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*Joking With a Heavy Heart: Bo Burnham as the Modern Underground Man*

In a way, Fyodor Dostoevsky is the least existential author that we have read from in this class. While Sartre, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger are all philosophers with explicit ideas and beliefs about the world, Dostoevsky is more of a novelist, choosing in his book *Notes From Underground* to instead portray a character with complex emotions and motivations, leading us to empathize with the Underground Man, instead of pick apart his arguments. The Underground Man doesn't say the word existentialism, but through his ranting we gain a better understanding of what it *feels* like, this human condition or situation that all existentialists say we're in. That's why I enjoyed reading Dostoevsky much more than Kierkegaard; while Kierkegaard hovered over my suffering and described it in schematic detail, Dostoevsky came down and suffered alongside me.

This is the exact same reaction I had to Bo Burnham's *Inside*. Though marketed as a "comedy special," I think *Inside* is the most important film to be made in the last 50 years. I felt as though if someone were to ask me what it felt like to be a young person in the current moment, I could just point to *Inside* and say, "That. That describes everything." Through song, sketch, and innovative lighting and cinematography, Bo Burnham, like Dostoevsky, portrays "one of the representatives of a generation that is still with us. (Dostoevsky, 193)" Though not explicitly existential, *Inside* says a lot about what existing is like, and the problems that come with it. Ultimately, I think *Inside* is for the 21st century what *Notes From Underground* was for

the 19th century. They express the same problems, in the same style, and ultimately come to the same conclusion about the absurdity of life: it's better just to go mad.

That's a hefty claim to make, so to support it I want to give a full rundown of the excerpt from *Notes From Underground* that we read, and a summary of *Inside*. Then I'll begin explaining how the two are similar, first in form, then in function, and finally I'll dive into what those similarities seem to say about existentialism.

The excerpt from Dostoevsky's *Notes From Underground* is divided into 11 sections, which is highly convenient for summary. Section 1 introduces us to the speaker: the Underground Man. He is, by his own admission, a sick and spiteful man. He was a former civil servant who now spends his middle age in a basement apartment in St. Petersburg, having nothing better to do than waste time and complain about the nature of reality, it seems. We learn in this section that he is not necessarily a reliable narrator, a trait that he and Burnham share. Section 2 is about how there is a kind of delight to be found in guilt, and he elaborates in section 3: while "the natural man" would cease pursuing his goal when he encountered an impassable stone wall, (a metaphor for all that is factitious) a more "clever" man like Mr. Underground would simply deny the stone wall, for "I shall not reconcile myself to it just because I have to deal with a stone wall and haven't the strength to knock it down. (Dostoevsky, 203)" Section 4 explains that the aforementioned delight found in suffering is performative; that one can find pleasure in a toothache by performing over-the-top groans for an audience (his family, and even himself) and thus "he is only amusing himself out of spite and malice. (Dostoevsky, 205)" Section 5 reveals the reason for this performance, this playacting: there's nothing else to compose yourself with. The Underground Man can't find "a primary cause to lean against." Thus everything he does is a conscious effort of spite, whether it's loving, loafing, or slapping

somebody in the face. He wishes he could be any of those things positively in section 6, because then he would have something definite to compose himself with, but since there isn't a primary cause, it's all spite. He then pivots and says that the desire for something positive is a golden dream, in section 7. He denies the notion that if only humanity were enlightened to their interests, we would all behave reasonably, and ultimately build a deterministic "Crystal Palace" where through math and science everything would be figured out and perfect. He says that we can't define our interests, and that civilization hasn't really made us any less brutal, and that "one may choose to do something even if it is against one's own advantage, and sometimes one *positively should*. (Dostoevsky, 215)" He continues on the same subject in section 8, saying that "man only exists for the purpose of proving to himself every minute that he is a man and not an organ-stop! (Dostoevsky, 221)". He builds on this further in section 9, saying that humans love making projects for themselves, wherever they may lead, and that we're like chess players: fond of the process of achieving our aim, but not of the aim itself. He says, contrary to the "lovers of humanity," people love suffering, because "it's the sole cause of consciousness! (Dostoevsky, 224)" In section 10, he continues to deny the Crystal Palace, but admits that he would gladly stop denying it if things could be so arranged that he would have no wish to do so. But it seems to the Underground Man that the Crystal Palace does not account for why he feels this way. Why is he incompatible with it, if not because that's the whole point? Finally, in section 11, he pulls back the curtains, and says that he doesn't really believe in anything he just wrote, that though he addresses an audience, he's really only writing to himself, to try and purge something from his mind, and to pass the time because he's bored. How existential.

Hopefully in the following summary of Bo Burnham's *Inside*, you will begin to see the similarities between it and *Notes From Underground* that I will note afterwards.

Before making *Inside*, Bo Burnham was a successful standup comedian who got his start making edgy musical comedy on YouTube. He quit performing live comedy in 2015 after suffering severe panic attacks onstage. In that time, he wrote and directed the awarding-winning film *Eighth Grade*, and was ready to begin performing live comedy again in January of 2020. And then, in Bo's words, "the funniest thing happened." The pandemic forced Burnham back into isolation just when he was ready to reenter, and *Inside* is what he created during that year. The film follows Burnham, alone in a single room, as he struggles to make the film itself, interspersed with comedic musical numbers and sketches. Generally, the progression of the plot goes from Burnham's optimism about his ability to affect change in the world, (in the song "Comedy") and his ability to finish making the special, through his despair and agonizing, and into his eventual acceptance of the absurdity of it all (in the song "All Eyes on Me"). The film comments most about the internet, portraying how it has absorbed every aspect of our lives (from intimacy in the song "Sexting", to our whole sense of self in "White Woman's Instagram") and Burnham states this thesis ironically near the end of the film: "Real-world human-to-human tactile contact will kill you...all human interaction, whether it be social, political, spiritual, sexual, or interpersonal, should be contained in the much more safe, much more real, interior digital space. (Burnham, 1:03:10)" Again, this statement is delivered ironically, but it serves to illustrate that the "inside" Burnham finds himself in is the performative hell the internet perpetuates.

When comparing *Inside* with *Notes From Underground*, I am surprised by how many stylistic similarities there are between two works 157 years apart. At the superficial level, both are stories about men isolated from the rest of society, trapped within their own head as they grapple with the absurdity around them. I guess that's why I resonate with them. Both of them also share the tendency to contradict things they say, like they don't really believe themselves.

The Underground Man says this explicitly on page 226, and Bo Burnham's asides are constantly layered in irony so that you can never tell what he's satirizing and what he believes. At 46:48, after delivering a line about killing himself, he clarifies that he doesn't actually want to kill himself, but as soon as he begins addressing people who have actually struggled with suicidal thoughts, his tone becomes sardonic, and his image is projected onto another shot of himself, dissonant and distracted. Both Burnham and the Underground Man are constantly undermining anything they assert, and I think it's because of their awareness that it's all performative anyway.

Speaking of which, another similarity the two works share is the omnipresence of an audience that the men address frequently. This seems more natural in *Inside*, because it is still nominally a comedy special, and addressing the audience is inherent to that format. The film is full of imagery of the camera consuming the whole screen (3:14) and in the song "All Eyes on Me," Burnham demands that the audience get up and cheer for him (more on this later). The Underground Man constantly addresses some group of "gentlemen," usually laughing at him or trying to counter his claims. On page 196, the Underground Man writes, "I expect you must be thinking, gentlemen, that I want to amuse you. Well, you're mistaken there too." This seems highly unusual, especially since later he admits he's writing only to himself, but like the piped-in laugh tracks of *Inside*, the Underground Man invented his audience. He needs something to perform for, to justify the whole endeavor.

These similarities in form are telling of deeper similarities in what they mean. Primarily, both works are an expression of pain over an expression of belief. This is what I mean when I say that Dostoevsky is the least existential author we've read. Neither he nor Burnham make many claims about how the world ought to be, or how to leave the miserable state they are in, at

least not without doubting themselves. Even when Burnham wonders if “maybe allowing giant digital media corporations to exploit the neurochemical drama of our children for profit, you know, maybe that was a bad call, (Burnham, 30:14)” he delivers that line lying on the floor surrounded by a tangle of equipment, hardly the voice of authority, and the line comes sandwiched between two songs, so it’s hardly a focal point. Rather, each work is descriptive of what it feels like to live in an absurd world. Both works acknowledge the people trying to make the world a better place, (the systematicness with which Burnham plans to “heal the world with comedy” at 06:42 is akin to the systematic approach of the “lovers of humanity”) but both deny that idealism. They assert that the world is messed up. The Underground Man says, “Well, just take a good look around you: rivers of blood are being spilt, and in the jolliest imaginable way, like champagne. (Dostoevsky, 213)” The song “How the World Works” is *Inside*’s version of this, as Socko the puppet refutes a functionalist model of society with a critical one, detailing various ways in which people are crushed and oppressed: “Don’t you know the world is built with blood! And genocide! And exploitation! (Burnham, 15:59)” But Socko doesn’t have a solution. When Burnham asks what he could do to help, Socko replies, “Read a book or something, I don’t know! Just don’t burden me with the responsibility of educating you. It’s incredibly exhausting! (Burnham, 16:53)”

The point of these works is not to provide a solution to the situation, but to say that you cannot leave the situation. This is the heart of both stories, I think, and of existentialism in general. You cannot leave this human condition of having to choose, of having to perform yourself. You cannot go outside, because there is no outside. This point is hammered home at the end of both pieces. In section 11 of *Notes From Underground*, after the “audience” delivers a tirade against the Underground Man’s ramblings, he says, “Now, of course, I’ve made up all this

speech of yours myself. It, too, comes from the dark cellar. I've been listening to your words for forty years through a crack in the ceiling. I have invented them myself. It is the only thing I did invent. (Dostoevsky, 227)" Indeed, the Underground Man has only ever been talking to himself, because he doesn't plan to publish what he's writing: "It is only a form, an empty show, for I know that I shall never have any readers. (Dostoevsky, 228)" He's only writing to pass the time, as an existential project for himself. "Can a man be left for forty years with nothing to do? (Dostoevsky, 227)" So while we might be tempted into thinking that his words speak to a truth transcendent of his situation, they're not. They're just something to do, which is exactly his point. The Underground Man accepts that he cannot do anything about the absurdity of the world, about his incongruity with the stone walls and the Crystal Palace, and writes it all down in spite.

This is the exact same conclusion that *Inside* comes to. Later in the film, Burnham admits that "If I finish this special, that means I have to not work on it anymore. That means I have to just live my life. So I'm not going to do that. I'm not going to finish the special. I'm going to work on it forever, I think. I'm never going to release it, so I'm not talking to anybody right now, I'm just talking to myself. So who fucking cares, fuck you, goodbye, and let's keep going. (Burnham, 1:01:06)" For Bo Burnham as well, his art is his existential project. After all, "When you're a kid and you're stuck in your room, you'll say any old shit to get out of it. (Burnham, 36:27)" But you can't ever get out of it. Over the course of the film, as Burnham begins to accept the absurdity of reality, sounds and images of nature begin to crop up inside his room. This is most evident in the song "That Funny Feeling," where the mood of sitting around a campfire at night is evoked using completely artificial means. This blurring of the line between the natural and unnatural represents how any idea of something outside the existential condition is actually

part of the existential condition. This comes to a head at the end of the film, when the door to Burnham's room is suddenly ajar. When he steps outside, however, he stands in a spotlight, and the audience applauds. As Burnham frantically tries to reenter his house, he finds that the door is locked, and the audience laughs at his panic. It's then revealed that the entire scene was simply a projection on Burnham's wall, and he's watching himself, still inside, and the film ends when he cracks a smile. This is congruent to the Underground Man's admission that the audience is invented. Both of them are trapped within their own heads, and there's no escape.

This is what *Inside* says about existentialism. You cannot leave this often quite miserable condition you find yourself in, and wanting to leave the condition is an integral part *of* the condition! Whether you ignore it or accept it, the world presents itself to you as absurd and uncertain, "But in spite of these uncertainties and this hocus-pocus, you have still got a headache, and the less you know the more splitting the headache! (Dostoevsky, 204)" Both the Underground Man and Bo Burnham accept that that headache is never going to go away, and embrace the deliberate and spiteful performance that is existing.

These don't feel like happy endings. In the penultimate song, "All Eyes On Me," Burnham gives in to performing for his completely imaginary audience, demanding "get your fucking hands up, get on out of your seats, all eyes on me. (Burnham, 1:12:49)" He revels in the narcissism that the internet enables. The internet has become that faceless audience that we perform ourselves for. This is existentialism, uploaded. But it's less of a project, and more of a coping mechanism. As Burnham declares in the bridge of "All Eyes On Me", "You say the ocean's rising like I give a shit. You say the whole world's ending, honey, it already did. You're not gonna slow it, heaven knows you tried. Got it? Good, now get inside. (Burnham, 1:15:50)" Such performance allows us to hide from the main predator of existentialism: nihilism. Surprise!



The internet provides us with “a little bit of everything, all of the time (Burnham, 58:10)” so that we can go on performing in spite of stone walls like climate change. Deep down we all feel that hopelessness, that the world has already ended, that none of this matters. I think *Inside* is about a man who is trying desperately to say that isn't true, to find a primary cause to lean against, and in the end he just gives up, accepting that he can never leave this desperate situation he's in, and gives himself fully to the internet that numbs his pain. It's better to just go mad. To lock yourself in your metaphorical room or basement, and talk to people who aren't there. Got it? Good, now get inside.

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