

Pandering Celebrities, Levied Insults and Novel Veracity: An Analysis of Bo
Burnham's

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Beginning as a teenager on Youtube and Vine, Burnham has been in the limelight as a borderline absurdist and musical comedian for over a decade. His second stand-up special, is a warning to the audience based on his struggles with his own celebrity and the larger culture surrounding fame. He calls attention to his biggest fear, and most comics' biggest fears, the thing that controls him, "you," the audience (Burnham 00:53:53). When talking to his audience, he continuously references how he wants to "please [them]" but also "stay true to [himself]" (Burnham 00:53:56). Then at other times, he insults them, and reveals his conflicted feelings for them in his song "Can't Handle This," in which he sings "a part of me loves you/a part of me hates you/a part of me needs you/a part of me fears you" (Burnham 00:54:13). He addresses that the audience and their preferences have the power to dictate his art because without them and their money he would be out of a job.

Burnham struggles with the need for money and fame and the desire to create the art he wants. He criticizes celebrities who fabricate their relatability by pandering to the largest common denominator of consumers in order to monetize their work-- something I call the

Stand-up comedy is a microcosm of performative living. Burnham's entire job during a stand-up special is to get the audience to like him and think he is funny and relatable so he can continue to work. It presents a performer on a stage directly addressing an audience in a way movie stars or athletes do not get the chance to. The medium allows Burnham to detail the falsity of celebrity performance by exaggerating that falsity in his own performance.

Burnham's exaggerations manifest in the form of a comic persona, which he contrasts with his genuine personality. Burnham's use of persona is perhaps one of the most fascinating and compelling elements of his special. Burnham oscillates between introspective and anxious, his true self, and arrogant and unconcerned, a parody of a male comic. When he puts on his persona, he's brash, pointedly insulting the crowd by telling them to "shut up" and calling them "idiots" even yelling "fuck you" and "stop participating," only really accepting their praise so as to give himself more credit than the "dumb fucks" backstage (Burnham 00:05:57-00:15:14). Daniel Smith, argues that Burnham's use of persona comments on the fluctuation between who we are and who we are perceived to be. Bo is anxious and struggling with the role comedy has in his life as evidenced by his song "Can't Handle This," in which he sings about how "[his] biggest problem's [the audience]" "[he] wan[ts to] please [them] and remain "true to [himself]" (Burnham 00:53:56). The truth of that is brought up in little beats throughout the special. Bo shows the audience who he really is before adopting the persona --the satirical, stereotypical arrogant male comic. Juxtaposing the two personas reveals, as Smith argues, the truth of who the comic is, in Bo's case an anxious twenty-something who is having a hard time "giv[ing] [the audience] the night out that [they] deserve" and also "sing[ing] what [he] think[s] and not car[ing] what [they] think about it."

Burnham's use of persona also uncovers what celebrities have become from Bo's point of view: self-centered, selfish and caring little about their audience except for their

praise. Rick Deroscher, claims that persona exposes the entirety of who/ what the persona is mimicking, Thus, Bo exposes the audience to how “entertainers... are lying and they are manipulating” audiences by exaggerating and embodying in himself the subtle ways they lie and manipulate (Burnham 00:24:02). In a particular bit Bo asks a member of the audience for his name. Bo had explained that he “wanted to work on his improv” and was trying to do something spontaneous with an audience member’s name. When given the name, Bo acts nervous -- the persona seemingly set aside-- for a beat and then a pre-recorded song plays with a pause for Bo to sing the name he was given. Once the song ends he addresses the audience once more, exclaiming: “How does he pretend to do it? How does he remain contrived?” Then finally, more urgently, “I’m not honest for a second up here” (Burnham 00:19:33-00:19:36). He quickly rebounds from that beat and moves on to the next joke. That moment, the pre-recorded song, the ardent and explicit emphasis of performer and audience, is one of the first moments in which Bo underscores the production surrounding celebrity. He illustrates how staged celebrity “relatable” moments are, by staging his own “relatable” moment. By setting aside his own persona for a moment during the performance, he mimics celebrities who “let their guard down” and “expose their own anxieties” in order to relate to the audience. Using his persona, he both exposes the truth of himself as a struggling celebrity and the truth of the manufactured entertainers.

His struggles, punctuated by his persona, lends a sense of integrity to his message that deepens the interrelatedness provided by his comedic medium. Pete Robinson argues that comedy is based in truth and the truth is what audiences crave (Robinson). Robinson supposes there is almost a layer of trust between the comedian and the audience. He adds that comedy has the power to ingratiate the audience (Robinson). The audience-entertainer connection that comedy fosters in addition to Bo’s willingness to expose his internal anxieties builds a relationship, or at least a sense of understanding and empathy, between the audience

and Bo. It fosters a credibility for Bo and eases the hypocrisy of a celebrity who is trying to keep your attention warning you about other celebrities trying to catch your attention. ByM

them of their power over him and over artists, he attempts to equip them so that they can hold celebrities accountable. He does not say that the state of celebrity disingenuity is the fault of the audience, but he does suggest that they have the power to alter celebrity culture with their power.

In face of all the ails facing society today (police brutality, unemployment, coronavirus), celebrities acting disingenuous does not seem like the most crucial issue to discuss, but holding celebrities accountable is absolutely necessary for our societal and political processes. Jonathon Gray argues that modern day politicians are “celebrify[ing]” their images just as celebrities are “politicizing” their images (Gray). The distinction between the two, politician and celebrity, is disappearing (or maybe was never there) (Gray). Gray’s argument, that celebrities and politicians are becoming the same, extends Bo Burnham’s exposition of the commercialization and inauthenticity of celebrities, to politicians as well. Gray further argues that both groups, celebrities and politicians, alter their images to seem “authentic” (Gray). That argument reaffirms the power of the people that Burnham highlights in his song “Can’t Handle This.” Both of Gray’s arguments perfectly address the necessity of Bo Burnham and . The population at large has enormous control over celebrities and politicians, and needs to exercise it and hold the people that they endow with power accountable.

Burnham’s truth to power has serious ramifications when considering celebrity-politicians, like Donald Trump. Burnham’s comments on celebrity failure and the manufacturing of their personality to pander to their fanbase parallel President Trump’s relationship with his own base. President Trump’s base shows a failure in holding a leader/celebrity accountable. Burnham constantly reminds the audience to hold him accountable and reveals his anxieties and failings. Trump, in contrast, does not acknowledge or accept his failings and benefits from audience members who are not critically thinking

