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Chapter

Virus World Vulnerability: A Critical Reading of Gender and Performance in Bo Burnham’s “Inside” (2021)

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Abstract

Through an engagement with the seminal work of Raewyn Connell on masculinities and hegemonic masculinity, this chapter argues for the hegemonic norm as producing behaviour among men that can be traced in multiple male subjectivities. The argument is that men respond to the prevailing masculine norm by enacting self-protective disavowal—a complex psychological process that involves the reordering of reality in the interests of the maintenance of power, and one that is seen in cases of both legitimate and imagined threats to the self and the body. Self-protective disavowal is at the core of the “Same Shit” phenomenon—the idea that while the experience of masculinity varies across culture and position in the gender order, self-protective disavowal is a constant that leads to predicable patterns among men. The discussion then explores deliberate vulnerability as a kind of anti-protective disavowal in Bo Burnham’s INSIDE, a complex, undefinable ‘special’ released on Netflix in 2021. The chapter considers Burnham’s work as a departure from self-protective disavowal and “Same Shit” masculinity through deliberate vulnerability and critically evaluates the value of this alternative, especially given the nihilism that reigns over the work and calls into question the validity of uncritically romanticization of alternatives.

Keywords: masculinity, gender, culture, disavowal, Bo Burnham

1. Introduction

Raewyn Connell has said that “Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” ([1]:77). The position of straight white men, as we know through Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity, is atop the gender hierarchy, above women and above homosexual men. The “gender practice” (ibid), then, is performed out of this position, where there is both privilege and normative pressure. Connell also writes that “mass culture
generally assumes that there is a fixed, true masculinity beneath the ebb and flow of daily life. We hear of ‘real men’, ‘natural man’, the ‘deep masculine’ and that this kind of thinking can be seen in “mythopoetic men’s movement, Jungian psychoanalysis, Christian fundamentalists, sociobiologists, and the essentialist school of feminism” ([1]:45). The term ‘toxic masculinity’ was coined by the mythopoetic movement and set up the ‘deep masculine’ as an ideal but ‘buried’ masculinity, predictably strong and warrior-like, to be sought out, unearthed, and (re)claimed from the rubble caused by the second wave of feminism in the 1980s. Under this ideology, toxic masculinity and its destructive aggression was the result of feminization, which “den[ied] them the necessary rites and rituals to realize their true selves as men” ([2]:online). Toxic masculinity has since operated differently in terms of meaning and is more aligned to meanings around #menaretrash, but it was initially tied to a view of femininity as a kind of avalanche over what was then identified as the ‘true’ way, or the ‘right’ way, and the ‘deep’ way of being ‘a man’. It was oppositional, protective, and, alignedly, singular. It was also a way to appear to acknowledge the multiplicity in masculinities in the kind of logic of, ‘there are bad ones, and there are good ones’, but if we really chase the ideology down, it in this case becomes, ‘there are bad ones because of women, and there is a correct good one, underneath the bad one’. And so, the singular force of ideology persists even within the function of the toxic masculinity term (both initially and in the modern sense) to differentiate between “traits such as aggression and self-entitlement from ‘healthy’ masculinity” ([2]:online).

Connell in her discussions of these kinds of ideologies takes issue with biological determinism, since “true masculinity is almost always thought to proceed from men’s bodies” ([1]:45) when in fact the prescription of the muscular body as the ideal has been in response to cultural values of ‘strength’ and containment [3]. The concept of masculinities plural, in its design, sees Connell thinking and writing against the biological determinism of sociobiology for example, perceiving it rightly as reductive, myopic, and steeped in ideological agenda in the formation of a singular, prescriptive way of being – in other words, in the fields she mentions, the body is used as a means to fix and continue the necessarily narrowed empathy of ideology, and to discount the bearings of history and continued economic inequality that produce different experiences for different people, born into different lives. The very idea of multiplicity in masculinities is to acknowledge such differences, and to be sensitive to the relationships between material conditions that differ across privilege lines and gender. Connell criticizes the myopic, agenda-driven drive of biological determinism and essentialism by describing and undermining the claim that “we inherit with our masculine genes the tendencies to aggression, family life, competitiveness, political power, hierarchy, territoriality, promiscuity and forming men’s clubs” ([4]:46). Indeed, such essentialism serves to hide the mechanics of ideology, and allows ideology to operate as if it does not exist – but what struck me on rereading Connell’s seminal work is that while she knows this and that this is in part the point she is making, there is a preoccupation at times with the force of the naturalization of masculinity, and with the deception of ideology, and less attention to the become-fact and force of masculine ideology itself. On the list Connell gives here, the “tendencies to aggression, competitiveness, political power, territorialism, promiscuity, men’s clubs” ([1]:47): these are not values and behaviours that can be connected to the body and the brain, this is true, but while they are values that may not be traceable in the behaviour of ‘all men’, they are constitutive of the demands that hegemonic masculinity makes. There is pressure to be aggressive, pressure to be competitive, pressure to be territorial, because the function of hegemonic masculinity is primarily self-protective. My point here is that
Connell’s list in this case, what for her are the lies of biological naturalization, are values and qualities that hegemonic masculinity expects, no, demands almost universally. I am exploring here, as may be becoming clear, a kind of parallel counterargument to the very idea of masculinities plural – the plurality may be accounted for in responses to the Norm in terms of subscription to it, contestation against it, or defined by the means one has to do either of those things, but as Connell herself notes but perhaps does not connect to the issue of plurality and singularity, the Norm is powerful and far-reaching. She says that “the evidence of cross-cultural and historical diversity in gender is overwhelming” ([1]:47), citing cases, but not specific examples, of “cultures and historical situations where rape is absent, or extremely rare; where homosexual behaviour is a majority practice (at a given point in the life cycle); where mothers do not predominate in childcare (e.g. this work is done by old people, other children or servants); and where men are not normally aggressive” (ibid). So, these differences would certainly disprove biological determinism (which is not really something that is any longer in dispute, and is not really the point right now), but they are also cases of cultures that would be untouched by the hegemonic masculine Norm whose very aim since the colonial project has been to silently reproduce itself, to make demands of people for the sake of its own continuation, and who finds a breeding ground in the far-reaching systems of capitalism and of western religion. These cultures that Connell brings forward here (no specific names and places are given, but one does trust the author, although in this chapter I do not extend that same faith to Jordan Peterson – interesting?) and their difference to a ‘true masculinity’ must somehow operate under gender ideologies beyond the One we know, the One that we seek to know, that has reached so far, and reached so many, which is also to say, demanded from so many and affected so many under a variety of different guises. And that reach and the demands it brings with it... is surely characterized by a kind of uniformity?

While I am aware of the reductivity that one risks when exploring an idea based on uniformity, and the need to fight that in the thinking and the writing, I do think that it is useful to analyse common threads when thinking about masculinity/ies through the lens of ideology, and if we dismiss such threads in the name of the sensitivity to very real cultural differences, we risk missing something about all of this. To write in the realm of singularity and uniformity is to, on the surface at least, mirror the singular nature of exclusionary and defensive ideology. Because ideology is singularly cohesive – it communicates, and prescribes, cohesive, totalitarian ways of being, and functions to suppress difference, creating and Disavowing ‘threats’ in order to define itself. And the value of approaching cultural issues like masculinity as multiple stems from that approach, which is to think and write from a more open and empathetic place, and to conduct research that approaches data as the result of multifactorial interplays between history and culture.

Having said at all that, at this stage, I want to put forward an idea. But first: in her Acknowledgments in the second edition of Masculinities [4], Connell shares that the book was “difficult to write” ([1]:ix) since “the issues are explosive and tangled [and] the chances of going astray are good” (ibid). This describes my own experience of developing this theory, which I do not consider to be complete, and to which I expect there will be, and also hope for, counterargument in the vein of academia as communal searching dialogue, and not what it is sometimes and arguably has become under pressure: a place to prove, and a place to argue. In response to Connell’s Masculinities, I tentatively put forward the theory of the “Same Shit” phenomenon. I am obviously aware of the colloquial place that the expletive takes the title to, and have interrogated this diction. On the one hand, open access publishing and the value of transparency
that are at its core facilitates the kind of urgent honesty that we experience in colloquial discussions but which are, or have been, out of bounds in academic projects. Or at least, one may carefully push in that direction. There is also the essence of change in open access publication, which brings with it a measure of contestation of tradition, which, if one is not careful, can translate into a kind of rebellious arrogance as one gets caught up in the excitement of innovation, as predicated on and necessitated by the inadequacies or even failures of tradition. I obviously do not want to springboard from such a position, and am aware that my choice of words for this theory perhaps strays into that territory to an extent. At the same time, rather than communicating the urgency for a different, perhaps controversial model, that carries with it a criticism bordering on condemnation of the models that it bounces off, I want the “Same Shit” theory and the direction it proposes to capture more the essence of intersections, of synthesis through analysis, in consideration of what the Common masculine cultural norm produces and indeed reproduces. The intention with the wording of this concept is to, alongside and not in dismissal of Masculinities, bring focus to illuminating commonalities or “gender practice” ([1]:77) that, as the word shit also suggests, are: damaging, exasperating, powerfully disempowering to the excluded, the ‘wrong’, the Abject, and even the privileged who have internalized the demands the Norm makes, and fail to meet them. As such, there is trace in the formulation of the discourse of Toxic Masculinity and more so, as I will show in a second, Fragile Masculinity and I do intend to, critically, involve these in this theory.

So, let’s go. At the core of the “Same Shit”, the things that creates the connection across histories and cultures, is a self-protective-defensive disposition, threat/threat management in the service of ideology, and what I want to call Protective Disavowal that we see in formulations of masculinity from both privileged and disempowered male subjectivities. Common among these concepts is also the force of normative pressure, which I argue has a distortative effect. Alongside, is the negative decision of masculinity, of masculinity as not: not gay (#nohomo); not dependent (i.e. independent – why not dependentless?); not weak; not feminine; not a ‘pussy’; not a loser; fearless: this not/less formulation which reinforces the “Same Shit” culture of defensive-protection. Connell says that different men engage with this force in different ways, where hegemonic masculinity as “the currently most honored way of being a man [that] requires all other men to position themselves in relation to it [and that] ideologically legitimates the global subordination of women to men” ([4]:832) does not produce men who embody this most honoured way of being – in fact, “in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it” (ibid). What we have then is a Norm, infrequently satisfied, but continuously exerting pressure to be satisfied: not normal, but normative. This is The “Same Shit”: “Winning, Heterosexual Self-Presentation, and Power over Women” ([5]:282) the tough-guy script, the strong-and-silent script, the independent script, the homophobic script, and the promiscuous script, all performed under normative pressure, and therefore, with both dominance and self-protectiveness at the centre of it all, to damaging effects for everybody involved ([6]:124).

2. Common pressure and protective disavowal in hegemonic masculinity/ies

In the case of something so normatively powerful, pressure becomes the key word to consider, because in something so normatively powerful, there are high stakes.
There is a desperation to (all?) masculinity that is in conversation with this normative force. Pressure and desperation, then, can be taken as central features of the “Same Shit” phenomenon: while different men may interact with and experience the Norm in different ways, with their environment and its history as a major factor, there is a Common Pressure exerted by the Norm, and the responses it seems to produce are often painfully predictable.

There are arguments, highly unpopular in the academy (more so than readings involving cross-cultural commonalities), of masculine norms as relationally positive: the likes of Jordan Peterson (an academic whose claims are often difficult to check through research) saying that strength, independence, industriousness, and a strong will are not inherently bad things: in fact, they are values to encourage because they are aligned with direction, purpose, order. However, when he says that the left has conflated power and competence in a way that threatens competence, he fails to spend time with the dynamic of pressure involved, as he himself instructs us, with rule 6 of 12, to “set your house in perfect order” ([7]:9). Under normative pressure, a man does not seek to be strong to live a life of competence, he seeks to be strong because he must not be weak, because he is aware of the penalties that weakness carries – chief among them, disqualification, a metaphorical revocation of the ‘man card’. ([5]:282) writing out of the precarious manhood paradigm hold that “many men view their gender as a social status that must be earned and maintained, and can be lost”: an idea, again, illustrative of the pressure involved, and also raised by Marques: “masculinity is earned through ongoing demonstrations of manhood” ([8]:103). Now, the behaviour that stems from this pressure of ‘earning’ and maintaining has a single purpose: to protect the man’s occupation of the topmost tier of the gendered hierarchy, a position that was written into law and reinforced ideologically and culturally. The goal is stay there, alone – to occupy the entirety of that space, and decide who is allowed to be there and who is not.

Now, a protective mission such as this has at its centre the management of threat, or indeed ‘threat’. It is important to note here that because we are in the arena of ideology-become-real, of changes to law over time but not always to culture, these threats are often, and obviously, manufactured. The circular logic of the hegemonic entity is that it must protect itself against threats it has itself created in order to exist, and now must pressurise people to do the same, because its goal is simply the continuation of itself and the maintenance of its position, which also defines it. Threat/’threat’ management, I argue, takes place primarily through Self-Protective Disavowal. But what is Disavowal, and what are its mechanics and, and through understanding it, how can it be a useful lens through which to understand the phenomenon of the “Same Shit” phenomenon when it comes to masculinity/ies?

‘Disavowal’ is certainly what we might call a ‘strong’ word that carries with it the force of words like ‘banishment’, perhaps because what the word communicates most immediately is a kind of forceful distancing. With disavowal, there is a deliberate act of removal of the self from something else: its primary function is to establish distance. There is here a refusal of (continued) association with, and a condemnation, a decree against. This reading is not inaccurate, but it is also not complete.

Vergès [9] defines the act of disavowal as “the repudiation of reality through parole and action”. There are a few illuminating aspects of this definition – firstly, “repudiation” implies once again a simple rejection, but also, in terms of the legal context of the word where it is now most commonly seen, it is the “refusal to fulfil or discharge an agreement, obligation or debt” ([10]:online). Because disavowal involves
ideological gymnastics and the reordering of materiality in the service of agenda, it
does represent a kind of break with the contract of reality: in the Prince of Egypt [11]
when Moses says regarding the Hebrew slaves, “I did not see because I did not wish to
see” he is failing to fulfill his natural obligation to interact with his reality, because of
what fulfilling that obligation would do to him as a person, which is also in no small
part, what it would do to him as a Prince. Aaron is incredulous, but Moses is saying a
true thing. I use this example to show that there is a level of distortion involved with
disavowal: a reorganization of one’s relationship with reality, fully rooted in self-
protective desire.

When Frantz Fanon reimagined his ancestry and adopted Algeria in a similar
kind of way as Marley spiritually adopted Ethiopia, he was enacting a repudiation
with the reality of his biological parenthood because “the enslaved father and the
raped mother could not be his parents” ([9]:594). They could not be: the reality was
impossible, and so needed to be changed. Fanon’s genealogical disavowal was in direct
conversation with racial disempowerment and, as a black man in 20th century United
States, he was writing, thinking, and being from a position of disempowerment:
the powerful in his environment viewed him as less of a human being, and, being
concerned with the mind of the coloniser and the colonized, his theories carry the
essence of the damage of injustice, and the drive for justice against it and so, the call
for strength.

Fanon’s disavowal of his biological ancestry was also directly connected to his
conception of masculinity – his ancestral disavowal was in line with “reconstruct-
ing the black male body to evacuate any sign of vulnerability, of passivity. He makes
it a tight body, erected and immune to any form of penetration in order to protect
it against all forms of assault. The concern upon which this reconstruction rests is
protection; yet it occludes any possibility of exchange” ([9]:583). This formulation, of
the fixed, invulnerable body is recognizable as part of the “Same Shit” phenomenon:
is this not the precise kind of body, the precise kind of normative masculine identity,
that we see operating in White America and in the west, and that we have seen in
operation for centuries among the powerful? The difference is that Fanon’s prescrip-
tive formulation for masculinity was constructed in conversation with an actual, and
not imagined, threat to black men under slavery, colonization, apartheid, and racial
segregation in the United States in the mid-20th century where threats and assaults to
the black body were physical, ideological, cultural, and written into law. There were,
in other words, real things to be protected from, and real ideologies to counteract that
informed his particular construction of masculinity. What is telling, and central to
the theory I am trying to advance/develop here, is that masculinity is defined in the
way that Fanon defined even in the absence of tangible threats to the body, and even
in cases where masculinity itself is a threat to others. In other words, white western
normative masculinity behaves as if it is under some kind of disempowering colonial
force. White American normative masculinity, for example, defines itself in much the
same terms as Fanon’s anti-colonial formulation: we see the same drive for protection
through invulnerability, the same “tight body” ([9]:583) and the same essence of
containment, mobilized through the value of strength, through the “evacuation of any
sign of vulnerability, of passivity” ([9]:583). The same protective-defensive militance.
The “Same Shit” phenomenon of masculinity, then, is that the performance of it is
self-protectively reactive – what has been termed ‘fragile masculinity’ as a result of
hegemonic masculinity as valued and earned, and the anxiety inherent in the pressure
to perform in the realm of “the precariousness of manhood” ([12]:1169) in which one
could lose their status as “real men” at any time ([12]:1169).
Next, Vergès says that the mechanism for the repudiation of reality in Disavowal is “parole” ([9]:581). There are at least two potential places to which this word could take us. First, again to the realm of law where the meaning of conditional release under surveillance creates interesting and contradictory implications for the part of disavowal that we assume seeks to outright banish the Other, the object of the disavowal. With parole as part of the relationship between the enacting of the disavowal and the object of that disavowal, the subject occupies a position of authority and control, but that is defined by continuous monitoring of the object of disavowal. Here there is punishment for what we might call “parole violation” in this metaphor, but there is also the continued obligation to oversee, and so disavowal cannot be accurately understood as the comprehensive removal of the Other from the self – as Žižek theorizes it, disavowal sees “the two universes of filth and of prohibition brush lightly against each other without necessarily being identified as such, as object and as law” (nd:34), which is not exactly the Parole relationship, but it is another take on how the object of Disavowal can remain near to the subject and how, through disavowal, attachments and meanings are distorted in the service of self-protection.

In Žižek’s exploration of Disavowal, and as is hinted at by that previous quote, Kristeva’s abject is a foundational concept. Žižek sees abjection, or the psychological disgust response, as manifesting in a number of ways, but most commonly writes of protective compartmentalisation: in the case of paedophilic Catholic priests for example, he says: “it is blunt foreclosure that voids those acts and objects from conscious representation” [13] and that “they just simply keep the two dimensions apart” [13] in order to keep functioning. Žižek traces the kind of permissiveness against law that such compartmentalisational disavowal involves with an analysis of the commandments of the Bible: he writes “The first commandment says: ‘You shall have no other gods before me’ . What does the ambiguous ‘before me’ refer to? Most translators agree that it means ‘before my face, in front of me, when I see you’ – which subtly implies that the jealous god will nonetheless turn a blind eye to what we are doing secretly, out of (his) sight” [13]. We have here mention of sight, of the connection between sight and consciousness. We might say that when the cliche ‘out of sight, out of mind’ is extended to disavowal, mind is in need of protection, and so sight must be organized accordingly. In Beyond Good and Evil, Nietzsche said, in a manner almost prophetic of Freud, “‘I have done that’ says my memory. ‘I cannot have done that’ says my pride and remains inexorable. Eventually - memory yields” [14]. The impossibility of the real in alignment with the desires of the ego leads to a kind of war between these two forces, where desire, which is organised through ideology, comes to erode the material, once again as part of the function of self-protection.

We speak also of ‘the way one sees things’, again connecting sight to understanding, to attitudes, to perception and then to behaviour. The sight metaphor logically has implications for the issue of proximity in discussions of inclusions and exclusions when it comes to discussions around power, where the distancing we are talking about is not necessarily geographical (although sometimes it can be) but more in terms of the diminishment of the influence of the low-Other, the abject, the ‘threat’ on the self. This is why disavowal involves threat management (“parole”) that involves ironic proximity with the low-Other, the abject, the ‘threat’ with that involvement being precisely and ironically about establishing and maintaining distance. Hegemonic masculinity answers the question, ‘how do I protect myself from you?’ (where ‘you’ is the ‘threat’ to the self) by saying ‘we must be kept separate, and I must be prepared for the time you come for me’, but that time, of course, will never come, and that is partly why this, the “Same Shit”, at its core, is all so perplexing.
We can also, in these contexts, read Parole in disavowal for its linguistic meaning, as a third of de Sausser’s circuit of language as the component of tangible text and speech: the physical utterances of Langue. If this is taken to be part of how repudiation of reality of disavowal is enacted, what is implied is that in order for this repudiation to work and to function, one must physically speak it into existence, this standing as an indicator that disavowal is not a natural inclination of human nature, and that it emerges in response to needs that involve the protection of the self against imaginary threats or in service of goals that also work in service of that self-protection. Parole, as physical utterance, is also organized around difference – the idea of negative definition against: “Concepts are purely differential and defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with the other terms of the system. Their most precise characteristic is in being what they other are not.” ([15]:117). Derrida then, of course, extended this concept into his difference and the chain of signifiers. The concept of negative definition within a system is not quite the same thing as Disavowal, as the latter involves more of the element of unconscious but deliberate (but unconscious) desire and choice. At the same time, hegemonic masculinity, the “Same Shit”, is, as mentioned earlier, defined by Nots: not gay, not weak, not feminine, not dependent, not a pussy, not afraid. Ratele [16] writes of what he calls defensive fearlessness in masculinity where the lack of fear, the pressured not fear, is “a compelling pose of manhood that many boys and young men grow up to internalise” and that “it is more likely to be a defensive mask intended to communicate to others a lack of fear, a facade of bravado or being ‘okay’ even though one could do with help”. Defensive-protection is once again here in the language itself, suggesting that the avoidance of fear, urgently under normative pressure, is the driving force behind the ‘pose’: that it is the potential lack that looms, that is defining, rather than any aspirational drive towards courage. ‘Fear’ to be disavowed, to be ‘lessed’ is always right there, in the word, in the protective-defensive behaviour.

3. Virus world, men, and protective disavowal

“Um.. what the fuck is going on?” asks Bo Burnham in Comedy, the second, (and objectively best) song of INSIDE. The onset of COVID-19 has changed the world. Before Covid, interpersonal contact or proximity did not carry with it the risk of dangerous and even fatal infection. Now, in Virus World, it does. This fundamental change in human interaction prompted lockdowns by countries across the globe in attempts to curb the spread of the virus. People got sick, and people died. Governments responded. People lost their means of income. What have these changes meant for men? There have been many accounts of how the death rate for men has been higher than for women, with India typically as an outlier, with no one really being able to explain why as yet.

Many (see [17–19]) have, though, written with the higher COVID-19 death rate for a man as a departure point. In asking “why” there are two main areas that are typically covered: biological and behavioural, the latter of which has been connected to the culture of hegemonic masculinity. The biological argument goes that women have naturally stronger immune systems than men (a claim that when fact-checked brings up a minefield of contradictory positions from biologists). The behavioural-cultural argument deals with the responses of men to the threat of the virus and, relatedly, their response to prescriptive measures designed to promote safety. Even before the pandemic, this has been observable: men are less likely to wear seatbelts, are more
likely to be smokers and abuse alcohol, more likely to engage in risky behaviours in general, and less likely to seek medical help [20]. Now, apparently, men wash their hands less [17]. They are less likely to wear masks [21], and, although there is some debate about this, a higher percentage of anti-vaxxers are men [22]. This behaviour has been theorized as the result of the normative pressure of hegemonic masculinity by Palmer & Peterson in “Toxic Mask-ulinity: The Link between Masculine Toughness and Affective Reactions to Mask Wearing in the COVID-19 Era” [23]. They write: “Observers have further argued that the resistance to mask wearing may be rooted in masculinity and the desire to appear ‘tough’ [24]. Arguably, this stems from social pressures for men to adopt masculine norms such as toughness [25, 26], which are regularly influenced by agents of socialization including the family, peer groups, and school environment. Furthermore, men express greater levels of toughness under conditions of threat [27] and express differential attitudes toward actions such as help seeking when their embrace of masculine norms deepens [28]. Mahalik, di Bianca, and Harris ([29]:online) arrive at a similar conclusion: “We believe that negative reactions to scientific expertise may arise from traditional masculine norms for men who view masculinity as being in control and having power because they may be less willing to ‘surrender control’ to experts or let others make decisions for them”.

Umamaheswar and Tan [30] have argued through their research that the situation goes deeper into the hegemony than this: the logic is that societal valuing places women in positions of caring for others in more cases than men, whether this be caring for children or the elderly. Such a position provokes anxiety, which in turn promotes responsible, care-taking behaviour. Men, finding themselves in this kind of position less often because of how society is organised, will therefore be less likely to take actions associated with keeping safe from infection: “when contemplating the risks of COVID19, women’s experiences of anxiety and distress are closely tied to their care responsibilities. During the pandemic, more women (including those who are not married and who do not have children) than men reported having increased care responsibilities as they and their families adjusted to disruptions related to COVID-19. We argue that protection from these demands, rather than just efforts to embody a ‘tough’ masculinity, explains men’s more dismissive attitude toward the risks of COVID-19” ([30]:4). This is a privilege thing – because men are, mostly, immune from being responsible for others, they behave in irresponsible ways. To a point, as well, men do not believe that they can be harmed – there is a desperate drive to protect the position of privilege against perceived threats to it (leading to exclusion without exception), while at the same time there is an attitude of that position as not only earned, but also as unassailable. Men at times simply do not believe that they can be harmed – the idea of their indestructability is somehow both pressure and fact. So, if one actually believes that they are indestructible, then they will not see the need, for example, to wear masks during a pandemic. So, mask-wearing as an example is not only an affront to the idea of strength as a sign of weakness, it is also just logically unnecessary in the mind of a person who has bought into their invulnerability.

In 2021, as lockdown restrictions began to lift as vaccines became available and economies continued to crumble, we could continue to trace hegemonic masculine self-protection throughout this whole situation. In August 2021, bro-Country musician Jason Aldean told his audience that his favourite part of playing that night was that, looking out into the crowd, he saw “not one fucking mask”. Queue “U-S-A” chants. Aldean and his audience’s relationship with the mask was framed entirely around the protection of personal freedom and so railing against restriction, first
feeling offended by the imposition, and then feeling relieved at the lifting of it. That’s it. This was after Jair Bolsonaro had said in July 2020 that masks are “coisa de viado,” or “for fairies” in a simultaneous conflation and Disavowal of masks and homosexuality [31]: masks were an affront to freedom, and the easiest way to dismiss them was to align them with the low-Other, Disavowed, but called upon to help clarify a position on an issue in this case. That was before Donald Trump in September 2020 had criticized Joe Biden for wearing “the biggest mask you’ve ever seen”, bizarrely bringing size into a standardized object, magnifying his ‘debate’ opponents’ act of weakness, of relenting, of giving into the wrong kind of protection. Trump said that he carries his mask and wears it when he feels he needs to, thus preserving his autonomy in the face of this ‘threat’ against it. These cases seemed fairly representative of the attitude of hegemonic masculinity towards measures prescribed to promote physical safety, that were experienced as threats to autonomy: seemingly more important than being physically safe is to be physically in control, where that control can produce the illusion of safety. Before COVID, we saw this kind of attitude in the case of Steve Jobs who, Kim [32] writes “avoided surgery because he didn’t like the idea of being invaded, of no longer being whole”. Kim sees his case as representative of part of the anti-vax psychology as he embodied “the core fear behind most people’s views of medicine: the idea that somehow one will come out of an operating room or after a psychotropic medication as fundamentally altered, no longer oneself, no longer in control of one’s own identity”. Were we surprised that ego was at the centre of Jobs’ decisions around his health, though? And are we surprised that this kind of self-defeating “irrational self-preservation” ([32]:online) continued to manifest in the Virus World? That the protection of the sanctified self through attitude, behaviour, narrative and through Protective Disavowal of masks, of vaccines, of science, would continue into, even be strengthened in, the Virus World? Because the Virus is not a fire that we can fight – but somehow, still, we can detest those who choose to ‘run away from it’.

4. Bo Burnham and vulnerability

And so we arrive at Bo Burnham. This book is concerned with “the social construction of what it means to be ‘a man’”. We know what the hegemonic response has been, and that it is has typical of its “Same Shit” default of self-protective Disavowal, and we (I) have defined that, hopefully sufficiently, at least for now. In such a situation, we then look for difference from that norm: is anyone contesting this, or doing or saying anything different? What are the alternatives? We must also be wary of how ‘difference’ has often led to the reproduction of hegemonic and toxic masculine norms because, we have been burned before. Early to mid-2000s Emo, for example, in its adoption of feminine aesthetics (‘guy’ liner, ‘girl’ jeans, a skinny frame) and a definition of ‘man’ that was introspective, softer and more sensitive, reproduced the same kind of violence against women that it purported to be against (see [33–35]).

Chris Carrabba of Dashboard Confessional in the corner singing in his trembling, high voice “this medicine is just what you deserve: swallow choke and die”, Jesse Lacey of Brand New, in a lower but still vulnerable voice, singing softly “I will lie awake, and lie for fun, and fake the way I hold you, let you fall for every empty word I say” (by no means the worst of his lyrics) effectively conflated an embrace of sadness and depression and the character of the ‘bitch’ (ex)girlfriend. Lacey was perhaps an extreme example, unsurprisingly in retrospect found to have been grooming minors
(fans) and abusing the para-social relationships that his more ‘feminine’ emotional ‘vulnerability’ established and the admiration that many young girls had for him and his whole thing, but the kinds of sentiments he put forward in Me vs. Maradona vs. Elvis and others could be traced in the songs of Taking Back Sunday, The Used, All American Rejects, and enough others for this to be constitutive of that whole scene. Now, as academics, we try not to cast moral judgments or make evaluative calls around what is ‘better’ and what is ‘worse’, but, is the insidious misogyny of this kind of movement not somehow worse than the muscular jock archetype it used as a differentiator to execute the same kind of violent attitudes towards the women who found comfort and resonance in the foregrounding of ‘common’ emotional and mental health struggles?

And we had the New Man, supposedly “caring, sensitive, and non-aggressive” but also a phrase in Utopian philosophy “that involves the creation of a new ideal human being or citizen replacing unideal human beings or citizens” [37]. So, something predictably sinister comes with. The New Man, though, beyond its Utopian philosophy attachments that I am (unfairly?) bringing up, is now “a relic of gender history” (ibid.): “they were around for a bit until they realised women didn't want to sleep with them” (2014), which was, incidentally, the goal of the Emo boy/kid as well. It was also a media thing, and, again, an aesthetics thing and as such, its lifespan was attached to the needs and goals of media representation. The New Man, the Metrosexual, the David Beckham, willing to embrace the feminine while maintaining the same values of the “Same Shit”: protect, dominate, conquer, win, be not weak.

With this history in mind, let us, for real this time, turn to Bo Burnham and INSIDE. When Burnham first addresses the ‘audience’ in the ‘special’, he says: “welcome to…whatever this is”. In critical, analytical response to ‘the special’ (which is what Burnham refers to it as, and which has become its de facto term of reference because of that and also through the force of tradition) there have been attempts to pin it down, mostly through employing words from other languages that are nevertheless naturalised in English through the western Canon: Kim Renfro [38] labels it a “poioumenon”, an impossible pretentious word that describes “a type of artistic work that tells the story of its own creation”. And, INSIDE does that, but is it that? Brian Logan (May 2021) has called it “Gesamtkunstwerk” or “an artwork, design, or creative process where different art forms are combined to create a single cohesive whole” [39]. This feels reductive as many works of art combine multiple forms – and, given the difficulty that has been experienced in defining INSIDE, it is probably not justified to consider it whole or complete. Wikipedia (apologies) tells us that Kathryn Van Arendonk has seen it as combining “confessional or journalistic styles” and Linda Holmes has labelled it “theatre”. In his take, Anthony Fantano sees it as a form of a “one man show” and reads into it a level of “Kauffmanesque showmanship”. There is a struggle apparent in these definitions of reconciling the performativity of INSIDE with the confessional edge that Burnham brings to it. The work itself seems to resist neat and clean categorization, and, predictably, we have tried anyway. Go us.

As for my own approach or reading, to start at the simplest place, I chose Burnham as the case study for this chapter because his work and persona when it comes to hegemonic masculinity have always been... different. Burnham is against the “Same Shit” phenomenon, in that he is against protective disavowal and the necessary narrow empathetic range of dominant ideology. The repudiation with reality is shelved in favour of a head-on collision with reality, and a creative documented account of the resulting explosion. He recognizes that what is being protected through hegemonic masculine Disavowal is not necessarily worthy of protection, and that the protection
itself is entangled with toxicity. Then, there has always been a resistance to pressurized hegemonic masculine terms in his persona and comedy. For example, in an interview with Pete Holmes in 2012 on Holmes’ podcast You Made it Weird, Burnham and Holmes discuss masculinity, femininity, vulnerability, and homophobia in comedy. At one point Burnham expresses disdain that American comedy culture has become a “boy’s club” and that while he enjoys and respects Louis CK and Bill Burr, has an issue with comedy as a whole being defined by “their perspective”. At other points, he says “I try deliberately to be more feminine on stage” and that he allows questions over his sexuality to not be resolved with defensive, emphatic claims of “NO I’M NOT!” because “if you asked [him] if he liked tomatoes” he wouldn’t respond defensively. He says “I’ll be pretty openly anything” that he “was a theatre kid growing up” and that he “feels ostracised in the comedy club setting” Bo Burnham on Toxic Masculinity and being feminine - YouTube. In another interview, in 2018, Burnham said: “I hated those fucking comedy clubs, fucking brick two minimum masculine bullshit places. They self-selected one type of thing, of course women feel fucking awful to come, have you been there? Anyone that’s even vaguely not like the most masculine person in the world feels uncomfortable there”. Logically, then, we should “tear them down, they’re from the goddamn ‘80’s” [40]. Burnham also directed the excellent Eighth Grade (2018), a film from the perspective of a 13 year old girl navigating junior high in the digital world. So, there is all that.

Then, and relatedly, there was always the introspection, the confessional approach to comedy that seems to often be accompanied with feminine-leaning aesthetics, and that he shared with the likes of John Mulaney and Pete Davidson, and the expression of (self)doubt, pain, fear, the “steadily declining mental health” (see Bo Burnham - Can't Handle This (Kanye Rant) - MAKE HAPPY Netflix [HD] - YouTube) that seemed to work as a kind of anti-Protective Disavowal: that turn to emotional vulnerability that coincided with more 'feminine' expression, that also seems to have a connection to the achievement of resonance with the audience, in the capturing of the ‘Zeitgeist’ through representation. The issue is that this capturing that we are talking about, and that INSIDE has been celebrated for (see [41]), Harvey [42], Tyrolt [43]), is at once an emotional thing and a creative and technical thing, and the relationship between those arenas, the tensions between them, in the analysis of this kind of work that is new in context, essentially undefined, and plays on the borders between fiction and non-fiction and is itself interested in what is real and what is not within itself AND beyond itself, and to do this through the lens of this kind of theory/literature can ‘unstuck’ a writer in short order. Another issue that emerged was that analyses of Burnham's work as both 'good' and as atypical in hegemonic masculine terms would end up alternately at one of two largely uncritical places: a celebration of his deviation from the norm (and his skillful, powerfully resonant framing of the (white) middle-class condition during the pandemic as part of that) or a condemnation of the inevitable insincerity of performance in the promotion of parasitically profitable para-social relationships, and the use of creativity and talent as tools of manipulation to meet these ends. Flowing out of the former, a celebration of the raw, relatable emotionality, the work achieves an empathy atypical of hegemonic masculinity secured through the artist's willingness to be open and honest about their feelings (which may mirror our feelings) and an appreciation of the insight of the artist into His/Our/ The world. And related to the latter, a condemnation of a performative, disingenuous appearance of deviation or difference from the Norm that certainly fails to really offer any alternatives (does it seek to? Do/should we expect it to?) and, given the inevitable reassertion and reproduction of the hegemonic norm, perhaps does not even stand
as any different in the first place. This reading understands Burnham in algorithmic terms: relevant, efficient, agenda-driven.

In an excellent piece for Slate, Lili Loofbourow [44] writes in this kind of world in her exploration of “the Problem with Bo Burnham’s Inside”. The subtitle/tagline summarises her main point of departure nicely: “confessional meta-comedy doesn’t have rules about the obligation to truth – yet”. In discussing the ethics of INSIDE, and issues of privilege, Loofbourow uses the following example that is illuminative of her position and this kind of reading: “say, to take only a slightly more extreme case, that you see the modern condition as one of detachment, rootlessness, and precarity. Should you, a wealthy but tortured creator, channel this into art by presenting yourself as literally homeless and then encourage confusion between the character you’re playing and yourself?” It is a compelling question, and one that pushes against the more common readings of INSIDE as resonance through admirable representation. It is also, surely, no way to be ‘a man’. Where I deviate from her standpoint is at the point at which she quotes a “commenter” (unfortunately not named) on presumably YouTube or Reddit or another similar forum, who she disagrees with, as saying: “Art is a lie. The film is presented like a captain’s log of a man living entirely in a single room by himself for a year. It’s a fantastic framing device. Burnham might actually be depressed, and we know he has mental health issues (5 years of crippling anxiety), but he also has millions of dollars, a partner he has been with for years (which it seems his character in this film does not have), a family and friends, a magnificent career. It’s obviously artifice but that doesn’t take away from any of it because there’s still a parallel sincerity in the art and a self awareness”. Loofbourow’s contention with this concept of parallel sincerity is rooted in the ambiguity between performer and ‘character’, between the material and the performance: it is the blurring of these lines that concerns the writer when it comes to the ethics of the thing. Loofbourow is not unempathetic though, and neither does she issue any sort of categorical condemnation, choosing instead to ask questions (some pointed and not fully rhetorical, but questions nonetheless) and to end the piece with a humility typical of the piece itself: “maybe what Burnham had to say about guilt and isolation and boredom and vanity and hopelessness and anxiety was profound enough to annihilate any irksome mismatches between the irony and the truth. Maybe the spiritual malaise he captured mattered more than the metaphor it came in. Maybe that’s a measure of something Burnham understands about truth on the internet that I still don’t”. I think that this is the key. Loofbourow’s article is incisive, and it comes from the mind of a critical thinker – now, this is an idea that I do not have the scope to fully develop in this chapter, but there is some relationship, some tension, and one that Loofbourow herself is approaching in her conclusion, between the intensity of emotion and intellect. Loofbourow’s kind of position, and the one that she adopted seemingly from the beginning as the “special fell flat for [her]” is likely to come to the fore and develop upon rewatches of the special, in the case of people who felt the emotional resonance effect on the first viewing. This has been a phenomenon in the response to the work where the experience of it changes when one ‘finds out’ about the extent of the performativity and some of the emotional magic is lost. There is something here, I think, in the interplay between raw emotional response and intellect, between the trust of emotional recognition and the distrust of critical thinking, between, perhaps, the intensity of young emotion and the justified cynicism (wisdom?) of educated age. Critical thinking and deep analysis, I suspect, play some part in what we might call the amnesia of naivety, which has particular implications for emotional intensity and suggests a kind of loss, parallel to the gains, of progressing and refining the mind.
This is not to say that one cannot be probingly considerate and emotionally moved at the same time, but the growing body of work around INSIDE (with some fantastic articles like Loufborow’s and well-considered YouTube videos like “Inside in Context” from Comedy Without Errors Bo Burnham - Inside In Context - YouTube but also some unironic React videos and some largely undeveloped video essays) reveals something in the interplay between these forces, which demands more focused attention than I am able to give it here.

Existing writing on INSIDE, as is clear from the above, has been dominated by the theme of performance. There have, though, been some readings of the work, and Bo’s previous work, through the lens of the issue of gender. Of course, the song White Woman’s Instagram has been the subject of such readings. Like much of the response to INSIDE, and in keeping with the elusive, ambiguous nature of the work itself, the response to White Woman’s Instagram has been varied, to say the least. Griswold [45] has covered how this inherent divisiveness has led to conflict on online forums around the song in that “Viewers began to draw battle lines over whether Burnham was a misogynist for satirizing a young woman at all” with some reading the tonal change in the song as humanizing, as empathy for the caricature that is the subject of the song, while others “saw all of it as criticism of a privileged and vapid worldview”. For all the balance that Griswold tries to bring to the piece, his conclusion to it seems to be in support of the latter. He writes, and links:

One fan said she had gone “all mama bear” on his critics for that; another lovingly called him “a giant twink” (he is six-foot five and has made jokes about being mistaken for gay), as if he could not intend real offense, or be serious enough to hope to criticize a kind of white, fourth-wave feminism that values individual gratification as empowerment, within an existing social system deeply rooted in exploitation.

There is trace of the ‘genius’ narrative in Bo Burnham in some of the other responses, such as that of [46], who writes that “Burnham bullseyes his target” and other similar takes that emphasise the accuracy of Burnham’s caricaturing (see “White Woman’s Instagram”: Bo nails feminine mannerisms : boburnham (reddit.com)). Gogerty reads the tonal shift in much the same way as the commentator cited by Griswold. After a call for white women in general to “get real about their own complicity in upholding the status quo” Gogerty writes that the shift communicates that the character’s “project of creating Heaven via a stylized recreation of her life is not the work of an airhead, but of a person experiencing real grief”. Gogerty ends with the point that “Burnham’s whole comedy career is about having it both ways. His speciality is espousing a sincerely held belief while simultaneously mocking sincerely holding any beliefs”. The ‘both ways’ argument feels somehow simultaneously like a justified take, but also somewhat of a cop out?

The ideas raised and the questions asked in this article circle us back to issues of performativity, empathy and sincerity. As a white man performing as a white woman, is Bo Burnham targeting ‘low-hanging fruit’? Is he being mean, or misogynistic or both? Does the tonal shift deviate from that and so cancel it out, or does it reinforce it? Is it all in good fun, in the name of ‘comedy’? I think that when you really chase the song down and consider its role and place in the ‘special’ and album (INSIDE: the songs) this one is definitely aiming to embrace and strengthen the ‘comedy’ aspect of the work (much like Sexting, a sometimes funny non-bop) in the balance between

1 This is only partially a rhetorical question
humour and relatable darkness and for that reason the empathy that Burnham allows the caricature (the “moment of soulful introspection” [45]) works more as a signature for Burnham than a genuine moment of empathy – it is, after all, a very Bo Burnham thing to do. It comes down to what we already knew, and is an extreme case of the criticism against INSIDE that counters the readings of resonance, relatability, and the “two-way mirror” [41]: that it is all about Bo, baby.

And so going forward I had to sort all of these issues and perspectives from each other and navigate this minefield of meaning, perception, response, implication while trying to contribute something of worth to this overall project – to explore and examine and follow rabbit-holes in a way that would not misrepresent the writing and ideas that were the basis of my application to the project in the first place. This process led me to the theory of Disavowal, the concept of Protective Disavowal in application to hegemonic masculinity/ies and power-driven proximities, and as grounding for that, the tension between masculinities plural and the “Same Shit” phenomenon. Ultimately, the thinking arrived at proximity as the defining key term for both masculinity/ies and Bo Burnham’s work.

As much as it is about anything, INSIDE is about proximity. That is, the work is about many things, but it primarily deals with issues of how close something is to you, how far away something is from you, and the relationship between these proximities and positional desire as well as with “who you are” in the first place. Proximity, of course, is also the basis of hegemonic masculine Protective Disavowal, as discussed earlier: the necessary distancing of the low-Other ‘threat’, and the reorganization of sight-based reality in service of ‘securing’ a desired identity and positionality.

In essence, Disavowal concerns one’s relationship with reality, and distance is an important concept therein. At least in part, the act of disavowal performs a distancing function, which is a function in the interests of protection of power, when it is enacted by those in power, of course. It is, in other words, a deliberate and protective-defensive reordering of one’s proximal relationships. Part “leave me alone” part “I cannot have you be part of me (any longer)” “part you/this don’t/don’t belong here” Disavowal is a complex psychological process that is exclusionary and ultimately damaging. It is also typical, I have argued, of the culture of masculinity. And so we must then talk about anti-Disavowal, as perhaps the quality that drew me to Burnham’s work in the first place. What is anti-Disavowal though, when Disavowal is so layered? If Disavowal is avoidance, is anti-Disavowal confrontation? Surely one can only understand anti-Disavowal as confrontation of reality exclusively or purely if we reduce Disavowal to mean the rejection of reality exclusively, when we know that it involves both Parole and protective-defensive action in the necessary repudiation and so reorganization of reality. This is again partly accurate, but again, incomplete. If we had to stop here and begin to extend from this formulation, we arrive at a tricky place where anti-Disavowal starts to feel like Nietzsche’s Ubermensch, or worse, Peterson’s Room-Cleaning-Man. The man who keeps his house in order, and the man who knows. And then even worse, thinking on the level of heightened awareness, we start to move into ‘red pilled’ territory. The alt-right has adopted consciousness, insight as values and the narrative of awakening, reacting against ‘woke’ with appropriations of Fight Club and the Matrix [47], intimacising these films with their ideology, in another response to ‘crisis’ and in another hypermasculine case of ‘threat’ management. So, the narrative of insight and willingness to ‘see the truth’ in attempting to define anti-Disavowal is... troubled by these cultural contexts.

So, perhaps Anti-Disavowal is less about insight, and more about the Disavowal of protection – that we may call the willingness to be vulnerable. To lay down the
arms of self-protective ideological protection and... see what happens. There is a kind of Romance to vulnerability, some feminine quality of beauty – the image of Wordsworth’s “sea bar[ing] her bosom to the moon”, calling to mind a vast mutual trust, a calm, Natural reciprocity. In INSIDE though and its context, vulnerability takes on a very different kind of essence: as Bo Burnham bares his bosom to the Virus world, things get dark. Hegemonic masculinity, in its protectiveness, is unyielding, and enclosed to the growth of meaning, typical of the necessarily narrowed empathy of heteronormative masculine hegemony. Vulnerability, societally more feminine, is open, but in it, there is now by definition a lack of protection: and whether the world is overwhelming or if it becomes that way through a nihilistic lens, vulnerability allows that world in, and in Burnham’s narrative at least, it destroys us. There is seemingly always a connection between the performance of emotional vulnerability and sadness, at the same time as there is a connection between ideologies that have a broader empathetic range (e.g. socialism) and cynicism, a darkness that at times borders on nihilism. The reverse is also true: we see optimism in ideologies of narrowed empathy, this in the determination and hope that we see in conservative pro-capitalist ideologies expounded by the likes of Jordan Peterson and Ben Shapiro. Peterson, Jungian, cites the UN (where? When?) as saying that poverty is being reduced under capitalism, while Žižek, Hegelian, says that the light at the end of the tunnel is the oncoming train. In those pro-capitalist narratives, expounded by the likes of Peterson, there is belief in the potential of the individual to innovate, to affect positive change, to be resilient. But in the world of ideologies of broader empathy that have socialist leanings and that also embrace the openness of vulnerability as a gentler way of being, there is always inevitably darkness, cynicism. We have seen this kind of combination in Marx, in Žižek, in Burnham, in Mulaney, in Oberst, in Dylan, in films like Parasite. We do not really see it in Marvel Movies.

The other issue with regards to the sadness in INSIDE, (and here we are back on the issue of resonance and creative ‘Zeitgeist’ capturing) is that, objectively, things have been hard. Deterioration in mental health has become a large-scale concern, directly in relation to the pandemic and to lockdowns (see [48–51], and many, many others: the mental health impact of the pandemic is not a particularly contested field). Frank Turner releases “I haven’t been doing so well” (the title that perhaps best proves the point I am trying to make here) Hilltop Hoods give us “I’m good?” (“I’m good, I’m good, but not great, how are you cos I’m kinda awful”), 21 pilots with “level of concern” (“is this how it ends?”), Blink 182’s “quarantine” (an objectively terrible song, but one that fits on this list): all songs that have sought to both express and capture the impact of the change of the world on mental health, and all that adopt a position of vulnerability that also accounts for the relatability of the work. There have of course been other approaches: Jewel’s “Grateful” and then “Gotta be Patient”, a collaboration from Michael Buble, Barenaked Ladies, and Sofia Reyes, and, early on, the misdirected collaborative cover of “Imagine” led by Gal Gadot, with definite Do They Know it’s Christmas vibes. And while these are not necessarily about the ‘suffering’ and the element of ‘struggle’ or reflecting that, they are well-meaning responses to it.

And so, Bo Burnham, speaking from a upper-middle class position, executes the reflective approach of ‘this is what it has been like and it has been hard’, better and with more skill than say Blink-182 (“quarantine, nah, not for me!”), and that seems to be an important factor in the emotional resonance that INSIDE achieves, along with
the rejection of the typically masculine self-protection response in favour of a more feminine vulnerability. Again, we can choose to look at this in at least two ways: as the use of talent for manipulation, or the creation of resonance and comfort through mutual recognition, especially through music. Fink, Warrenburg, Howlin, Randall, Hansen, and Wald-Fuhrmann [52] write about the ways in which music has been listened to and ‘used’ in the pandemic era. They draw on the idea that in theory, music “provides a sense of empathic company as indicated by reduced loneliness and heightened empathy” ([53]:online). While Fink, Warrenburg, Howlin, Randall, Hansen, and Wald-Fuhrmann’s [52] research showed this kind of “social surrogacy” as a minor predictor in how their respondents used music to cope with pandemic-related stress, the case of Bo Burnham and the response INSIDE has had can, at least in part, be attributed to this phenomenon, where the “surrogacy” element, which is distantive, is reduced through the performance of vulnerability and the extent to which Burnham creates an intimacy with the audience. Certainly Klein [41] takes this view, writing for Forbes in a reading of INSIDE that is all about the issue of reflection, of this thing of ‘capturing’. Klein writes “simply put: our mental health is dire, our world is hopeless, and our internet is off its rails. Admittance lessens the weight. Thank you Bo for finally saying it. We’re no longer alone with this dread”. Exploring a specific instance of Burnham and ‘capturing’ our “Zeitgeist”, Klein argues that the performativity of INSIDE, the exploration of “the pressure of performance” in it is one example of what he calls Burnham’s “two-way mirror”: “everyday life is now scripted and manipulated to make for better (funnier, sexier, more outrageous, etc.) content to publish. Content is our livelihood, whether it’s for attention or money. When fiery outrage to emotional anguish catches eyes and cashes checks, it’s hard to tell if Bo is helplessly stranded inside the system, or actually playing into it. It makes no difference. Inside addresses this tension”. Such resonance readings, like Klein’s and those put forward by [38], Harvey [42], Tyrolt [43] among others, focus on INSIDE as an achievement, and so as much as they emphasise emotionality, they also emphasise Burnham’s skill as an artist, a combination of meanings that can also be found in the discourse around Bo Burnham as a ‘genius’ or indeed ‘virtuoso’ – Klein, through his title, makes the claim that Burnham creates resonance with the audience “perfectly” similarly to Di Placido’s [54] take on it as “painfully accurate”. That, in these kinds of readings, is something to respect, something to enjoy, something to admire, something to be grateful for – that the approach of these pieces is rooted in the idea of connection, of having found a connection in a difficult time, and that they celebrate the art behind the bringing of that into their world, is evidence in itself of the manner in which Burnham’s approach of vulnerability in his work and his music as opposed to Protective-Defensive Disavowal can, despite the darkness of the work or perhaps because of it in this instance, produce net-positive affects.

In 1807, in response to the conditions of the Industrial Revolution Wordsworth said “the world is too much with us, late and soon”. In 2021, Bo Burnham, personifying the Sinister Internet said “could I interest you in everything, all of the time? A little bit of everything all of the time?”. Late AND Soon: omnipresent, All of the Time. In Burnham and Wordsworth, there is a complaint about the intimacy between the environment and the self: the ever presence of the shit of the world as at 1807 and 2020 in ‘our’ space. For Wordsworth, the Romantic, the antidote is return to nature. At the height of lockdowns in 2020, nature was effectively legally outlawed, or at the very least rationed, and a year later Mark Zuckerberg began to argue for the irrelevance of materiality and the human body in the exciting near-future here
metaverse original - YouTube. The condition of being overwhelmed for Burnham and Wordsworth is the intimacy between self and world that is “with us”. In INSIDE, Burnham says on two separate occasions and two contexts that the “world is (so) fucked up”, and then it is implied through the narrative that that fucked up world is “too much” in our space: one is reminded of the merchant in Aladdin (possibly the Genie?) who invites the viewer to come closer to listen to his story, before we, and the camera, come “too close” and squash his face. In Burnham, there is more suggestion that we 1. Created this world and then 2. Invited it in without any exit plan. Having foregone the usual masculine protection, either out of choice or because the sheer scale of what is wrong with the world (“systematic oppression…income inequality… the, other stuff”) renders protection a folly, Burnham asks/pleads: “What do I do?” in Comedy. Good question.

In a scene towards the end of INSIDE, Burnham performs as a ‘stand-up comedian’, bare-chested and sitting on a stool, full beard that is less about masculinity than about the passage of slow time and self-neglect, ‘interacting’ with an absent crowd. The following is a breakdown of the words of the scene as well as the visuals:

After a kind of pained ‘shared’ laugh that we hear over a shot of the outside of the room, with the top-right corner of the door in the centre of the shot. This section of the building and door are painted with shadows of leaves. As the (probably electronic) sound of birds chirping in the background is heard and continues through the scene, Burnham says:

“man you guys are a great crowd, give it up for yourselves for coming out by the way tonight, give it up… [at this point, Burnham begins to emerge]

Here he leads a claps on the mic, which produces a hollow sound – no artificial applause or laugh track this time. He continues: “supporting live comedy in these weird times, uh, … [by this point the shadows of the leaves are inside the room with Bo, as are we (sort of). His body is in that shadow, from the nipples down: “it’s crazy, um… these are some pretty crazy times but it’s nice during these crazy times, that we can get together, we can laugh… “you know, I’ve learned something over this last year, which is pretty funny…um… I’ve learned that … [definite tone shift here] real world, human to human tactile contact will kill you… and that all human interaction, whether it be social, political, spiritual or sexual, or interpersonal should be contained in the… much more safe, much more real interior digital space, that the outside world, the non-digital world is merely a theatrical space in which one stages and records content for the much more real, much more vital digital space… we should only engage with the outside world as one engages with a coalmine: suit up, gather what is needed and return to the surface… um… and is it just me or do pirates need to take a little bit better care of their maps? [’joke’ here around the tradition of burning the edges of childrens’ ‘pirate maps’ and staining them with tea, then the punchline following on from the setup of, if a pirate wants you to go through all this effort to find the treasure [55]: “THEN LAMINATE IT!”

Followed by a look that says, “that’s the punchline, what do you think?” – tragic in context Cue “That Funny Feeling” song, which Burnham intro’s with a typical self-deprecating qualifier: “I can't really play the guitar very well, or sing, so you know, [stutters] apologies” Now, what do we make of all this in terms of this as part of a reading of “ways to be a man”?

It is true that “real world, human to human tactile contact” can “kill you”. That interaction in this way has, in Virus world, become a risk. And it is this risk that (fact) led to the enforcing of lockdowns around the world, which in turn, led to an escalation of unemployment and near economic ruin. For people living in suburbs
or free-standing houses in wealthy areas, i.e. those whose living conditions intersect (sort of) with Burnham’s, there has been widespread mental health deterioration associated with isolation (see [56–58]).

That is a fact of reality. Faced with this situation, as we have seen, the response of men has been to ‘double-down’ on the “Same Shit” (see [59]): a case of Disavowal of a real threat (for once). Burnham speaks out the ‘fact’, in a performance of a ‘comedy show’, drowned in its own impotence, drowned in its own non-reality, having previously meditated on the failure of comedy given the ‘world’ as at 2020 (“should I be joking at a time like this?”). There is some narrative reinforcement here in Bo’s words as the fact is that from 2020 onwards “human to human contact” can “kill you”, but he says that it “will kill you”. That is not true in the objective sense, but the fact of likely death is what prompted the lockdowns, which then became an unfamiliar reality that provoked the wide-scale anxiety and depression that Burnham is... feeling? performing?

The next question is: is this a ‘better’ way to be a man? Is this an ‘honest’ way to be a man? Is this, the willing-to-be feminine, willing to be vulnerable Bo Burnham, the suicidal ‘genius’, the ‘virtuoso’ who smells like “shit”, (y)our king? We have seen that when the enclosing protection of privileged space against ‘threats’/threats through Protective Disavowal is at the core of the masculine normative system, damage ensues. Burnham’s work, and in his work in this scene in particular, embraces vulnerability, yes. He performs femininity, as part of that, yes. Through speech, he creates an intimacy between himself and the fact of the risk of human contact in 2020 – he brings it close, into his space, into his mind, and into ours, yes. And people have written about his success of ‘capturing’ the ‘Zeitgeist’, yes. But, the result of this manner of engagement, this manner of organizing one’s proximity to the facts of the world, leads, in the narrative at least, to... suicidality, and therefore full circle to potential death. Burnham, adopting an anti-Protective Disavowal stance, seeks to forego the self-protectiveness of normative masculinity and is floored in the process and horrified by what he finds once the guard is down. What seems to happen in the narrative, and what we have to conclude if we approach INSIDE as a narrative for a second (as it is), is that if we are not busy reorganizing reality through Protective Disavowal in the interests of ideological survival in 2020, the unfiltered force of that reality and our own vulnerable empathy will thoroughly fuck. us. up. Unfortunately, adopting a position of vulnerability (or anti-protection if you will), which is a no-no in terms of the hegemonic masculine standing, will obvious leave one vulnerable, that is to say fully without protection, at which point ‘vulnerability’ ceases to be a Romantic quality, admirable in its anti-hypermasculinity, and becomes the beginnings of a spiral into the condition of existing in a shower-skippingly depressed state and a mental health “ATL (all time low)”. Then, as Tim Dillon asks, there is the question: “do we want to get better?” or does the depressive element of this kind of work that seeks to be vulnerable, to have a broader range of empathy, to understand the world for what ‘it is’, come to define the individual such that the anxiety, depression, and suicidality become constitutive aspects of identity? And, another question, that I am not going to answer here, is this a case of the romantic celebration of the struggling artistic genius-man: self-reflective, insightful, atypical, depressed?

And can there be any hope in this formulation, any solution, or is the only alternative to masculine Protective Disavowal fully realised nihilism in the guise of feminine vulnerability, as represented by individuals with talent and means to spare? Does Burnham’s narrative offer anything in the world of redemption, of a ‘healthy’ masculinity? I rewatched the ‘special’ with this specific question in mind,
and this is what I found: hope in the narrative is firmly situated in work. On a few occasions, Burnham sees the special as a kind of saviour: a distraction from “wanting to put a bullet in my head, with a gun”. Towards the end, he says that he doesn’t want to finish the work, because doing so would mean he would have to “live [his] life”, something that he does not want to do (presumably, either his partner and dog are terrible, or he feels nevertheless lonely in their presence, as can happen). The line in Content: “Robert’s been a little depressed, no, and so today I’m gonna try just getting up, sitting down, going back to work, might not help, but still it couldn’t hurt”. This is not exactly a direct appraisal of the positive utility of work, but this line, in addition to the others in which Burnham talks about the relationship between his work and his mental health explicitly, reveals that, in his narrative, work is the only hope. The aforementioned line is also the only time that Burnham has used his birthname in reference to himself in front of us, so the content of the line can be taken as significant from the point of view of Burnham’s message, if there is one. Then, the final shot of the show is of Burnham seemingly at the end of a (first?) full watch-through of the INSIDE product, smiling: he leaves us with a moment that is essentially “pride in work”.

This, perhaps surprisingly given all the atypicality I led this section with, is a normative masculine prescription: “For most men, any ‘heroic project’ begins when they leave for work” (p. 123). Now, Burnham’s work is creative, and that has another romantic attachment to it. This is not the case for everyone, of course, whose work may be cubicle-bound, or even non-existent in the case of the 220.5 million number of unemployed people in the world [60]. We see Burnham setting up and testing lights, retaking drafts (“one more”/”I took a big fucking BREATH”), critically rewatching and editing, executing the kind of meticulousness that has always gone into his work and which has always framed his performances. In fact, arguably the most beautiful, directly affective moment of the ‘special’ comes at the end of White Woman’s Instagram, not only because the song is over, but also because the angelic harmony of “whiiiiiite” that we hear coming out of Burnham’s laptop, softer than we have just heard it in the ‘music video’, as he sits and reviews it alone with intense focus in tranquil semi-darkness with his hoodie up like Mr Robot or something, takes on a quality of searching beauty that it does not have when set against the completed video itself. The section we are played when Burnham is listening back and rewatching the song, unfinished at that point in the narrative and so still alive with possibility even though we have just watched the finished product, is used in the song itself as part of the ‘comedy’ – and he uses the rising sound “whiiIII” to comedic effect as he suddenly appears from behind some bushes as it plays, performing that kind of faux wonder, that exaggerated ‘wow!’ that is part of his performance of this kind of woman. But the sound only becomes hauntingly beautiful when it is set against Burnham working, like a man. And so, are we right back where we started?

2 there is an outlier to this as in the prelude to the song 30, Burnham expresses disappointment in not having finished the project before his 30 birthday and says that the idea of still working on the special in “this fucking room” at that stage disturbed him. But this is less about his relationship between the work itself and his mental health, and more about feeling like a failure against a benchmark that has come to have personal meaning.

3 This is a fully rhetorical question.
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