

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

Burnham's *Make Happy*

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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. *Make Happy*, 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 commercialization of art. Bo Burnham epitomizes this concept with his song "Panderin'/End of Culture," in which he details country stars who falsify rural roots and keep their songs vague and stereotypical in order to fanservice an audience. He later sings, "you can tell them anything if you just make it funny, make it rhyme," insinuating that celebrities believe that consumers will consume any form of entertainment as long as it is appealing, regardless of the veracity of the content (Burnham 00:55:40). In this essay I will focus on Bo Burnham's special, *Make Happy* and how Burnham uses it to warn the audience about the commercialization of art and the manufactured relatability of entertainers. Burnham's advocacy reveals that the audience needs to become aware of their power and hold celebrities accountable.

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. By letting his guard down with his audience, he shows them that he cannot resolve his own celebrity, and he acknowledges his own failings. Ultimately, the sincerity that he provides gives his message about commercial celebrity weight and nuance.

His own struggles and sincerity dampen the lighthearted tone of the special at times. Burnham allows the audience to laugh at the stupidity of these mass-market celebrities and their ploys to be relatable and likable, but he makes sure that they understand the severity of the issue. He unabashedly says that these types of celebrities are wasting your time and stealing money from “working class people” (Burnham 00:21:10). He forces the audience to contemplate the truth of the issue, not just the comical veneer, but the danger of celebrity that is not kept in check.

Burnham insinuates that the audience is both the victim and the perpetrator of commercial celebrity. In his podcast interview with Pete Holmes, Bo explains that it is almost like everyone has become a celebrity through the advent of social media (Pete Holmes). Everyone has their own following that they try to appeal to, to seem cool or likable (Pete Holmes). This adds an interesting layer to Burnham’s commentary on celebrity, he is also criticizing everyday people for bolstering false interactions in order to gain the positive perception of others. This makes the moments when he voices his personal struggles with authenticity in his art more powerful, because the audience can in some ways understand what it means to change how they present themselves to sell their personality.

More than just perpetuating the actions of falsified celebrities, Burnham subtly argues that the audience has the power to do something about false celebrity. Burnham makes sure the audience understands that in order to stay relevant, his occupation demands that he serve their interests. He asserts the power the audience members have for them. By reminding

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 *Make Happy*. 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

about his actions and his responsibility to them. He has seemingly made a political base, a die-hard fanbase and thus, satire is ineffective to Trump's base, as is evidence of his dishonesty or criticisms of his character. They do not exercise their power over him to demand better. They uncritically applaud his every move. They let him be an unresponsive and ineffective leader. They are the antithesis to the audience that Burnham hopes to empower during his performance.

Above all, Burnham's performance in *Make Happy*, is a testament to the necessity of a power-speaker relationship when being an advocate. While initially it seemed that Burnham's situation was unique in that the power he was speaking to was also who he was advocating on the behalf of, upon further analysis it becomes obvious that Burnham's advocacy to an audience is the norm. Oppressors in power do not respond well to being told that they are harmful, and they are not often keen to render themselves impotent. In fact it is almost never the oppressor who willingly stops oppressing. External pressures (being voted out of office, legislation criminalizing racist/sexist acts, public acts of protest) ultimately remove oppressors. While the oppressor does have to comply, it recontextualizes who has the power in terms of activism. And the answer is the population at large. Speaking truth to power does not invoke change in powerful people; it enlightens the population at large who then go and invoke change in powerful people or powerful systems. By speaking to his audience and not his fellow celebrities, Burnham empowers his audience rather than chastising his peers. It forces one to consider which has the longer term significance, a change in the oppressor's actions or a change in how the general public reacts to the oppressor's actions. It seems clear that a public that continuously holds an oppressor accountable is much more effective than an oppressor who self-regulates. It is we, the people, who have the power and Burnham holds that we recognize it.

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