed by embeds are more likely to be altered or skewed by media-editing when editors preemptively choose a particular stance based on politics at home. What we can ultimately gain from an understanding of editorial bias is the relative ease with which an already subjective embed’s story can be made more subjective not only to the opinion of the American public, as is the case with reader-response bias, but the opinion of news media editors in reaction to American politics and domestic war sentiment.

“I may have been recording my own obituary.”

Sacrificial Bias in the American News Media

Capitalism drives not only a need to sell any story at a good price, objective or not, but also the need to get a good story at any price—a price that, in the case of embedded reporters, is often one’s life. While there is a wide array of opinions on the issue, the basic question reporters must face is: are you willing to risk your life to get a story? Thus the question the American public should be asking itself: is the loss of more American lives worth the story? Jane Arraf, CNN’s Senior Baghdad Correspondent and unilateral reporter, says no. In a panel interview with Michael Fumento and Paul Rieckoff on The Al Franken Show, Arraf replies to Fumento’s criticism of unilaterals by saying, “there’s been more than sixty reporters killed. Reporters don’t have to go to Baghdad, take the risk of flying in, being hit by missiles as they’re flying, go on that road to the green zone where they might be blown up. They can easily stay in Jordan…” (“Special Iraq Panel”) Arraf continues to argue that often it is unilaterals who gain a better understanding of the war, as they have the ability to speak Arabic to the Iraqi people and to understand both the experience of Iraqis and the plight of the American military.

But many reporters, like Michael Fumento, believe that risking one’s life is necessary for getting the best story. Of unilateral reporters, Fumento, in his article “Covering Iraq: the Modern Way of War Correspondence,” writes: “If you don’t have the guts actually to cover the war, stand aside for those who do.” His disgust for “hotel-bound credit-claimers,” prominent throughout his article, makes his position abundantly clear. His photo caption, which shows his late editor Michael Kelly, who was killed while embedded in Iraq, reads, “Embeds die in Iraq, not members of the Baghdad Brigade,” referring to the “rear-echelon reporters” otherwise known as unilateralers. “[With] the sole exception of
Steven Vincent, the only American journalists killed or even seriously injured by hostile action in Iraq have been embeds.” Quoting Harry Truman, Fumento writes, “If you can’t stand the heat, get out of the kitchen” (Fumento, “Covering Iraq”). While such impassioned rhetoric reinforces the skewed and opinionated nature of his article, Fumento also writes that when asked where he wanted to be embedded, he replied, “the redder, the better,” claiming a willingness to sacrifice his own life for a story by embedding in the most dangerous war zone available (Fumento, “The New...”).

Unlike Fumento, photographer and journalist Stephanie Sinclair is unsure of her willingness to risk her life for the best pictures. In a recent PBS documentary on embedded journalism titled War Feels like War, Sinclair reflects on the danger of her current situation: “I’m a little wary. I really don’t want to get hurt. It’s just not worth it to me at this point. I don’t really know enough about covering wars or any sort of real violent subject matter.” While she may be unwilling to risk her own life, she certainly does not mind risking the happiness, or in this case sadness, of the grieving Iraqi wife she pushes out of the way in order to take a picture of her dead Iraqi husband:

I can’t imagine people photographing if I was in that situation. That’s what just kills me. If that was like my mother, or my brother or something ... It’s asking a lot for us to be there for those moments and be, like, right in the middle of it. I mean, I was in front of her, and it was the only way I could get a picture; otherwise, I couldn’t see, and there’s no point in us being there. And she was just wailing right in my ear, and I felt it throughout my whole body. A lot of journalists tell you [that] you have to block that out, and it’s impossible to not feel something when that’s happening.

While the obligation to her reporting allows her to disregard compassion, Sinclair, who plans on continuing war correspondence for fifteen more years, is still afraid of what she might lose: “I definitely don’t want to go out on my first one. Not only would it be a bad way to die, but it’d be a pretty bad way to be remembered.” Her main concern, then, is not to avoid dying or being shot at, but to avoid being remembered as the photojournalist who died in her first war. Similarly, Polish reporter Jacek Czarnecki of Radio Zet is concerned with how he will be remembered: “Some people do this because they want an exciting life. I don’t know why I do it. But I know I will quit this job sooner or later. I don’t want to be a 53 year old killed reporter.” To Czarnecki, dying is simply not worth the thrill of being a war correspondent.

Photographer Marco Di Lauro of Getty Images, on the other hand, claims that war hardens a reporter. In conversation with Stephanie Sinclair, Di Lauro says that experience in the field will over time change a reporter’s willingness to sacrifice for a story. “You will be ready to kill another photographer for a better picture like everybody else is ... [Before coming to Iraq] I was the nicest person in the whole world; now I am the biggest fucker ever. So here I am, ready to kill my mother for a better picture.” Though not all of the reporters featured in War Feels like War were embedded with the military, their experience sheds light on the bias associated with one’s willingness to risk his/her life. The inherent value Sinclair places on her own life causes her to feel compassion for her subjects, but allows greed to overcome any emotion. Conversely, Di Lauro, hardened by war, is willing to sacrifice anything to outdo other reporters, which may or may not help him get a better story.
Like Di Lauro, NBC News Middle East Correspondent Richard Engel thought the war would harden him. And, in a way, it did. But as he prefers to describe it, there are four stages of the embedding process. “Stage 1: I’m invincible. I’m ready. I’m excited. I’m living on adrenaline.” Then as the war begins, Stage 2: “You know what, this is dangerous, I could get hurt over here. And that starts to sink in. Then the war continues and friends start to get kidnapped or killed and you see bodies on the streets.” Stage 3: “I’ve been over here so long, I’m probably going to get hurt. And then at a certain stage, you hit rock bottom and you feel, I’ve used up my time. Stage 4: I’m going to die in this conflict. And that’s a dark place to go into.” And yet, as Engel goes on to reflect upon his five years in Iraq he concludes, “Has it been worth it? All the sacrifice? I think it has” (Engel). But even if the sacrifice is “worth it,” does greater sacrifice necessarily translate into greater success?

A reporter’s willingness to risk his/her life for a story creates problems both on an individual level and for war correspondence as a whole. We might be tempted to think that the more a reporter is willing to sacrifice, the better the story. However, this can mean that a reporter is desensitized to trauma and can no longer relate to the American public on a human-interest level. The reverse can also be true: a reporter willing to sacrifice his life for a story might be overly sensitive to the horrors of war and thus write a story which sensationalizes suffering. In either scenario the amount of risk a reporter is willing to take with his/her life does affect the objectivity of the story and ultimately allows emotion to creep into a human-interest piece as a desire for sympathy and pity — that is, sympathy and pity for the reporter, not for the soldiers. At this point, I am now not only considering how sacrificial bias affects objectivity, but whether the life-risk is ethical and, further, what risking civilian lives reveals about American capitalism with respect to the media. Why are Americans willing to risk more lives, the lives of civilian reporters, in order to experience a vicarious intimacy of war? Is this willingness simply in exchange for national pride and justification for overseas occupation? For that matter, we might include editorial bias to ask this question: why don’t we save ourselves time, money, and lives by having Tracy and Tyler just write the stories from home?

We don’t do it because we are intoxicated by military strength, power, and domination — feelings that manifest themselves in embedded war correspondence. Rather than concerning ourselves with the loss of objectivity, we seem to fixate on technologically-advanced, superior weaponry and the feelings of power it engenders. In his article, “Grunts and Pogues: The Embedded Life,” for example, Dillow recalls the feelings of calm and strength by holding a grenade given to him by one of his marine grunts: “It had been more than thirty years since I’d held a grenade, and I knew that my having it violated written and unwritten rules. Still, it felt comforting in my hand” (Dillow). Clearly, the marines as well as Dillow, in the heat of a struggle, were willing to disregard military regulations for the sake of saving their own lives. If this is the case — that during times of war, when life is at risk, the rules do not apply — then a host of implications can be drawn from the controversy embedded reporting is causing. For example, where exactly can we draw the line between embed and soldier? As colleagues “[who] operate as a part of their assigned unit,” do we expect embeds to take fire for fellow soldiers? (“Public Affairs ...” Sec 3.F.) The ground rules say no. But when do the rules actually apply? The result is simply this: when it comes down to life and death, objectivity is not merely impossible; it’s the last thing on anyone’s mind.
“You can’t objectively cover both sides when I’m guarding your butt.”

A Military Opinion of Embedded War Correspondence

The media are not the only ones telling the stories of embedded reporters. Both soldiers and veterans of the U.S. Military have their opinions of embeds, and the consensus seems to be a lack of breadth of scope. Dillow’s article, while written about his own experience, provides a unique, second-hand account of the initial skepticism his marine grunts held for embedded reporters:

They had been warned about us, I found out later. Be careful what you say to them, the Marines of Alpha Company were told before we joined them in early March…Don’t bitch about the slow mail delivery, don’t criticize the antiwar protesters back home, don’t discuss operational plans, and for God’s sake, don’t use ethnic slur words for Arabs. Better yet, don’t talk to the reporters at all. They’ll just stab you in the back (Dillow).

To Dillow’s surprise, the marine grunts not only saw embeds as an annoyance and an additional man to cover, but were initially suspicious of Dillow’s loyalties. After getting to know the men of his unit, Dillow explains that “they realized that we weren’t using our Iridium cell phones to alert the Iraqi army high command to the Marine’s next move,” and subsequently Dillow was able to develop both trust and camaraderie with his soldiers. Eventually, the soldiers’ initial mistrust grew into a desire to have their stories told accurately and affectionately to their loved ones at home. To the Marines of the Alpha Company, Dillow’s “marinegrunt truth” would suffice (Dillow).

Paul Rieckhoff, an Iraqi war veteran devoted to removing troops from Iraq, however, does not agree that the embeds’ reports are sufficient substitutes for truth. He argues that while embedded reporting sometimes produces useful reporting, the fact is that embeds are not getting the full story. He further suggests that it is impossible for embeds to report objectively when they, like the soldiers, must have a battlefield mentality. Rieckhoff makes this view clear not only in his book Chasing Ghosts: Failures and Facades in Iraq: A Soldier’s Story, but also in a panel discussion along with Michael Fumento and Jane Arraf on The Al Franken Show. Al Franken, the show’s host, quotes Colonel Johnson as having once said, “Every man thinks meanly of himself for not having been a soldier.” To which Franken responds, “Well I don’t.” After some laughter by all three panelists, Rieckhoff speaks up:

But a lot of reporters do. A lot of reporters really covet the experience. And I’m not saying this about you personally. But they like going over there. And they want to get their reporting chops. And we used to call them in the military “jock sniffers.” They wanted to be part of the action. And I’m not saying this of all reporters, but there are some elements of that. And in my opinion, if you’re embedded, you’ve compromised some of your journalistic integrity. You can’t
objectively cover both sides when I’m guarding your butt. And I’ve been there with embedded reporters and I think some of them do a great job. And I think honestly Ms. Arraf you’re doing a wonderful job at CNN, but you’re still only getting one side of it for the most part. You can’t independently operate without U.S. Military protection now. So you’re still only getting a very narrow understanding. And I think most of the people who’ve been there will admit that (“Special Iraq Panel”).

Rieckhoff’s statement sparks heated debate among the other two panelists, Arraf and Fumento, and even Franken, who continues to play devil’s advocate. Franken immediately points out that he thinks the best and bravest reporters are men and women like Jill Carroll and George Packer, “the people who have gone through that country without being embedded.” To this, Arraf strongly agrees and argues that embedding is not necessary to knowing the country and the people well. For instance, she states that “there are places you cannot go now without being embedded”; yet, if you “know the country as we do, as I do, you go there, you can actually speak Arabic to the Iraqis,” which, as she explains, is both necessary and sufficient in understanding the story in Iraq. Fumento, on the other hand, suggests that unilateralists are getting too comfortable sitting on the sidelines reporting second-hand information without actually experiencing what the soldiers experience. But perhaps it is actually the embedded journalists who exhibit a “false bravado,” as Arraf claims, because they are attempting to credit themselves with a combat mission (“Special Iraq Panel”).

In his article, “Covering Iraq: The Modern Way of War Correspondence,” Fumento addresses Rieckhoff’s comment: “Rieckhoff, an anti-war vet who was hawking his boring book…labeled those who actually go into battle with troops as ‘jock sniffers.’ To him, the Ernie Pyles and Joe Rosenthals of America’s past were just a bunch of contemptible groupies.” Fumento continues to mock Rieckhoff’s statement by projecting his term “jock sniffers” onto journalist heroes of the past, where, under the photo of the famous flag raising at Iwo Jima, Fumento’s caption reads: “The most iconic image of World War II, by ‘crotch-sniffer’ Joe Rosenthal”. Fumento’s response demonstrates the sharp contrast between the view of a soldier and that of an embed. While in the field they might get along, tension still exists between the two. Rieckhoff seems to be the more rational of the two, arguing not for the factual storytelling of a soldier’s plight, as one might expect from a veteran, but rather for the combination of correspondence gained by embeds, unilateralists and non-American war correspondents. Ultimately, both Dillow’s and Rieckhoff’s accounts of soldiers’ responses to embeds reveal the complexity surrounding an embed’s inability to objectively view both sides, while resisting the distractions of camaraderie, fear of the enemy, and pressure from soldiers to communicate their stories compassionately. Despite the military’s skepticism of embeds and the tension created by mistrust in Vietnam, embedded reporting has changed the way the military views the media. As Commander Rodriguez points out, “The shift in the military’s perspective of the media from that of an adversary to an ally was central to the mission” in Iraq and ultimately to the development of a symbiotic relationship between media and military (Rodriguez).
“A *that-could-be-me-feeling.*”
The Use of Personal Pronouns in Embedded Reports

Julia Fox and Byungho Park, authors of a statistical analysis of the use of personal pronouns by embedded reporters versus non-embedded reporters, suggest that the context in which embeds use personal pronouns reveals not a lack of objectivity or an imposition of a journalist’s personal values, but rather a use of personal pronouns conducive to and necessary for an eye-witness account of events. Fox and Park agree with my argument in that “news professionals have come to adopt objectivity as an essential component of sound reporting”; yet, “given their physical and likely emotional closeness to their embedded troops,” “embedded journalists’ objectivity [is] jeopardized as they [become] part of the story.” In order to better understand this problem, Fox and Park advocate a rethinking of “the concept of objectivity in terms of broad standard of impartial inquiry, rather than as absolute adherence to traditional conventions and techniques such as the use of impersonal, third-person writing style.” However, we must be critical of this reconceptualization, as one of the benefits of an unattainable goal of objectivity is that it forces journalists not only to be cautious about and aware of subjectivity, but to adhere to traditional conventions characteristic of objective reporting (Fox).

The Fox/Park study makes three critical hypotheses: first that, “embedded journalists will use the first-person singular pronoun in its various forms—*I* (nominative), *me* (objective), and *my/mine* (possessive)—more often than nonembedded reporters.” Second that, “embedded journalists will use the inclusive pronoun in its various forms—*we* (nominative), *us* (objective), and *our/ours* (possessive)—more often than nonembedded reporters.” And finally, “embedded journalists will be referred to by others with the personal pronoun *you* (nominative and objective) and *your/yours* (possessive) more often than nonembedded journalists.” Although Fox and Park found statistically significant evidence supporting hypothesis one and part of hypothesis two, they admit that “this study does not take into account the context of the reporters’ use of the first-person singular pronoun.” While the study’s statistics reinforce my argument that embedded journalists incorporate themselves and their lives into their stories, it is rash to assume that mere analysis of word usage accounts for content and subject. Fox and Park set up a statistical analysis of pronoun usage through three hypotheses, the null hypothesis being that the likelihood of personal pronoun usage is equal for both embeds and unilateralists. The study then concludes that there is statistically significant evidence to reject this null hypothesis in favor of hypothesis one: embeds use personal pronouns more often than unilateralists. While this may be the case, the Fox/Park study uses this empirical evidence for an interpretive analysis. They continue to suggest several situations in which the use of the personal pronoun *I* is “similar to an eyewitness account of events,” as in the case of Art Harris who reported, “Paula, right now I’m standing in a major intersection in southern Iraq.” Here, journalist Harris is not making himself a “central actor in the story” which lead Fox and Park to the conclusion that “the reports [by embeds] were void of personal values and ideologies.” However, Fox and Park have no statistical evidence to support this claim. Their post-hoc analysis is a mere observation of trends in the use of personal pronouns, yet their introduction claims that statistical evidence proves that embedded reporting is void of personal ideology (Rodriguez, 36). Though the study
provides an in-depth analysis of the use of personal pronouns, it deceptively masquerades an interpretive qualification as a statistical quantification of embedded journalists’ assertion of personal values.

Despite its persuasive nature, the Fox/Park study remains a microscopic magnification of a complex, macroscopic problem. Penn State sociologist Andrew M. Lindner, for example, studies the number and type of stories published about the war in Iraq, using statistical evidence on a more macroscopic level to demonstrate the result of embedded reporting: more articles are published “about the U.S. soldiers’ personal lives and fewer articles about the impact of the war on Iraqi civilians.” Lindner stratifies articles by five topics: combat, military movement, soldier deaths, soldier source, and soldier human interest. “Embedded reporters published stories with soldier sources in 93.2 percent of the stories analyzed,” compared to independent reporters whose reports had soldier sources in only 42.8% of the stories analyzed. Similarly, embeds reported on soldier human interest in 24% of stories analyzed while independent journalists and Baghdad-stationed reporters reported on soldier human-interest in only 1.4 and zero percent of stories, respectively (“Embedded Reporting Influences”). This evidence suggests that, overall, embeds are more likely to report on soldier human-interest and to use soldier sources than are independent journalists or Baghdad-stationed reporters. “But the question may really be whether embedded reporters had the access or opportunity to talk to with people other than the soldiers,” says Lindner whose point here reinforces my argument that the narrowed scope inherent in embedded reporting automatically skews the content of embedded reports, making objectivity and neutrality impossible.

Distraction, Desensitization, Arrogance
The Effect of the Media-Military Conspiracy

The media-military relationship, built upon embedded reporting, does not simply cause a biased collection of war correspondence. In order to rally pro-war sentiment—to justify America’s desire to spread democracy and glorify the American soldier—the media and military have teamed up for the war in Iraq, creating a Hollywood-esque dramatization of war which is transforming reporting on combat in Iraq from a relay of unbiased facts to a red carpet media event; they are manufacturing entertainment rather than offering information. In doing so, the media-military partnership has effectively distracted and desensitized the American public, strategically utilizing American overconfidence in U.S. war ability in order to justify the use of civilian embeds.

Embedded reporters, whether they intend to or not, are keeping Americans occupied with stories of war corresponds rather than stories of war. By introducing embeds in the war in Iraq, the media-military machine is providing Americans with a convenient distraction—one in which embeds continue to glorify themselves, making Americans think they are winning a war, while the military continues to make poor decisions in Iraq that go completely unnoticed. Embed and foreign correspondent, Robert Kaplan, comments on this in “The Media and the Military,” where he attempts to justify the media-military intimacy created by the “embed phenomenon.” He writes, “The Columbia Journalism Review recently ran an article about the worrisome gap between a wealthy media establishment and ordinary working Americans. One solution is embed-
Embedding, which offers the media perhaps their last, best chance to reconnect with much of the society they claim to be a part of” (Kaplan). Embeds may be attempting to relate to the working American public, but in reality, their presence on a battlefield makes this “reconnection” impossible. Still, “the hundreds of embedded journalists aren’t just reporting on this war; they’re serving as surrogates for all civilians. And they’ve given the story a visceral immediacy, a that-could-be-me feeling” (Fox, 37).

And it is precisely this feeling that keeps the public’s attention drawn towards the media, rather than the true heroes, the men and women of the American military who are dying in service of a country, not the embeds who are “dying” to get a story. By creating this distraction, which focuses attention on the death count of reporters rather than on the death count of soldiers and Iraqis, the media-military mechanism is operating a machine that symbiotically serves the interests of each. Should the Pentagon make a mistake with military strategy, it can simply force embeds to comply with the orders of the unit’s commander. Similarly, the media gain inside access which, while inherently biased, blindsides the American public with the idea that some inherent truth lies inside troop operations. Both at home and in Iraq, there seems to be an overwhelming notion that the true story is “embedded” in daily troop operations and that if we could only gain access, we would achieve an omniscient understanding of war. In reality, this complete understanding comes not from embeds whose scope is narrowed by limited information, but from a range of sources and stories able to contribute to a more objective truth.

The distraction caused by embedded reporting takes the form of a theatrical dramatization. “At first there is a build up and expectancy of a Hollywood script about to unfold, but then reality hits and we are reminded that war feels like war,” says journalist P.J. O’Rourke (War Feels Like War). War may feel like war, but it certainly does not look like it. Though we expect a Hollywood script, instead of witnessing the gut-wrenching thriller scenes of war movies like Black Hawk Down, we find bizarre uncut film of cameramen chasing soldiers through fields. Not only does this raise questions about the relationship between Hollywood and news media, fiction versus reality, but for those who have never experienced war, it begs the question: what does war actually look like?

Ironically, the documentary, meant to expose the condition of necessary unilateral reporters, actually gives insight into what war might look like if there were no reporters in the field at all and, instead, a video camera were simply left in the war zone to shoot uncut, unedited reels. Surprisingly, war does not have the rushed thrill of the Hollywood renditions. While at times soldiers are excited by the action and begin throwing around meaningless expletives, the reality of war appears to be a slow, daunting march towards an untimely and inevitable death.

This march, however, does not end in Iraq. With increasing ubiquity, embedded reporting has become a phenomenon that cannot restrict itself to war coverage overseas. In transforming war correspondence into a cinematic narrative, journalists have followed wounded soldiers home, reporting directly from hospital beds. “The idea was simple,” writes Anne Hull. “If the Pentagon was embedding journalists with military units in the invasions of Iraq, why couldn’t it apply the same principle inside the nation’s largest military hospital?” In her article, “Proposing a Variation on Embedded Reporting,” Hull recounts her experience as a reporter embedded in the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C. Hull writes, “We’d locate ourselves inside a military hospital to explore the physical and psychological aftermath of war.” The media-military
machine thus does not stop in Iraq, but continues to impose itself upon soldiers at home. “We wanted a counterpoint to the ongoing stories and imagery of tanks rolling toward Baghdad and Pentagon officials point at maps. It was time for a gut check. The casualties were starting to come home” (Hull). Hull claims that, once the terror and excitement of war is over for the wounded, they come home to an uncomfortable environment in which they become outcast from mainstream society. However, as War Feels like War clearly demonstrates, the physical hardship of war is surprisingly similar to the hospital experience. This parallel demonstrates two things: first, it emphasizes the fact that war, as demonstrated by uncut film, is not equivalent to the common Hollywood-esque perception and, second, that the term “embed” is becoming a token of Operation Iraqi Freedom, showcasing a heroic embed icon that displays the media-military intention of distracting the American public from combat and military operations in Iraq.

However, the media-military scheme does not stop with the icon of the embed. Rather, it forces a dramatization of the military experience similar to the one provided by war imagery used in film production, which inherently sensationalizes combat in order to sell movie tickets. This raises the question: to what extent does the news media attempt to take its cues from or even compete with Hollywood in order to retain a captive audience? While I cannot answer this question here, we might consider the fact that, to some extent, the news media must obtain a universal audience in order to make money and, in doing so, must compete with other forms of media, both entertainment and infotainment. We can easily see how the news media might fall into a habit of sensationalizing reality for the sake of selling stories. However, embedded reporting is the result of a combined effort, both media and military, to dramatize the war in Iraq.

By allowing the media and military to enter this illicit relationship, America stumbles down a slippery slope. First, we are distracted by embeds, whose stories provide compelling human-interest pieces eliciting reader emotion, despite truth-value. Then, we become distracted by the fact that our favorite television news anchor has flown into Baghdad to begin war correspondence. And before we know it, all we want to know is how many civilian reporters have been killed in Iraq—as if it were some awful statistic not in any way associated with the fact that reporters are risking their lives out of greed, whereas soldiers are risking their lives out of duty and loyalty to their nation.

Desensitization
American Apathy for War

This distraction then becomes part of an overall desensitization to the horrors of warfare, which is apparent in the American public’s indifference towards war. The surrogacy provided by embedded reporters is inherently contradictory in that it claims to offer a reconnection to and a link between war experience and the American audience; yet, in reality, it merely serves as a filter through which Americans might read someone else’s experiences, someone else’s reaction to war. Short of having all civilians take military-assisted tours through Baghdad, it is quite impossible for the public to experience war; perhaps reporters are the closest substitute for personal experience. However, as we have seen in the inherent lack of objectivity, embedded reporters in particular may not be the best substitute, as they become a filter that actually puts one personal human
experience between reality and the audience. In this sense, Americans are faced with the impossibility of personal experience and the dissatisfaction of being once removed from war itself. It serves only to create more apathy for and desensitization to war: after seeing the most gruesome pictures and reading the most glorified war stories, the American public is simply tired of trying to connect with war when, in actuality, it isn’t even possible.

American apathy for war is not only a problem for pro-war, Operation Iraqi Freedom supporters, but, as Paul Rieckhoff can attest, it is a problem for soldiers coming home from Iraq as well. “There’s a war going on over there,” says Al Franken, “and most Americans just don’t relate to it at all.” It is the one thing Franken, Arraf, Fumento and Rieckhoff all agree on. “They [the American people] live life uninterrupted,” says Paul Rieckhoff. “It is patriotism light….and my biggest criticism of this administration is that they haven’t asked the American people to do anything.” To this, Fumento points out that every unit with which he was embedded complained, “why don’t the folks back home know what we’re doing here?” a question to which Fumento responds: “I’m afraid that a good part of the explanation is that reporters aren’t getting out to them” (“Special Iraq Panel”). And this indifference to war becomes frustrating for reporters as well as for soldiers returning home. MSNBC’s embedded foreign correspondent Richard Engel speaks to this undeniable apathy from a journalist’s perspective. In the onset of war, during the “Shock and Awe” Campaign, “everyone wanted to know every sound and picture and image that we could get out of Iraq. Now five years later we have a huge infrastructure in the country, but the interest level has dropped dramatically and that’s one of the frustrating things, when you’re in Baghdad and you want to tell a story and people don’t want to listen.” Even two years ago, claims Engel, Americans were interested in stories of conflict in Iraq. “Now, nobody asks anymore. People don’t want to hear it, even on a personal level” (Richard Engel). Even Engel’s family and friends grow tired of the constant reminder of their own lack of participation in the war effort. American apathy, then, seems to come from the guilt “every man [feels] for not having been a soldier,” as well as from the media’s contribution to the public’s perception of war (“Special Iraq Panel”).

The American public, due either to naïveté or necessity, gets its information from the news media. If the media, as I have argued, cannot report objectively, then we can expect very little from the American public in return. The sheer volume of information overwhelms Americans so that they either disregard the war altogether or naïvely believe whatever article or photograph happens to slide across their desk on Monday morning. And part of this apathy and lack of concern stems from the comfortable lives most Americans live and the confidence and pride they seem to have in their nation’s supreme military and weapons arsenal. So long as Americans feel that their presence in Iraq is morally justified by the spread of democracy, citizens will not be able to feel any of the effects of war – especially so long as there are no direct repercussions for the individual. American overconfidence leads paradoxically to an apathetic attitude toward war; what should breed patriotism actually generates both arrogance and indifference.
American Overconfidence

How Embeds Contribute to American Egotism

American overconfidence can be characterized not only by an inherent belief in U.S. military superiority. The mere use of embeds exposes the relative ease with which both Americans and the military are willing to allow civilians on the battlefield, despite the obvious danger. Moreover, as becomes apparent in the ground rules of embedded reporting, the military is bending over backwards in order to take care of extra personnel. “Use of priority inter-theater airlift for embedded media to cover stories [...] is highly encouraged [...] units should plan lift and logistical support to assist in moving media products to and from the battlefield so as to tell our story in a timely manner” (“Public Affairs...Sec 2.C.”); as if to suggest that if soldiers want their stories told, they should be ready and willing to help the media in any way possible. Both an exaggerated effort by the military to accommodate media embeds and a willingness to risk more American lives supplement embedded journalism’s contribution to a growing problem of American egotism, which ultimately leads to a lack of separation between government and free press. By teaming up and taking sides, the news media are waving the American flag, helping the Pentagon promote support for Operation Iraqi Freedom and, by extension, support for the current administration. In fusing together what should be entirely independent operations, the media-military cohort creates a pro-war dramatization that is based on an entirely un-American relationship.

In the past, media-military cooperation has been much less conspicuous. For the sake of keeping free-enterprise free, the only relationship shown publicly has been one of mistrust and competition between the media and military. With the advent of embedded reporting, however, the public has the unique opportunity to fixate its war-time anxieties on the icon of the embed—a courageous journalist heading off to war. This, however, is not to say that embedded reporting has been unimportant in the past. Michael Fumento, for example, responds to comments by screenwriter-director Nora Ephron: “Amazingly, Ephron also believes embedding was an evil idea dreamed up for this war, even though in World War II and later wars all major news outlets had reporters with the troops on the front lines. That’s how we got the incredible dispatches of Ernie Pyle, and the wonderful Iwo Jima flag-raising photo by Joe Rosenthal” (Fumento) Fumento correctly suggests that both Joe Rosenthal and Ernie Pyle made significant contributions to war journalism in their time. However, as he himself implies, it is the term “embedding” which was dreamed up for this war, not the idea of having journalists on the front lines. And thus we see how embeds are becoming a tool of the media-military machine in serving as surrogates to the American public for an experience they cannot sufficiently or accurately communicate.

The disparity between the actual war experience and what is being relayed to the American public is apparent to both the media and the military. Thus, there is a need to fill the gap with a fabricated story surrounding the reality in Iraq. In doing so, the media and the military have entered into an illicit relationship in which both parties effectively take advantage of one another, resulting in a theatrical production suited for the naïve and apathetic American public. What we are beginning to see with embedded reporting is a de-secularization of American enterprise in favor of an increasing fictionalization, militarization and politicization. Where once we were looking to the First Amendment
to separate the powers of media and government, providing checks and balances by establishing a government-free press, we are now allowing the media and military to become accomplices in the creation of a Hollywood-esque dramatization of war in Iraq used to propagate pro-war sentiment at home as well as justify America’s presence in overseas conflict.

“In bed with the military.”
A Sexual Interpretation of the Media-Military Relationship

Perhaps unwittingly, the Pentagon’s choice of the word “embed” implies a sexual pun that helps illuminate the transgressive and incestuous quality of the media-military relationship. “This time the military said, ‘We’re going to embed reporters.’ We’d never heard that word before and we weren’t sure what it meant,” says Marjorie Miller, editor of the L.A. Times; “We didn’t want to be in bed with the military, but we certainly wanted to be there. And we didn’t know if it was a trick or if...they, for some reason that we couldn’t fathom, had decided to give us access.” Embedding reporters suggests an incestuous intimacy between the media and military; which becomes an unprecedented sexual exploitation of the concept of freedom of the press. Not only are both parties disregarding the notion of a free and independent press, but both are exploiting one another’s resources for their own benefit. “A newspaper of our size is a lot like the military. We have to decide how many people to deploy, what equipment we need, how many troops, what our tactics are going to be, get the supplies,” claims Miller, who figuratively blurs the boundaries between media and military operations here (Miller).

Where Miller’s argument blurs the line separating media and military, Fumento’s interest in “false bravado” begins to erase it. Fumento and Arraf argue incessantly over which reporters, embeds or unilateral, are braver and more courageous. But are “bravery” and “courage” not words associated with soldiers? Should we not be concerned with the bravery of our military personnel rather than that of our journalists? Recently, Robert Kaplan published an article titled “No Greater Honor,” in which he comments on “what it takes to earn the highest award the military can bestow—and why the public fails to appreciate its worth” (Kaplan, 1-2). Meanwhile, embedded war correspondent Richard Engel has been named the 2007 winner of the Medill Medal for Courage in Journalism. “Chosen for his outstanding work in War Zone Diary,” Engel is praised for revealing “the unsanitized and often grim truth” of war in Iraq. Judge of the Medill Medal, Richard Stolley writes of Engel’s accomplishment, “This brilliant, deeply personal story defines both the qualifications for and the need for the Medill Medal” (Hagen). Though his diary is a biased and personal exploration, Engel is given what might be the journalistic/military equivalent of a Medal of Honor. Courage, bravery, and honor, once solely associated with military achievement, are now tokens of a “false bravado” and an attempt to credit embeds with combat missions.

What was first confusion between what is military and what is media, now becomes an incestuous, exploitative relationship between the two. Paul Workman, a non-American journalist, criticizes embedded reporting as allowing the war to be “covered…by a press corps that’s sleeping with the winner,” (Workman) accusing the media of
sexually exploiting the military. We are reminded, however, that the relationship works both ways. Robert Kaplan writes that when embeds return home from a stint with the military, journalism professors often question whether the “embedded journalists have become, in effect, ‘whores’ of the armed forces” (Workman). Dillow corroborates this claim as he recalls his soldiers’ desire to have their stories told accurately to loved ones back home. “But the biggest problem I faced as an embed with the marine grunts was that I found myself doing what journalists are warned from J-school not to do: I found myself falling in love with my subject. I fell in love with ‘my’ marines” (Dillow). Despite any effort to remain objective, the seductive ways of the military somehow overwhelm reporters, ultimately creating a sexually charged tension between reporters and soldiers, media and military. This tension breeds a unique war dramatization meant not only to entertain, but to distract and desensitize the American public to the harsh realities of war overlooked and convoluted by the media-military machine.

“There’s a fine line between being embedded and being entombed.”
The End of Eye-Witness Journalism

Perhaps, though, neither party is to blame. Perhaps it is not an elaborate scheme or a political conspiracy meant to deceive the American public. Rather, it can be thought of as the result of primitive human instinct. Perhaps the incestuous relationship between media and military is merely a retrospective interpretation mapped onto what is an undeniably complicated situation. When men are capable of instantaneously killing thousands of other men, when the lives of others are being placed in their hands, when all it takes is one bullet, then perhaps it is impossible to remain unbiased, impossible not to take sides, impossible to remain independent of the man on your right. At the same time, we are forced to consider the effect embedded reporting has on the American public’s view of war; as a result, we must be critical of the media and military’s over-willingness to cooperate and corroborate. To the extent that both parties intend to capitalize on a cooperative relationship, we can see that the effect is a paradoxical reconceptualization of the eyewitness war correspondence of previous wars. World War II correspondents Joe Rosenthal and Ernie Pikes created iconic images and glorified stories of soldiers for the American public. Unlike the great journalists of the past, however, embeds themselves are attempting to replace the heroic soldier by becoming the icon idolized by Americans. This evolution of war correspondence has created significant problems for the American perception of the global implications of war in Iraq. Paradoxically, the media and the military are creating both an overwhelming apathy for war and a subconscious desire for soldier human-interest pieces, both of which side-step the important and objective issues of war in favor of total access to information that is ultimately filtered into a self-affirmation of American principle. In a post-September 11th world, the media and military have reached an unprecedented level of cooperation through the use of embedded reporters, calling into question the platonic separation of government and press which lies at the heart of American journalism.
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Instructor’s Foreword

On his first day in my PWR course on “Food, Politics, and the Rhetoric of Ethical Consumption,” Jacob Stern established his enthusiasm for the subject matter: he vividly described seeking out gastronomic experiences that defied cultural and geographic boundaries, displaying the same culinary and intellectual curiosity that would inform his research and writing throughout the quarter. Jacob chose his research-based argument topic just a few weeks later, and as he began sharing discoveries that included dozens of sources and a variety of images that revealed the fusion of art and science in kitchens around the world, I realized that his project was grounded in a similar fusion of creativity and analysis. Though his personal experiences with food created the foundation for his interest in the course and for his final project, Jacob was eager to make claims that had relevance beyond a single meal. The result is an essay that transcends disciplinary divisions and has ramifications far beyond the seemingly rarified worlds of contemporary art and molecular cuisine that Jacob juxtaposes so compellingly.

The central premise of Jacob’s argument—that “molecular gastronomy as a movement is a rare cross between science and art that, through its artistic side, provides its executors a medium through which they can promote science to their customers regardless of national boundaries”—is an innovative elaboration on the metaphors cooks and scientists use to describe their gastronomic creations. Harold McGee, for example, notes how “molecules could be mixed much as ‘a painter mixes colours on a palette,’” and Jacob’s attention to such linguistic and conceptual frameworks is evident throughout this essay. Jacob expertly weaves together a variety of sources, from his own interview with a curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles to food memoirs and scientific journals, in order to establish a complex and multifaceted argument. This is challenging work, but it is also—and perhaps most importantly—written in captivating and accessible prose. In our conferences regarding his papers, Jacob and I discussed techniques for integrating his creative talents into a rigorous academic argument. Over the course of multiple revisions, Jacob decided to grab his reader with an arresting account of his own experience with molecular gastronomy and to thread evocative sketches of that meal through his scientific, artistic, and culinary analysis. Jacob’s descriptions of dishes like “caramel corn,” a creation whose “torrent of cold cornmeal milk exploded out of the liquid nitrogen-hardened shell to create the impression of a glacier spontaneously melting in my mouth,” allow his reader to imagine the sensory and intellectual experience inspired by molecular cuisine. It is impossible to read such descriptions without wanting to read more, and thus Jacob accomplishes something similar to the process he describes, building “upon the foundation of science with culinary bricks and aesthetic mortar to the point that [he] break[s] through the clouds of the traditional boundaries of food.”

—Jenna Lay
If You Give an Artist an Apron

Jacob Stern

The discovery of a new dish does more for human happiness than the discovery of a new star.
- Anthelme Brillat-Savarin

From the moment I entered the room, the sky bar at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel in Tokyo assaulted every sense with the fact that life is full of complications and contradictions. I looked through the huge full-story windows lining the walls and saw the present flashing all around me, as I stood on an isolated mountain looking out into a sea of lights. There is nothing quite as modern as Tokyo viewed from above at night; however, the brightness belies a culture that remains largely unchanged, as salarymen and subways continue on their one-track missions for perfection all through the night. I made my way over to the little bar in the corner, known as the Tapas Molecular Bar, where the chefs were preparing dinner for six. Here, old and new clashed once again: in principle, the bar resembled a sushi bar, one of the oldest of Japanese food institutions, but, in reality, the marble table, dark wood paneling and glass accoutrements created a very contemporary atmosphere. As I sat down, I was greeted by the chef, Jeff Ramsey, a twenty-six year old man from Orange County who is not afraid to speak his mind, while being served water by a pretty young Japanese waitress who bowed as she poured and said “I have humbly committed a discourtesy” in her native tongue as she left. At once, the progressive concept of globalization, even in the realm of food, and the contrasting traditional Japanese notion, reflected in language, custom and apparently restaurant service, of women as the subservient gender wove and welded together to create a dynamic effect akin to that of milk and cocoa coming together to make chocolate. Once his guests were properly settled, Chef Ramsey introduced the meal at hand: a tour of the delights of molecular gastronomy, which he described as the use of science to enhance food. Through complications and contradictions within and without his dishes, Ramsey hoped to expand the horizons of our appreciation for food.

In this essay, I will endeavor to argue that molecular gastronomy as a movement is a rare cross between science and art that, through its artistic side, provides its executors a medium through which they can promote science to their customers regardless of national boundaries. After clarifying exactly what is meant by molecular gastronomy, as the term is often misconstrued or taken out of context, I will establish the principles of contemporary art, and link parts of molecular gastronomy to those principles. Once molecular gastronomy has been established as both a science and an art form, I will show how it acts as a means through which science can be popularized and brought to the public’s attention in a positive light. In addition, I will illustrate how molecular gastronomy, like contemporary art, breaks down the boundaries of culinary cuisines, and how this advances the cause of science. An explanation of the possible effects that the advances of molecular gastronomy might have on the future will finish the argument, making it clear that the high science of food is not, as some may say, just a passing fad.
Not-So-Humble Beginnings

Intrigued by Ramsey’s introduction, I peered at the first dish, which had been ambiguously named “caramel corn.” It looked a bit like a golden egg with a stalagmite of amber caramel protruding from the top. I expected this golden morsel to be solid and crunchy. As I put it in my mouth, however, it was anything but. A torrent of cold cornmeal milk exploded out of the liquid nitrogen-hardened shell to create the impression of a glacier spontaneously melting in my mouth.

Just like many advances in human history, molecular gastronomy started when a young man with unquenchable ambition decided that existing materials or assumptions were not sufficient to fulfill the needs of his contemporary society. Food is a fundamental necessity of life: everyone must eat in order to survive. Because of this unavoidable fact, the act of cooking was taken for granted for centuries. Scientists studied the compositions of ingredients and food, but the actual process of making the food was left largely untouched. Old wives’ tales developed around recipes—for example, some women believed that menstruation was a cause of failed mayonnaises—and the act of cooking became as imprecise as a presidential candidate’s campaign promises (This, “Food for Tomorrow” 1063). However, in 1988, Hervé This, a young physical chemist, along with Nicholas Kurti, officially founded a new branch of food science—molecular gastronomy—in order to counteract this vagueness. This discipline seeks to create a better “understanding of food... [of] the chemistry and physics behind the preparation of any dish” (1062). This and Kurti, along with other molecular gastronomists, have compiled a list of over 20,000 ambiguities and superstitions in the food world, which they named “culinary precisions” and have since sought to clarify methods of cooking into scientifically quantifiable steps that can be used to enhance old dishes and create new ones (This, “Molecular Gastronomy” 6). Take, for example, the process of cooking meat. Everyone acknowledges that meat tastes better when it has been salted; however, there is an age-old debate over whether to salt the meat before or after cooking. Some say the salt penetrates the meat during cooking and enhances the flavor; others say the salt just cooks off to the point that the meat will need to be re-salted. This tested this procedure by cooking meat under an x-ray machine. He determined that salt will largely pass out of most pieces of meat, but particularly lean cuts will show traces of NaCl metal remaining in the meat (This, Molecular Gastronomy S2). Rather than forcing home cooks to try methods out for themselves, This and the molecular gastronomers promote the use of experiments to determine what actually works in cooking and what does not.

The basic definition of molecular gastronomy provides a foundation upon which the architects of complex science build formulas for new and better foods. Food scientists are conducting experiments on every level. They are breaking down or analyzing even the simplest ingredients: NaCl, or common table salt, has been tested in water at different concentrations to determine just how much salt is necessary to create a salty taste (Amerine S4). The results of these tests show that at very low concentrations, regular table salt actually tastes sweet. Of course, more sophisticated elements in the world of food are also being researched. In a study analyzing the odors of organic molecules, molecular gastronomers identified the sources of the smells of carrots, cloves, cherry, cucumber, celery and walnut; these molecules could be mixed much as “a painter mixes colours on a palette” to create new and exciting flavors (McGee, “Taking Stock” 1). Even
procedures as simple as boiling an egg have not escaped scrutiny. Hervé This himself discovered that the proteins in an egg denature at 68°C, so cooking an egg indefinitely at exactly that temperature will yield a perfectly smooth and creamy result (This, Molecular Gastronomy 33). Through chemistry and physics, food and science are inextricably linked. Scientists have thus far experimented with everything from interactions on molecular levels to double cooking methods (using two cooking methods in succession; the possibilities of different combinations have hardly begun to be explored) with more tinkering to come (310). This experimentation opens up the possibility of unprecedented innovation in all aspects of the food world.

A group of talented chefs have taken the discoveries of molecular gastronomy and created an elite subset of the movement, commonly called molecular cuisine. Led by Ferran Adrià of elBulli in the Catalan region of Spain, this group of chefs uses “new technologies [as] a resource for the progress of cooking” (Adrià 1). Although “the aim [of their cooking] is always to preserve the purity of... original flavor,” Adrià and company consistently shock the food world with their original and sometimes even outlandish creations. Wylie Dufresne, at his restaurant, WD~50 in New York, makes “knot foie”—foie gras combined with agar gum that creates pliant duck liver that can be twisted into all sorts of interesting shapes (Maddox 1). Heston Blumenthal, one of the most famous members of the molecular cuisine posse, uses “pressure probes to detect the crunchiness of batter” in order to create perfect fish and chips at his restaurant, the Fat Duck, in England (“Molecular Gastronomy is Dead” 2). Seiji Yamamoto, operating out of Ryugin in Tokyo, arranges squid ink into a barcode, “which, when scanned, leads the PDA-toting diner to a website that explains the dish’s ingredients” (Abend 2). And, of course, Adrià himself produces flashy dishes from gorgonzola “mochi”—cheese encased in its own curd mixed with algae—to passion fruit flowers hardened by liquid nitrogen, candied, and served as an amuse-bouche (a bite-sized morsel served before appetizers). Each of these chefs takes the information provided to him by the molecular gastronomists, such as This and Kurti, and performs his own science to create new cuisine; some, like Adrià, even close down their restaurants for months at a time in order to conduct research. However, these chefs do not limit their research to the realm of science. They build upon the foundation of science with culinary bricks and aesthetic mortar to the point that they break through the clouds of the traditional boundaries of food and bring their Babel-like creations into the stratosphere of contemporary art.

The Art of Art

Before Ramsey set the plate down in front of me, I did not know what to expect. The menu said the dish was called “Red,” but what did that mean? After seeing the dish, though, it became clear to me. On the left side of the thin rectangular plate sat a roasted red pepper. Next to it was a piece of king crab meat, accompanied by a tomato puree. The dish had everything: cold and hot, meat and produce, objects and empty space. But everything, from the food itself to the presentation, just screamed “Red!”

Before I can endeavor to prove the connection between molecular cuisine and contemporary art, I must first lay out the precepts of the latter. Contemporary art started to surface in the late 1950s as artists began to experiment with new forms of expres-
sion. Artists like Andy Warhol and Jackson Pollock focused on the context of a particular piece, rather than its purely aesthetic value. To the untrained eye, contemporary art can look simplistic and meaningless: many people have looked at a white canvas with a single black dot in its center hanging on a wall, on sale for tens of thousands of dollars, and thought to themselves, “I could make this.” However, the value of a piece of contemporary art does not derive solely from its complexity and visual expressiveness. According to Philipp Kaiser, one of the curators of the Museum of Contemporary Art (MoCA) in Los Angeles, a piece’s meaning, and therefore its worth, “depends first on the context” in which it was created and is presented: the timeframe of its creation, the artist’s local history, where and how it is displayed, and what is displayed alongside it, among other aspects (Kaiser). The Body Cavity Inspection Network (Node in a Corner) by Eduardo Abaroa, an entropic amalgamation of cotton swabs and plastic balls that resembles organic molecules free floating in space, embodies this concept of context as the defining function of modern art. It is not particularly impressive at first glance: anyone could glue together swabs and balls to create that design. There is no inherent artistic talent involved in this piece—nothing comparable to the painting skills apparent in a Monet, for example. The context, though, gives Abaroa’s piece true artistic integrity. The balls and swabs are ripped out of their usual functions and forced together into geometric shapes that fill the empty void of the huge space provided for the piece at MoCA. The piece could not achieve the same impression in, say, a household living room, where space is limited; however, in the specific context of the museum, The Body Cavity Inspection Network becomes artwork in the most definite sense.

In addition to utilizing a unique context, “a successful work of art expresses a reality beyond actual reality” (Gortais 1241). A piece of contemporary art is not just a canvas or a sculpture or, in the case of some of Marcel Duchamp’s readymades, a toilet; the artistic value resides primarily in the meaning beyond the object itself. Of course, this meaning cannot be separated from the context of a piece, as the context often creates the alternate reality. Take, for example, Cindy Sherman’s Untitled Film Still #6. On the surface, it is just a photograph of Sherman lying on a bedspread with a mirror in her hand. Without looking at context and seeing the alternate reality created by this picture, it is difficult to call it art. However, once the viewer realizes “the irony of Sherman posing as an actress posing for publicity pictures” and identifies the satire emanating from behind the photographic exterior of the piece—Sherman criticizes the superficiality of Hollywood through the very means used to create that superficiality—the artistic value of the piece becomes clear (Heiferman 1). Deep introspection on the part of the viewer is intrinsic to contemporary art; after all, “if something is an art piece, you have to look at it differently [than you would] a bottle of water” (Kaiser).

Contemporary art, through its embrace of subtext and context in addition to method, has broken down traditional disciplinary and national boundaries that have pervaded the art world for centuries. Before contemporary art, each art movement had a clear hub from which it originated and spread: Impressionism and Surrealism started in Paris, Dadaism was conceived in Zurich, and German Expressionism began in Berlin, just to name a few. In contrast, contemporary art has no one clear central nucleus. Warhol started pop art (which in effect popularized the contemporary art movement) almost simultaneously in both New York City and Los Angeles, and now contemporary art springs freely from London, Berlin, China, Los Angeles, and countless other cities across the
world (Kaiser). This fact can be traced to the disciplinary openness of contemporary art. Before, artists were either painters or sculptors; there was no room for artists of other persuasions (Kaiser). With the canonization of contemporary art, however, the previously insular definition of artist became open to all sorts of creators: Jackson Pollock proved through his work (such as No. 5, the most expensive art piece ever privately sold) that painting does not have to have a linear focus, and Cindy Sherman, along with others, made photography into a legitimate art form. Within the boundaries of the contemporary movement, as long as a piece represents something beyond its physical self, it can be considered art. Some artists have even expanded their tools from paint and a brush or marble and a chisel to include light, sound, or space. Through this extension of what can be considered art, “we see and understand that the world is vaster than it is said to be” (Gortais 1241).

Although the contemporary movement has made art more inclusive to the point that there seems to be no central set of guidelines for its creation, art in all of its forms can still be boiled down into sets of generic principles. One of these, put forth by Bernard Gortais, a French artist and professor at the University of Evry, partitions art into five aspects: space, points and lines, constructions and rhythms, colors, and time-image perception (1244-1246). Space is the area that contains the art; this can be a canvas, a volume of air taken up by a sculpture, or an entire room, as in the case of the Abaroa piece. Points and lines create the piece itself, while color fills the gaps between those points and lines. The points and lines coalesce to form different constructions within the piece, which interact with one another in unique and dynamic rhythms like gas molecules colliding in a closed container. Finally, these aspects all come together to create a relationship between the piece and the viewer, who perceives different aspects in different orders and different ways depending on his perspective. These rules can apply to all forms of art, from contemporary art to neoclassical paintings, with the specifics changing from piece to piece. They even apply to one of the most often overlooked art forms: molecular cuisine.

**Edible Art**

When Ramsey asked who would be willing to eat the Blue Hawaii first, I enthusiastically volunteered. The meal had been so spectacular up until this point that I was eager to experience what came next. Ramsey presented me with the dish: a pile of blue crystals that resembled cotton candy, served with a spoon. He said to eat it quickly, and all at once. I took the substance as I would take medicine: swiftly and in one motion. It tasted like a winter’s chill. I looked around and saw the other diners laughing hysterically; I did not understand why. Finally it hit me: smoke was billowing out of my nose like a dragon’s.

As Ferran Adrià so aptly states in his “Synthesis of elBulli Cuisine”—a manifesto of twenty-three aspects that define molecular cooking—“a culinary language is being created which…establishes a relationship with the world and language of art” by the major players of molecular cuisine (Adrià 1). Every dish served according to the precepts of molecular cuisine can be reduced down to its basic artistic elements. The plate is the space; chefs can and do use different initial spaces, from traditional circular plates to long, skinny, rectangular plates to elaborate multi-tiered cupboards of food, just as
contemporary artists experiment with canvases and rooms. Within the boundaries of their space, molecular chefs play around with ingredients, flavors and temperatures, the food equivalents of points and lines. These are the most basic tools that a chef has to construct his masterpiece, and they vary immensely in nature: some are hot, some are cold; some are sweet, others are sour. Chefs work these basic instruments of art into complex combinations, creating aesthetic and flavor-related amalgamations to shock and/or please the consumer. These combinations of flavors, temperatures and ingredients, found in the components of a dish, correlate to constructions in contemporary art; how these constructions are arranged on the plate creates a rhythm akin to one found in a specific artwork. Some dishes have more traditional, accepted rhythms and constructions (like a bowl of fettuccini Bolognese), while others have more startling and original combinations (like a dessert of crunchy vanilla crepes arranged over a cold barley crème at David Kinch’s restaurant, Manresa). Finally, the texture and overall aesthetic appearance of the dish combine to create a relationship with the consumer. The diner will see the dish and make a correlation in his mind as to how it should feel and taste, but may be surprised upon putting the food in his mouth. This creates a time-image perception in the mind of the eater, which chefs can exploit to create new experiences for their audiences.

Molecular cuisine, like contemporary art, distinguishes itself from normal food through the manipulation of context. “Decontextualisation, irony, spectacle [and] performance” are at the very heart of molecular cuisine, allowing its products to transcend normal food and become art (Adrià 1). Take, for example, one of the final dishes of a meal at Adrià’s restaurant. The dish, from the perspective of space, color and construction, looks like a chocolate truffle. However, once the eater engages in time-image perception by eating the “chocolate truffle,” he realizes that not everything is as it seems. The points and lines of this dish include a chocolate shell, of course; this produces the illusion that the piece of candy will taste like chocolate. However, the shell is not filled with chocolate at all; rather, it is filled with liquor infused with the essence of real white truffles, thus producing a “truffle truffle.” Adrià takes the white truffle out of its usual context of garnish on pasta or risotto and forces it into a piece of candy, creating art with positive shock value to rival in absolute terms the pure surprise produced by seeing Marcel Duchamp’s first toilet in a museum. Like that of contemporary artists, the work of molecular chefs does not derive its meaning entirely from an isolated end result; the procedure used to make the dish and how it is presented mean just as much as the dish itself.

Molecular cuisine’s relationship to contemporary art also expands into the realm of the abstract. Just as the use of context allowed art to branch off into a greater number of less traditional disciplines, molecular cuisine has expanded the repertoire of what can be created in a kitchen and considered gastronomic art. Jeff Ramsey’s Blue Hawaii is not food in the traditional sense. It has little to no nutritional value: no proteins, no carbohydrates, not even any fats. It is merely smoke, taken out of its vapor form and thrust into the context of a solid and onto its new space, a plate. Because of this, it is now food, in the most abstract way. As new avenues of cooking are steadily opened up, chefs like Heston Blumenthal are suggesting that the molecular food world is “quite close to throwing out the theory of five tastes,” as taste can now be perceived in so many contexts (This, “Molecular Gastronomy is Dead” 3). As Adrià claims in his Synthesis, “the barriers between the sweet and savory world are being broken down” (Adrià 2); through
dishes like parmesan churros and roasted red pepper geles, molecular chefs are creating new and intuitively contradictory tastes that conjure “a reality beyond actual reality” (Gortais 1241).

A Tree of Knowledge

Ramsey brought out a spoon with a little ball of what looked like beige cream perched on top. It was perfectly spherical, its unblemished exterior reflecting the light from above like a diamond; it looked almost regal. What a shame to eat this opal of beauty, I thought to myself. But I did, of course, since nothing in this meal should be put to waste. Out of the flawless exterior of the beige shell surged a tide of miso soup, the simplest of Japanese dishes, one that is enjoyed by almost everyone in the country, rich or poor, famous or nameless.

Both molecular cuisine and contemporary art provide plenty of opportunities for their respective audiences to actively participate in the interpretation process; however, neither art form can achieve its fullest potential if this procedure is completely unregulated. It is “completely impossible” to view contemporary art without a bias, since the art is meaningless without a knowledge of its context and the context must be provided by some source outside the viewer (Kaiser). This source, be it the artist himself, a museum curator, an art dealer, or the museum itself, will inevitably have its own opinions about or interpretations of a given piece, which it will naturally pass on to the viewer. In an article describing Cindy Sherman’s work in a Museum of Modern Art publication, Marvin Heiferman, a guest curator and professor of photography at Bard College, uses his expertise to inform potential viewers of Sherman’s intentions. He emphasizes the “ingenuity and playfulness” of her work, and makes clear Sherman’s influential advancement of the “power of photography, and… issues of feminism, psychoanalysis, and performance” (Heiferman 1,3). Heiferman uses his position as the purveyor of information not only to provide the context necessary to appreciate the art, but also to put a positive and optimistic spin on Sherman’s work that will hopefully cause more people to go see the photographs. Experts like Heiferman and Bernard Gortais, whose system for analyzing art is the ultimate example of an attempt to direct interpretation, give the art that they describe meaning by telling their audiences how they should perceive the art in question.

Experts in the cooking world use similar methods to direct the common understanding of their food. Chefs like Ferran Adrià at the top of the molecular pyramid emphasize that their food is to be “enjoyed and interpreted by reflection,” but also set forth the parameters in which that reflection must take place (Adrià 2). Adrià emphasizes the novelty of his cuisine, from the mixing of sweet and savory to the “veritable revolution” occurring in the world of first courses and desserts (1-2). Heston Blumenthal notes that he “do[es] not pursue novelty for its own sake”: he just uses new techniques and methods to supplement the old ways of cooking, and his “delicious and stimulating dishes” are meant to be enjoyed as such (“Molecular Gastronomy is Dead” 2). In his cookbook, Thomas Keller, the chef at the French Laundry in California, “uses the words ‘precision’ and ‘repetition’ in ways that reveal [the] quasi-spiritual relationship to cooking” that he wishes to pass on to his customers (Moskin). As the members of the pantheon of their
art form, these chefs set the tone for the appreciation of their food, showing their audiences the path towards gastronomic appreciation.

Following the lead of the true experts, self-proclaimed experts try to create their own arguments about the art at hand to further the appreciation of the art by those less knowledgeable. The “Anyone else fed up with ‘molecular gastronomy’?” feed on chowhound.com provides a microcosmic example of the organic development of this grassroots rhetoric. The bloggers try to frame molecular cuisine in a context of good vs. evil, with members on both sides trying to influence people who do not live to eat. Some, like Kagey, make the claim that molecular cuisine is “interesting but not necessary” (Chowhound 1); others, like Flynn 1, cite the fact that elBulli is “often rated as the best restaurant in the world” to promote the movement (2). Regardless, these middle men and their equivalents in the art world act as a pipeline between the real experts and the average consumer, bringing context and bias down to the people from on high. This tree of knowledge that grows from the master’s trunk, through the branches of the dedicated followers, and out to the leaves of the general consumers introduces new people to the art forms, which absorb new perspectives and give life to understanding and innovation.

A Bridge to Somewhere

There are few things that I love more in this world than Wagyu beef, and Ramsey’s version was the most spectacular I had ever had. Cooked in a sealed bag in a pressure cooker for twenty-four hours at a precisely mandated temperature, the prime beef came out perfectly cooked. This alone would have made for a delicious dish; however, Ramsey, as usual, went above and beyond the call of duty. He used a drop of benign liquid nitrogen to make the beef “sizzle,” as though it had just been taken off the griddle. The sizzling sounds, in contrast with the perfect, tender texture of the beef, created a harmony of flavor and feeling that amounted to the perfect meat dish.

Since it is both a form of art and a form of science, molecular cuisine serves as a bridge between the two wildly different pursuits. Although I have already made comparisons between contemporary art and molecular cuisine, which is specifically the part of molecular gastronomy that aims to create high-flying dishes at high-flying prices, it is important to note that molecular cuisine is in fact a subculture of molecular gastronomy. Every single molecular dish that qualifies as a piece of art uses some scientific principle that has been identified and applied by molecular gastronomers. The Blue Hawaii takes advantage of the freezing point of condensation in the air and the extremely low boiling point of nitrogen, which requires that liquid nitrogen be kept at very low temperatures. The success of parmesan churros relies on the fact that the fatty cheese can be mixed with starches and still be fried to a golden crisp. The “truffle truffle” can only be made because the organic molecules that compose the essence and odor of white truffle can be infused into liquor and overpower the alcohol’s taste and smell. The science of food, when applied properly, connects science, the basis of all fundamental actions and interactions, to the highest of all cultural endeavors: art.

Perhaps more important, though, is the fact that molecular cuisine’s artistic aspects bring science into direct contact with people it would hardly be able to reach otherwise.
Scientists and artists generally do not hang around each other very often, and their disciplines do not generally go together in the public eye. As such, art and science each have distinct reputations. Art is the pinnacle of civilized human achievement, since it represents the perfection of leisure activity, which is proof that humans have conquered the basic necessities of survival. The art world is a high risk, high reward society: the most successful members obtain obscene riches, while those who are left behind make next to nothing. These rewards appeal to people's innate sense of adventure, drawing the consumers of the art into the stories of those who do succeed through a desire for their own artistic success and the subsequent consequences. Since these stories are inherent in the art (as part of its context), the viewer becomes enmeshed in the art, its maker, and its history, bringing product and consumer together to create an experience like blue and yellow combining to make green.

Conversely, science does not carry as positive a connotation. Science is often equated with nerds and a lack of originality, because it is the study of what happens in the world of base survival (which art manages to transcend). It does not come up with anything new; rather, it discovers the truth behind what already exists. Science is by all means a necessary discipline, because it allows humans to understand and better conquer their surroundings (thus facilitating art); however, for the most part people are just not as interested in science and its proponents, so scientists are not as famous as artists. In addition, the range of pay for scientists is far more stable than that of artists, eliminating some of the adventure and risk that comes with life in the art world. Because of the lack of profound connection between scientist and science, since the science exists before the scientist discovers it, the recipients of scientific knowledge do not become as engaged as they would with art, and a distance develops between scientists and students. What little popularity science does have derives from art in other forms, such as science fiction novels. The discrepancy in appeal between art and science creates a cycle that drives more people towards the former and away from the latter, thus harming our potential as a society.

Molecular gastronomy helps to counteract this imbalance. When people eat molecular cuisine, they are “eating ‘chemistry’” (This, “Food for Tomorrow?” 1064). Some particularly scientific cooking procedures are even named after famous scientists, though most people do not know it: the process of whipping egg whites with oil and cooking them in a microwave to produce a gel is named after Josiah Willard Gibbs, an American physicist, while “cooking” an egg by immersing it in alcohol is named after Antoine Baume, a French chemist (1064). Through experimentally developed dishes such as these, science is forced upon the public through their everyday food, thus hopefully ameliorating the negative stereotype that science currently carries. This process is streamlined by the fact that the practitioners of molecular cuisine have attained fame as artists. Granted, due to the sheer cost of eating at one of these chefs’ restaurants, most people do not experience direct exposure to molecular cuisine. However, the sheer volume of articles about and interviews with molecular chefs in popularly digested sources as diverse as the Wall Street Journal, the New York Times, and Le Monde overrides this lack of direct exposure. Combined with the chefs’ visibility and credibility within knowledgeable food circles such as chowhound, this publicity allows molecular chefs to emphasize the virtues of science in the context of food in more widely accessible ways, bringing further awareness of and appreciation for science to the hoi polloi. Newspaper interviews
have led to talk shows and even the mass release of “cookbooks” that showcase the chefs’ art with beautiful pictures while also providing complicated and impractical recipes with as many as twenty-two sub-procedures each (Moskin). Each of these steps brings the chef and his science one step closer to the average eater who might never have the chance to dine at elBulli or any of its peers.

These endeavors to bring science to the masses through food have been, on the whole, successful. Taking the chowhound blog as a sample for the food loving population as a whole, it is easy to tell that people who were never excited about science before tasting molecular cuisine have become interested in the science of molecular gastronomy, regardless of whether or not they approve of it. The creator of the thread in question, diropstim, is an art major. After eating “someone else’s ‘experiments,’” however, he was intrigued enough to start a thread on molecular gastronomy (Chowhound 1). A blogger by the pseudonym of cayjohan, on the other hand, acknowledges that molecular gastronomy (through the arm of molecular cuisine) is “expanding our knowledge of the world” through experimentation, even though he thinks food will always revert to a simplistic and natural state (3). Similarly, a poster named celfie believes “we should applaud the fringes for their daring passions” (6). This state of mind is particularly productive for society as a whole, as it fosters risk taking and innovation in realms that can enhance society in—perhaps—more meaningful ways than food alone can. Molecular gastronomy has played its part by bringing this sentiment to the fore and paving the way for other scientific disciplines to court the approval of the mainstream in nations around the world.

Outsourcing Food

If Ramsey’s meal were a college applicant, it would have had no trouble getting into even the most selective universities based solely on the sheer diversity of its dishes. He included everything from a Greek salad (artistically deconstructed into its components) to a condensed New York cheesecake (made along the lines of the caramel corn) to a Japanese Kyoho grape (provided alongside a fake grape made of a liquid nitrogen-hardened shell filled with slushy grape juice). Ramsey gave me a tour of various national cuisines—through his own looking glass, of course—while I sat comfortably in my chair.

The languages of both science and contemporary art know no national boundaries. However, for centuries food, like traditional art, was defined by its native land’s specific national culture. Even today, “citizens in developed countries still cook almost the same way as their ancestors did centuries ago,” as remnants of these habits and prejudices remain (This, “Food for Tomorrow” 1063). As national cultures became definite and defined after the middle ages, national cuisines reflecting those cultures began to develop. In France, a customer can go to a restaurant or bistro and order simple yet elegant dishes like moules frites, oysters or sole meuniere—“a large, flat[, whole] Dover sole that [is] perfectly browned” (Child 18). This style of cooking, with its lack of waste and simple combinations of elements, reflects the “thrifty Gallic ‘save everything’ quality” that pervades French culture (24). Similarly, a recipe for Old Virginia Mince Pie, written in rhyme, shows the parallels between American cuisine and American customs. Some of the lines reflect good qualities: the line “worth and beauty need no frill” demonstrates Americans’ respect for results and individualism over aristocratic privilege (Longone
Jacob Stern

88). Some of the lines reflect less desirable qualities: the line “things that grow in foreign lands may have been packed by germy hands” is rank with the distrust of immigrants that has been unfortunately prevalent throughout America’s history (88). Likewise, a meal at Urasawa, a Japanese restaurant in Los Angeles, is a tour through the intricate caves and crevices of Japanese culture. Urasawa, the chef, takes his mountain of toro the size of a small turkey and cuts out small pieces like a diamond cutter creating a high-grade gem. To the horror of any American guests in the room, he throws away most of the extra-premium fish. Urasawa does not operate on a save-everything basis or think that worth and beauty need no frill; rather, in accordance with his culture, he seeks only perfection and aesthetic purity.

Food is not only a reflection of national culture; sometimes it defines national culture. Certain dishes can come to be identified so strongly with a given country that they become a part of the culture, and subsequent aspects of the culture are built around them. Take, for example, lamingtons (sponge cakes with chocolate icing and coconut) in Australia. In Mem Fox’s children’s book Possum Magic, an Australian possum has become invisible and can only get his corporeal body back by eating Australian foods. Bit by bit he regains his identity by eating native foods like “mornay and minties [and] a veg-emite sandwich” until finally he eats a lamington and becomes fully visible (Daniel 278). Here, the foods create the national identity, both inside and outside the story. While geographically specific foods have distinct nations of origin, by no means are they exclusive to their respective birthplaces. Food can and does travel the world—an enthusiastic diner can order sushi in Chile and paella in Mongolia—however, ethnic foods always retain their national nametags. Sushi is Japanese no matter where it is eaten.

Like contemporary art, molecular cuisine transcends the national confinements that are normally associated with food. Adrià in his Synthesis acknowledges that “regional cuisine as a style” is prevalent and “enriches [the food’s] relationship with its environment”; however, he holds that “products and preparations from other countries [should be] subjected to one’s particular style of cooking” (Adrià 1). He and the other molecular chefs have taken this maxim to heart, as any one molecular meal draws upon national influences from around the world. A single meal at elBulli offers everything from olive oil capsules (very Mediterranean) to a mint leaf embedded in a hard yogurt casing topped with curry (Indian in nature) to gorgonzola mochi (a completely original and nation neutral dish). Molecular chefs do not use fusion, the mixing of aspects of different national cuisines in their entirety, to make new dishes; they are not “making sushi out of couscous” (Chowhound 12). Rather, they make new dishes in new contexts independent of cultural boundaries. And while Adrià is considered the “godfather of the Spanish (and global) avant-garde movement” (emphasis added), by no means is Barcelona the only hub of molecular gastronomy (Burnett 2). Like with contemporary art, centers of molecular cuisine have sprung up all over the world, from Japan (Tapas Molecular Bar) to England (The Fat Duck) to the United States (WD~50). The international nature of molecular cuisine is a reflection of the international nature of both molecular gastronomy and science as a whole. The molecular chefs build upon the achievements of one another like scientists in a given field, driving the art and science of molecular gastronomy to ever-higher heights. Using its inherent popularity (due to its artistic side), molecular gastronomy not only utilizes but also promotes the sharing of ideas to people who might be otherwise entrenched in nationalistic protectionist tendencies.
The Other Side

The menu indicated that the next dish would be lamb chops. Great, I thought, I love lamb chops, but how will this dish be molecular? My question was quickly answered. The lamb chops came out looking beautiful: double-thick and perfectly browned. Ramsey said they were the finest lamb chops a chef could get in Japan. I stuck my knife into the chop to cut myself a bite, and I thought I had cut an artery: juices squirted everywhere. It turns out Ramsey had cooked the chops in a carefully calculated manner such that the juices had been retained in the meat, creating an incredibly juicy and tender piece of meat.

While many chefs and consumers propagate, enjoy, and appreciate molecular gastronomy in its different forms, some do not support what they see as the molecular blasphemy of their peers. Opposed to the use of scientific impurities, such as liquid nitrogen, in their food, these chefs prefer to cook as they always have: along national lines with fresh, local produce. Some of these chefs are content to cook their own way and let molecular cuisine coexist with other styles of cooking; others, however, are not so passive. Santi Santimaria, a rival of Ferran Adrià in the northeast of Spain, claims that the molecular chefs are “a gang of frauds who work to distract snobs…the only truth that matters is the product that comes out of the earth, passes through the ovens and is defecated” (Abend 1). This impassioned defense of purist cuisine, while at the extreme end, sums up the criticisms against the molecular chefs’ tampering with nature. Purist cuisine focuses on the primitive aspects of cooking, with organic materials and bodily functions working together in harmony to create the ultimate gastronomic experience; to its executors, anything else is superfluous. At his three Michelin star restaurant, Can Fabes, Santimaria holds on for dear life to his principles, serving rustic yet refined dishes like octopus salad, suckling pig and lobster tail surf and turf, and incredible fresh bread. He is trying to polarize the food world into those who “continue to use...fresh produce” and those who “opt for using additives,” with the molecular chefs on one side and more traditional chefs—such as himself, Urasawa, and Daniel Barber, who operates a restaurant in New York called Blue Hill that only uses produce grown on its farm—on the other (Burnett 1).

Partly as a result of Santimaria’s and Barber’s incendiary comments (Barber called molecular cuisine “effete, precious [and] egotistical” at Madrid Fusion in 2007), a backlash against molecular cuisine can be seen fomenting among some consumers. Diners who have read or heard the comments of Santimaria or Barber or other such chefs go into molecular restaurants with a degree of skepticism: one foodie writer watched in horror as his cynical date rejected some of Dufresne’s famous fried mayonnaise at WD~50 just on principle (Maddox 2). Some patrons even voice criticism of their own. One of these, Das Ubergeek, wrote on the chowhound blog: “I don’t eat foam. I don’t need to be experimented on” (Chowhound 3). Like many of his peers, Das Ubergeek would rather eat a hearty dish of chicken parmesan than be subjected to what he sees as the erratic musings of the molecular chefs (3). Some have even gone so far as to suggest that molecular gastronomy is “a sign of a doomed civilization, of Food Gone Too Far,” as it could eventually lead to meal pills that eliminate the joys of eating altogether (Moskin).

These criticisms actually help to keep molecular gastronomy vital and fresh. Together, the opponents and proponents of molecular gastronomy weave a dynamic argu-
ment, with each side producing fresh ideas, fresh defenses and, most importantly, fresh
dishes—after all, the proof is in the pudding—to stay one step ahead of the opposition.
According to John Stuart Mill, “he who knows only his own side of the case knows little
of that”; by providing a counterargument, the gastronomic traditionalists are helping
to spur the molecular chefs and their supporters to bring their art to higher heights via
a food race to rival the space race (Mill 35). For example, when Ferran Adrià presents
a dish of hot/cold clam chop suey, Santi Santimaria feels compelled to retort with pure
raw razor clams in fish broth; this in turn spurs Grant Achatz of Alinea in Chicago to use
clams with fillets of ice fish to construct a dish that resembles a live ice fish. Though the
traditionalists may disagree, they are aiding the development of the food science they so
adamantly oppose as molecular gastronomy continues to expand the horizon of what is
possible in the kitchen.

A Bright Future

The final dish of Ramsey’s extravaganza was the most impressive. In name, it sounded
innocent enough: “Fruit.” He gave us each a plate of fruit, with a couple of pieces each
of lime, lemon, grapefruit, orange and strawberry. He told us to eat two pieces of fruit; it
was good fruit, but nothing out of the ordinary. Next, though, Ramsey gave us a little red
fruit, and told us to eat it and roll the seed around in our mouths. After this, I put a piece
of lime in my mouth; it tasted like a sweet drop of ambrosia from Olympus. I looked at
Ramsey with bewilderment in my eyes. He explained that the little berry, called miracle
fruit, chemically disables the bitter and sour taste buds on the tongue, creating an incred-
ible new sensation that alters the eater’s perception of reality.

As molecular chefs continue to explore new methods of cooking in their own kitch-
ens, the time-tested methods that have become a part of the science of molecular gas-
tronomy are making their way into the average home. Through the media attention and
popularity provided by the artistic aspect of the movement, people are beginning to be-
come aware of the methods and “precise and convenient appliances that make it a snap
to prepare moist, tender meat and fish every time” (Mcgee, “The Science of Cooking”
2). With the help of molecular gastronomy, home cooks can consistently create better
tasting and more efficient foods. Take the perfect French fry, for example. Before the ef-
forts of Adrià and company, people may have had to serve soggy fries with their ribs on
the Fourth of July for lack of a consistent methodology, and who likes soggy fries? With
the help of the discoveries of molecular gastronomy, however, at-home chefs can now
learn that the perfect fry is cooked for seven minutes at 180°C and then again at 200°C
until it is golden brown (This, Molecular Gastronomy 193). With the help of molecular
gastronomy and its artistic dissemination process, the soggy French fry could be offi-
cially eradicated from the home.

Molecular gastronomy is a hybrid between science and art that helps connect av-
erage people to science across the world. There is no limit to what the science of food
can achieve, since it is such a relatively new and untapped scientific discipline. Already,
more research is pouring into the realms of molecular interactions to try to discover new
flavors and culinary sensations. It has been found that different sensations are felt on the
tongue in a set order—pain, bitter, sweet, salty, then sour (Amerine 41). Imagine what
molecular chefs could do with this information: pretty soon, Jeff Ramsey might come out with a dish called “roller coaster” that slows down the sensation process and goes through a tour of every one, from spicy pain to citrusy sourness. In addition, scientists have discovered that one molecular arrangement of Toly lurea (an organic molecule with a 6-carbon ring) tastes bitter, while the movement of a methyl group from the third position on the ring to the fourth position makes the same Toly lurea taste sweetish (67). It is possible that, at some point, a molecular chef like Heston Blumenthal could find a way to alter the molecular structure of radicchio, a bitter leafy vegetable, to make it taste sweet. According to Adrià’s synthesis, “the technique-concept search is the apex of the creative pyramid” for molecular gastronomers, so this drive for more science and new ways to present it will not soon come to an end (Adrià 1). The artistic presentations and new contexts used to accompany the culinary discoveries will advance at a proportional pace, and more and more receptive eaters will be drawn into this mesmerizing amalgamation of art and science, where each supports the other. Complications and contradictions will cease to be detrimental and puzzling, and will instead start working together with the grounded facts of science to open up new pathways of perception and understanding for everyone involved.

Works Cited
Works Consulted


Appendix A

Eduardo Abaroa

*The Body Cavity Inspection Network (Node in a Corner)*, 2007

[url to image of Eduardo Abaroa's art piece]

Cindy Sherman

*Untitled Film Still #6*, 1977

[url to image of Cindy Sherman's art piece]
Marcel Duchamps
Toilet “ready-made,” 1917
http://web.mit.edu/~bdemers/www/images/fountain.jpg

Jackson Pollock
No. 5, 1948
When Katherine Disenhof first proposed to write about multi-media corn syrup advertisements for our class on “Visual Rhetoric Across the Globe,” I was a little skeptical of the potential research rigor of her project. But when she handed in her first draft focusing on the manipulative strategies of the Sweet Surprise ad campaign, I realized that her keen eye for logical fallacies, her engaging writing style, and her passionate position against the poisoning of the American diet all combined to make her project one of the most significant of the class. As Katherine then delved into her research, she researched widely, including studying Michael Pollan’s work, attending the Stanford lecture series on the Ethics of Food and the Environment, and examining FDA decisions on corn syrup. As she revised draft after draft, her shrewd assessment of the campaign videos, website, and still ads evolved to offer a chilling perspective on diverse food cultures within America. Her innovative research embodies the Stanford motto, “The wind of freedom blows” while her writing conveys her ideas with creativity and grace. Yet this was no mere academic exercise for Katherine. Her concern to warn America fueled her project, and thus it is the words of her cover letter, explaining the importance of her project, that I would like to cite as the most appropriate introduction to her fine essay:

Dear America,

After viewing the “party” commercial from the Sweet Surprise campaign, you might have thought something you never imagined you would ever think: maybe high fructose corn syrup isn’t all that bad after all. It’s made from corn, a healthy vegetable, and contains no artificial ingredients. Moreover, it’s fine in moderation and has the same nutritional value as sugar. You might have avoided high fructose corn syrup because you heard that it was unhealthy, but what exact reasons do you have to condemn it? I am here to tell you that you should never ever agree with an argument just because you cannot argue against it yourself. If you began questioning your stance on high fructose corn syrup because you could not explain the scientific and nutritional argument against the processed and overabundant substance, you should know that you are being misled. In the following essay you will learn just how the Corn Refiner’s Association is distracting you from the real problems behind high fructose corn syrup. Through strategies of visual persuasion and logical fallacies, the commercial seeks to improve the ethos of high fructose corn syrup. It feeds on America’s limited public knowledge of nutrition and aims to instill a sense of humiliation in those who criticize the ingredient without a full understanding of the issue. So, if you are one of viewers who questioned their view on high fructose corn syrup after viewing this commercial, then take a second look, read the essay, and think. Do not agree with an argument when you haven’t seen the other side of things. Get the facts and educate yourself. After all, it’s your health we’re talking about.

—Alyssa O’Brien
Sweet Surprise

Visual Rhetoric and the Flawed Message of the Corn Refiners Association’s Sweet Surprise Campaign

Katherine Disenhof

“There are so many myths, inaccuracies and untruths associated with [high fructose corn syrup] that we felt it was necessary to set the record straight.”

– Audrae Erickson, President of the Corn Refiners Association

The Corn Refiners Association is fighting back. In an attempt to combat the negative press and improve the reputation of high fructose corn syrup, the Corn Refiners Association announced its plans to launch the Sweet Surprise campaign in June of 2008. As detailed in the project’s “Campaign at a Glance” news release, the association created the multi-media movement to “change the conversation about high fructose corn syrup” (“Campaign at a Glance”). Faced with an increasing amount of criticism, the sweetener is widely misunderstood. Flagged as the new trans-fat by the general public, it is often wrongly accused of being the sole villain behind the nation’s growing obesity and type II diabetes problems (McLaughlin 1). Recognizing that the majority of consumers do not comprehend the similarities between sugar and high fructose corn syrup, the campaign specifically targets consumers over the age of 25, especially mothers. To accomplish this, it aims to share scientific facts, communicate in a responsible way, and provide credible sources of information (“Campaign at a Glance”). Currently, the campaign is comprised of three television advertisements, three web banners, three magazine advertisements, and two newspaper advertisements, all of which refer the viewer or reader to HFCSFacts.com, the official campaign website.

This campaign is extremely pertinent to our lives today because high fructose corn
syrup makes up an increasingly large portion of the American daily diet. In a *TIME Magazine* article written in response to the Sweet Surprise campaign’s September launch, journalist Lisa McLaughlin reported that the United States’ food system manufactures approximately 56 pounds of the sweetener per person per year. Consequently, each of us ate nearly 60 pounds of high fructose corn syrup in 2006 in addition to a slightly smaller amount of sugar (McLaughlin 1). Currently, almost 10% of the calories that American adults eat is derived from corn sweeteners, and that figure is 20% for most American children (Pollan, “Becomes King” 1). In this way, the campaign addresses and influences a crucial ingredient in our diet.

The message of the campaign’s advertisements is simple: high fructose corn syrup is made from corn, contains no artificial ingredients, is nutritionally the same as sugar, has the same amount of calories as sugar, and is fine in moderation. However, this evidence is a little too simplistic. While the campaign cleverly uses rhetorical strategies to convince viewers of its cause, its message relies heavily on logical fallacies and neglects to acknowledge its possible implications. Instead of an in-depth scientific explanation, the advertisements provide generalized, one-sided, oversimplified argument. Furthermore, the campaign recognizes that the stigma attached to high fructose corn syrup is a product of a more complex food culture flaw, but then proceeds to take advantage of that flaw to persuade its audience. With possible significant cultural and environmental ramifications, it is imperative that this campaign be carefully analyzed and thoroughly discussed.

A Sweet Message: Examining the Rhetorical Strategies of the Advertisements

At first glance, the campaign’s advertisements are very unassuming. The print advertisements do not contain any unique eye-catching graphics and the Internet banners simply depict an ear of corn and a tractor. Similarly, the foundations of the television commercials are nothing out of the ordinary; each contains two people who fit into the stereotypical cultural images of Middle America. In the “Party” commercial, two middle class, middle-aged mothers are seen at a well-furnished children’s birthday party. “Two Bites” depicts a young couple enjoying a springtime picnic in the park. Meanwhile, the “Brothers” commercial portrays a classic brother relationship – a lazy and rude brother mocking his more intelligent younger brother. Thus, text and dialogue aside, the message of the campaign is rather inconspicuous to the audience within the visual aspects of the advertisements. Instead, the visuals provide a construction of normalcy. The Sweet Surprise television advertisements begin like most other commercials: average, middle class people doing ordinary things. The soccer moms organize the birthday party, the boys bicker over breakfast, and the cute couple has a romantic date.

However, once the dialogue between the television commercials’ characters begins, the campaign moves from portraying a clichéd Middle America to exposing a significant cultural flaw. Each of the conversations is set up the same way: the first character comments on the unhealthy nature of high fructose corn syrup in the food or beverage of the second character. When the second character questions the opinion of the first, the first character is speechless, baffled, and cannot explain why high fructose corn syrup is
bad. The best justification they can give is, “well you know what they say about it.” In this fashion, the campaign responds to the instability of our easily-influenced diet. As characters in the commercials condemn high fructose corn syrup but cannot justify their criticism, the Sweet Surprise campaign provides a social commentary about our lack of nutritional education and our acceptance of the dietary information that we hear without questioning it or fully understand it.

In a *New York Times Magazine* article from October 2004 titled “Our National Eating Disorder,” acclaimed author and environmentalist Michael Pollan commented on this unstable, diet-crazed American food culture. From what he calls the “carbophobia” of 2004 to the soy craze and the more recent organic fad, he believes that we base our diets on the latest food gossip. As many Americans lack a proper nutritional education, what we put in our mouths is dangerously dependent on the latest news, whether heard from the media or from a friend. According to Pollan, it takes very little to catalyze a new national food fashion. Even “a lone crackpot with a medical degree can alter this nation’s diet overnight,” he wrote in his article. Furthermore, food marketers tend to exploit the shifting trends which inevitably leads to more dietary instability. Consequently, this creates the great paradox of the American diet: unhealthy citizens obsessed with the idea of eating healthily (Pollan, “Eating Disorder” 1). The more the people of this country worry about their weight, the more they destabilize their diets by following food trends and the bigger they get. In this way, the campaign can be praised for drawing awareness to such an important and influential cultural problem though its television commercials.

The Sweet Surprise magazine advertisements also feature the same social commentary. In the “Hairdresser” print ad, one character says, “My hairdresser says that sugar is healthier than high fructose corn syrup,” while the second character remarks, “Wow! You get your hair done by a doctor?” Likewise, in the campaign’s “Dry Cleaner” advertisement (Fig. 2) one character tells the other one, “My dry cleaner says high fructose corn syrup is loaded with calories.” In response, the other character asks, “A registered dietitian presses your shirts?” In both cases, the Sweet Surprise campaign brings our lack of nutritional knowledge to light and expresses its disapproval of the unquestioning, trend-following nature of Americans.

Assuming that a large portion of its audience is unable to explain the negative aspects of high fructose corn syrup themselves, the Sweet Surprise campaign cleverly persuades its viewers through an emotional appeal. The advertisements portray the
misinformed characters that condemn high fructose corn syrup as idiots who base their opinions on the inaccurate opinions of others. The magazine advertisements employ this tactic through sarcasm and mockery (“Wow! You get your hair done by a doctor?”) while the television commercials combine visual and audio elements to highlight the lack of intelligence of the characters. For example, in the “Party” commercial, as one of the mothers tries to explain the negative things that people say about high fructose corn syrup, the camera focuses in on her face as she fumbles for an explanation (Fig. 3). In addition, the background music pauses. These effects makes her stuttering even more awkward and her humiliation even more painful. This amplification of the character’s humiliation triggers an emotional response in the viewers. Identifying with her misinformed opinion, they too feel embarrassed. In this way, the advertisements utilize pathos to make the audience self-conscious of its nutritional stupidity and instill a feeling of humiliation.

Through this emotional appeal, the Sweet Surprise campaign establishes its ethos with the audience as well. Commenting on the misinformed American with a condescending tone, the campaign portrays itself as an educational, informative source which is courageously confronting public opinion. As viewers begin to question their own views of high fructose corn syrup when the characters who criticize the sweetener cannot provide evidence to support their opinions, the campaign takes advantage of the situation to establish itself as an authoritative power and communicate its message. For instance, at the bottom of each magazine advertisement is the following statement:

There’s a lot of misinformation out there about sugars made from corn. Truth is, high fructose corn syrup is nutritionally the same as table sugar. The same number of calories, too. As registered dietitians recommend, keep enjoying the foods you love, just do it in moderation. We welcome a healthy discussion. Get the facts. You’re in for a sweet surprise. (Sweet Surprise)

The campaign offers the information its audience lacks – the information to alleviate their embarrassment. Its message cites scientific information (“nutritionally the same as sugar” and “same number of calories”) and references registered dietitians as opposed to hair dressers and dry cleaners. The truth, it argues, is that high fructose corn syrup is basically the same as sugar (an accepted ingredient) and perfectly healthy in moderation. Additionally, in other advertisements the campaign mentions that high fructose corn syrup is made from corn (a healthy vegetable) and contains no artificial ingredients.

As a result, the Sweet Surprise campaign effectively uses rhetorical strategies to persuade its audience. Though the campaign’s advertisements may seem quite unassuming
at first, the dialogue between characters draws attention to a significant flaw in our food culture. Commendably, it exposes our lack of nutritional education, easily-influenced diets, and habit of basing our food-related opinions on those of others. By doing this the advertisements cleverly cause their viewers to identify with the humiliation of the characters who are portrayed as fools. Then, using the emotions of the audience to its advantage, the campaign steps in as the credible source with the dependable facts. Consequently, the Sweet Surprise campaign works to improve the reputation of high fructose corn syrup by combating the inaccurate public opinion with facts as a responsible, educational resource.

Here’s the Skinny:
Revealing the Not-So-Sweet Logical Fallacies

The Sweet Surprise campaign may skillfully utilize rhetorical strategies to persuade its audience and work hard to establish itself as a trustworthy informant, but its argument is misleading as it relies heavily on logical fallacies. Most obviously, the campaign’s advertisements stack the evidence heavily in support of high fructose corn syrup. Neglecting to address any of the arguments against high fructose corn syrup, the characters in the advertisements who criticize high fructose corn syrup are ridiculed and portrayed as unintelligent. In reality, not everyone who believes that high fructose corn syrup is bad is ignorant and yet the campaign does not even give the other side a chance to justify its opinion. Instead, the characters who represent the anti-high fructose corn syrup claim are depicted as having no valid reasoning for condemning the sweetener. Their stupidity is emphasized and they are quickly shot down by their pro-high fructose corn syrup counterparts. Had the characters provided reasons for disliking high fructose corn syrup that were then disproved by the other characters, the campaign would have avoided this fallacy. However, only one side of the argument is communicated.

In addition to stacking the evidence, the campaign’s message is even more misleading because it makes hasty generalizations about the issue at hand. There is very little evidence provided in the commercials; the “facts” that are presented are very general and lack complete explanations. For example, the campaign argues that high fructose corn syrup is nutritionally the same as sugar and has the same amount of calories but then does not explain how the two sweeteners are different from one another. In fact, even after it is apparent that the advertisement’s characters lack a complete understanding of high fructose corn syrup, a suitable definition of high fructose corn syrup is not provided for clarification.

In her article “The Facts about Corn Syrup” for the San Francisco Chronicle, prominent nutritionist Marion Nestle describes the similarities and differences between sugar (sucrose) and high fructose corn syrup. Unlike the Sweet Surprise campaign’s message, Nestle states that high fructose corn syrup is not the “same as sugar,” but is still relatively equivalent. Sucrose, also known as sugar, is a double sugar composed of two types of single sugars – glucose and fructose – in an equal 50/50 ratio. Similarly, high fructose corn syrup is made up of glucose and fructose but in a slightly different ration; it is approximately 55% fructose and 45% glucose. The chemical difference between the two is minor.
The fundamental distinction lies instead in the process of getting the substance. With sucrose, on the one hand, it is a process of obtaining the sugar whereas with high fructose corn syrup, it is a matter of creating the sweetener. Sucrose is boiled down from sugarcane (or beets) and then processed through a system of washing, clarification, filtering, and drying. On the other hand, the process for producing high fructose corn syrup is much more complex. First, starch is extracted from corn and broken down by enzymes to produce glucose. More enzymes are then used to convert some of the glucose into fructose. The final steps include a refining, separating, and evaporating of the products (Nestle, “The Facts” F-1). Consequently, while the campaign is almost correct in arguing that high fructose corn syrup is nutritionally equivalent to sugar, it fails to recognize the major difference between the two: sugar occurs in nature while high fructose corn syrup is man-made. Furthermore, it may state that the sweetener does not contain artificial ingredients, but that does not mean that it is not processed. Even though there might not be anything artificial used to produce high fructose corn syrup, there is still something very artificial about its creation.

Through this definition of high fructose corn syrup, it is also evident that the campaign leaves out key details in its argument that the sweetener is made from corn. Yes, high fructose corn syrup is derived from corn, but the starch that is extracted from corn subsequently undergoes a chemical procedure. Despite what the campaign logo – an ear of corn – implies, very little of the vegetable is utilized. Corn is just the foundation of a complex production process.

Even so, the fact that corn is involved at all is controversial. In a 2002 New York Times article titled “When a Crop Becomes King,” Michael Pollan discusses what he calls “cornification,” or the domination of the corn industry over American foods supply. Every aspect, he argues, of the United States’ food supply today is linked to corn in some way, shape, or form. Pollan believes high fructose corn syrup is by far the industry’s best tactic for staying in business. Pushing sugar aside, high fructose corn syrup provides the food industry with a cheap substitute that can be found in a wide range of foods and beverages. Now factor in the corn-fed animal protein and food which is made from actual corn: the species has fully converted the unwitting human race into a fully dependent population of corn eaters (Pollan, “Becomes King” 1).

Another part of the campaign’s argument that is not discussed in full is the concept of moderation. The characters of the Sweet Surprise television commercials declare high fructose corn syrup “fine in moderation” while the magazine advertisements tell readers that “as registered dietitians recommend, keep enjoying the foods you love, just do it in moderation.” However, these days moderation seems nearly impossible to define because high fructose corn syrup is an ingredient in nearly every food and beverage product. Treasured by the food industry for being cheap and long-lasting, it took the food industry by storm in the 1980s and replaced sugar as the leading sweetener. The list of what it is now included in is extraordinary. According to The 2007 Corn Annual published by the Corn Refiners Association itself, not only is high fructose corn syrup included in foods (crackers, fruit juices, catsup, candy, beer, salad dressings, chicken products), but other kinds of products as well, including baby food, animal feed, lecithin, antibiotics, and shampoo (Corn Refiners Association 29, 30). The sweetener, in short, is being produced in massive amounts. For example, the association’s publication reports that the corn industry distributed a total of 23 billion pounds of high fructose corn syrup in 2006.
As a result, the Sweet Surprise campaign may argue that high fructose corn syrup is fine in moderation, but it neither defines moderation nor does it address how unrealistic moderation is because of the sweetener’s overproduction.

Not only is the credibility of the campaign weakened by its reliance on logical fallacies, but its commendable act of exposing the flaws of our food culture is discredited as it simultaneously takes advantage of those flaws. In the second half of the television commercials the non-criticizing character justifies the safety of high fructose corn syrup after the other character cannot explain its negative effects. Upon hearing the campaign’s argument, the character immediately changes its opinion about the sweetener. For example, in the “Party” commercial, after the mother who criticizes high fructose corn syrup is “proved wrong” by the other mother, the critical mother looks embarrassed and compliments the other mother to make up for her mistake and redeem herself. Similarly, when the younger brother proves his high fructose corn syrup-questioning older brother wrong, the older brother mumbles “whatever” and begins to eat the younger brother’s bowl of cereal. Within a matter of seconds, both disproved characters are chastised for avoiding high fructose corn syrup based on the opinions of others and then proceed to accept the opinion of the other character in the scene. This is a direct contradiction to the campaign’s criticism of the unquestioning American who bases his or her opinion on those of others.

Additionally, the oversimplification of the Sweet Surprise “facts” can be seen as an insult to our intelligence. The campaign appears to believe that a couple of very general and very simplified facts that utilize keywords such as “calories” and “artificial ingredient” are enough to persuade its audience. Health contributors such as Marion Nestle have even found the campaign’s strategies offensive. Although she agrees that high fructose corn syrup has a large public relations problem, Nestle wrote the following in a blog entry posted after viewing the campaign’s website:

“It’s hard to know what on the website is most offensive: the videos of the dumb people being condescended to by friends who think they know better (and what’s up with the race and gender combinations?), the slogans (“HFCS has no artificial ingredients and is the same as table sugar”), the quiz questions (“which of the following sweeteners is considered a natural food ingredient: HFCS, honey, sugar, or all of the above”), or just the take home message: “As registered dieticians recommend, keep enjoying the foods you love, just do it in moderation.” (Nestle, Blog Entry)

As Nestle notes, the campaign oversimplifies the information it provides and expects us to accept its diluted message without question. Consequently, the Sweet Surprise advertisements criticize our cultural food flaw, but then turn around and take advantage of that flaw. They assume our nutritional unintelligence and presume that we will be easily persuaded by a small amount of evidence.

Nestle also makes an interesting observation regarding race and gender as portrayed by the campaign. In both the television commercials and magazine advertisements, there are noteworthy patterns about which gender and which race is the smart, sweetener-promoting character and which is the misinformed one. With the exception of the “Brothers” commercial in which the discussion is between two boys, all of the advertisements depict a female as the high fructose corn syrup advocate. The “Party” com-
mercial and the “Hairdresser” advertisement illustrate conversations between women, but in the “One Bite,” “Dry Cleaner,” and “Thirds” advertisements it is the female who chastises the male for believing high fructose corn syrup to be unhealthy.

As the campaign is particularly targeting mothers, the campaign’s choice of a dominant gender may be an unethical tactic for winning the trust and confidence of the female audience. Although times are changing, women tend to be generalized as the more nutritionally educated of the sexes because they have historically and stereotypically been the ones who do the grocery shopping and cooking. Furthermore, a man discussing a woman’s weight (especially if commenting on her being overweight) is culturally viewed as being more offensive than if a woman comments on a man’s weight. For example, the man in the “Thirds” advertisement (Fig. 4) says, “High fructose corn syrup made me fat.” To this the woman replies, “No, going back for thirds made you fat.” While the woman does appear to be mocking the man, her comment is not entirely offensive. However, if the roles are switched, the advertisement would take on a whole new tone. In this fashion, the campaign inadvertently comments on our food culture as it pertains to gender.

The representation of race provides another inadvertent social commentary. Of the twelve characters in the six advertisements under examination, all are Caucasian except for two African Americans. Both African American characters are women, and both are in support of high fructose corn syrup. This could be interpreted as the campaign’s attempt to connect with and persuade that racial demographic, especially African American mothers. The Corn Refiner’s Association might be assuming that their audience members are most likely to listen to, respond to, and agree with messages coming from their own particular demographic. But on another note, the choice to portray the African American characters as more informed and, therefore, more intelligent than the Caucasians might have been made to avoid the culturally sensitive subject of race-related superiority. As in the “Thirds” advertisement, if the characters’ roles in the “Party” and “Dry Cleaner” advertisements had been reversed, they might take on an entirely different tone. By choosing the race and gender combinations that it did, the Sweet Surprise campaign targeted its intended audience, provided an interesting social commentary, and avoided sensitive cultural issues of race and gender.

While we might be tempted simply to disregard the advertisements as being a part of just another campaign, the possible repercussions if people actually listen to the Sweet Surprise campaign’s message are too great to ignore. Unlike a commercial for, say, a car or even a specific food product, the Sweet Surprise commercials have the power to alter our food culture. Corn Refiners Association might have initiated the campaign to merely improve the reputation of high fructose corn syrup, but convincing us to consciously accept high fructose corn syrup into our diets also entails convincing us to consume more high fructose corn syrup. While the campaign’s visual media works hard to establish it as a healthy substance, increased consumption of the sweetener leads to detrimental effects of our physical health. Although it has yet to be proven that the chemical itself is leading to problems such as obesity and diabetes, there is substantial evidence that the effects of high fructose corn syrup are catalysts of such major health epidemics. The quotes and “scientific” facts provided by the campaign often exclude key pieces of information. The association portrays high fructose corn syrup as a natural substance with no connection to diabetes, when it is actually an addictive chemical that can cause overeating and mental instability.

The slideshow of quotes on the homepage of the campaign’s website features the following statement from the American Medical Association (AMA) taken from an AMA press release dated June 17, 2008: “After studying current research, the American Medical Association (AMA) today concluded that high fructose corn syrup does not appear to contribute more to obesity than other caloric sweeteners” (Sweet Surprise). While this quote (Fig. 5) seems to disassociate high fructose corn syrup from our nation’s quickly growing obesity levels, there is more to the AMA’s view of the sweetener than the campaign would like to share. Yes, the AMA has stated that high fructose corn syrup does not contribute to rising obesity and type II diabetes rates any more than sucrose, because studies have suggested that it is not a unique contributor to the health problems. That said, this does not mean that high fructose corn syrup has no contribution, it just does not stand out as a leading contributor. Nonetheless, while there is currently no evidence that points to high fructose corn syrup as a key culprit, the AMA
makes it very clear that this does not completely vindicate the sweetener. Presently there are very few studies that have been conducted on the health impacts of high fructose corn syrup and any long-term effects have yet to emerge.

Released in June 2008, the AMA summarized the situation in its Report 3 of the Council on Science and Public Health (A-08) with the following statement:

Because the composition of high fructose corn syrup and sucrose are so similar, particularly on absorption by the body, it appears unlikely that high fructose corn syrup contributes more to obesity or other conditions than sucrose. Nevertheless, few studies have evaluated the potentially differential effect of various sweeteners, particularly as they relate to health conditions such as obesity, which develop over relatively long periods of time. Improved nutrient databases are needed to analyze food consumption in epidemiological studies, as are more strongly designed experimental studies. At the present time, there is insufficient evidence to restrict use of high fructose corn syrup or other fructose-containing sweeteners in the food supply or to require the use of warning labels on products containing high fructose corn syrup. (AMA 1)

The AMA is not taking a proactive stance on the issue – even though high fructose corn syrup might have harmful side effects, the association will not act until concrete proof has been provided. It does, however, recognize the lack of data and need for more studies, especially those that examine long-term effects.

There currently might not be sufficient evidence to connect the increase in high fructose corn syrup consumption to rising rates of obesity and type II diabetes, but there is evidence that it is tampering with our brain chemistry. In her book Death by Supermarket: the Fattening, Dumbing Down, and Poisoning of America, real-food activist Nancy Deville argues that, like sugar, high fructose corn syrup is a powerfully addictive stimulant. Furthermore, Deville claims that the sweetener is even more dangerous than sugar: “The closing of that sugar plant was like the closing down of a marijuana farm (American Sugar Refining) because of an increased demand for heroin (high fructose corn syrup). In other words we went from a bad habit to an out-and-out lethal addiction,” she writes of our nation’s transition from sugar to high fructose corn syrup in the 1980s (Deville 24).

What Deville is hinting at in her allusions to bad habits and drug addiction is a neurological explanation of the “sugar high” phenomenon. Such an explanation is complicated. In brief, the consistent consumption of high fructose corn syrup (or sugar) leads to imbalanced neurotransmitters. Eating sugars activates the pancreas, which begins secreting insulin. The production of insulin then catalyzes an excessive rush of stored neurotransmitters in the brain. As a result, our brains beg for more sugar, but consuming more of it only worsens the situation as the body will continue to crave increased amounts. This leads to irrational and hysterical hunger and further destabilizes our American diet. We become addicted, lose our self control, and not only want high fructose corn syrup, but need high fructose corn syrup.

The strength of such an addiction is exemplified by a recent study conducted at the University of Bordeaux in France. Analyzing the addictive nature of sugar in comparison to addictive drugs, the study came to the startling conclusion that sugar and sweeteners
may be even more addictive than cocaine. Given a choice between highly sweetened wa-
ter and intravenous cocaine, the experiment’s laboratory rats overwhelmingly preferred
the water. Various sweeteners were tested, all of which procured the same conclusion.
Additionally, the study found that the rats that were already “experienced cocaine us-
ers” (meaning they had previously learned to self-administer the drug) even favored the
sweetened water. A separate experiment has also shown the rats can become dependent
on sugar and exhibit symptoms of addiction such as cravings and multiple symptoms of
withdrawal (Dvoskin 16). Though similar studies have yet to be conducted on human
subjects, all of this research has raised serious concerns about the safety of high fructose
corn syrup as it has demonstrated the addictive strength and power of sweeteners.

As if this study does not raise enough concern about our addictions to sugar, some
believe that this addiction has generational ramifications. In Death by Supermarket: the
Fattening, Dumbing Down, and Poisoning of America, Deville continues her discussion of
sugar addictions with the argument that the effects of a diet high in high fructose corn
syrup extend beyond our own brain chemistry to that of our children. Pregnant women
who consume a diet of processed foods high in sugar run the risk of preventing their
baby’s brain from fully developing in the womb. Furthermore, the mother’s sugar-heavy
diet can result in her child being born with unbalanced neurotransmitters and prone to
sugar addiction. Factor in the fact that an increasing amount of mothers are choosing
to feed their newborns sugary factory formula and we literally have a recipe for disaster
(Deville 19).

The connection between the sugar-induced neurotransmitter imbalance of mother
and that of her child is also very significant because the Sweet Surprise campaign is tar-
geting mothers. While the Corn Refiner’s Association provides no explanation of their
choice of target audience, it can be assumed that the association has chosen to target
mothers for their familial role. The Sweet Surprise advertisements’ construction of nor-
malcy conforms to the stereotype that mothers are the ones who do the grocery shop-
ing, who cook for their family, and therefore who tend to control their family’s diet. In
this way, convincing mothers that high fructose corn syrup is a safe and healthy ingredi-
ent not only affects her diet, but also has the power to change the diets of her family.
This increases the chances of a mother giving birth to a mentally unstable child, fuels her
child’s imbalance, and can cause the rest of her family to become imbalanced.

Accordingly, a socially-accepted addiction to high fructose corn syrup produces an
emotionally unstable population. We crave the sweetener and experience symptoms of
withdrawal when we do not consume enough of it. This craving is what then contributes
to the growing obesity epidemic, an exponentially growing national problem that shows
no signs of slowing down or even leveling off. A need to consume more of the sweet-
ener means an increase in the consumption of products containing it and, therefore, an
increase in overall caloric consumption. As a result, high fructose corn syrup may or
may not be directly worsening our health itself, but the effects of its consumption are
detrimental as the chemical furthers our habit of overeating, which consequently plays a
critical role in the exponential growth of obesity.

Obesity itself has extreme health effects and societal implications. In a lecture in
Stanford University’s “The Ethics of Food and the Environment” series, Dr. Thomas
Robinson of the Lucille Packard Children’s Hospital and Stanford Prevention Research
Center presented staggering statistics about our national obesity epidemic. For example,
in 2007 a survey indicated there are currently four American states in which over 30% of the local population is obese. While this is a problem which affects the entire population, one of the most visibly influenced demographics is children. After remaining at a natural 5% from the 1960s to 1980, the level of childhood obesity in the United States doubled during the 80s. By the late 1990s, childhood obesity had climbed to 15%, tripling from the 1960 statistic. Today, a worrisome amount of children are overweight and show signs of pre-diabetes (high fasting insulin levels). These statistics not only represent larger people and higher blood-glucose levels, but also foreshadow an array of serious health complications. Obesity means cardiovascular, endocrine, gastrointestinal, orthopedic, and even reproductive problems. It complicates basic surgeries and increases rates of premature death. Thus, the word obesity does not stand for a single health issue, but a slew of deadly problems.

Food for Thought: Possible Cultural Ramifications of the Campaign’s Message

Unfortunately, the negative effects of high fructose corn syrup extend beyond a slew of deadly health problems. Overconsumption and overproduction of the sweetener prompts national and even global crises larger than our individual physical issues. A socially accepted addiction to high fructose corn syrup creates an unstable society and the growth of obesity rates builds cultural challenges. Furthermore, the mass production of high fructose corn syrup that is needed to fulfill our addiction has serious environmental impacts worldwide. For this reason, the possible repercussions of the cleverly persuasive Sweet Surprise campaign extend far beyond the obvious health and safety issues of high fructose corn syrup.

Obesity does not just imply problems about our physical health, but also raises concerns about the health of American culture. As Dr. Robinson discussed in his lecture, obesity is accompanied by severe societal costs. Not only does it significantly increase the amount of money the country annually spends on medical costs (which is already in the billions), but it also reduces productivity as the disabled population grows. Furthermore, the mere fact that obesity makes Americans physically larger would eventually require a complete restructuring of the nation’s infrastructure. From schools, to business, to homes, our lives would need to be widened. Doorways would need to be broader, movie theater seats would need to be enlarged, and even road lanes may need to be expanded if car seats need to be altered. This may seem like an unrealistic future, but listen to Dr. Robinson’s statistics, think about the long term effects, and then decide if this is really that improbable.

A current and visible societal impact of high fructose corn syrup is due to the sweetener’s addictive qualities. In Death by Supermarket, Deville goes so far as to connect the country’s rise in crime rates with the growth of high fructose corn syrup. Those who develop an addiction become emotionally unstable while an increasing amount of Americans are neurologically imbalanced from the time of birth. While many equate the 150% increase from 1985 to 1993 in homicides committed by boys fifteen to nineteen years of age to the increased amount of violence on television and in movies, Deville points to neurotransmitter imbalances (Deville 29). She writes, “if you think about it, those brutal
ideas [in the media] don’t just spring out of the air. There’s a reason Americans don’t feel well and that many feel the rage that permeates our society” (30). Some may respond to their imbalance by eating sweets, but others may be driven to project outwards. She believes that the addiction and imbalance triggers a rage so influential that it is often manifested in major crime and violence. Thus, Deville argues that avoiding factory food (which contains high fructose corn syrup) would significantly reduce our prison population (29). In this way, she believes high fructose corn syrup leads to monumental societal implications.

While the connection between rising crime and increased consumption of high fructose corn syrup might sound outlandish, it is not impossible. Of course correlation does not imply causation as other external factors could also contribute to rising crime through that period of time, but there is something to be said for Deville’s logic. The fact that a national increase of the sweetener’s consumption leads to addictions and neurotransmitter imbalances is probable cause for a more violent culture. If an addiction to high fructose corn syrup is comparable to that of cocaine, it does not seem so improbable that our overconsumption of the sweetener would produce a more aggressive society.

The overconsumption of high fructose corn syrup also brings about serious environmental problems. As previously mentioned, Michael Pollan discusses the connection between high fructose corn syrup and corn in his article “When a Crop Becomes King.” Not only does high fructose corn syrup challenge the diversity of our diets by benefiting the domination of the corn industry, but it also threatens the planet’s natural diversity. The world’s most widely planted cereal crop, we have devoted over twice the area of New York State to corn - more of our land than any other plant (Pollan, “Becomes King” 1). In addition, corn is increasingly comprised of genetically modified organisms (“GMOs”) – a controversial scientific technology criticized for tampering with DNA and having unknown future effects.

In addition to challenging nature’s diversity, the domination of corn also creates many other negative environmental consequences. As Pollan details in his New York Times Magazine article, a plethora of corn crops demands large amounts of fertilizers and pesticides – 80 million acres worth. One of the primary issues here is that runoff from these inorganic chemicals contaminates groundwater and, subsequently, larger bodies of water. For example, runoff from the Midwestern Corn Belt had already flowed from the Mississippi River into the Gulf of Mexico where it has eradicated a twelve thousand square miles area of marine life. The other major issue associated with fertilizers and pesticides relates to their chemical manufacturing. As if it doesn’t take enough energy to manufacture high fructose corn syrup itself, the growing of each bushel of corn consumes half a gallon of fossil fuels (oil and natural gases) (Pollan, “Becomes King” 1). Accordingly, the corn industry may feed millions of mouths, but at the expense of the environment. And while it may be hard to visualize the larger future effects, we need to recognize that how we treat our nation’s soil will certainly have long-lasting consequences over time.

Not only will these consequences be long-lasting, but they could be nearly irreversible, if not permanent, much like the physical harm that the effects of overconsuming high fructose corn syrup may inflict on our bodies. Because of this, it is imperative to the health of mankind, our culture, and Mother Earth that the truth be unveiled. The Corn Refiner’s Association is right, there is a lot of misinformation out there. Though cleverly
persuasive and well-strategized, the Sweet Surprise campaign might not be the appropriate remedy for the misinformed American population. As noted in the campaign's social commentary, we are a nation susceptible to fad diets and easily persuaded by the latest public opinions of nutrition. So let us decide that it is time to change. Let’s listen to the Sweet Surprise message, but take it with a grain of salt or, in this case, sugar. Through strategies of race and gender, hasty generalization, and stacked evidence the campaign is persuasive but misleading in itself. However, if there is one message we can take away from it, it is to get the facts. So let’s get the facts. Let’s learn truth. Besides, who knows? We might be in for a sweeter surprise.

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How does a writer question what we know, by habit, by history, by culture, to be true? This essay, at its inception and from its introduction, doubts the superiority of the spoken word. What we assume to be the distinguishing human capacity for speech, this essay takes as a dubious homage to tongues and voices. What we follow as a natural progression from ideas to verbal expression, it resists as neither so natural nor so expressive.

Taking us by the hand, this essay leads us rather into silence-through Charlie Chaplin and Jane Campion, performance and paralysis, linguistic equations and literature. A daunting venture for a writer whose own language is precise, poetic and evocative: we read here an essay in tension with itself. This tension between form and content, words and bodies limbs the essay from beginning to end, even as it aims to expose the presence and perhaps greater power of non-verbal language over verbal language. A natural interloper, Rachel pursues silent expression from one field to another, one genre to another, one species to another. With the finesse of a researcher attuned to the subtleties of the unspoken, she demystifies and remystifies this language for us. In truth, she reads us as we forget we are read.

What is so satisfying about “A Journey into the Heart of Silence,” moreover, is not just its ode to silence, but the private journey of its writer. Moving past foundational beliefs and assumptions, Rachel ultimately uncovers an emotion, a desire for communication that paradoxically transcends, even as it underwrites, silent and spoken language both.

—Gabrielle Moyer
A Journey Into the Heart of Silence
The Rhetoric of Expression, Gesture, and Thought
Rachel Kolb

Introduction: Subtleties and the Smile

“The language of the body is the key that can unlock the soul.”—Konstantin Stanislavsky

In chapter three of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby, Nick Carraway, beckoned by an invitation, finally sets foot on Jay Gatsby’s manicured lawn and attends his first of his neighbor’s extravagant summer parties. He has not yet met Gatsby, only heard scattered rumors of him, but in their first encounter words prove unnecessary. Once Nick discovers Gatsby’s identity, his first impression is surprisingly profound:

He smiled understandingly—much more than understandingly. It was one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it, that you may come across four or five times in life. It faced—or seemed to face—the whole external world for an instant, and then concentrated on you with an irresistible prejudice in your favor. It understood you just so far as you wanted to be understood, believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself, and assured you that it had precisely the impression of you that, at your best, you hoped to convey.

(Fitzgerald, 48)

Intuitive rapport, understanding, perception: all are attained through a single smile. Neither Gatsby’s words, which “just miss being absurd” (Fitzgerald, 48), nor his physical appearance, that of “an elegant young redneck, a year or two over thirty” (Fitzgerald, 48), can define Nick’s first impressions as much as this simple display of his demeanor. In a novel consumed by the superficiality of its characters, Gatsby’s smile alone has the ability to inspire confidence and establish intimacy. It takes the place of a conversation, where both participants yearn to believe in the other’s integrity, and provides a moment of unexpected personal connection during an otherwise trivial encounter. Fitzgerald intentionally skips over much of Nick and Gatsby’s conversation; none of it matters as much as this smile, this exchange in the language of gaze and gesture. Almost nothing, that is, except for Nick’s inevitable questions: Who is this man? What do his expressions reveal about him?

These are the questions we ask ourselves when we attempt to communicate without words. Many of us remember being warned as children not to “judge a book by its cover,” and thus we might be wary of judging a person by his appearance, in terms of both physical features and active gestures—not only when forming first impressions,
as Nick does with Gatsby, but at any stage of a relationship. However, is it possible that a person's demeanor, not to be confused with his physical attractiveness, is not just the cover of his "book," but also an essential part of that book itself? Consider this book for a moment. Those of us who love books love to ripple through the pages smelling of glue and ideas and see the lines of text swim before our eyes—but this particular book, the volume of individual understanding, would contain more than words, for they could not denote a person fully. Instead, it would also envelop a range of nonverbal indicators. These expressions and gestures, admittedly, form the essence of others’ first impressions, but they accomplish something more: they denote a range of qualities that surpass the superficial and enter the realm of the profound, the rare, and the strange. Gatsby’s smile fits into this category. In a single startling moment, it suggests emotions, perceptions, nuances of personality. It establishes him as a mystery, and what human being is not at least slightly mysterious at the core?

The power of physical communication, when added to the complexity of words, transforms man into a concoction whose exact chemical composition is unknown. In his book Silent Messages, about the subtleties of nonverbal communication, Albert Mehrabian attempts to pin down exactly how we understand a person by formulating an unusual equation:

\[
\text{Total liking} = 7\% \text{ verbal liking} + 38\% \text{ vocal liking} + 55\% \text{ facial liking} \\
\text{(Mehrabian, 43)}
\]

These values, seemingly arbitrary, have been acquired through a process of experimentation which Mehrabian refers to but fails to adequately describe. Nevertheless, his point holds: the messages conveyed through the face, and by extension the body, can impact our understanding of a person more than his voice or words combined. It is another overused cliché, but silence, in this sense, does speak louder than words. Nonverbal behavior possesses its own form of rhetoric, then, but what exactly is it? It would seem, at first, like a natural, unconscious form of truth that surfaces through the body and cannot be diverted, explained, or even conveyed by words. The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social Psychology defines nonverbal communication as referring to “the transmission of information and influence by an individual's physical and behavioral cues” (Patterson). It points out the interesting way that some definitions ‘restrict ‘communicative’ behavior only to cues that are intentional or goal oriented in nature and/or to cues that possess relatively universal meaning” (Patterson). In other words, this raises the question of whether language must always be intentional and conscious. If nonverbal communication and physical nuance are indeed linguistic—such as the phrase “body language” would indicate—what specific rhetorical strategies do they use to achieve their goals? Since they cannot employ the exact vocabulary comprised in spoken language, how do they capture the subjective, deeply personal nature of human experience?

These are challenging questions, and in this essay I want to engage with them as fully as does the body with its physical world. However, first consider some forms of gesture: if one waves or points at an object to clarify one’s meaning, besides the nerve signals flashing down the spinal cord from brain to muscle, what is so mystifying about it? Not every bodily motion carries the mystery of nonverbal communication. I am not interested in auxiliary indicators such as gesticulating or pointing, nor do I want to
define the facial expressions or physical cues that function as understudies while spoken words take center stage. The verbal context of such gestures negates their individual power, reducing them to self-explanatory actions with little linguistic mystique. Instead of spending time with the gestures that are really verbal in use, I aspire to journey into the body’s own territory. In this space, physical gestures morph and develop a separate mind and a separate language, rawer and occasionally more powerful than words. The unconscious truth of this body, released from the constraints of garrulous sociality, presses into the realms of solitude and silence. When we sit alone with our bodies—and, more importantly, our minds—we are more purely ourselves than at any other moment, and our immediate impressions seem to transcend description. They take on the power of present awareness, our power to simply be. Does nonverbal communication make it possible to understand other people in this state, once we stop talking and start seeing them as they are? After a moment of silence, let the investigation begin.

Part I: The Truth and the Liar

“I detest that man, who hides one thing in the depths of his heart, and speaks forth another.”—Homer

Perhaps the greatest challenge with nonverbal communication is that it is sometimes ineffable, difficult to specifically describe in hands less skilled than Fitzgerald’s, and so fleeting that it requires us to verge on the realm of interpretation. Depending on our level of comfort with its intangibility, it can create a range of responses in our minds, from clarity and intrigue to frustration, mystification, and skepticism. Lie to Me, a recent television drama airing on Fox, demonstrates the complex forms taken by this rhetoric. Dr. Cal Lightman, played by Tim Roth, is a private investigator who depends on nonverbal cues for interrogating crime suspects and psychoanalyzing the ordinary people around him. Like a “human lie detector,” Lightman is able to perceive the slightest physical gestures, which he calls microexpressions, and interpret them to provide the series’ next clue. In the show’s first episode, Lightman tells us, “I don’t have much faith in words.” Instead, he chooses to rely on nonverbal messages due to his belief that “The truth is written in all our faces.” Lightman’s rhetoric, which attests that our bodies alone reveal our true selves amid the tendency of words to create deceit, is supplemented by the show’s cinematography. Each episode, although occurring on a flat television screen, presents a dynamic, physical presence to the viewer. The camera constantly zooms into dramatic close-ups of facial expressions, and we anxiously wait for Lightman to imbue them with meaning. Even if cocky, arrogant, and burdened with an inability to maintain functional social relationships, he is our only guide to understanding what we, theoretically, should already understand: the physical expression of another person.

Lightman’s lie-detector expertise does not only rely on analyzing nonverbal signals; more essentially, it rests in making judgments about whether these signals and his subjects’ words are consistent with each other. This is what Gerard Nirenberg and Henry Calero have called “nonverbal congruence.” According to their book, How to Read a Person Like a Book, nonverbal congruence is the most important part of understanding someone’s true intentions:
Understanding congruency of gestures serves as a monitoring device for discovering a person's attitude and then giving his actions meaning. In our early research we sometimes found a dichotomy between obvious verbal and nonverbal meanings. It was only after a later, fuller evaluation of the situations that we found that the nonverbal gesture proved to be the more truthful. So the consequence of gestures not only concerns us with matching gesture with gesture but with verbal/gesture evaluation. It is the gesture-endorsing spoken word that is important for total communication.

(Nirenberg and Calero, 9)

The most important points from Nirenberg and Calero here are the assertion that nonverbal gesture is more truthful than spoken words, as Lightman believes, and the concept that achieving “total communication” is impossible without some nonverbal basis. The latter is an interesting concept. It implies that reading someone’s letters or having a phone conversation gives us only a partial understanding of that person; we must enter their physical presence in order to gain the full picture of who they are. If F. Scott Fitzgerald had omitted nonverbal aspects from his descriptions, we would be left with a lopsided, rather uninspiring impression of Gatsby. All we might have would be empty words and, quite possibly, an empty character. We can find more profundity and truth in words not when we take them at face value, but when we measure them against the litmus test of their accompanying nonverbal gestures.

The show *Lie to Me* depicts most people as unaware of the added dimensions that nonverbal indicators add to total communication. The incompetent government officials forced to deal with Lightman tell him, “Personally, I think what you do is a joke,” and describe their perception of nonverbal communication as “Wild guesses that have no basis in hard evidence.” For them, penetrating the body’s mystery is impractical and a waste of time. The body itself becomes an external shell masking unknowable motives, never to be understood in terms as clear as those which Lightman whisks out of his hat for us. But as Lightman’s methods are ultimately proved right—since, of course, he solves all his cases, discovers the true murderer, and moves on with his reputation unscathed by criticism—does the series attribute too much power to his uncanny, almost fabricated ability of reading facial expressions so precisely, thus forcing upon us a bias for “guesswork” that may not be applicable to our real world? A New York Times review for the first episode of *Lie to Me* comments on its premise, saying, “There is an appealing cheekiness to the show’s insistence on dressing up hunch work as the purview of serious science” (Bellafante). Although “hunch work” is perhaps a severe criticism—the word “intuition” might be better—there is nonetheless some validity in the Times’ skepticism about the ability of nonverbal communication to become scientifically precise, specific, and objective. Are physical expressions at all scientific? Can they be rationally interpreted and understood?

Specific fields of psychology would argue that yes, they can, if not in the theatrical ways portrayed in Fox’s series. Charles Darwin, although primarily known as a biologist and for his groundbreaking and controversial work *The Origin of Species* (1859), was one of the first to investigate the meaning of human emotional expression in his classic 1872 book *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*. Although Darwin’s book discusses animals in addition to humans, and thus has a broad theoretical framework,
even today it is regarded as an exceptional effort to define and describe the body’s range of expressions. Many modern works about nonverbal communication—including Nirenberg and Calero’s *How to Read a Person Like a Book*—cite it as a foundation, and it also has unique pioneering status in the field of emotional psychology, being the first to investigate cross-cultural human perceptions of emotion. Darwin, we get the sense, would not disagree with Nirenberg and Calero or with Cal Lightman’s assertions that physical expressions convey a dynamic, irrefutable truth. This truth—the truth of human emotional experience—is a corporeal reality, incapable of being willfully negated by mental or verbal pretenses but capable of being brought into the realm of science. Socrates maintained the ancient Greek aphorism “Know thyself,” but knowing our emotions and perceptions is inseparable from knowing the functions and sensations of our bodies.

The way Darwin describes it, the body operates nearly like a machine. There is no intermediary of conscious will between our impressions and our physical reactions, for “nerve-force,” the respiratory and circulatory systems, and the brain all interact to directly produce the sensations that surface in the form of physical expression. We link the faculty of consciousness with producing spoken language, but it has little role in controlling the expression of emotion. Darwin writes, “[C]ertain actions, which we recognize as expressive of certain states of mind, are the direct result of the constitution of the nervous system, and have been from the first independent of the will, and, to a large extent, of habit” (Darwin, 69). For example, when the sudden emotion seizes us and we laugh or cry, this impulse is outside the suppression or control of our conscious will. We cannot fully control our bodies, for they seem to possess a drive to communicate on their own. As Lightman’s vocation rests on the assumption that we cannot completely suppress our emotions, so does Darwin’s theory on the assumption that emotions serve as a foundation linking man to the basic drives of his evolutionary past. The body, a relic of forces too ancient to be fully human, is stubbornly independent and mysteriously honest. Like nature, it will speak its mind whether we would like it to or not.

Actions separate from the will seem to tie us to animals, to the creatures whose expressions and reactions are shaped by instinct. Indeed, one of the main aspirations of Darwin’s book seems to be to investigate human expression as merely a more sophisticated mode of animal behavior. Darwin does not hesitate to make the connection between man and beast, describing such diverse creatures as cats, dogs, swans, lizards, hyenas, and porcupines, and arguing that “[T]he movements of their features and their gestures are almost as expressive as those of man” (Darwin, 144). If we accept Darwin’s claim, we confront the possibility that animals’ basic emotions operate through similar biological means and convey similar messages to those of humans. Are our bodies more animal than human? This concept brings us to the main rhetorical problem we find in Darwin’s work. It makes us feel uneasy that animal emotional expressions, and thus animal experience, could be equated with the highly rational, highly cognitive complexities of human existence. As the verbal and the nonverbal form two distinct modes of communication, there may be a similar division between the human and the animal. In other words, silent expression, if governed by the same biological rules in both man and animals, would seem to be a more animalistic form of communication than verbal expression. If the term “body language” applies in the same sense to both animals and humans, as Darwin seems to suggest, is it truly a human form of language?
The problem with addressing body language in animals is that linguistic self-expression has long been considered a uniquely human faculty. Admittedly, we often equate this self-expression solely with verbal communication. In his book *Eve Spoke: Human Language and Human Evolution*, linguistics scholar Philip Lieberman writes, “Speech is so essential to our concept of intelligence that its possession is virtually equated with being human. Animals who talk are human, because what sets us apart from other animals is the ‘gift’ of speech” (Lieberman, 5). Conversely, since nonverbal communication is not speech, it is not a “gift” that establishes the interspecies supremacy of which humans are so proud. Instead, it seems to be a puzzling kind of bastard child, transporting us closer to our animal roots than we might like to admit. We see this in Darwin, where nonverbal communication is not rational or intelligent like spoken language, where instead it consists of involuntary and instinctive reflexes, such as appear against a crime suspect’s will in the show *Lie to Me*. These nonverbal reflexes cannot reach a high level of cognitive function; they cannot carry true communicative intent like Nick Carraway receives from Gatsby. If animals’ expression lacks the high level of rational output that verbal language can have, then might not our own nonverbal expression operate under similar animal laws? Or is human physical expression different from animals’ in a way that Darwin overlooks?

As difficult as they are to answer, these questions begin with the assumption that physical communication in animals is spontaneous, never contemplative or insightful. While this might be true for some animal emotions—or for “microexpressions,” as Cal Lightman might call them—it does not appear to be a general rule for all of them. Anyone who has taught a dog obedience commands knows that animals can master forms of communication outside of their instinctive tendencies. For example, amusing tricks like sitting up and begging, walking on its hind legs, and balancing a treat on its nose would never occur to a dog by nature, but through the instruction and—admittedly—the food incentive that humans provide, it can readily learn and perform such behavior on command. But can training, beyond its entertainment value for the human, ever reveal any true expressive intent on the part of the animal? Can it ever move beyond forming automatic associations between stimulus and response, so that the nonverbal cues which human and animal share reveal higher understanding and make cognitive and linguistic sense to both? Well-known horseman Pat Parelli suggests that, to some extent, it can. Parelli advocates a natural approach to horsemanship that aims to build relationship and rapport based not on aggressive human methods foreign to the horse, but rather on its inherent “language,” on the inherent “games” it plays with other horses. He compares his training approach to the linguistic process of moving from words to sentences to paragraphs, building on a foundation of simple concepts that the horse can apply to increasingly complex maneuvers. This philosophy almost identically echoes a passage from Nirenberg and Calero’s book—which, we note, is about human communication:

The understanding of gestures is very difficult when the various elements are separated from their context. However, when gestures are fitted together into their composite positions, a complete picture evolves. Each gesture is like a word in a language. In order to be understood in a language, one must structure his words into units, or “sentences,” that express complete thoughts.

(Nirenberg and Calero, 7)
While Niremberg and Calero create a linguistic parallel between nonverbal and verbal communication, Parelli presses this envelope by attempting to apply it to animals. In other words, he attempts to teach his horses to interpret his gestures and use them as linguistic signals to perform a wide array of high-level tasks. The horse, according to Parelli’s theory, is not a cognitive, intellectual, problem-solving animal by nature, but if taught and guided by humans, it can quickly assemble the thoughts conveyed by silent language and learn how to use its body in new ways.

Perhaps surprisingly, Parelli’s theory works. Watching him play with his mare, Magic, at liberty is an exercise in watching language unfold. With no ropes attached, relationship and physical nuance stretch to their limits. This is not an exercise in performing prearranged “tricks”; human and horse dynamically respond to each other’s gestures, often so subtle that they become invisible. Parelli stands still and Magic trots a circle around him. She matches her strides to his footsteps, her canter light and smooth. Whimsically, he directs her through a series of obstacles, each of which presents a unique challenge: standing atop raised platforms, weaving through barrels, sidepassing or jumping over logs. They come to a horse trailer, usually a claustrophobic place for horses, and she calmly backs up the ramp into the dark cavern, ears pricked and gaze fixed on the signals of his hand. Never is there any resistance, any disharmony between human and horse. Throughout this symbolic conversation, whenever Magic makes a mistake, Parelli pauses to help her understand, so tuned into the messages of her body that it seems their communication is not exclusive to man or horse, but an unusual language they have fashioned together.

Parelli’s achievements with horses give us what Darwin’s book does not: they establish nonverbal communication, even in animals, as peculiarly clear and linguistic. Yet, although Parelli portrays animals as being able to collaborate to form a physical language, it is the humans who initiate and shape the language, not the horses. One cannot easily imagine an animal putting in the patience and effort towards developing a nonverbal language with humans, all on its own. In addition, there is no linguistic self-expression involved. The horse is not articulating the deepest contents of its soul, merely responding to and thinking through the human’s nonverbal cues. Although the rhetoric of Parelli’s methods emphasizes the linguistic and problem-solving capability of horses, only through the human drive to communicate and understand is any human-animal connection truly possible. It is humans who can understand and interpret horses’ emotional expressions, thus ultimately humans who prompt horses to be problem-solving and linguistic. Darwin’s basic principles of understanding emotional expression serve as a foundation in this case, and become a means to achieving the more sophisticated end of goal-oriented communication. Emotions and momentary responses are not linguistic in themselves, but if understood as thoroughly as Parelli does in his horses, they take on the potential for coherence, flexibility, and meaning. If we could understand this communicative range of expression in animals, as Parelli does, what complex concepts could we grasp from human silence? Could we build on our intuitive understanding of Darwinian physical reflexes to establish a human physical language as intricate as Parelli’s?

For this, let us cross that barrier from the basic and involuntary to the artistic and the intentional, from animals to human complexity. Let us look at silent communication in itself, turning to that art sometimes neglected in our commotion, sound-filled world: silent performance.
Part II: The Silent Performer

“The most profound statements are often said in silence.”
—Lynn Johnston

Announced only by a signbearer, Marcel Marceau takes center stage, illuminated by a single spotlight’s bright halo. Around him are no backdrops, no props save what he holds in his hand—a hula hoop, maybe, or a floppy hat adorned with a single flower. The audience swarms the theater, but its noise seems like a jarring antithesis to Marceau’s silent art. His face painted pale, his body peculiarly genderless in its tight shoes and flowing garments, Marceau gestures and begins, weaving a story not with words but physical nuance. He mimes, conversing with each of us in a language we are unaccustomed to yet intuitively understand. When he staggers to the floor, we immediately visualize him struggling with a weight. He indicates and converses with people who are not there. He evokes intimate relations by using his hands for someone else’s. At first we feel surprised by our ability to envision this range of experience, but our hesitation soon yields to eagerness and acceptance. For once we follow Marceau’s storyline—whether it is dancing, tightrope walking, or bullfighting—we feel like we are in on a secret, or opening a door to an imaginary world in which he is our only guide. His silent means of communication is all we have, and by the time he departs the stage we have come to trust him intimately. We have glimpsed his personal reality—or is it our own?

The act of describing mime perhaps defeats its purpose, and so introducing Marcel Marceau in the foregoing words presents a dilemma, just as verbally describing Parelli’s work could not capture the physical feeling of linguistic connection. In her book If You Tame Me: Understanding Our Connection With Animals, Leslie Irvine attempts to capture the profound reaction which often follows a fulfilling encounter with someone else:

Good relationships stretch our interactional abilities by requiring us to see things in new ways and remain open to surprises.... These words do not really do the experience justice, however, for there is much about good relationships that is pre-linguistic and even pre-cognitive. Think about the last time you really ’clicked’ with someone. Now try to put the reasons you liked that person into words. Although there are probably elements of the interaction that you can easily describe, much of it exists at the level of pure feeling...
(Irvine, 119)

This might serve as a description of what happens when we watch Marceau perform. He “clicks” with us in the realm of pre-linguistic feeling, causing some fundamental aspect of our humanity to shift in innate recognition. After the performance ends, we are left unable to precisely describe the rhetoric of the interaction, even though we can explain what happened. The power of Marceau’s art lies in his ability to build rapport through a complex, ineffable exchange of human understanding. Like Irvine’s definition of a “good relationship,” his art of mime creates a profound connection that is difficult to explain. It “stretches our interactional abilities” by influencing us to see in a new, surprising way, for when we free the body from the bounds of visible props and physical context we also free our ability to communicate without restraint. This form of communication wishes to convey something unutterable, impressionistic, physical and momentary—the opposite, it seems, of what can be written on paper. In order for his communicative impact to be
fully grasped, Marceau must be witnessed. In his hands, silence comes to hold more imaginative potential than spoken words could, and his body becomes a tool to surpass cultural and linguistic bounds. We might call the rhetoric of his body language peculiarly “human,” for it proffers a unique testament to how we understand ourselves. Marceau himself acknowledges that Bip, the face-painted character whose persona he adopts onstage, is modeled after human experience. He writes, “Bip is humanity…. Bip is you and me” (Marceau, 149). Marceau’s intention is not for us to witness his performances and think of him as an isolated individual, but to experience him in connection with ourselves.

Marceau further attests that the greatest strength of the physical body, besides its intimate connection to the core of human existence, is its ability to spur and shape the imagination. Instead of illustrating reality in words, the body requires our engagement, our interpretation, our insight into the heart of our own personal experience. Jacques Lecoq, himself a master of silent theater, describes Marceau’s style of mime paradoxically as a process of restoring our full range of self-expression through silence:

The mime is there to create illusion. In his hands, dream becomes reality. Speech becomes free in the mouth of the other, by way of the magic of the mime, whose art is to enter silence, to bring from it what no word says, and to return speech to all those who love and suffer and die when, in the paroxysm of the emotions, man sometimes cries out ‘I don’t have the words.’ Symbolically, then, Bip induces and suggests another dimension of speech: the poem that cannot be heard.

(Lecoq, 58)

Lecoq’s rhetoric classifies expression as capable of occurring through speech, silence, and—something else. This “other dimension of speech,” which we attain through physical expression, functions as a middleground between silence and poetry. Mimes such as Marceau achieve this balance through evoking emotions and spontaneous experience, thus building on the expressive foundations which Darwin sought to define. Unlike Darwin’s expressions, however, Marceau’s gestures are not unconscious or involuntary. Although he has the ability to make them seem impromptu, subject to human whimsy, we must remember that in truth his art is a carefully deliberate, finely crafted one. A collection of compelling images by Ben Martin, originally intended for Life magazine but published in the book Marcel Marceau: Master of Mime instead, feature Marceau not only onstage, but also in the secluded attic of his French home, practicing before a mirror. In these images, his face alternates between his performances’ characteristic vivacity and a more pensive seriousness. His dilemma: the challenge of consciously molding his body after the unconscious expression which natural emotions achieve so effortlessly. Such fine-tuning, involving tireless attention to each isolated expression and gesture, is hard work. Paradoxically, the act of transforming a dream into reality, as Lecoq puts it, becomes a highly cognitive way of capturing the most visceral part of human experience: the consciousness of our immediate physical impressions.

Physical expression, however, need not require us to make such great leaps of imagination, to recreate invisible contexts in our own minds. It need not be restricted to the somewhat unnatural act of squinting at the isolated mime in the spotlight, feeling mystified, and wondering, as Woody Allen puts it, “why this universal art form is patent in meaning to all but me” (Allen, 221). Nonverbal communication, far from being
merely an abstract art, aids our understanding of tangible situations. When viewing silent films, for example, we quickly observe how skilled we are at interpreting physical and visual cues. These films give us a window into how well we might understand each other if we relied solely on nonverbal communication. Charlie Chaplin’s classic 1925 film *The Gold Rush* reveals unprecedented profundity in physical gesture. *The Gold Rush*, written, produced, directed by, and starring Chaplin, features Chaplin in his trademark “Little Tramp” role as he seeks gold in Alaska, becomes stranded in a cabin with a wanted man, and eventually returns to civilization and wins the heart of a beautiful girl, played by Georgia Hale. Although much of the film’s plot relies on physical slapstick humor rather than the rapid-fire verbal witticisms that characterize later comedies of the 1930s and ‘40s, it is surprisingly fleshed-out and easy to follow. While our first witness of the characters moving their mouths in an imitation of speech—but not actually speaking—causes us to feel frustration, we soon grow accustomed to ignoring the perceived gap left by their words and relying on their actions, gestures, and expressions alone.

Our half-conscious recognition of the insignificance of words to the essence of what is being conveyed in Chaplin’s *The Gold Rush* creates a paradigm for how we can apply principles of nonverbal communication to the real world. Like Lightman, the human lie detector who relies on nonverbal congruence to reveal the truth, Chaplin shows us that the body reveals a simple and straightforward reality that is in itself reassuring. We can perceive someone else’s intentions, anxieties, and personality type through his actions—and, with regards to deep interpersonal understanding, what else is necessary? Words become superfluous. Chaplin describes the advantage of silence this way:

> In pantomime, if it’s good, you can get away with anything, and make it believable. Movement is near to nature—as a bird flying—and it is the spoken word which is embarrassing. The voice is so revealing, it becomes an artificial thing, reducing everybody to a certain glibness, to an unreality. Pantomime to me is an expression of poetry, comic poetry.

(Chaplin, 118)

Chaplin’s rhetoric portrays movement, and thus nonverbal communication, as the closest man can come to expressing his inherent self. Unlike verbal forms of language, physical gestures are not “artificial” constructs or abstract representations. Actions, in themselves, simply are. Lecoq describes them as “escaping us, revealing our profound nature to others” (Lecoq, 6) and, through silence, “recreating the territory of the unsaid that the discourse of words had forgotten” (Lecoq, 72). The body cannot “forget” itself, as we see both in animals’ spontaneous expression and humans’ inability to consciously reclaim their facial terrain as masks, wiped clean of all microexpressions and inadvertent slips. Instead, it keeps dynamically responding to the present moment, rejecting the “glibness” of words and basking in the realms of silence.

We should not, however, take silence as a magic solution to the dilemma of direct interpersonal understanding, for this oversimplifies its limitations, its portentousness, its associated unease. When William Shakespeare’s Hamlet says “The rest is silence” (*Hamlet*, V.i.395), this seals his tragedy. As we have come to understand Hamlet through his words, when words cease to exist, so does his essence. In our daily lives, this is the problem of silence: the unsaid equals the unknown—but also nothingness. We often associate silence with a dark, looming quality, defining it as a mysterious void which we
are unwilling to face. This discomfort with silence is visible throughout our culture, in the form of those of us who must have music blasting in the car or whenever we are alone, those of us who gravitate to cities filled with noise and activities and advertisement, who retreat to small talk to ease our discomfort with the unspoken void within another person, or ourselves. Even Chaplin and Marceau, fully engrossed as they are in silence, cannot completely ignore the spoken word. Both imitate conversations with other people—Chaplin with his visible world, Marceau in evoking the invisible—and Chaplin at times is given to gesticulation, a sign of the mind’s longing to be verbally understood. Enforced silence, while it removes the artificial polish created by words, also contributes to a sense of restriction and confinement. We recall our frustration at how Chaplin’s films never give us the words, for we feel that silence, as it does for Hamlet, cannot give us the whole story. Is this perceived limitation an assumption that we must get over? To become comfortable with nonverbal communication, must we first acquaint ourselves and become comfortable with silence?

The 1992 film *The Piano*, starring Holly Hunter, argues that familiarity with silence leads to open-mindedness regarding alternative forms of communication—mainly through showing us how discomfort with silence can tragically block human understanding. Unlike Chaplin and Marceau, *The Piano* represents silence not as an artistic attribute, but as an individual distinction that frequently leads to misunderstanding. It traces the story of a mute but talented pianist, Ada McGrath, whose father sends her with her daughter to New Zealand for an arranged marriage. In a rare voice-over narrative at the beginning of the film, Ada nearly sums up the following two hours in two sentences, as she says of her new husband, Stewart, “He writes, and hark this: God loves dumb creatures, so why not he! Were good he had God’s patience, for silence affects everyone in the end.” And so it does, for the film’s rhetoric illustrates the tendency of silence to stunt empathy and promote condescension more suitable for “dumb creatures” or animals. At one point in the plot, the crotchety old lady Morag snips to Stewart, “Indeed, there’s something to be said for a pet, and they’re silent.” Characters like these clearly would not deem Parelli’s horse training methods—or indeed, any form of silent communication, human or animal—as linguistic. For them, silence only invites incompatibility. The socially clumsy Stewart cannot surpass his discomfort in Ada’s presence, and his words evade the true matters at hand, similar to the household maids whose chatter, as vapid as flies buzzing, makes the silent and stern Ada stand out in their midst. Ada’s own father shies away from silence as “a dark art,” and her first lover and her daughter’s father “became frightened” by her nonverbal communication and “stopped listening.” Even her daughter, who arguably understands her best, cannot accept her silence without explanation: to gain attention, she makes up wild, dramatic stories to account for her mother’s muteness. Not helping Ada’s cause is the fact that she does not bypass misunderstanding through active expression and gesture, like Marceau does; her face is a blank, stone slate, and her inaccessibility often fringes on the passive-aggressive. Her only escape from this lack of communication is her piano.

Ada’s piano, although audible instead of silent, models how we understand nonverbal communication. It rips free from the shackles of her silence, exposing the full, rich human being within, but like nonverbal communication it is not merely a substitute for words. Rather, it takes on a different form altogether, replacing the specificity of language with a raw, abstract impressionism that projects itself directly into
the intuitive spaces of the mind. The film’s rhetoric portrays few people as having this ability for insight. For instance, Stewart’s dismissive attitude toward the piano, through first refusing to bring it up to the house and then selling it to his neighbor Baines, reveals his narrow-minded reluctance to acknowledge any form of communication outside of words. He is not alone. Ada’s talents as a pianist are seen as eccentric by everyone except her daughter, who understands her nonverbally as a matter of course, and Baines, with whom she eventually falls into an erotic passion. Yes, the piano liberates Ada from the stubborn constraints of silence, but its intricate means of communication fails to shape most people’s conceptions of her identity. Does this reveal a widespread prejudice against nonverbal communication, such as we saw in the government officials in Lie to Me who called close analysis of facial expressions “wild guesses” and “a joke”? Does our inability to look past silence ever bar us from developing intimate relationships?

Part III: Words, Words, Words

“Words for mental processes are all derived from physical things.”
—Robert Smithson

At this stage of the debate, we are veering toward a dangerous assumption: that, since silence is inscrutable, words are always clearest, always closest to reality, always best to express one’s inner thoughts. This oversimplification is not necessarily true. The rhetoric of The Piano suggests that many of us have a narrow-minded preference for spoken language over silence, but words in themselves are shaky foundations on which to tread. As early as the 17th century, the philosopher and scientist Francis Bacon cautioned against preoccupation with vain words as barring active study and pursuit of knowledge. In his The Advancement of Learning, he writes:

Here therefore is the first distemper of learning, when men study words and not matter….. It seems to me that Pygmalion’s frenzy is a good emblem or portraiture of this vanity: for words are but the images of matter; and except they have life of reason and invention, to fall in love with them is all one as to fall in love with a picture.

(Bacon, 139)

Bacon fears that, in crafting flowery phrases and flamboyant verbal rhetoric instead of things of physical substance, we will end up like Pygmalion, the sculptor in Ovid’s Metamorphoses who falls in love with the very statue he has made. Although Bacon cites pragmatic scientific pursuit as the remedy to this deluded condition, we can still apply his thinking to our discussion of nonverbal communication. Attempting to express ourselves most breathtakingly through words alone might be restrictive rather than liberating, and might limit our mental world to a mere representation of reality. The art of words insufficiently captures the art of living life. When we fall in love with words, we are becoming enamored with shadows rather than the practical and the physically tangible. Bacon illustrates the problem of the mind dwelling upon its own verbal contemplation with the image of “cobwebs of learning, admirable for the fineness of thread and work, but of no substance or profit” (Bacon, 140). Does devoting ourselves to the craft of words lead us into unnecessary vagueness, wherein we fail to see the corporeal world before us?
Many writers of the 20th century engaged in a similar philosophical skepticism of language, bringing its capacity, its implications, and its limitations under close analysis. One of the most essential thinkers during this period was the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, who worked with mathematical logic and the philosophy of consciousness and understanding in addition to the philosophy of language. For Wittgenstein, verbal language raises questions of content and meaning, including how it functions in tandem with subjective experience. In his *Philosophical Investigations*, originally published in 1953, Wittgenstein explores the topic of how we understand language as a symbol of personal reality. He questions how language mediates the public and private parts of ourselves:

Now, what about the language which describes my inner experiences and which only I myself can understand? How do I use words to stand for my sensations?—As we ordinarily do? Then are my words for sensations tied up with my natural expressions of sensation? In that case my language is not a ‘private’ one. Someone else might understand it as well as I.—But suppose I didn’t have any natural expression for the sensation, but only had the sensation? And now I simply associate names with sensations and use these names in descriptions.

(Wittgenstein, 91)

For Wittgenstein, language springs from deep sensations within us, but it does not only function as a private entity; rather, it is multi-dimensional, also able to adopt a public role and create a bridge of understanding between ourselves and others. Granted, Wittgenstein questions just how language represents inner experience, but yet his rhetoric illustrates a deep faith in its ability to transmit that experience and make it intelligible for another person. Moreover, language composes a crucial part of how we interpret ourselves. Without any natural form of language, Wittgenstein seems to ask, how would we express our sensations or even understand them? Understanding ourselves and understanding others seem to be intimately related through the process of creating and using words. Although we cannot experience another person’s sensations firsthand, through words we can understand them “as well as” that person does himself. This seems to involve a process of projection and association: in drawing from our own linguistic associations and projecting our understanding upon another person’s descriptions, we can approach the sensation itself. In other words, we can comprehend for ourselves the events within the closed recesses of another human being’s mind.

This is a profound level of connection and interpersonal understanding that animals cannot approach, and language is the enabler of it. But does it apply only to words and not to nonverbal communication? The process of projecting our linguistic understanding does not capture the subjective experience itself, but is merely “associated” with it. In this way, it is similar to Pygmalion’s statue, in which a representative reality is crafted from an intangible mental image. It also approaches the impressionistic process we use when viewing the work of Chaplin and Marceau. When we watch Chaplin’s film, our projected understanding of a character’s motives, assisted by our own experience with physical gesture, helps fill the gaps created by the absence of words. Language appears to be a similar act of bridging spaces and holes, allowing us to leap from description to sensation,
and vice versa, through the process of associations, experiences, and guesswork. To understand another person, we must become active collaborators ourselves. When we do this, we do not merely obtain information; we understand someone else’s inner experience by physically reimagining it in ourselves. This description captures our mental process while witnessing silent shows: we empathize with the actor, so that—as described with Marceau—his reality becomes our own. Language can form this interpersonal connection, for, as Wittgenstein says, “When I think in language, there aren’t ‘meanings’ going through my mind in addition to the verbal expressions: the language is itself the vehicle of thought” (Wittgenstein, 107). Language exposes our inner state, but so does nonverbal communication as understood by Darwin’s theory of involuntary and automatic expressions. Focusing on the inability of communication, either verbal or nonverbal, to completely capture the impressions of experience is a misguided endeavor, for it is only a vehicle; the deeper connection between humans arises from a more intuitive level of understanding. Wittgenstein cautions us of falling into “that dead-end in philosophy, where one believes that the difficulty of the task consists in our having to describe phenomena that are hard to get hold of, the present experience that slips quickly by, or something of the kind” (Wittgenstein, 129). Expression of “present experience” is indeed a slippery task, and I do not mean to pose the question of whether nonverbal communication or spoken language is the best avenue to reach this goal, for such conundrums lack a definite answer. Instead, it seems valuable to understand the role of language by questioning its function. In other words, is the true aim of language to capture present experience, or to set the stage for someone else to project, interpret, and understand that for themselves?

The author Virginia Woolf, known for her attempts to capture perception and character through a stream-of-consciousness style, grapples with the same “dead-end” in language that Wittgenstein describes. She, like Wittgenstein, believes in language as a vehicle to convey thought, but her perceptions of its limitations further complicate the debate. Her essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” written in 1924, objects to external superficialities as a means to understand another person, implying that we can only communicate in terms of the internal essence of character and human nature. In her essay, Woolf attempts to grasp this expression of character, arguing that description of a person’s physical appearance or surroundings is not enough to truly understand them. External circumstances are only a fragment of who we are—as great authors like Jane Austen realized. According to Woolf, authors like Austen “were interested in things in themselves; in character in itself; in the book in itself. Therefore everything was inside the book, nothing outside” (Woolf, 327). Less astute observers are apt to allow physical descriptions to distract them from the essence of a person, in this case Woolf’s description of an old woman referred to as Mrs. Brown. This external approach is the wrong one, for character is something innately understood, not defined by a list of physical qualifiers. Woolf describes the “Edwardian writers” as an example of people who have missed this mark, for they “have looked very powerfully, searchingly, and sympathetically out of the window; at factories, at Utopias, even at the decoration and upholstery of the carriage; but never at her, never at life, never at human nature” (Woolf, 330). Although “the vagueness of language” requires that we move from the outside in, “putting before [the reader] something which he recognizes” (Woolf, 331), too many writers like these linger on the outside and never delve into a person’s core.
Is what Woolf discusses different than the physical? Does the physical, as we see in the body language of Chaplin and Marceau, Lightman and Gatsby, sufficiently capture “human nature” rather than external actions and circumstances? Woolf leaves us without much information or satisfaction, implying that internal character is not physically tangible and calling it a “will-o’-the-wisp” and “phantom” (Woolf, 319). Can such a phantom only be pursued through abstract language, rather than physical gesture? We are reaching an intersection between the abstract and the concrete, the physical and the ineffable. Can the stream-of-consciousness of human experience, what Woolf understands to be the essence of character, be understood visually and physically, or can it only be felt and described? The problem here seems to be that of separating body and mind. We are used to equating the mind with an “unlimited capacity” (Woolf, 336) that we cannot gain access to through the body. However, we have already seen that, to some extent, our mental states can only be understood through our bodies; like Darwin describes in the ebb and flow of “nerve-force,” emotional understanding goes hand-in-hand with physical consciousness. We understand our own subjective impressions well enough, but can we ever communicate this consciousness to others? Can we understand others as we understand ourselves, responding to them as Pat Parelli does his horses, based on the physical cues they show us? If so, and if we can cause others to empathize with the “feeling” of our emotions and perceptions like silent performers do, does this skip over verbal language as a communicative vehicle and aim at the heart of experience?

**Conclusion: The Butterfly’s Wing**

“The way we communicate with others and with ourselves ultimately determines the quality of our lives.” —Anthony Robbins

So far our outlook has been contained within a specific rhetoric that believes in the strength and capacity of the body. This rhetoric attests to the body’s ability to tell the truth, to free our silence from inscrutability and terror, to liberate our minds within the thrill of a shared glance. It posits that our true selves might most fully exist in the solitude we find in our bodies, and that the challenge of true communication lies in translating our silent perceptions, either through the “vehicle” of language or through physical expression, into a form with which others can actively identify. But this ignores situations in which the body cannot lend itself to the display of language, either verbal or nonverbal. Our physical selves are more mortal and fragile than we would often like to believe, and when the body fails, language must struggle against the steel bars of the mind. The expression of thought relies on our ability to communicate it—but what happens when the body is uncooperative in this enterprise? Is a colorful blend of language, when we are physically impotent, still possible? All forms of expression, whether verbal or nonverbal, depend on the body to articulate them. In the chase after communicative intangibility, we sometimes ignore that we are limited, physical beings, so I would like to conclude our contemplation of verbal and nonverbal communication not by polarizing the two, but by healing the schism and returning words to the embrace of the body. The best way to do this is by looking at Jean-Dominique Bauby’s haunting, beautiful memoir *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly.*
Bauby’s memoir explores firsthand the changed nature of communication within a limited body. Bauby has suffered a stroke which has damaged his brainstem and left nearly his entire body paralyzed—but, far from being a “vegetable,” his mind still retains its rich function, trapped in the suffocation of what is medically called locked-in syndrome. Bauby describes his condition like living inside “something like a giant invisible diving bell [that] holds my whole body prisoner” (Bauby, 3)—hence the first half of his memoir’s title. The “butterfly” in question is his still-colorful imagination, which pulses and “takes flight,” causing the diving bell to “become less oppressive” (Bauby, 5). Bauby’s memoir, instead of pitting the verbal against the nonverbal—as in this essay we have been prone to do—contrasts the beauty of individual experience with the confining inability to express it. In other words, he reminds us that our means of communication is not what matters, as long as we can communicate. As long as the butterfly has wings to take flight, the human longing to experience and to be understood can be slowly quenched.

Borrowing the images Bauby uses, the challenge of communication lies in releasing the butterfly from the confines of the diving bell. For Bauby, this passageway is very narrow indeed. Although he can slightly move his head and stretch his limbs, the only part of his body still under his control is his left eye. This eye virtually becomes the channel for both verbal and nonverbal communication, as it is his only means for self-expression against the “uncooperative deadweight limbs” that “serve [him] only as a source of pain” (Bauby, 8). The process of communication is slow and arduous: to spell out the very words which we read in this book, Bauby has blinked his left eye in response to a recited alphabet, turning simple dictation into a painstaking process in which he mentally “churn[s] over every sentence ten times, delete[s] a word, add[s] an adjective, and learn[s his] text by heart, paragraph by paragraph” (Bauby, 5-6). His condition is not science fiction or a fantasy; it is terribly real, and the experience of reading The Diving Bell and the Butterfly is an exercise in realizing how much communication matters, however desperate the means we take to attain it. Every phrase, every carefully chosen word weighs down the page with the effort it took to transcribe it there. Bauby’s words are impossible to take lightly—and this fact derives not from any atypical approach to language, but from our consciousness of his body’s limitations. Physical freedom ultimately determines verbal and expressive freedom.

The Diving Bell and the Butterfly is a book that clings to language after all other aspects of normal life have fled, but for Bauby, having his verbal freedom restricted is not the greatest tragedy of locked-in syndrome. More crushing than his inability to easily express his words is the grief he finds in the unfeasibility of simple physical contact. In one instance, he writes:

My heart is not in the game. Grief surges over me. His face not two feet from mine, my son Theophile sits patiently waiting—and I, his father, have lost the simple right to ruffle his bristly hair, clasp his downy neck, hug his small, lithe, warm body tightly against me. There are no words to express it. My condition is monstrous, iniquitous, revolting, horrible. Suddenly I can take no more.
(Bauby, 71)

We get the sense that, as beautiful and profound as Bauby’s words are, they are not enough to sustain him. As Bacon says, they are indeed analogous to falling in love with a
statue. Although they allow him to express himself, they do not replace motion, do not replace life, do not replace the simple joys found in physical contact. There is a certain amount of physical interaction necessary for wholly integrating ourselves in the world; without it, we are indeed “locked in,” and silence would be preferable to this corporeal immobility and mental claustrophobia. Mimes like Marceau have expressive freedom, even if they have no words; Bauby, although he can painstakingly transcribe his words into a book and although his mind still soars with the butterfly’s wings, lacks this social and interactive mobility. The body, and by extension nonverbal communication, is the foundation on which we build to convey the richness of human experience, even in an action as simple as ruffling a little boy’s hair. To alter Wittgenstein’s phrase, “the vehicle of thought,” slightly, the body is the vehicle of living.

At first glance, Bauby’s butterfly is predominantly linguistic in nature, taking the form of the words that soar to loosen the confines of his diving bell, but its freedom stems from physical yearnings. Bauby is not satisfied with contemplating the hazy and the abstract; far from composing static words in his head, he speaks of doing concrete things, of flying off to pursue active experience. He desires to “wander off in space or time” and physically visit such exotic locations as “Tierra del Fuego” or “King Midas’s court” (Bauby, 5). His butterfly represents the complexity of descriptive and verbalized, yet also active and physical thought. We need not divide communication into two separate boxes, verbal and body language, for both comply with the nature of the butterfly. And since thought itself is continuous, since its nature can be physical as well as verbal, soaring from place to place, why should we restrict language to one or the other? If we must define language at all, it is best embodied by the butterfly’s wings, which, I would like to argue, flutter back through this essay and all its innate, subtle recognitions. The butterfly takes many different forms, from the “will-o’-the-wisp” of character to a pianist’s fingers picking out a thin melody, from the light rhythm of a horse’s hooves to the telltale contraction of someone’s eyebrows, and finally to the direct messages conveyed by a single smile. Regardless of which shape it takes, its nature is always fleeting and ineffable, like the sudden touch of its wings, the flutter and rush of air that quickly vanishes but leaves no doubt that contact has taken place. And, as we glance across the room and find a face there, a solidly and reassuringly human face that believes in our integrity, our intellect, and our capacity to achieve the extraordinary, we realize that it has. No garish words need be said; no introductions need be made. What we have gained from silence may be revealing enough.

Works Cited


**Works Consulted**


Winter 2009 Honorable Mention

Caitlin Colgrove

Instructor’s Foreword

Listening to a piece of music, we lose ourselves in its emotion, its elegance, its rhythms that make us move and sing.

This essay retrieves us from our visceral trance to ask what we are actually hearing: music or mechanism, human genius or robotic imitation? Caitlin opens, then, with difficult definitions as a way to explore our facility for confusing what we never want to confuse: mechanical invention with living intelligence, silicone with flesh. Beginning with music she leads us organically from computers to consciousness, media to philosophy—and so we are led from music to ourselves, where questions of what we hear are also questions of what we are.

The emotional stakes of the essay escalate, then, as musical tests give way to human tests. This tension reveals itself in the current debate on artificial intelligence, what Caitlin describes as a dialectical and increasingly fruitless tug of war, where arguments dissolve into *ad hominem* attacks. By locating the fears behind this debate, however, she manages to resist its dialectic and instead show how our definitions—of music, of genius, of machines—serve as a defense of what is sacred to us: our humanity.

It is Caitlin’s fluency and clarity with topics as diverse as musicology, philosophy, and computer science that allow her to transcend the arguments in each and construct her own. Reading the compositional layers of Johannes Sebastian Bach and Daniel Dennett with impressive and equal deftness, she manages to harmonize them into a superior polyphony. A composition in its own right, this essay is at once imitative of the fugue and novel in its formal and intellectual choices: a daring, revealing invention.

—Gabrielle Moyer
Fugue in A minor for Carbon and Silicon

Caitlin Colgrove

Subject
The theme.

Emmy is one of the most prolific and versatile composers of the past century. Over the span of 25 years, Emmy has composed and published more than one thousand individual works in dozens of styles—from Baroque to Romantic, from opera to ragtime. Yet this substantial body of music remains largely unperformed, not because of its musical content, but because Emmy is not a person. Emmy is a computer program. Experiments in Musical Intelligence—EMI or Emmy—is a program written by modern experimental composer David Cope to create new musical works by analyzing and recombining different aspects of a certain composer or style of music. The results are a surprising combination of faithful stylistic imitation and original melodic content. To the “naïve listener,” as George Johnson writes in the New York Times, these pieces appear to originate from “a sentient being musically reaching out to them.” The “artificial Chopin” is indistinguishable from the composer’s own work (see figures 1 and 2).


Granted, the differences between Emmy and Chopin are readily apparent to scholars of Chopin and well-trained musicians. Yet Emmy seems well on its way to passing a musical version of the Turing Test, the first and most culturally pervasive standard for determining whether or not a computer could be said to have “artificial intelligence.” Alan Turing, one of the most prominent mathematicians in computing
theory, first proposed his eponymous test in his essay “Computing Machinery and Intelligence.” His test takes the form of a game in which a human and a computer each try to convince the human “interrogator” that he, she, or it is the real human being and the other is the computer. Turing’s argument is that the question, “Can machines think?” is “too meaningless to deserve discussion” (Turing 449), and instead should be replaced by the question, “Are there imaginable digital computers which would do well in the imitation game?” (448). Turing never specifically suggests that by winning the imitation game a computer demonstrates the capacity to think. However, he implies that these questions are equivalent, or that the second is as least a satisfactory substitution for the first. Turing, then, is suggesting that sufficiently advanced imitation is indistinguishable from actual human thought.

Moreover, Turing’s standard is not that the computer must fool the interrogator all the time; he only sets the bar at a 30% success rate. Since far less than 70% of the population is comprised of musicians, composers, and Chopin scholars, Emmy has obviously passed the Turing Test with flying colors, and should therefore be recognized by all as the gifted composer she is. QED.

Answer

A second voice.

Implications regarding consciousness aside, there is a serious flaw in this application of the Turing Test to a computer generating or composing music. Music is an art form; as such, it is fundamentally about being creative. As Immanuel Kant argues in his Third Critique of Judgement,

[...] genius is entirely opposed to the spirit of imitation [...]. Even if a man thinks or invents for himself, and does not merely take in what others have taught, even if he discovers many things in art and science, this is not the right ground for calling such a (perhaps great) head, a genius (as opposed to him who because he can only learn and imitate is called a shallow-pate). For even these things could be learned, they lie in the natural path of him who investigates and reflects according to rules; and they do not differ specifically from what can be acquired by industry through imitation. (190)

The essence of Kant’s argument is that artistic ability, or genius, is entirely distinct from imitation. While elsewhere in his Critique he does accept that some imitation and learning is necessary to become a great artist, here he makes it clear that ultimately what distinguishes “genius” from mere “industry” is the ability to leave the “natural path.” Clearly, someone who could exactly reproduce Michelangelo’s David has great technical talent but none of what Kant describes as genius. But Kant goes further: someone who could exactly reproduce Michelangelo’s techniques to produce new sculptures lacks genius as well, for once one learns the techniques of sculpting or painting or composing, it takes no genius to churn out artistic works in the same style over and over again without contributing something new.
Kant’s conception of genius would seem to be clearly supported by human musical composition. Take the works of revered composer Johann Sebastian Bach. Though rules must to some extent be followed in music, Bach was “no lover of dry mathematical stuff,” according to his son Carl Phillip Emanuel, and had little interest in the more intangible aspects of music theory (Christensen 24). Bach followed his musical instincts more than prescribed mathematical rules, in the process actually inventing for himself much of the music theory we know today as tonal harmony. Interestingly, Bach was famous for his fugues, traditionally one of the most structured, mathematical, and rule-based forms of composition, yet Bach still shows the spark of Kant’s formulation of genius. For example, examine closely his Fugue #20 in A minor from Book 1 of his masterpiece The Well-Tempered Clavier. While working within the formal rules of a fugue—which Kant’s definition would allow without diminishing the genius of the composer—Bach manages some spectacularly complex interplay of voices. While many of these instances follow the rules, rules alone it seems could not have produced them by random chance. In measure 77, for example, Bach superimposes a subject, an inverted subject (the same melody but with each interval moving in the opposite direction), and a transposed subject (the same melody starting on a different note) all over the same few beats to create entirely new harmony (see fig. 3). As music reviewer Edward Rothstein of the New York Times describes a Bach fugue, “It is an astonishing structure, constructed with intense concentration. In the midst of that musical society, combinations can never be random or arbitrary” (Rothstein). Such magnificent complexity, it appears, can only be generated through human purpose, carefully aligning the particular variations of the subject rather than randomly selecting and positioning the way a computer might. Bach can work within the rules, but even within a strict framework he is creative and new. This is true Kantian genius.

Using Kant’s definition of “genius” to evaluate a “musical turing test” exposes a fundamental flaw in the very concept: Turing’s test evaluates how well a computer can mimic human behavior, but in art, imitation is undesirable. Thus a high-quality imitation does not produce a high-quality piece of artwork, and consequently the Turing Test is essentially void when it comes to human creativity. Any computer that would pass the Turing Test would still fail the Kant Test, because at the most fundamental level, the digital computer is imitative. According to Turing, “The idea behind digital computers may be explained by saying that these machines are intended to carry out any operations which could be done by a human computer” (Turing 444). In addition to their function, their construction is modeled on the capacities and regulations of human computers; each computer possesses a “store” (equivalent to the human computer’s paper containing previous calculations or instructions), an “executive unit” (which actually performs actions or calculations), and a “control” (which makes sure that the rules or instructions are followed). Computers have been designed to imitate humans, not just in output,
but in their fundamental processes as well. But because Kant argues that even faithful imitation of technique with unique output does not constitute genius, on the deepest level computers, as inherently imitative machines, cannot be creative. And given that according to Kant, “genius is a talent for producing that for which no definite rule can be given,” and that computers by their very nature only rely on definite rules, computers cannot possess genius.

Richard McDonough’s theories, in the field of psychology, provide a slightly different formulation of creativity (i.e. “genius”) from Kant’s, within the context of machines. First and foremost, McDonough defines machines to be predictable. If your watch didn’t give you a predictable representation of the time, it wouldn’t be any use, he argues. Similarly, he argues that “the view that persons are creative is not a thesis about persons. It is, rather, a condition on what it is to be a person” (Dartonl 129). Essentially, McDonough argues that the very definitions of machines and persons are incompatible: one is fundamentally predictable, the other fundamentally creative. The difference is not just one of complexity—a complex machine is still a machine—but of essence. Thus to suggest that Emmy, a machine, is creative is as ridiculous as to suggest that the sky is green: factually, it just isn’t true. Emmy—and any conceivable computer—can by definition only imitate, never create.

Counter-Subject
The first voice responds.

But what of the human compositional process? David Cope argues that Emmy’s process differs from the human compositional process only in speed, not in methodology. While many critics attack Cope’s work as “imitations” and “simulations” rather than art, Cope responds that Mozart reuses his own music even more faithfully than Emmy does. Yet, Cope continues, “I don’t really feel Mozart’s music represents imitations and simulations, any more than I really feel Emmy’s music represents imitations and simulations” (Muscutt 13). To support his belief in the musical nature of imitation, Cope quotes a joke about Vivaldi, who “didn’t compose hundreds of concertos, he composed the same concerto hundreds of times” (Muscutt 16). While some question the quality of Vivaldi’s work, few would deny it the status of music. As a result, denying that Emmy’s output is music on the basis that it is imitative is to deny the validity of the actual process of composition, which relies heavily on imitation both of oneself and of others.

Cope’s compositional philosophy also refutes a second powerful objection to the music composed by computers: the idea that computer music is meaningless because it must necessarily be composed by an algorithm, a mindless formula that is, as Daniel C. Dennett puts it, “simple enough for a dutiful idiot to perform” (51). Cope, however, considers himself an “algorithmic composer,” which, given that algorithms are mindless and composition is definitely not, seems to be an oxymoron. In Cope’s explanation, however, an algorithm is just a “step-by-step recipe for creating new compositions,” ranging from vague outlines of movements to specific rules about tonal harmony and chord progressions. According to Cope, all composers use algorithms, consciously or unconsciously—a composer’s “intuition” is just his unconscious application of algorithms (Muscutt 10). What happens on the computer and what happens in the
composer’s mind are roughly the same, except that the computer works thousands of times faster.

Looking at Bach for a second time from this perspective leads to a very different analysis of his music. As a tonal composition, Fugue #20 in A minor follows strict harmonic algorithms: the final chords of the piece, for example, follow a standard chord progression, culminating with a chord based on the “leading tone,” which resolves immediately to the “tonic,” the final chord of the piece (Fig. 4). In tonal composition the piece always begins and resolves on the tonic, which is preceded nearly always by one of only two chords. Different sections of the piece are indicated by smaller “cadences”—brief periods of resolution—in much the same way. For example, in measure 14, the end of the opening section is followed by the first statement of an inversion of the theme (Fig. 5). This transition is marked by a chord progression from the “dominant” (which, like the leading tone chord, almost invariably leads to the tonic) to the tonic of E major, a key strongly related to A minor. Resolution in a different key provides a much more temporary feeling of resolution than that of the final measure, which resolves back in the key of A. These patterns of chords, which are simply algorithms for creating tension, movement, and resolution in music, form the framework for all of Bach’s pieces.

Moreover, Bach’s apparent “creative” or “artistic” application of these rules can be increasingly closely simulated by recent advances in computer programming called genetic algorithms, which breed different possible harmonies for “fitness” based on certain criteria. As a result, even though the creations are random within the rules, all combinations are not equally probable and the ones that are most aesthetically pleasing are actually the most likely. It is certainly true that currently computers can only approximate the complexity of a Bach fugue, simply because computer science has only been around for half a century and hasn’t had time to develop the algorithms necessary
to fully emulate it. However, Cope himself has made enormous progress: Emmy has composed a piece entitled “Invention,” which is almost indistinguishable from a simple Bach invention. As programming techniques advance, there is no reason to believe that more complicated forms could not be followed.

**Diminution**

*A short restatement.*

But many would agree with Johnson that music stems from a “sentient being... reaching out.” While a good deal of pleasure and meaning stems from the listener’s own personal experience and interpretation, music is not random: it is composed for a purpose. It is often tritely described as “the universal language,” in which the composer can express some meaning of his own—be it an image, a story, or an emotion—to the audience. But there is a reason the metaphor is cliché: it is compelling. Humans feel a deep connection to the composers and performers through music, but this sense of connection can disappear if the being on the other end is an emotionless automaton, and as a consequence the music arguably loses much of its meaning for the audience. As Rothstein, in his review of *The Art of the Fugue*, writes,

> Musicians [...] have spent most of their lives trying to reconstruct and reimagine the musical universe of Bach’s time. And though these recordings filter the music through a modern sensibility, no emotional chord is left unsounded: the exquisite pain of the cantata arias, the spunky energy of the orchestral music, the sprightly dances of the suites, the pungent despair of the passions.

Trying to figure out what was taking place in Bach’s mind has provided a lifetime of work for composers, conductors, and performers alike. In a drive for “authenticity,” performers seek to reconstruct the human emotions and desires that produced such art, from spunk to despair. Whether or not these emotions actually existed at one point, the search alone gives meaning to generations of musicians. The audience, though on a less technical level, uses the same search for meaning to perceive a personal connection; they imagine that the one composing the music has thoughts, desires, messages. And this, according to prominent AI skeptic John Searle, is precisely something a computer program like Emmy cannot have, no matter the complexity of the program or the performance on the Turing Test.

Searle has famously presented his philosophical rebuttal to the Turing Test, known as the Chinese Room thought experiment. His main goal is to refute Turing’s proposition that imitation is indistinguishable from thought by providing a scenario in which the appearance of understanding does not imply true understanding. The experiment proceeds as follows: imagine Searle, who knows no Chinese, is put in a room by himself with no contact with the outside world, other than pieces of paper which are passed in to him and pieces of paper which he passes back out. On the slips of paper he receives are questions in Chinese, but he doesn’t know this. All he has is a book of rules (in English) on how to respond to certain squiggles with other squiggles, which he then sends out of the room. Suppose the book is extremely detailed, and Searle gets very good at this.
To the native Chinese speakers outside the room, it appears that Searle understands Chinese because his answers pass the Turing Test, but in reality he understands none of it. Making the analogy to computers, Searle argues that computers, like the man in the room, only manipulate symbols syntactically, without any real knowledge of semantics. In essence, a program can never understand what it is doing, despite the fact that it might perfectly simulate human functions. A machine can never be conscious. Because creating art requires conscious effort, computers could never compose true music.

Modulation

A whole new key.

We have seen the two most prominent positions in the debate over AI: Cope’s and Dennett’s arguments for the musicality of Emmy and Searle, Kant and McDonough’s arguments against. Having examined both sides, most people simply take one position or the other in this polarizing debate. The fundamental question, however, remains unresolved. Over decades, Searle has been matching wits and exchanging verbal blows with Dennett as well as Douglas Hofstadter over the possibility of what Searle calls “Strong AI,” which is the idea that a computer program alone could be considered intelligent. The arguments, though in theory rational, are hardly civil. Searle accuses Dennett of “intellectual pathology” (112), “evasiveness” (101) and of a lack of “candor” (101). Dennett replies that “the feeling is mutual” (Searle 115). Beyond rational argument, the disagreement has evidently dissolved into name-calling, suggesting that the debate has indeed come to an impasse. Rather than attempt to answer a question—whether or not a computer could ever possess true intelligence—that is currently (and possibly eternally) unanswerable, we can use the nature of the debate itself as a lens with which to examine the human psyche.

Culturally, there is a tendency to slip into the same dialectic model that has stimulated so much philosophical debate over the past half century. Many android cultural icons fall clearly on one side or the other of the human/machine divide. We sympathize with the struggles of Data from Star Trek and the little android boy of Stephen Spielberg’s film AI. Both embark on quests to become more human, facing violence and bigotry from their biological companions. On the other end of the spectrum, the Terminators are set on destroying humankind; their humanity is not an issue. However, examining these images leaves us with nothing new: machines can either be human or monster, sympathetic or unsympathetic, one extreme or the other. However, by looking instead at the gray area presented in Philip K. Dick’s profoundly confusing and uncomfortable novel Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? we gain insight not into the nature of machines, but into the nature of humans.

Dick’s book provides a series of morally ambiguous android characters, each of which provokes deeply confused reactions in the reader. On one level, we sympathize with Dick’s androids in their desire to be free; all of the androids on Earth have escaped captivity on the colony worlds. However, in order to be free they must have killed their human masters, making them paradoxically both sympathetic and horrifying. Additionally, not all androids generate the same emotional reactions. The death of opera singer Luba Luft, for example, has an air of tragedy and loss; protagonist Rick Deckhard
wonders, “[H]ow can a talent like that be a liability to society?” (Dick 137). On the other hand, the death of android Pris Stratton—who earns the revulsion of the reader by sadistically cutting the legs off a living spider—does not elicit remorse but rather relief that such a monster has been destroyed.

Despite the complex and non-uniform human reaction to the various androids, human characters in the novel tend to see these incredibly complex beings as below the simplest forms of organic life. Though we may be tempted to think differently, androids aren’t human: despite their undisputed intelligence and capacity for emotion, they lack the ability to empathize with others. This fundamental difference at first allows for a definitive test for an android, but as android technology improves, successive generations of tests must be abandoned. Yet the humans of the novel unceasingly resist the progress of androids toward humanity by developing increasingly sensitive measures of empathy. Eventually, the tests use measures so arbitrary as to be meaningless; for example, the Boneli test measures the “reflex-arc response taking place in the upper ganglia of the spinal column” to the microsecond in order to determine if the test subject is an android.

Computational psychologist Margaret Boden comments that the history of science has often been humanity “repeatedly [moving its] deck-chairs up the shore,” trying to flee the rising tide of scientific advancement (277). Each time the science of AI reaches a new height—for example, giving computers the ability to play chess or to compose a sonata—humans have to change their anthropocentric definitions of humanity to maintain the boundary between themselves and machines.

What we learn from Dick and Boden is that humans like to be able to draw a definitive line between the machine and the human. Dick’s book makes us uncomfortable precisely because he blurs that line, making us wonder if perhaps our deck-chairs may be getting washed out to sea after all. Even in otherwise positive accounts of artificial intelligence, a subtle bias against the validity of computer composition emerges. A closer reading of Johnson’s New York Times article suggests the listener who believes Emmy’s composition to be music is “naive,” that is, uneducated, gullible, or simply stupid. What’s more, Emmy’s music is still referred to a “artificial Chopin,” implying that it is somehow fraudulent, manufactured, and still primarily belonging to Chopin rather than Emmy. The author mentions, in comparison, that “people see images of Jesus in burnt tortillas,” further adding an air of ridiculousness to the notion that Emmy’s products could be music, despite the fact that he ultimately has a favorable view of the music itself (Johnson).

Johnson’s rhetoric exemplifies the pattern of subtle bias against the legitimacy of artificial intelligence. This pattern is prevalent enough that even Dennett does not dispute that Searle and like-minded thinkers like McDonough can claim the common sense, intuitive, or “natural view” (Dartnall 117) of the conflict. In fact, Dennett even agrees that his view is “remarkably counterintuitive” (Searle 116). Searle’s theories of consciousness and intelligence follow the trend of attempting to draw a definitive line: he rejects the idea that a human is nothing more than a program by citing our internal states, our “qualia,” as our distinguishing feature. His rhetoric on this point is based not in philosophical logic but in a simple, intuitive observation: when you pinch yourself, it hurts. A machine, a mere program, doesn’t hurt. It may react like it does, it may even simulate an internal representation of pain, but “the simulation of mental states is no more a mental state than the simulation of an explosion is itself an explosion” (Searle
Our mental states are forces as real and powerful as explosions, and it is precisely these which make us more than a program. While Searle’s Chinese Room experiment argues that computer programs cannot be human, here Searle’s work on consciousness argues that humans cannot be programs.

Searle, in his argument that programs cannot be human, simultaneously argues a related—and more compelling—argument: humans cannot be programs. In fact, his argument could be construed as follows: Programs cannot be humans because humans cannot be programs. In fact, to Searle, the implication that programs could be human seems to necessarily imply that humans are programs. How else could a program accurately represent a human, if a human were composed of something different?

Not only are these two questions—whether machines might be human and whether humans might be machines—linked, they are inextricably so. Herbert Brün, essayist and composer of electronic music, writes, “Composers may think of themselves and their minds and their ideas in any way they please, until they decide to use the computer as an assistant. From that moment on, composers must envisage themselves, their minds, and their ideas as systems, since only systems can be translated into that language, the program” (Brün 178). Brün argues that even using a computer, the most innocuous of interactions, forces the human mind to subconsciously change its perception of itself. In order to communicate with the machine, the human must re-envision itself as a machine as well. His emphasis is telling: he notes that composers “must” imagine themselves as systems, not might or should or can but must. He implies that this is a fundamental property of human-computer interaction: the imagining of the human as a machine.

Though Brün believes it is “careless” (196) to think that the computer is the one composing music—it cannot give itself the data it needs for its algorithms—his insight into the process of composing music is directly applicable to the human reaction to computers and AI. In some cases, the interaction between humans and computers is at least philosophically uncomplicated, if perhaps technically difficult. In all computer programming, for example, the programmer must break down even the simplest tasks into completely unambiguous fragments the computer can execute. However, most computer programs don’t aspire to be human; they simply add two really large numbers together or process ten thousand data points or compute pi to the millionth decimal place. But if a program could perfectly mimic a human, it would mean that a human mind could be perfectly described as a “system,” as a series of mindless computations and flipping bits. Because few people want to think of themselves as a string of ones and zeros, many people are not prepared to accept that a string of ones and zeros could be a person.
Stretto

The interplay of voices.

“To the question whether a statement is true,” Brün suggests, “let there be the added question: What if it were true? To the question whether a composition is music, let there be added the question: What if this were music?” (174). Brün asks that we consider the implications of christening the products of computer algorithms “music,” but he is by no means the first to do so. In addition to the scientific arguments on both sides of the debate, using Brün’s second question opens an entirely new avenue of analysis. No matter on which side the authors fall, they invariably note their impressions of the implications presented by artificial intelligence. These perceived implications vary just as widely as the views on the possibility of artificial intelligence itself.

Returning to Searle’s arguments, we see that his primary concern is actually not that artificial life of some kind is impossible. In fact, he makes it very clear that there is “no reason in principle why we couldn’t give a machine the capacity to understand English or Chinese, since in an important sense our bodies with our brains are precisely such machines” (Hofstadter 367). That is, he is not at all against the prospect of non-human, conscious, artificial life. In a way, Searle notes, we are machines (though he conspicuously avoids implying that we are machines in all ways, merely in one important one). Rather, Searle’s greatest fear is exactly what he says Dennett and company argue: that “we are all just complex zombies” (Searle 120). This characterization of the problem likely gets at the heart of Searle’s objection, as he uses the zombie metaphor repeatedly throughout his essay. The “zombie” to Searle represents the mindless biological automaton, walking and talking but unthinking. However, the notion of zombie cannot be examined outside of its cultural context, and with an entire genre of horror movie devoted to zombies, the cultural connotations are vast. Zombies are not just mindless, they are horrifying, unnatural, disgusting. Searle is implying that Dennett’s argument reduces us not just to robots but to abominations: the reader should feel a visceral reaction against Dennett’s arguments from Searle’s description. When Searle places Dennett’s zombies in the same sentence as our “inner feelings” (Searle 120), the juxtaposition makes the reaction even more pronounced. Moreover, zombies are not merely disgusting animals, they are vicious and destructive. By analogy, the arguments for Strong AI are equally destructive, tearing down all that is good and human in the world.

The rhetoric of AI itself often contributes to the impressions generated by Searle’s vivid descriptions. For example, no one wants to be one of Dennett’s “dutiful idiots,” mindlessly computing all day. Saying that humans are the product of algorithms and that algorithms are the product of dutiful idiots suggests to many that humans themselves can be nothing more. Additionally, proponents of AI and computer-composed music have validated Searle’s destructive portrayal by cavalierly dismissing the emotional reading of music that is so important to many people. Johnson, in the title of his article about Emmy, quips “The Artist’s Angst is All in Your Head.” This description dismisses the humanization of otherwise abstract aural phenomena such as notes and rhythms as made up by the imaginations of the listeners. While it is certainly true that the meaning the listener derives from music is not always the meaning the composer intends, the process of imagining a “sentient being reaching out” (Johnson) is what gives the music
meaning in the first place. While perhaps all in the head, as Johnson’s title suggests, this feeling is certainly not easily dismissible. Another of Searle’s metaphors reflects this sentiment: Dennett’s descriptions are like “a performance of Hamlet without the Prince of Denmark” (Searle 100). That is, the AI argument fails to account for the human aspect of great art, and leaves nothing for the observer to connect with. Without the character of Hamlet, the theatre-goer has nothing to identify with, no way to empathize with the narrative. Similarly with music, without at least the perception of intention by the composer, the listener has no way to connect to the music on a human, emotional level, no matter how technically brilliant the piece may be.

Coda
Resolution.

Searle’s rhetoric characterizes the common rhetoric surrounding AI: that having machines become human means that humans must be themselves machines, mindless automatons. However, this is not the only theory of the implications of artificial intelligence. Though Dennett frequently engages in the AI debate with Searle, some of his later work—only loosely related to AI—presents one such view. In his book Darwin’s Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meaning of Life, he argues that all life is in fact the product of a mindless algorithm: evolution. Unlike Searle, however, he comes to an entirely different conclusion about the implications of this. The fact that we are products of evolutionary algorithms does not “dissolv[e]... our own divine spark of creativity and understanding” (Dennett 63) as Searle believes. Instead he asks, “Why should the importance or excellence of anything have to rain down from on high, from something more important, a gift from God?” (Dennett 66). Rather, importance and value emerge out of a confluence of initially mindless forces, combining and recombining into something greater. Reductionism is part of science, but it doesn’t lessen the whole. After all, Bach is no less of a genius simply because we discovered that he is made up of mindless atoms interacting with each other, based on impartial and immutable physical laws. Bach is more than the sum of his molecules. Even if we could accurately measure all of the atoms in Bach’s body, we could not have predicted the composition of Toccata and Fugue in D minor. A sufficiently complex computer program likewise has the potential to be more than the sum of its subroutines, developing meaning out of meaningless ones and zeroes.

Margaret Boden, who studies computational models of human creativity, explains, “A prime source of this common attitude is the widespread feeling that science drives out wonder. Wonder is intimately connected with creativity... To stop marveling at the creativity of Bach, Newton, or Shakespeare would be almost as bad as denying it altogether” (Boden 278). Even if we still value creativity, any attempt at explanation drives out Kant’s idea of genius, that which cannot be explained by the application of rules. Yet as Boden explores in her work, the computational modeling of creativity is extremely complex, so much so that it is currently beyond our full understanding. This scientific exploration should give us more reverence for the astounding accomplishments of human creativity, not less. The fact that we can only approximate Bach so far does not
indicate attempting to replicate his compositional process cannot or should not be done, but rather that the human mind is a fantastically intricate work of biological engineering which deserves admiration in its own right.

The model for our interactions with computers all too often becomes homophonic: one melody necessarily dominates the harmonizing voices; the sanctity of our own humanity requires the inhumanity of machines. However, the views of Boden and Dennett—that meaning can in fact develop from non-meaning, and that the scientific exploration of creativity is itself a source of wonder, not the elimination of it—allow us to develop a new outlook on the prospects of musical composition by computers. Rather than homophony, we look to polyphony, with our interactions with our silicon counterparts composing a fugue whose subject is not a sequence of notes, but the nature of humanity. Just as one voice of a Bach fugue is a musical piece in its own right, so can each of our voices stand alone. Yet with all the voices together, the musicality—the humanity—of each voice does not detract from the others but rather enhances them, complementing and coloring each of its fellows. Artificial intelligence complements human intelligence; it enhances our understanding of and our appreciation for our own gifts.

Ultimately, we may or may not be programs running on neurons rather than silicon. We may or may not be able to create machines who can genuinely compose and understand music. But if we ask, as Herbert Brün does, “What if these possibilities are true?” we come to a new conclusion, based on what we have learned from the study of artificial creativity: affirming this proposition doesn’t diminish what we do. We are extraordinarily complex, marvels of evolutionary programming. A computer program that could replicate Bach down to the very process of composition would have to be a marvel in itself, not diminishing the composer but serving as testament to the staggering, awe-inspiring essence of true genius.

Endnotes

1 Arguably, music does not require rules; in some cases (for example, John Cage’s 4’33”) the purpose of the piece is to utilize random noise. However, in the traditionally defined sense, music generally requires some order.

2 By “human computer,” Turing means the human performing the calculations we would now do on a computer or calculator.

Works Cited


INTRODUCTION

The courses that make up the Introduction to the Humanities (IHUM) program present Stanford freshmen with opportunities to engage with significant issues, themes, and ideas concerning human identity and existence. Students select from a wide range of offerings specifically designed for the first year of college. Distinguished faculty members address these topics in lectures, and students explore them further in discussion sections and writing assignments. The success of IHUM students’ writing represented by the Boothe Prize winning essays in this volume validates the decision to organize freshman humanities in terms of freedom of choice rather than a single canon. One cannot but be impressed by the diversity of topics and the subtlety of argument as well as the admirable seriousness essays bring to bear on a diverse range of texts. Adam Adler wrestles with the question of how to reconcile issues of cultural preservation with the state’s concern for individual citizens through the landmark Supreme Court case, *Yoder v. Wisconsin*. Nicole Gordon shows that Stanford’s silence regarding the developing HIV/AIDS crisis in the 1980s reflected both the interests of certain Stanford affiliates and the national response to the epidemic. Rachel Kolb analyzes how the same scene in two different film versions of *Hamlet*, offers opposing interpretations on the nature of contemplation and on Hamlet himself. Sarah Nomanbhoy proposes that the indeterminacy at the heart of “Bartleby the Scrivener” is essential to understanding how the text functions as an allegory for literature within a market economy. Jake Vandermeer argues that two disparate texts, the slave narrative of Olaudah Equiano and Voltaire’s *Candide*, reveal the fluidity of identity in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world. This extraordinary sweep is indicative of the breadth of the long tradition of liberal arts education at Stanford. We congratulate the Boothe Prize winners for 2007–08, as well as the nominees and finalists, whose names are listed in this book. We are proud of these essays, and we are sure that you will find in them clear evidence of the vitality of and passion for humanistic learning that flourish during students’ first year at Stanford.

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—Ellen Woods  
Associate Director, Introduction to the Humanities Program
Herman Melville’s novella “Bartleby, the Scrivener” has been vexing readers for over a hundred and fifty years. Its title character is a cipher. Arriving one day in New York’s financial district, Bartleby is taken on as a scrivener—a copier of legal documents—in the offices of an attorney. He soon refuses to do the work for which he was hired: he tells his employer, “I would prefer not to.” Bartleby’s passive resistance is total and altogether unexplained. Bartleby says little, and what he does say is expressed only in negative terms; he would prefer not to comply with any demands. That refusal, thoroughly provoking for everyone in the story, is equally provoking for students of the novella. Bartleby’s passive “preference” stirs up discussion sections. Why won’t Bartleby just do something? Bartleby is selfish; Bartleby is lazy; Bartleby is insane; Bartleby is supernatural; Bartleby is a ghost, a ghoul. But you could argue that Bartleby is like Christ, dying for the sins of a society driven by conflict (in which he refuses to take part) and economic greed (in which he refuses to involve himself). But you could also argue that Bartleby is satanic, endorsing selfishness, sloth, inaction, and indifference to others. But really, the story is implausible—there’s no way Bartleby wouldn’t be carted off by the police on the first day. And also, no one could stand in the middle of a room all day doing nothing. Nor could anyone actually live on a diet of “ginger nuts” alone. What could possibly account for Bartleby? A particular hypothesis gathers the weight of plausibility. Students agree; it makes perfect sense. They conclude. Bartleby is—anorexic, mentally ill, dying for the sins of society, a ghost, an incubus, a proto-absurdist figure. The interpretations are all valid, susceptible to textual support. Unfortunately, no one interpretation excludes the others. “Bartleby” gives no conclusive information; both character and story refuse to endorse any particular perspective.

Like the narrator of “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street,” students feel drawn to write about Bartleby. Almost inevitably, however, essays about the novella succumb to a kind of interpretative frustration: the reader feels compelled to come to a definite conclusion about the scrivener’s problem—to turn up the one answer that will make everything in the story clear. Only rarely does a reading recognize that the text itself resists any such definitive or single conclusion; few arguments can grapple with the novella’s indeterminacy without attempting to resolve it. In the essay that follows, however—Sarrah Nomanbhoy’s “Embracing Ambiguity in ‘Bartleby, the Scrivener’”—the problem is tackled with unique success. Not only does Sarrah’s essay cope effectively with the indeterminacy of “Bartleby,” but it sets out to analyze that indeterminacy itself. Resisting the interpretative desire that the “Bartleby” provokes—the desire to coerce the story into a disclosure, a confession of its “true” significance—Sarrah’s reading recognizes and respects the limits the story imposes upon interpretation. The result is an essay remarkable both for its discursive elegance and its interpretative sophistication—a penetrating and often moving account of “Bartleby” as an allegory for the fate of the literary work in the marketplace. Beginning with the end of the story—the tentative intelligence that Melville’s scrivener may have worked in the Dead Letter Office before arriving on Wall
Street—Sarrah suggests that “Bartleby” can be read as a play on the idea of the “dead letter.” Melville, she argues, is entangled, like his scrivener, in an economic dilemma: he can succumb to the demands of the market, producing a form of writing that will “pay,” or he can expire—become, with his story, a “dead letter.” Instead, he produces a narrative that blankly refuses, like its title character, to supply the form of writing demanded—and survives through that very refusal. “Bartleby,” Sarrah argues, succeeds in the marketplace through its resistance to the coercions of the market. Declining to accede to the demands of its readers—puzzling us, haunting us, provoking interpretations it will forever “prefer not” to confirm—“Bartleby” lives on, eluding the fate of the dead letter.

—Zena Meadowsong
Embracing Ambiguity in “Bartleby, the Scrivener”

Sarrah Nomanbhoy

A ghost, a vagrant, a tragic hero, a victim of capitalist oppression, or a man with a severe mental disorder? Who is Bartleby, and what kind of story is Melville trying to tell? Like its central character, Melville’s famously ambiguous short work, “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Tale of Wall-Street,” seems to resist classification. As we debate the central message of this work, fundamentally unanswered questions leave us more baffled than ever. Where did Bartleby come from and why does he refuse to work? The ending seems to offer some resolution, when we receive a clue about Bartleby’s past employment in the Dead Letter Office; yet even this is qualified. The “vague report” (98) could be nothing more than a rumor. Instead of offering any conclusive interpretation, Melville uses the ending to raise even more questions. As we struggle desperately to extract the meaning of Melville’s prose, we are reminded of the lawyer’s futile attempts to understand Bartleby. “Will you tell [us] any thing about yourself?” (82), we ask the work, and, if we are quiet enough, we can almost hear its mild, firm response: “I would prefer not to” (82).

Although it would be reductive to classify “Bartleby, the Scrivener” as simply a critique of capitalism or a metaphor for Melville’s life, the story does express an anxiety about the position of the writer in a capitalist society. Employed in the Dead Letter Office, Bartleby would have sorted through countless undeliverable letters, burning “by the cart-load” (98) communications which “on errands of life … speed to death” (98). Metaphorically, however, “dead letters” suggest not only personal letters, but, in a short story preoccupied with marketable writing, all forms of writing doomed to failure. Through this metaphor, Melville seems to reflect upon the futility of writing in a capitalist system, which creates an audience that cannot appreciate true literature. Confronted with the demands of the consumer, writers must either choose to abandon their creative identities or accept the tragic fate of dead letters. But if writing for a capitalist audience is futile, why does Melville compose this work? Does he succumb to the pressures of the market, or was “Bartleby, the Scrivener” fated to be a dead letter? As I will argue, neither is true because Melville resists being forced into this dilemma. Melville’s ambiguous work is a successful attempt to maintain a place for true literary work in a capitalist society. By resisting classification, “Bartleby” forces its audience to change its demands.

Melville wrote “Bartleby” when his literary success was on the wane. Though he had been very successful as a writer of adventure stories based on his experiences as a sailor, Moby Dick—a deeply metaphorical work about the human condition—failed commercially, rejected as a dead letter. Reflecting on this tragic experience, Melville wrote in a letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne, “What I feel most moved to write, that is banned,—it will not pay” (Letters 128). By demanding cookie-cutter adventure stories, capitalist society exercised a stifling control over Melville’s creative will. With the failure of Moby Dick,
he was faced with a choice: he could abandon his artistic identity and write something marketable, or he could continue to write works that “would not pay.” Like Bartleby, consigning “dead letters” to the flames “by the cart-load” (98), Melville confronted the possibility that the works he wished to write would never be read. Every letter, when it is written and sent out, has the potential to end up in the Dead Letter Office; its fate depends entirely upon its recipient. Moreover, as the narrator puts it, “Dead letters! Does it not sound like dead men?” (98). A writer that ignores the demands of his audience will not have an income to physically sustain himself in a capitalist society. The choice leaves little room for original literature to flourish.

In “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” the law office on Wall Street reveals how capitalist values alienate and dehumanize the writer. The narrator of “Bartleby,” employing several scriveners—men who are paid to write—represents a typical literary audience that has embraced capitalist values. An “eminently safe man … snug … among rich men’s bonds and mortgages and title-deeds” (66), the lawyer demands a form of writing that is easily constructed and categorized according to an established set of rules. The law-copying for which the scriveners are employed represents the base form of writing that sells in the literary marketplace. While the lawyer’s capitalistic personal qualities of “prudence” and “method” enable him to benefit from the market, however, they also organize his social relationships, leading him to commodify his workers (66). The narrator seems to collect scriveners, proudly claiming that he has known “very many of them, professionally and privately,” and going on to present a sort of inventory list of his current employees, “First, Turkey; second, Nippers; third, Ginger Nut” (67).

Further, although the narrator claims to be able to write “the complete life” of his law-copyists, his characterizations of the scriveners are stereotypical and dehumanizing. Even his use of nicknames suggests that the narrator devalues the identities of his employees. Attempting to extract the essence of their “respective persons or characters” in a single word (67), the lawyer classifies his copyists in much the same way that the literary audience tries to categorize a work according to predetermined labels (like “an adventure story,” “a romance novel,” or “a critique of capitalism”). Crucially, this tendency to classify writing stems from the intrusion of market logic in the private relationship between writer (here figured by the scriveners) and audience (represented by the lawyer who employs them).

Classification essentially enables the commodification of written work, and of writers themselves. The narrator thinks of his scriveners as commodities, and the only descriptions of them he provides in his own writing are about their working habits. For example, the narrator regards Turkey’s “strange, inflamed, flurried, flighty recklessness of activity” in the afternoon as “eccentricities” that “seriously [disturb] … his business capacities” (67). Instead of realizing that Turkey’s restlessness might be due to the fact that “copying law papers, … [a] proverbially dry, husky sort of business” (67), stifles his individuality and alienates him from his work, the narrator chooses to overlook it because he values Turkey’s morning services. Much the same is true for Nippers, who becomes restless in the morning due, apparently, to “diseased ambition” (69). Although the narrator recognizes the discontent among his scriveners, he is satisfied because he “never has to do with their eccentricities at one time” (70). His observation that “their fits relieve each other like guards” underscores the fact that these writers have, for the lawyer, been reduced to cogs in a single, reasonably proficient machine. As long as the
copies are produced for the market by the end of the day, the individual identities of the writers do not matter.

The interchangeability of Turkey and Nippers suggests that Melville also places responsibility on writers for the wretched situation they have come to bear. Although all writers presumably feel unsatisfied with the commodification of their work, they tend to succumb to market forces. If one writer refuses to meet the demands of his audience, there are hundreds more who will, and the resistance of Turkey and Nippers to the demands of the lawyer is at best oblique. For example, Nippers often jerks his desk around, creating “a grim, grinding motion on the floor” (70) to demonstrate his impatience with his work, but always stops short of voicing his complaint. His writing is commodified, without intrinsic value, and easily replaced; like stories in the adventure genre for which Melville had become famous, the legal documents Turkey and Nippers copy are all of a kind, endlessly reproduced. Like Melville, then, the scriveners are presented with an unfortunate dilemma. On one hand, as they continue to copy they sacrifice their unique, personal identities. On the other, if they refuse to meet the lawyer’s demands, he may “[fly] outright into a dreadful passion, [scorn] all further words, and thrust [them] ignominiously from [his] presence” (74). Classified according to their productivity, and therefore dispensable, they would suffer the fate of dead letters.

In Turkey and Nippers, Melville paints a tragic picture of how the capitalist audience inhibits artistic will and the creation of original literature. However, while the scriveners of the world continue to copy, Melville reveals his own response to the dilemma—a form of passive resistance—through Bartleby. Having processed thousands of dead letters, Bartleby recognizes the tragic dilemma that writers face in a capitalist society, and refuses to participate in this futile process. When he initially joins the office, he says that he “would prefer not to” examine his copies, and he later decides that “he would prefer not to” copy at all (74). Introducing the concept of “preference” into the law office, Bartleby not only resists the demands of the market, but asserts his individual identity. For while Turkey and Nippers, despite their outbursts, continue to operate as cogs in the office machine, Bartleby’s quiet resistance allows him to assert his inviolable personal integrity.

As Bartleby settles in at the law office, he gradually retreats within himself, staying within his “hermitage” behind the green folding screen (75). Interestingly, the narrator places him behind this screen to “isolate Bartleby from [his sight], though not to remove him from [his] voice” (71). Like the literary market, which expects to have its demands met by writers, the narrator believes that as long as Bartleby can hear him, he can have the “natural expectancy of instant compliance” (72). Instead, Bartleby causes the narrator to “stagger in his own plainest faith” (74). His passive resistance causes his employer to question his own demands, and suggests that the economics of writing can be effectively reversed—that an audience depends upon its writers just as much as writers depend on their audience. Significantly, the narrator goes to the other scriveners for reinforcement, and they give it to him, answering, “I think I should kick [Bartleby] out of the office” (74). Here, Melville seems to blame writers for reinforcing the demands of the literary marketplace; if all the scriveners were to follow Bartleby in resisting commodification, perhaps the market would no longer demand it.

Indeed, Bartleby’s passive resistance ultimately changes the lawyer’s demands. When Bartleby refuses to work, the lawyer does not react by “[flying] outright into a
dreadful passion” (74), as he would with Turkey or Nippers; further, Bartleby is the only scrivener whose real name the narrator uses. No nickname is possible because all of the narrator’s attempts to stereotype Bartleby fail. Because he resists the lawyer’s attempts to classify him, he does not become a commodity that the lawyer can use or dispense with at will. Even though Bartleby does very little besides sitting quietly behind his green folding screen, he has a huge influence on the lawyer and his office. He becomes such an immovable presence that the narrator, in order to be rid of him, decides to move his office somewhere else. Even then, however, the narrator continues to think about Bartleby, a “ghost” that haunts him (91). As hard as he tries, the lawyer cannot discard Bartleby as a dead letter.

Ultimately, the narrator is compelled to reject the intrusion of market logic in his relationship to Bartleby. When he visits Bartleby in prison, he even acknowledges him as a friend (96), embracing the enigmatic persona that had previously frustrated him. And in the end, when he sees the dead, “wasted Bartleby” (97), the word suggests both a physical condition and complex feelings of disappointment and loss. Although the “waste” seems to equate Bartleby with a dead letter—“Dead letters! Does it not sound like dead men?” (98)—Bartleby as a character is by no means a waste. When Bartleby worked at the Dead Letter Office, he had to sort through the letters before burning them, and I speculate that a letter full of mystifying ambiguities would be difficult to thoughtlessly cast into the fire. If a piece of writing can provoke thought in even one reader, it is no dead letter, and the fact that Bartleby’s employer is moved to write about him—that “a few passages in the life of Bartleby” are worth recounting (65)—proves that he is no dead letter. Even though the work’s full title is “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Tale of Wall-Street,” the name we remember is Bartleby. And even though the market—the world of capitalist exchange that “Wall Street” represents—plays an important role in the story, it never overpowers Bartleby. In addition to having a lasting effect on his employer, Bartleby also influences his fellow scriveners. Although they deny it, Turkey and Nippers adopt the word “prefer.” By introducing the concept of personal preference into the law office, Bartleby subtly influences the dehumanized scriveners to express their individual choice. Unyielding to the end, Bartleby represents a hope that writers can influence the demands of their audience by resisting classification.

Is it possible for true literary work to flourish in a capitalist society? “Bartleby, the Scrivener” illustrates Melville’s anxiety about the intrusion of market logic in the relationship between writer and audience—the concern that writers must choose either to commodify their writing or to accept the tragic fate of dead letters. Yet in Bartleby, he creates a character who preserves his individual integrity by refusing classification. Bartleby’s mystifying ambiguity makes him resistant to market forces; neither he nor the story that is named for him can be commodified or set aside as a dead letter. Melville once wrote that “it is better to fail in originality than to succeed in imitation,” but in “Bartleby,” he succeeds through originality. This enigmatic story instructs writers to resist responding blindly to the demands of its audience, yet “Bartleby, the Scrivener” was popular as a serial in Putnam’s Magazine and continues to provoke discussion today. We can never quite close the book on “Bartleby,” nor can we toss it out as a dead letter. And as much as we might prefer to arrive at some conclusive interpretation (especially in a critical essay like this one), we must content ourselves in embracing the ambiguity of this literary work. In doing so, perhaps we reach a higher form of literary appreciation, which
persistence despite the growing presence of market values in other aspects of our lives.

Works Cited
SPRING 2008 HONORABLE MENTION

Nicole Gordon

INSTRUCTOR’S FOREWORD

Students in Robert Proctor’s World History of Science IHUM course learn that science has “a face, a house, and a price.” The stories told by science are not objective and universal, but dependent on individual, historical perspectives. As part of this lesson, the students are instructed to “swarm” across the campus, investigating numerous research topics that lead them to dusty archives and sanitized labs, in order to discover whatever they can about the ways in which Stanford is itself situated on the contentious intersection of science and history. The fruit of this quarter-long labor is, when all goes right, a research paper that demonstrates the student’s ability to apply one of the key lessons of IHUM, the capacity to approach texts and contexts in a critical manner, to the world around them, specifically to the university they have chosen to attend. In Nicole Gordon’s examination of Stanford university’s reaction to the AIDS crisis in the 1980s, “When a Silent Killer Confronts a Silent Society: Stanford University’s Response to the HIV/AIDS Epidemic from 1980-1989,” everything has indeed gone right.

The essay you are about to read represents Nicole’s quest to understand how and why Stanford University responded to the early years of the AIDS crisis in the ways that it did. In pursuit of this goal, Nicole not only poured through the archives of both the Stanford Daily and consulted other local newspapers, she also conducted several interviews with individuals around campus who were eyewitnesses to the events of that decade. She went, by her own admission, in search of heroes. And, to some extent, she found them. However, along the way, she also discovered a story far more complicated and less heroic than she had expected. Her final argument, that Stanford’s silence regarding the developing crisis and in spite of its own position on the cutting edge of research, reflected the concerns and interests of a wide variety of Stanford affiliates, and, finally, was representative of the nation as a whole, is cogent, well-developed, and ultimately devastating. She leaves this reader with hope, however. Hope that understanding the ways in which certain aspects of the university’s response to the crisis were bungled, will help insure that future challenges are met with greater success, and, beyond this, hope that by training students like Nicole to question and transform the world around them, Stanford makes its greatest contribution to a brighter future for us all.

—Melissa Stevenson
There was one phrase I knew very well by the end of my research: “it was a homosexual disease from the beginning”; and so it was. An article in the New England Journal of Medicine links the beginning of the HIV/AIDS epidemic with an article in the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report that described a fatal disease that affected “five homosexual men.” News of the disease reached the public on July 3, 1981 in a New York Times article titled “Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals.” This was the first trickle of what would become an epidemic that caused a national frenzy, but only after years of puzzling silence. These were the first cases of HIV/AIDS in the United States of America. The controversy surrounding HIV/AIDS today is whether or not the highly politicized climate into which the disease was born hindered societal response to the disease on medical, social, economic and educational levels.

This essay historicizes the response of Stanford University to HIV/AIDS between the vital years of its discovery and the height of the national epidemic from 1980-1989. What I had hoped to uncover was a hero’s story in which Stanford University defied the negative social pressures of the time and rescued the sufferers of HIV/AIDS from medical woe and social scrutiny. Upon research, however, I discovered that the story was not so simple. The complex and juxtaposed responses of Stanford’s medical center, students, and administration to HIV/AIDS from 1980-1989 reveals the infiltration of the public’s discriminatory social and political attitudes into many levels of Stanford University, an educational institution that prides itself on forward thinking and independence.

I. The Virus and its Social Context

The Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) causes the steady depletion of CD4+ T-cells in the blood until the body’s immune system response is virtually zero. When the number of CD4+ T-cells drops below 200 cells/µl, a patient is said to have Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome. The virus leaves its host prey to thousands of possible opportunistic infections and cancers ending certainly with premature death (Engelman). The horror of this disease is underlined by the fact that in the early 1980s it seemed to be spreading extremely rapidly throughout specific populations of United States municipalities.

HIV/AIDS is one of the nation’s largest and tragically preventable epidemics
In his book *And the Band Played On*, Randy Shilts characterizes the treatment of HIV/AIDS in the first five years of the epidemic as “a national failure” because “it did not just happen in America—it was allowed to happen by an array of institutions, all of which failed to perform their appropriate tasks to safeguard the public health” (Shilts xxii). In fact, although the disease surfaced in 1981, there was no public uproar about it until 1985. The reasons for this delayed response are multitudinous and complex. However, the fact that in the beginning the disease appeared to affect only populations on the outskirts of society, such as homosexuals and IV drug users, played a large role in national ignorance (Robinson). This is especially in light of the conservative social and political constructs of the Reagan administration (1981-1989). It wasn’t until the disease began to appear in hemophiliacs and recipients of blood donations that the general public reacted and began demanding information about the disease.

**II. The Scandal at the Blood Banks: 1981-1984**

After its initial appearance in the medical world in 1981, HIV/AIDS began to ravage specific populations despite the ‘out of sight out of mind’ mentality of the general public and major figures of the U.S. government (Engleman). Ironically, it was an issue involving the safety of the general American public that launched Stanford University into the forefront of HIV/AIDS research in 1983.

The Stanford Blood Center was created as an offshoot of the Department of Pathology at Stanford University in 1978 (Engleman). It was the first university-operated blood bank in the country and was under the direction of Dr. Edgar Engleman, an immunologist. The blood bank served a large population, saving hundreds of lives.

When three patients were hospitalized at Stanford in 1982 with a rare disease that had recently been in medical journals, Dr. Engleman noticed that the only common vector amongst the three patients was the same source of blood transfusions. This discovery, and the subsequent deterioration of these patients, convinced him that he needed to begin researching this disease that was apparently hematological in nature. As he and his researchers began to study the disease, they noticed the abnormality of missing CD4+ T-cells in all studied patients and eventually developed a test to screen all of the blood coming into the blood bank for this potentially fatal characteristic. In 1983 the Stanford Blood Center became the first blood bank in the nation to screen its blood for the level of CD4+ T-cells in order to identify and remove contaminated blood from bank circulation and prevent the spread of the new disease. Engleman did so because he believed the new disease was more prevalent than espoused by general medical opinion (Engleman). Yet the move was not without controversy. Andy Shilts comments, “The rest of the blood industry was stunned that Engleman would conduct tests that the industry had rebuffed. Some said it was a gimmick to draw AIDS-hysteric patients to Stanford from San Francisco hospitals” (Shilts 308). While recounting this story during his interview, Engleman laughed the situation off with a mischievous smile and explained his disbelief when he discovered that the next step of the other blood banks was to band together with the local media to criticize his decision. The blood banks argued that screening the blood for the abnormality was a waste of crucial funds. Despite the criticism, Engleman was firm in his standing that no untested blood would pass into The Stanford Medical Center
Nicole Gordon

Shilts attributes the resistance of the other blood banks to a “psychological web of denial,” which is understandable because millions of lives depended on their blood, which was supposed to be pathogen free (Shilts 308). If the blood banks made a mistake then human lives were put at risk.

It wasn’t until 1985 that the United States Government licensed the use of a test for the antibodies made by the immune system in response to HIV. It was the same year that the HIV/AIDS epidemic entered into public consciousness. Patients who had contracted the virus from contaminated blood sued many of the blood banks that did not test for CD4+ T-cell deficiency. The success of Engleman’s test for the CD4+ T-cells was discovered later through back testing of the HIV/AIDS virus; his tests were extremely successful in predicting the existence of the virus in the bloodstream. This was not a victory to Dr. Engleman, however, because the number of HIV/AIDS patients was rising geometrically. The public was increasingly more frightened as more information of the epidemic was uncovered (Wallis).

The controversy at the Blood Center was the first encounter between Stanford University and the HIV/AIDS epidemic. It was Engleman’s sharp eye and dedication to taking care of his patients that pushed Stanford into the forefront of HIV/AIDS research in the early years of the epidemic before the surrounding stigma had fully materialized. The groundbreaking research done at Stanford University at the beginning of the epidemic is commendable and congruous to the idea that Stanford conducts cutting edge research. However, it is important to remember that in the period between 1981-1984 there was no major evidence of HIV/AIDS-related events or awareness initiatives sponsored by either students or the university. Responses from these groups began around 1985, coinciding with national awareness.

III. Reaching Critical Mass: 1985 -1989

The Stanford Bubble - The Students

The front cover of the August 12, 1985 edition of TIME magazine shouts “AIDS: The Growing Threat and what’s Being Done” in giant font (“AIDS: The Growing...”). The appearance of the article on newspaper stands four years too late is a microcosm of America’s late response to the dangerous AIDS epidemic. The awareness was partially due to the death of celebrity Rock Hudson; after he died, “AIDS was suddenly a front-page disease, the lead item on the daily news, and a frequent topic on talk shows” (Wallis) Professor Paul Robinson of Stanford recalls a time of great panic when people in San Francisco were dying in the arms of their loved ones in relatively short periods of time. The scene on campus in 1985, however, was strikingly different. Professor Robinson explained that students showed little awareness of the HIV/AIDS crises occurring in full force just twenty miles north (Robinson). His observations are warranted given that there were virtually no articles relating to HIV/AIDS in The Stanford Daily the entire year of 1985. Evidence of efforts to educate Stanford students on the epidemic can be found in publications not affiliated with the University; however, the reception of these programs on campus was not promising. An article in the San Jose Mercury News from 1985 cites the ambition of Stanford’s “campus wide program to educate the university community-students, faculty, staff and spouses about AIDS” that was largely ignored.
by Stanford students (Schalit). There were also efforts by the Cowell Student Health Center to visit the “student residences to show a KPIX-produced documentary ‘Our Worst Fear: the AIDS Epidemic’” (Schalit). These resources were also not well received by the student body population. Bret Wolf, a senior pre-med student at the time, attributed the lack of support to “sexual narrow-mindedness” and mentioned, “Male students were afraid that they would be identified as gay if they came to the session” (Schalit). This attitude was apparent on all grade levels as Michael Alves, a freshman, blamed “homophobia” and noted, “There’s a lot of AIDS-ophobia too” (Schalit). Thus, the fearful and discriminatory attitude became apparent on Stanford Campus only when there were attempts at HIV/AIDS awareness education.

The suffocating stigma might not have been the only reason for the poor turnout of students. The format and execution of the presentations handled by the administration are extremely important factors in the effectiveness of HIV/AIDS awareness education. Richard P. Keeling in *The Education Record* states that “the greatest challenge on most campuses is to imagine, design, and implement effect prevention programs; strategies that will reliably and durably help students change risky behavior” (34). Keeling continues with a proposed outline of effectiveness that relies on:

- Clear comprehensive focus on behavior rather than on information,
- Highly specific, targeted programs for each student’s needs comprehensive inclusions of students; a focus on self, identity; and competency as deep determinants of behavior; understanding and addressing social and cultural norms, building a caring community (34).

Given that the format of the HIV/AIDS awareness information sessions on campus were mainly informative, done *en masse*, did not require attendance, and were not personalized, it is highly unlikely that the information sessions fulfilled any of Keeling’s requirements. Despite the complacency of the majority of the student body and the ineffectiveness of the information sessions, there were groups on campus that did recognize HIV/AIDS as a detrimental problem, namely the Gay and Lesbian Alliance at Stanford (GLAS), which would later become an integral part in planning various HIV/AIDS awareness events and classes in the subsequent years.

The reasons for the relative silence of the student population are complex. Although to some extent the students on Stanford Campus stigmatized HIV/AIDS as did the general public, Robinson offers additional explanations for their silence. It is important to note that these explanations do not excuse students who ignored HIV/AIDS; it puts their actions into a social context. Professor Robinson explained that students then, as students now, had a certain set of priorities that they followed. In order to be active in HIV/AIDS awareness, a student had to be somewhat of a revolutionary and humanitarian due to the sparse information and lack of presence of HIV/AIDS on campus (Robinson). Until 1985, there had been only ten known cases of Stanford-affiliated HIV/AIDS patients; therefore, the problem did not directly affect the students (Schalit). This is not to say that Stanford students were not compassionate about global issues. In 1986 the Stanford Co-op, Columbae, declared itself an international sanctuary and housed a refugee from Central America who had escaped from persecution (Robinson). Still, these movements were relatively uncommon and most students at Stanford tended to prioritize their classes and social lives ahead of much else. At Stanford “HIV and AIDS were theoretical concerns; AIDS was an issue not a person” (Keeling 32).
A Public Face - The Administration

Beginning in 1985, the Stanford Administration was more active than its students in HIV/AIDS initiatives, but it was late compared to programs begun by the medical center. In 1986, when the death of a Stanford graduate student became the impetus for an administration-sponsored benefit to raise money for HIV/AIDS, the epidemic began to make fairly regular appearances in The Stanford Daily. Perhaps this is because Stanford could finally put a face on the epidemic. In the months before the benefit, The Stanford Daily ran the article “Farm to Raise Funds for AIDS” (McDevitt). The article explained the logistics of the benefit entitled “Stanford Cares” including that the reception was to be held at the Stanford University’s President Kennedy’s house. In one of his speeches before the event, President Kennedy affirmed Stanford’s commitment to the HIV/AIDS awareness initiative stating,

AIDS threatens all of us—if only by claiming the lives or people that we respect and care about... As an educational and research institution, Stanford can play a vital role in combating this devastating disease. This event provides an opportunity to acknowledge the special efforts by members of our community engaged in AIDS research, treatment and education (McDevitt “Farm...”).

The article also espouses the initiative of Stanford University above all other schools explaining that the benefit “is one of the first efforts of its kind at a major university” and that the purpose of the event is to “raise awareness of the disease and its impact on the nation’s colleges and universities” (McDevitt). Although Stanford’s claims of breaking new ground in university programs for HIV/AIDS awareness were probably true, the fact that the claims were advertised in the article implies that the university was aware of its image and how it compared to other universities. Therefore, Stanford could have exaggerated their claims to promote a positive public image. It is also notable that the source of this statement is The Stanford Daily, which often holds some bias toward the virtues of Stanford University over peer institutions.

The benefit was reported in The Stanford Daily on May 12, 1986 in a follow-up article. There were two hundred guests, and the event raised thirty thousand dollars for HIV/AIDS-based research. President Kennedy reaffirmed the University’s participation in HIV/AIDS research and awareness by declaring, "AIDS is an international problem, a national problem, it is our problem" (McDevitt “AIDS Benefit”). These words echo Robinson’s assertion that HIV/AIDS was a national problem and the fear surrounding the disease belonged to everyone, no matter who ignored it.

The strongest evidence supporting the administration’s assertion that it was in the vanguard of HIV/AIDS awareness was the issuance of an employment policy implemented in May of 1986. The Stanford Daily delineated the policy on its front page in an article titled “Farm issues AIDS policy” (Kasterski). The article reports that Stanford made an official statement “clarifying its employment practices” and adjusting them to prevent employee discrimination on the basis of HIV/AIDS. Employee Rob Parker believed that the “specific statement” did “represent some leadership on the part of Stanford” cementing Stanford Administration’s efforts to make its policies the gold standard in the field of education (Kasterski). A later article notes that, “Some universities have requested information about Stanford’s employment policies and educational outreach
programs regarding AIDS” (McDevitt “AIDS Benefit”). From this evidence, it is fair to conclude that Stanford University was a leader in the policy of HIV/AIDS during this time. However, in the journal Education Record, Richard P. Keeling argues, “Early AIDS policies were administratively protective: salvaging the institution’s reputation” and that “Many of these policies affirmed the institution’s commitment to avoid discriminating against people with HIV/AIDS...but most did not construct a mechanism of investigation or redress to employ in the event of discrimination” (32). Stanford’s lauded policy mentions the commitment of Stanford to its antidiscrimination practices, but the article does not state specific actions enacted by the new policy. This again suggests Stanford’s intention of creating an admirable image of itself for comparison against other institutions. In this case, a positive image is reinforced because Stanford is the “first” of many educational institutions to endorse this humanitarian cause in such a way.

While competition between other peer institutions might have motivated Stanford to champion the cause of HIV/AIDS awareness, the university also had to balance how much it endorsed the cause as not to alienate the generally conservative alumni that supported the school financially (Robinson). The stigma attached to HIV/AIDS was not a palatable topic for the University’s alumni and older affiliates as evidenced by the few articles about HIV/AIDS in The Stanford Magazine. The publication usually contains stirring articles of up-to-date, non-controversial articles. The first mention of HIV/AIDS in the Stanford Magazine publication from the beginning of the 1980s was published in the Winter of 1986, late even by the standards of general public awareness in 1985. The first article titled “Understanding AIDS” contained four sections about HIV/AIDS dealing with the idea of quarantine, the science of the immune system, the virus, and the heroin connection (Kizer). Given the usually dynamic and interesting writing of the magazine, a purely informational article indicates that the magazine did not want to voice an opinion. If the magazine chose a controversial stance on HIV/AIDS, it faced losing some of its readership. Roughly one half of the article was an explanation of the medical implications of HIV on the human body. Additionally, the article characterizes the HIV/AIDS as a disease that only affects populations on the outskirts of society, “nearly all cases of AIDS in the U.S. have been reported from certain population groups, including promiscuous male homosexuals and bisexuals, hemophiliacs, and blood transfusion recipients before AIDS blood screening procedures were implemented” (Kizer). By this time, initiatives against the discrimination of people for this disease had already begun.

Stanford Magazine’s approach was a conservative one in respect to the goals of Stanford Dean of Students James Lyons who was concerned “about the impact of the disease on the university community” and believed that Stanford officials “have the responsibility to help both students and members of the larger community” (Cathright).

Snippets of the social controversy do appear in the magazine, however briefly, in the form of heated responses to the article in the next issue of the magazine. The debate through the letters to the editor underscores the controversy surrounding the issue even in circles less apt to discuss controversial subjects (“Responses to Articles”). There were only two other articles in the Stanford magazine for the rest of the 1980s, one of which dealt with how to treat the victims of HIV/AIDS and the other about the emerging problem of infants contracting HIV from their mothers (Adams). The presence of only three articles in the magazine throughout the entire 1980s, especially during the peak of the epidemic, is a testament to the relatively little attention that HIV/AIDS awareness re-
ceived in the alumni audience at Stanford. With two sets of expectations to fulfill, that of the progressive world of education and the opinion of the alumni, the complexity of the Stanford Administration's actions regarding HIV/AIDS awareness increased greatly.

**On the Frontlines—Research from the Medical School**

After Stanford Medical Center entered HIV/AIDS research facilitated by the actions of The Stanford Blood Center 1983, research efforts increased as the epidemic worsened. Perhaps the most significant occurrence was the establishment of the Stanford AIDS Clinical Trials Group in 1987, one of the original sites set up by the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. The purpose of these centers were to research HIV and evaluate “novel therapeutic agents” to treat HIV infection and publish the findings into a national database (Slamowitz). Because the Stanford research center was “among the original five units established” it became a model for other sites at medical centers across the country (Slamowitz).

Virginia Tallman who began as the original Study Coordinator of the ACTG noted, “AIDS research started very slow” at Stanford with a relatively small working team. Eventually, the ACTG expanded as more funding was poured into the project; sub-sites were added in Santa Clara, San Mateo and the VA. As a national organization, the ACTG has been vital to HIV/AIDS research. Tallman stated, “I think the ACTG as a whole has been about the only system that has created the information we know now about AIDS and how subjects should be handled” (Tallman).

The importance of the ACTG and Stanford’s participation in the research group made a strong statement about Stanford University’s commitment to public health especially in the face of the new HIV/AIDS epidemic. However, resistance to the social and political pressures of the time was not one hundred percent. Tallman recollects, “there was resistance in all aspects in the early years” to Stanford’s participation in HIV/AIDS research. She explains further

> The University was happy of course to get the money but did not really like the idea of having people outside know that AIDS research was being done here. We were basically told to keep quiet. We had to put some protocols through the GCRG in the Hospital and they really did not like us being there, patients were admitted under another diagnosis, put in private rooms, under isolation and were told not to tell anyone what they had for fear that other patients would not come to the unit. Nurses would refuse to take care of AIDS patients. It was very slow to change, but it did over time (Tallman).

Stanford’s reluctance to fully publicize the inner workings of the ACTG could indicate motives for research different from the generally noble goals of progress in science. Professor Robinson clarifies that the decision to do a specific type of research involves many levels of decision, not the least being the image of the university and the opinions of the alumni who donate money to the university (Robinson). Additionally, the university is responsible to its students, to its founding principals, and to its image as a top research institution. Perhaps the reason for keeping the research relatively quiet was related to the image that the university needed to uphold. Endorsement of a controversial subject,
especially one as stigmatized as HIV/AIDS could have led to lost funding especially because of the widespread fear that gripped the nation at the time. In a society where HIV+ children were ostracized from their schools due to the misunderstanding panic of other parents, Stanford’s secrecy could have been a mechanism used to prevent uproar at the hospital and decrease the tension already surrounding the subject (Healy 4). Additionally, secrecy protected the confidential circumstances of the patients who were more likely to be refused coverage by insurance companies in addition to being shunned by society. Despite these reasons, the fact remains that Stanford University succumbed to some extent to the societal pressures that stigmatized HIV/AIDS.

IV. Conclusions

The majority of students at Stanford in the 1980s were relatively complacent about the HIV/AIDS epidemic and non-responsive to attempts made by the administration to educate the student body. While many students were probably aware of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, it did not affect them and therefore was not a high priority. The administration on campus was active once the epidemic became frantic and hit the public radar in 1985. The actions of the administration were well documented in student publications and administration leaders cited the need for HIV/AIDS awareness and action; however, the fact that the University had to uphold a particular image implies exaggeration of some aspects of their actions. Additionally, the University had to struggle between competing with peer institutions and upholding goals for the University’s alumni. Finally, easily the most active sector of Stanford University with regards to AIDS in the 1980s was that of the medical school. The scandal at the blood center launched Stanford into the HIV/AIDS problem in the early 1980s making Stanford a leader in research. However, later research was affected by Stanford’s pressure to keep the treatment of HIV/AIDS research in the 1980s quiet for reasons that could be related to the stigmatization of HIV/AIDS.

The research shows that a complex dynamic between University policies and social attitudes and pressures of the general public exists even at respected, top tier research institutions such as Stanford University. In the case of HIV/AIDS, the Stanford student body, administration, and medical center did submit by varying amounts to the stigmatization of HIV/AIDS. This was probably detrimental to the patients who needed the most help during the peak years of the epidemic in America. However, there are unsung heroes in the battle against the stigma of HIV/AIDS at Stanford University; the nameless and faceless workers at the medical center, humanitarian activist students and administrators representing their true beliefs and upholding the founding principals of the University. Reflecting on the reaction of students, administrators and researchers to the HIV/AIDS awareness initiative in the 1980s provides an opportunity for introspection and the possibility for current students to step back and analyze what parts of society are currently stigmatized. From there, Stanford University can implement change. If negative social pressures can infiltrate the iridescent walls of the Stanford bubble, then certainly the walls are permeable from the opposite direction as well. Students, administrators, and researchers have the possibility to change society’s current perceptions of the world and make the nation aware of harmful stigmas.
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FALL 2008 WINNER

Adam Adler

INSTRUCTOR’S FOREWORD

In the landmark case, *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, the Supreme Court grapples with one of the most difficult issues faced by a liberal polity—just how we are to reconcile claims for cultural preservation (proposed by particular groups) with the state’s concern for its individual citizens? Or, to stick more closely to the specifics of the case, should the Amish be granted exemption to mandatory school attendance laws in order to preserve their way of life? Over the course of this essay, Adam Adler deftly explores some of the most significant tensions in this legal decision. Although he excels in reconstructing the difficult normative logic of the case, this is not what I find most interesting about it. Nor does the essay succeed solely through its conceptual and linguistic clarity (though it surely does both of these things). Rather, I am most impressed by how Adler evaluates the court’s reasoning and convincingly argues that their decision may ultimately undermine their own stated aims: our ability to choose a life that could be recognized as our own in some meaningful sense. As it proceeds, the essay sheds light not only on the tension between the state and particular groups, but also the tensions within these groups, which are hardly univocal in terms of what their members need and want. In the end, Adler’s essay demonstrates not only a sensitive analytic mind, but a concern for questions that matter within the messy business of political life.

—Michael Feola
Wisconsin v. Yoder
Maximizing Religious Choice
Adam Adler

In 1972, the Supreme Court decided the case of Wisconsin v. Yoder, holding, on First Amendment grounds, that the state of Wisconsin could not compel Amish parents to send their children to school beyond the 8th grade. While the interests of the state differ in many ways from the interests of the Amish, both parties involved in this case recognize the fundamental and overriding importance of religious choice in one’s life. The state recognizes this most directly through the First Amendment to the Constitution, which allows all individuals the right to practice whatever religion they wish. But the extent to which religious choice is a core American value can best be seen by examining the works of John Locke, who states that “no man by nature is bound unto any particular Church or Sect, but every one joins himself voluntarily” (“Letter” 28). Locke argues that one’s religious practices should be voluntary—that neither nature, nor the state, nor anyone else should force or coerce others into a religion. This philosophy is also shared by John Stuart Mill, who suggests that individual life choices such as religion create “different experiments of living” that benefit society as a whole (54). Consistent with the philosophies of Locke, Mill, and the Constitution, the Amish religion is predicated on the idea that each of its adult members must choose voluntarily to be a member of the Amish church and community (Mazie 10). To provide this meaningful choice to their children, the Amish allow each child, upon reaching the age of sixteen, a year of “Rumspringa,” or “running around,” in which Amish teens leave their community to experience life in mainstream society.

Since both the Amish and the state regard religious choice as one of the most important freedoms an individual can have, the presence and significance of religious choice is what should be evaluated in an analysis of the Yoder decision, as whichever side maximizes this choice would be the side that, from both perspectives, would be most beneficial. While the Supreme Court believed their ruling to be consistent with the values embedded in the Constitution, a closer examination of the case shows the Court’s decision actually harms both state and Amish interests by decreasing religious choice and reducing cultural awareness both in and out of Amish communities.

Allowing Amish students to leave school before the age of sixteen infringes on their right of religious choice by depriving them of the education necessary to live a successful life outside of the Amish community. The Supreme Court in the Yoder case recognizes that “the value of all education must be assessed in terms of its capacity to prepare the child for life” (11). The Court argues that the education received in ninth and tenth grade has little value because it will not be used inside the Amish community. But in making this assertion, the Court falsely assumes that Amish students will live the entirety of their life with the Amish, ignoring the choice each student has to leave his or her Amish community. The education received in ninth and tenth grade is critical to prepar-
ing Amish students for a potential life in mainstream society. Education in the United States is cumulative, such that each class builds upon the classes before it. Accordingly, taking Amish students out of school for an extended period of time will make it extremely difficult and impractical for them to re-enter at a later date or to pursue alternatives to a high school education—preventing them from obtaining a college education or even a high school diploma. On the other hand, delaying their training in Amish crafts by two years does not appear to significantly decrease their access to Amish vocational training (Mazie 13). It thus follows that by allowing students to leave school early the Supreme Court relegates them to choosing between a successful life as a member of the Amish community and a disadvantaged and restricted life outside the Amish community. This choice is clearly articulated by Steven Mazie, a professor of political theory from Bard College: “Inside the Amish church, a secure and well-paying job in a factory or on a farm awaits most young people[...]. Leaving the church brings uncertainty at best, a solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short life at worst” (18). Reviewing these two options shows that Amish students’ religious decisions will be confounded by the non-religious disadvantages they would face if they chose to leave the Amish, meaning many students will choose to remain in the Amish community not because that is their religious choice, but rather because it guarantees them a higher quality of life than they would be afforded in mainstream society. In this way, allowing the Amish to leave school after the eighth grade prevents them from having a real, meaningful religious choice.

Whereas my argument is framed around the religious choice of Amish children, the Supreme Court bases its decision on “the fundamental interest of parents, as contrasted with that of the State, to guide the religious future and education of their children” (15). Under this framework one could argue, as the Supreme Court does, that parents should be able to choose how their children are reared and educated. While this is true, parents should not be able to prevent their children from exercising fundamental rights upon reaching adulthood. In the context of religion, this means parents should not be able to force their children to follow their religion. Locke supports this idea when, in A Letter Concerning Toleration, he notes that the “Religion of Parents [should not] descend unto Children” (28). Locke demonstrates this again when, in the Second Treatise, he argues that a parent’s control over his or her child is temporary—that it can only be exercised “till [the child] comes to the age of discretion; and then he is a free man, at liberty” (63). Accordingly, the state would be justified in curtailing the Amish’s ability to raise their children if such a curtailment would preserve the presence of a real and meaningful religious choice for the child.

While a high school education provides Amish students with the intellectual tools necessary to live a successful life in mainstream society, it also provides the students with a thorough understanding of mainstream culture, meaning even if Amish students who leave school after eighth grade are guaranteed to have the skills necessary to live a prosperous life in mainstream society, they would still lack the cultural knowledge needed to make an informed religious choice. To understand why this is so, we must first understand how Amish teenagers typically decide whether or not they wish to live an Amish life. As mentioned above, Amish teens leave the Amish community for a year of Rumspringa, during which they are supposed to learn how life functions outside of the Amish community. Unfortunately, for most Amish teens Rumspringa does not provide a holistic understanding of mainstream culture. The year off does not give Amish
teens an idea of how most mainstream Americans live their lives. To the contrary, most of their time is “spent horsing around in bowling alleys or getting drunk in cornfields” (Mazie 17). In short, the mechanism Amish communities have established to help their children learn about other cultures is no longer an effective tool. Accordingly, another process must be used to provide Amish teenagers with the cultural awareness needed to make an informed decision.

By requiring Amish students to attend school through the tenth grade, the government would provide them with the opportunity to learn about mainstream culture in a controlled setting. High school will afford many Amish teens the opportunity to discover how other students live their lives spiritually, intellectually, morally, and culturally. By providing Amish students with cultural knowledge before their Rumspringa, the government would prevent Amish teens from assuming that the wildest aspects of American culture are the only aspects of American culture, and are thus the only alternatives to life in the Amish community. It thus follows that, with their broader cultural knowledge, the Amish students will explore not only bowling alleys and cornfields, but also a broad range of other lifestyles and cultures in their year of Rumspringa. These explorations, as a whole, will provide Amish students with the information they need to make an informed religious decision.

In the Yoder case, the Amish put forth the argument that by “exposing Amish children to worldly influences in terms of attitudes, goals, and values contrary to beliefs” schools “[contravene] the basic religious tenets and practice of the Amish faith, both as to the parent and the child” (Yoder 1). The Amish continue to argue that, because of this contravention, compulsory education threatens to destroy the Amish religion. Despite their bold assertions, neither the Amish nor their experts explain how an exposure to different values and cultures will destroy their religion. Amish teens will not abandon their Amish culture, as throughout their high school years they would still live in their Amish communities abiding by all Amish rules. Further, the Amish recognize the importance of cultural exposure. This is seen directly in the practice of Rumspringa, in which Amish teenagers are encouraged to learn about other cultures. The cultural exposure provided in high school should not be rejected simply because it paints a more accurate picture of society—to the contrary, the Amish should embrace high school as an opportunity for their children to gain the most accurate understanding of the outside world. Finally, in response to the Court’s concern that to require Amish students to attend school would destroy their religion, I note that we should not preserve religions simply because they are religions—we should preserve religions because they represent different values, ideals, customs, and beliefs that people choose to have. If the Amish are prevented from making that choice, then their religion is not worth protecting as the Court did in this case.

In Wisconsin v. Yoder, the majority ruling of the Supreme Court in favor of Yoder is inconsistent with the values of freedom and diversity as espoused not only through the First Amendment of the Constitution, but also the philosophical groundings of our constitutional founding as described by Locke and Mill. When the Supreme Court held that requiring Amish students to attend school past the eighth grade prevented them and their families from freely exercising their religion, it sidestepped the true intent of the First Amendment, the preservation of religious choice, and made a decision that actually acted against the spirit of the Constitution. Because a high school education provides Amish students with the skills necessary to survive in mainstream society and
because it allows them to learn about mainstream culture, Amish students must attend school past the eighth grade if they are to make a real, informed, and rational decision about the rest of their lives.

Endnotes

1 A religious choice is one made in the field of religion based on personal beliefs—here, it would probably be based on whether the Amish students strongly believe in the Amish religious teachings, or whether their beliefs are more in line with modern-day Protestant religions, or even atheism or agnosticism. A religious choice in this context is distinctly different from a choice made in the field of religion based on other motives (such that choosing an Amish life to avoid a disadvantaged, impoverished life outside the Amish community would not be a religious choice even though it is a choice that dictates what type of religious life they would lead). The choices accorded by the Amish, Mill, Locke, and our Constitution are each consistent with this interpretation of religious choice.

2 I do not mean to imply that children should be able to decide their religion during their childhood—US law, Amish customs, Lockean philosophy, and Millean philosophy all indicate that children do not have the capacity to make such a decision—rather, what the government can and should do is take action to guarantee conditions in childhood that allow the child, upon reaching adulthood, to make a meaningful religious choice.

3 The practice of Rumspringa developed at a time when the Amish culture was not as far removed from mainstream culture as it is now. At that time, secondary education was not needed to secure a living wage for a family. The importance of education in modern society, as well as the vast differences that have developed between Amish and mainstream cultures, now prevent Rumspringa from serving its purpose.

4 For many Amish students, high school would be their first time dealing with kids from other backgrounds. This is because, as the Supreme Court notes, many Amish students attend special Amish schools through the eighth grade and are thus completely isolated from mainstream society (Yoder 7). For the students who have been exposed to culture before ninth grade, the two years of high school education are still needed for them to gain a holistic cultural understanding of mainstream society. The formative significance of ninth and tenth grade is not disputed by the Amish. The Amish argue, and the court recognizes, that these first two years of high school take place during a "crucial adolescent stage of development," meaning that ninth and tenth grade provide significant cultural lessons even if some Amish students have had previous exposure to mainstream culture (Yoder 3).

5 Absent space constraints, I would show how Mill's "dead dogma" argument can be applied to Amish communities and how, by allowing their children to attend high school, Amish parents would, in fact, be strengthening their children's religious beliefs by forcing their children to think about why moderation and a strict adherence to morals leads to a better life, whereas in the status quo, Amish children merely take these ideas as givens without thinking about why they are true.

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To be or not to be? Taxed by the burden of revenging his father's death, Shakespeare's Hamlet contemplates the choices that lie before him. Should he accept his call to duty, confront the "slings and arrows" of human suffering? Or should he, instead, take shelter in the "undiscovered country" of death? Toward the end of the speech, Hamlet’s meditation turns upon itself, examining the very act of contemplation: "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all," he muses, "and thus the native hue of resolution / is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought." Does contemplation bolster and inform incisive action in the world? Or might the intricacies of thought prevent action, trapping Hamlet in their web?

Hamlet’s soliloquy is undoubtedly the most famous passage in Shakespeare’s corpus—endlessly rehearsed, memorized, and studied. This familiarity, however, is more of a challenge than a comfort to students, as those well-worn pathways make the task of innovation all the more daunting. In her essay, “Thought Aids Acting, Not Action: Laurence Olivier’s and Franco Zeffirelli’s Versions of Hamlet,” Rachel Kolb rises to the challenge with aplomb. Comparing the interpretations of the “to be or not to be” scene in the Olivier and Zeffirelli films of Hamlet, Rachel focuses, in particular, upon how each director depicts the nature of contemplation. Olivier, she argues, shows us a Hamlet fatally limited by his psychological condition—suffering from a sort of contemplative paralysis—while Zeffirelli gives us a restless Hamlet frustrated by material impediments to action. Moving through the various components of each scene’s construction, her analysis is consistently dexterous, incisive, and original. She illuminates, with remarkable insight, how the films use the same script to produce distinct and opposing portraits of the nature of thought, and, consequently, the brooding Prince himself.

The strength of Rachel’s close reading is matched by a lucid and elegant prose style, forceful argumentation, and an ability—unusual in a first-year student—to reflect upon the stakes of her own argument. While the contrast Rachel develops is the aim, and end, of many a literature paper, she takes the divergent interpretations of Hamlet as an occasion to examine interpretation itself. This self-reflexivity is, perhaps, Rachel’s most impressive turn. In the end, Rachel states, the opposing visions rendered by Olivier and Zeffirelli testify to the fact that there is no fixed portrait of the Prince of Denmark—that Hamlet, in short, is the product of subjective interpretation. The problem that drives Hamlet, or impedes him, “does not exist, except perhaps in the interpretations of the individual.” As we, like Denmark’s court, attempt to “pluck the heart” of Hamlet’s mystery, Rachel reminds us that Shakespeare’s contemplative Prince is “as elusive as his thought.”

—Abigail Heald
The greatest testament to the complexity of William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is that virtually no single performance can do its title character complete justice. In *Hamlet* we find numerous contradictions: between the depressive and the manic, the sensitive and the cruel, and the contemplative and the active. Laurence Olivier’s and Franco Zefferelli’s film versions take opposite stances regarding the latter two, and although neither film achieves the ideal well-rounded portrait of *Hamlet*, when placed in juxtaposition they provide startling commentary on the motives shaping his character. In their representations of *Hamlet*’s “to be or not to be” soliloquy—a speech in which *Hamlet* fears that contemplation has paralyzed him—Olivier’s and Zefferelli’s different approaches become visible, their interpretations disagreeing about the nature of thought. Although both films concur that thought is murky and removed from the conditions of everyday life, ensnaring us in a sort of reflective claustrophobia, they represent its restrictions differently. For Zefferelli, the claustrophobia of thought results from our knowledge that our options are limited due to circumstance. For Olivier, thought adopts a less concrete form of restriction, instead plunging into the innate neurosis of the mind, the labyrinthine structure of self-reflection that preempts any form of active escape. The contrast between these perspectives, demonstrated by each film’s choice of setting, choreography, and use of the camera, raises the question of whether *Hamlet*’s paralysis arises from his psychological objection to himself or from his objection to his physical situation.

For both Zefferelli and Olivier, *Hamlet*’s “to be or not to be” soliloquy involves a drastic escape from the usual surroundings of Elsinore. In Olivier’s film, Elsinore is a dark, sparse stone castle with little practical functionality or logical spatial organization. Its stairs and passageways wind upward and inward, merging with the black-and-white cinematography and zoom shots across stairways and halls to create an impression of confusion and claustrophobia. Elsinore is modeled after the nature of the mind—namely, *Hamlet*’s mind, trapped within its own deliberations. No natural light illuminates the interior of the castle, and we often have the feeling of being underground. In escaping to the open air at the top of the tower, *Hamlet* seeks not only a break from his normal surroundings. More critically, he seeks to break from his usual inertia by contemplating suicide. His return to the location where he met his father’s ghost indicates that he subconsciously desires another rendition of its explanation and call to action. However, the tower lends itself to neither, nor does it provide any clarity. It is a dead end, with nowhere to go but down off the edge, and although it does provide *Hamlet* some fresh air, opaque mist shrouds everything in uncertainty. If venturing outside is *Hamlet*’s
attempt to escape the deceit and artificiality of his stone Elsinore, the natural world disappoints. The waves and rocks grant him none of nature’s respite; they are as harsh as the stone of the tower itself, and, as a destination for a suicidal leap, they only threaten to break his body. Although Hamlet is in the open air, his mind has left him with as few alternatives as before.

In Zeffirelli’s film, Hamlet’s restriction does not result from being trapped in his own thoughts, and the destination of his physical retreat is the opposite of Olivier’s. Instead of escaping upward into a mist of thought, Hamlet creeps down into the dank, earthy atmosphere of a crypt. For Zeffirelli, this is a major change, for, unlike Olivier, his film portrays a bright and open Elsinore, setting many scenes outside and incorporating nature into many of its shots, from the courtyard of the castle to the green hills and lake. Descending from this open air into the shadows is as striking for Zeffirelli as the tower is for Olivier. It is also Olivier’s opposite, replacing an ascent to abstract thought with the basic, grimy reality of all human existence: death. For Zeffirelli, thought is buried and covert rather than exalted and isolated. His Hamlet is returning to dust—as he will later say, “whereto ’tis kin” (IV.ii.6)—and, as such, is contemplating the foundations of the concrete problem he must resolve. This particular crypt is the same place where Hamlet and the rest of the royal family interred his father’s body at the beginning of the film. That body—and, as such, his father’s death—has launched not only Hamlet’s melancholy, but also Claudius’s rule and Denmark’s entire demise. In the decomposing skeletons, sarcophagi, and tombs of the crypt, “the rottenness of Denmark” (I.v.100) becomes tangible and real. As in Olivier’s version, Hamlet returns to memories of his father during this soliloquy, but he does so in contemplation of a fleshy reality. He does not wistfully recall his exhortation to action, but rather reflects on the physical circumstances keeping him from his purpose. While Olivier’s Hamlet is recalling an abstract, ghostly spirit, Zeffirelli’s Hamlet is remembering a tangible body.

The settings of the scene establish divergent characterizations of Hamlet, but equally important in shaping our perceptions is the use of the camera. Olivier’s film precedes the “to be or not to be” soliloquy with an urgent flight to the tower that is surprisingly revealing about Hamlet’s mental state. We leave Ophelia sobbing and soar upward, repeatedly sweeping through the same clip of curved stairs as the background music swells. At no point do we see Hamlet himself, but we understand that the camera is characterizing his perspective, showing us his limitations and his obsession. In revisiting the same stairs over and over again, Hamlet reveals himself as dwelling on the same locations and thoughts, incapable of escaping his self-destructive behavior by taking true initiative. Every time he approaches the top of the stairs, he wavers and falls to the bottom again. It thus makes sense that he should make his soliloquy on the tower; the location marks a return to the familiar, to preceding events and attitudes, instead of establishing a new pattern. After this psychotic film sequence, the break from stairs to sky releases our claustrophobia, like a cinematographic sigh of relief, but we must realize that Hamlet’s “escape” is illusory. The nature of his thought, and his constant returning and obsession, leave him as trapped atop the tower as he is in Elsinore.

The sky’s liberation is short-lived, for we are not free from Hamlet’s mental neurosis for long. As if to emphasize the concept of psychological struggle, Olivier immediately transports us back inside the confines of Hamlet’s mind—quite literally. He zooms in on the back of Hamlet’s head and enters, showing us the blurred rocks and waves from
Hamlet's point of view and flashing the brief silhouette of a brain. Olivier has made us understand that Hamlet's problems result from his inability to escape from his own mind. Suitably, during the course of the soliloquy, Olivier refuses to let us escape from Hamlet to look elsewhere. Unlike Zeffirelli's version, when Mel Gibson darts in and out of various shots, Olivier has transported us into Hamlet's mind and intends for us to stay there. The camera lingers on him, emphasizing the creases in his brow and the limpness with which he leans on his stone slab. This limpness is so prevailing that Hamlet's dagger slips from his hand into the sea before he can decide whether or not to use it. Like Zeffirelli, Olivier emphasizes the words “To sleep, perchance to dream” (III.i.73) as Hamlet opens his eyes and another surge of music rises—but, unlike in Zeffirelli's version, he reacts by slumping even further, not getting up in restive unease. He is resigned to his own state of mind, for it cannot override its pensive nature, thus deciding him against action. Hamlet specifically addresses the consequences of thought on action at the end of his soliloquy: when he speaks the words “With this regard their currents turn awry” (III.i.95), he physically turns, demonstrating the flaccid compliance of his body to his psyche and indicating that the only physical action he can take is essentially inaction. In aesthetics, Olivier has taken the soliloquy quite literally: when obscured by excessive thought, all Hamlet's hopes for action are lost.

If Olivier uses the camera to reflect the psychological chaos that results in Hamlet's limpness and inaction, Zeffirelli uses it to suggest the ongoing physical action that occurs, and even clashes, with thought. Although the camera tracks Hamlet through the crypt, it does not follow him with the same intentness as in Olivier's film. It is looser, more apt to wander and shift in order to capture the physical setting of the crypt. As Zeffirelli's Hamlet is a more materially focused man, the camera suitably adapts. It takes in the skeletons in the wall as well as the tombs and coffins, not only to show us the objects of Hamlet's gaze but also to emphasize the objects in his path. Hamlet's journey through the crypt is not made in a straight line; he walks down steps, crosses uneven patches in the floor, and finds his way around stone dividers. He is navigating his world and addressing his problems more adeptly than Olivier. When in the agitation of his soliloquy he presses himself against the sarcophagi, they emphasize the looming, solid nature of the obstacles that keep him from action. Like the matters he is struggling with, the tombs refuse to move. The camera, as a sympathetic observer to this roving struggle, often moves before Hamlet does, allowing him to fill his space. Unlike the fixed, restricted shots we see with Olivier, it invites him to wander and deliberate, knowing that his movement will shape and reflect his thought.

Teaming up with the camera's effect is Mel Gibson's acting as Hamlet. Unlike Olivier, for whom the camera can only construct a limited perspective, Gibson works with the liberty the camera gives him. This means that his Hamlet becomes physically agitated at his inability to act, rather than resigned to it. He can remain in no place for long, and his restlessness dominates the screen. During the lines in which he considers all the physical injustices one must bear, he teems with frustration and disgust, showing that he is not acquiescent to accepting such “scorns,” but feels ready to take them on if circumstance will let him. In this case, the “bare bodkin” is a hypothetical matter, not a real threat. Gibson's Hamlet is not considering suicide to the same extent as Olivier's, only protesting against the impossibility of his circumstances in that, being unable to “take arms” against his troubles, he only has the dismal alternative of seeking death. Like
an action hero who vows to succeed or die, he feels unable to overcome “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” (III.i.66)—that is, Denmark’s corruption—and sees death as the only suitable alternative. His suicide would be an escape from material failure, not psychological chaos. At times Gibson shouts into the darkness, as if protesting against this failure and the dim nature of the thoughts that inhibit his desire for revenge. He ends his soliloquy not resigned to thought and inaction like Olivier, but temporarily subdued by the weight of his circumstance. Appropriately, he collapses against a stone ledge as if unable to bear the burden. Thought, like the darkness, has imposed itself on him.

Neither Zeffirelli nor Olivier makes any alterations to the text of Hamlet for this soliloquy, but their different interpretations reveal two different men. As readers, we cannot “pluck out the heart of” Hamlet’s “mystery” (III.ii.395-396), for the play’s text is composed of words alone. Hamlet’s character is clearly more than words, for these can be represented in different ways. As these two films show, his essence is inseparable from the theatrical interpretations of setting, articulation, and demeanor. Thus is it possible to truly know Hamlet’s inner self? His mind is perhaps defined by limitations, flaccidity, and resignation, like we see in Olivier, so that he essentially objects to the claustrophobia of his thought but is nonetheless unable to escape. Or, as Zeffirelli shows, his mind could be a voice that protests against the darkness of physical ineptitude and inevitable death. The definitive problem that consumes Hamlet does not exist, except perhaps in the interpretations of the individual. His character is as elusive as his thought, for a simple change of directorial focus can redefine all our perceptions. Indeed, we are no better than the members of the royal court, for however often we read Hamlet we cannot fully penetrate his “seeming” to find a definitive “Nay, it is” (I.ii.79).

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For most of human history, the Atlantic Ocean formed a nearly impassible barrier between the Americas, Europe, and sub-Saharan Africa. But beginning with the Portuguese voyages of exploration during the 1430s—and accelerating dramatically after 1492—the Atlantic became less of a barrier and more of a bridge that connected these distant lands and peoples. Previously isolated and autonomous regions became interconnected and interdependent in this, forming a complex web of relationships that historians are still in the thick of disentangling and interpreting. Plants, animals, goods, people, ideas, and microbes crisscrossed the Atlantic, with devastating effects for most involved. About 95% of the native human population of the Americas died from Old World diseases, and subsequently about 15 million Africans were forcibly transported to the New World, primarily to grow an Old World crop, sugar cane, that was then consumed in Europe, often with tea imported from India or China.

The story of transatlantic slavery and of the increasing complexity of the eighteenth-century Atlantic world form the historical context for the two primary texts under consideration here: Voltaire’s *Candide* (1759) and the first few chapters of Olaudah Equiano’s slave narrative (1789). *Candide* was the crowning achievement of the European Enlightenment’s most distinguished philosopher, and Equiano was an Igbo from West Africa. He was enslaved as a child, taken across the Atlantic, and later bought his own freedom and emerged as a leading figure in England’s antislavery movement. At first glance, these texts might seem to have little to do with one another, and that was part of the point of this assignment. What light do these quite disparate texts shed on the eighteenth-century Atlantic world?

While the instructors expected the texts to illuminate different aspects of the eighteenth-century Atlantic, Jacob Vandermeer noticed how identity was manipulated as a means of power in both works. In his essay, he argues that the increased malleability of identity was itself a product of the increasing connectedness of the various lands bordering the Atlantic. He demonstrates how the manipulation of identity was a form of power and a means of negotiating power relations. He arrived at this very sophisticated analysis of big theoretical issues that preoccupy Atlantic history today without the benefit of any secondary texts or historical scholarship, and he did so, moreover, while demonstrating great sensitivity to the primary texts themselves. Consider, for example, his discussion of how slavery and the Middle Passage obliterated and reconfigured slaves’ identities in Equiano’s narrative, and how he then considers the problem of Equiano’s birth: recent archival evidence indicates that Equiano may have been born as a slave in South Carolina, and that therefore his entire account of his childhood as an Igbo in West Africa, his kidnapping, and the Middle Passage may very well be fabricated. Yet Vandermeer has framed his argument in such a way that both scenarios support his argument. Vandermeer’s brilliance was his demonstration that both authors—an Igbo (or South
Carolina) slave and the Enlightenment’s preeminent philosopher—struggle to come to
terms with the unsettling effects of the fluidity of identity created by globalization in the
eighteenth-century Atlantic world.

—William Carter
Identity Manipulation in *Candide* and *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* as a Model for the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World

Jacob Vandermeer

The immense power associated with the name of a person or object was no more novel to the eighteenth century than it was to any other era in which people sought to establish control over their surroundings; indeed, shaping the identities of others seems to be a historical hallmark of asserting authority. When Roman generals wished to assimilate conquered peoples into the empire, they gave new Latin names to local gods, villages, and landmarks. When Medieval Christians began to resent increasing Jewish commercial success and material prosperity, the Fourth Lateran Council declared that Jews' identities should be saliently marked by distinctive clothing and the Star of David. The emergence of the Atlantic world in the wake of European colonialism, however, resulted in a vast intensification and complication of manipulating identity as a means of establishing power. Interestingly, this trend constitutes a principal theme of two powerful and classic texts of the period, Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* and Voltaire's *Candide*. Though quite disparate in form—the first a slave narrative and the second an intellectual satire—the sources converge in their treatment of identity as a battleground for asserting intellectual, political, and even physical dominance. And while this mutual theme is certainly of great interest even in a literary sense alone, the heightened malleability of identity in both works is inextricably linked to, and in effect a direct product of, the burgeoning complexity and geographical mobility of the eighteenth-century Atlantic world.

In Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative*, the question of identity arises most conspicuously in the great plurality of names the narrator-protagonist assumes. Born Olaudah Equiano, the author is later called Michael, Jacob, and Gustavus Vassa, and in the many periods during which he cannot communicate with his masters, he is simply left in the “miserable, forlorn, and dejected state” of anonymity (Equiano 78). Equiano's desperation at lacking a constant identity communicates the immense power his European captors hold, embodied most significantly in the forced adoption of his final name, Gustavus Vassa. For his master, this name change is tantamount to establishing physical and personal dominance over a newly acquired dependent. Equiano writes, “When I refused to answer to my new name, which at first I did, it gained me many a cuff, so at length I submitted, and was obligated to bear the present name, by which I have been known ever since” (Equiano 79). Thus name changing, perhaps the most patent form of identity manipulation, is a principal means of forcing Equiano's submission to his new state of bondage. A similar situation in *Candide* confirms the namelessness of Africans who had undergone the Middle Passage: When Candide and Cacambo encounter the disfigured “negro” on the outskirts of Surinam, he identifies himself only by the name of his master, Monsieur Vanderdendur (Voltaire 68). Voltaire provides no
other information about Vanderdendur’s slave, and the latter’s lack of any substantive identity parallels the physical abuse he has suffered at the hands of his overseers. Thus in both texts, if names are any indication, slaves’ identities are subject to the whims of their captors, demonstrating the impossibility of maintaining any sense of self during and after the terror of the Middle Passage.

Forced renaming, however, is not the only means by which Europeans in Equiano’s account manipulate and suppress their slaves’ identities for purposes of exploitation. As described in The Interesting Narrative, the separation of families and slaves with the same cultural background likewise adulterates their identities by isolating them from the context in which they were originally cultivated. Equiano feels most helpless when he is separated from his own cultural community, recalling of his time in Virginia: “I had no person to speak to that I could understand. In this state I was constantly grieving and pining, and wishing for death rather than anything else” (Equiano 77). In this and other instances, Equiano’s lamentations are fundamentally a product of the absence of any constancy in his own identity. Yet even when he recovers a stable sense of cultural belonging, his newfound comfort represents not a return to his previous state but rather the ultimate completion of the identity alteration he has forcefully undergone. In recounting a confrontation with a French fleet onboard the British HMS Namur, Equiano writes, “had the Frenchmen known our condition, and had a mind to fight us, they might have done us great mischief” (Equiano 90, emphasis added). Equiano’s redefinition of “them” and “us” is particularly illustrative; whereas at the outset of his narrative Equiano associates himself with African kinsman against his European captors, he ultimately comes to regard himself as sharing in the fortunes and even the national pride of his fellow British crewmembers against the French and the Spanish. Thus Equiano’s text demonstrates the tremendous volatility of personal identity in the Atlantic slave trade of the eighteenth century, and in both The Interesting Narrative and Candide, the Middle Passage effects the complete transformation of identities as a means of establishing dominance and control.

An even deeper level of identity alteration becomes likely in Equiano’s narrative if we consider the scholarly dispute over the author’s alleged geographic origins. If Equiano was indeed born in South Carolina rather than Africa, as evidence from baptismal records and a naval muster roll suggests, he effectively usurps the identities of Africans who did undergo the Middle Passage in order to further his own abolitionist rhetoric, signaling an entirely different form of identity manipulation at play. Although Equiano’s deliberate assumption of a partially fabricated identity directly opposes, to a certain extent, the forced identity transformation his character undergoes in the narrative itself, it is still characteristic of the more general trend toward representational malleability in the increasingly complex Atlantic world.

Voltaire, too, partially falsifies the legitimate natures of people and institutions depicted in Candide for satirical purposes; his manipulation of identities is carried out perhaps to an even greater extent than Equiano’s, even as it is confined to the fictional realm. Over the course of Candide’s adventure, Voltaire reduces almost every prominent thinker and institution in European society to a collection of one-dimensional caricatures and stereotypes. In his introduction to the Raffel translation of Voltaire’s text, Johnson Kent Wright calls the mansion of Thunder-ten-Tronckh an “elfin model” of eighteenth-century Europe (Wright 23). Similarly, Voltaire’s depiction of the Jewish merchant in
Constantinople as a ridiculously unscrupulous and avaricious skinflint is fundamentally just as much an identity manipulation as can be found in Equiano's account of the slave trade: “They paid a visit to a Jew to whom, for fifty thousand gold ducats, Candide sold a diamond worth a hundred thousand, though the Jew swore in the name of Abraham that he could not pay a cent more” (Voltaire 118). Whether Voltaire subscribed to popular anti-Semitic characterizations of Jews or was in fact attempting to satirize them is immaterial; in either case, the reduction of Jewish commercial practices to a stereotype is a deliberate alteration of identity to a rhetorical end. The same is true for his portrayal of the Jesuits, the French Academy, and even the sailor Candide and Pangloss encounter in Lisbon after the earthquake.

But the most striking instance of identity manipulation in Voltaire's novel is in the character of Pangloss, by which the author distills the entire philosophical oeuvre of Gottfried Leibniz and infuses it into a foppish, dilettante, and slightly ridiculous pedagogue. It is rather plain that Pangloss's teachings—“in this best of all possible worlds, the Baron's mansion was the most beautiful of all mansions and the Baroness best of all possible Baronesses”—are a direct mimicry of Leibniz's theory of theodicy (Voltaire 2). And when Voltaire says of Pangloss, “once having declared that everything was wonderful, he’d go on declaring it, though he didn’t believe a word he was saying,” he very clearly robs Leibniz of any realistic identity through the excessive intellectual sclerosis of his caricature (Voltaire 126). Thus identity manipulation is certainly a central motif in both works, and its thematic significance becomes even more central when we consider that it constitutes the linchpin of both authors' main rhetorical intent. In The Interesting Narrative, Equiano's abolitionist message derives from his putative experience on a trans-Atlantic slave ship; if he was truly born in South Carolina as historical records suggest, his account would be meaningless without the assumption of a new identity. Likewise, the great humor and social critique that form the thematic backbone of Candide rely almost exclusively on Voltaire's satirical caricatures, which, as demonstrated above, are fundamentally rhetorical manipulations of identity.

And while these observations are of interest even in a purely literary sense, their prevalence in Equiano's and Voltaire's writings reflects much broader trends defining their historical context. The exponentially increasing complexity of the eighteenth-century Atlantic world witnessed a growing preoccupation with racial, class, religious, and even linguistic identity, a preoccupation of which The Interesting Narrative and Candide are most certainly a direct product. First, the inconstancy of Equiano's name was by no means an isolated case in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Slave owners often renamed their captives for greater ease of communication and management. Historian Trevor Burnard claims that, when their cargoes arrived in the New World, “Slave owners, rather than slaves, were the originators of slave names[... ] Slaves were seldom allowed the right even to name themselves and their progeny” (Burnard 326). In the same vein, black slaves devised satirical nicknames for their white masters, and pro-slavery advocates propagated the image of “Sambo,” a slave caricature who was outwardly servile and submissive but inwardly duplicitous and insubordinate (Rodney 607). Thus the eighteenth-century slave trade itself was rife with identity manipulations at every level; from the fluidity of slave nomenclature to the dissemination of artificially constructed stereotypes, the institution of slavery in the Atlantic world provided an important historical foundation for questions of identity in the texts under examination.
These historical foundations were by no means limited, however, to the African slave trade; radically volatile sentiments of race, class, and nation in Europe and Spanish America also provided considerable material for the malleability of identity found in Equiano and Voltaire. Eighteenth-century South America witnessed the continual obfuscation of racial categories due to the large degree of miscegenation among its African, European, and native inhabitants (Como 3/4/2009). Yet rather than accepting the diminishing rigidity of ethnic lines, South Americans obsessed over maintaining distinct racial identities even in the midst of so much intermixing. Prevalent in colonial households and parlors, casta paintings epitomized this preoccupation, establishing carefully delineated racial categorizations pictorially by assigning labels to the offspring of various interracial unions (Como 3/4/2009). Likewise, class identity in both Europe and America grew extremely tumultuous as the eighteenth century progressed; heightened tensions between peninsulares and creoles in the Spanish colonies and growing concerns over special class privileges in pre-revolutionary France fostered the same pattern of societal self-categorization as did racial intermixing in the New World (Como 3/4/2009). And contemporary commentators were keenly aware of the growing malleability of identity in this respect, as Voltaire and Equiano demonstrate. The former’s quip that Cunegonde is “of seventy-two-percent noble blood” and the latter’s amazement at the polyglot atmosphere that greets him upon his arrival in the Caribbean reveal that such questions of identity were indeed embedded in the era’s psyche (Voltaire 49). Finally, nascent sentiments of nationalism that emerged toward the end of the eighteenth century further complicated identities on both sides of the Atlantic, often by imputing to a single representational entity the character of an entire nation. The British John Bull and the French Marianne both assumed the corporate identities of their respective peoples, and the use of each as a caricature in propaganda aimed against its country of origin comports exactly with Voltaire’s exploitation of corporate stereotypes in the course of his satire in Candide (Como 3/9/2009). Furthermore, these national sentiments are the ultimate cause of Equiano’s psychological transformation into a Briton onboard the Namur; as in all of the aforementioned cases, textual evidence directly reflects real historical circumstances.

Thus two distinct yet parallel forms of identity shifts, one a product of the growing geographic mobility of the Atlantic world, the other an intellectual exercise characteristic of satires and partially fabricated memoirs, form the rhetorical backbone of Equiano’s The Interesting Narrative and Voltaire’s Candide. But, as evident from the above analysis of eighteenth-century European and American societies, neither form is limited to the realm of written texts alone. Both a heightened awareness of race, culture, and class, and the reduction of these complex identities to one-dimensional stereotypes, were highly prevalent in the era of Voltaire and Equiano and shaped these writers’ works considerably. Furthermore, to a certain extent the sudden increase in the malleability of identity in the Atlantic world began a deeply rooted historical trend that has characterized the process of globalization to the present day. That greatly enhanced social, national, cultural, and even sexual mobility in the modern world is fundamentally traceable to similar trends in the eighteenth century, demonstrates the importance of understanding conceptions of identity in the latter; as Equiano and Voltaire reveal, representational malleability in their times forms a basis for the even more pronounced fluidity of our own.
INTRODUCTION TO THE HUMANITIES

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