



the **R**

**RIDGE**  
MAGAZINE



# Editor's Note

Dear readers,

This is not a magazine. It's a question mark, inviting you to sit beside it and ponder in solitude. It's a joke that refuses to land, keeping you on the edge of your seat like a loaded spring. It's chaos, carefully arranged to provoke and disrupt your peace. Have I lost you yet? Good.

Welcome to the world of Ta Da-Da! In this issue, we borrow the spirit of the 20th century Dada movement to explore the absurdities of life. From the abstraction of the body to critiques of AI, we reflect on how the concept of Dada can still guide us today. What else can we do in the face of this brave new world?

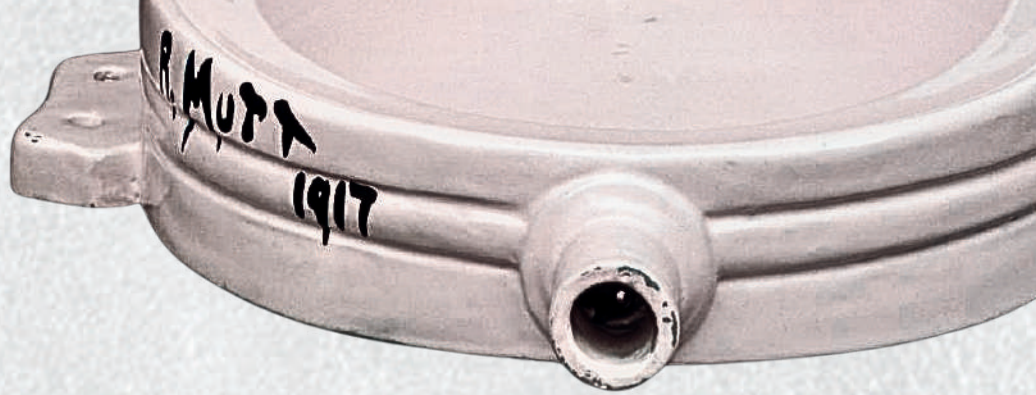
I'd like to thank our amazing contributors for their hard work in making this magazine possible. Without the innovative and brilliant minds of all our writers, designers, marketers, and website managers, our magazine would never have grown to the size it is today. I'd also like to give special thanks to the EXCO team for your unwavering support this past semester: Jonathan and Cheerly, who's pushed through all the administrative work that goes into running a magazine, Beatrix, a creative soul with a keen eye for beautiful design, Anh, Bobo and Jing Yan, hard at work to expand our reach to wider audiences, and of course, Tue, Nat, Yi Xuan, and Zoe, our team of editors which form the backbone of this magazine.

If you've read our work before, welcome back! It's good to see you again. And if you're new here, I hope this magazine piques enough of your interest to keep us on your radar.

Laughter is the best medicine, so just keep laughing—Ha ha-ha! Ta da-da!



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**"...a roaring of tense colors, and interlacing of opposites  
and of all contradictions, grotesques, inconsistencies: LIFE."  
—Tristan Tzara**

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*This*  
**Poem**  
*is Meant to be*  
**Eaten.**

by Teo Yi Ling, Dawn

swallowed raw. it feeds into a fever,  
sharp guts slipping in bile – emetic verse.

here, the butchered earth, ripe wounds bloom where the  
flesh snared, bare, now sinews breathe and bristle,

brought to boil, pain pulses in metre. foam  
old bones of prose slough from fleeing rivers.

the poem meets death in syntax  
the birthed hurt of words.  
nerves unearthed, unswallowed sound,  
raw where the mouth marks.

do the teeth eat / clean, bone b(reached) to stone / thrown /  
whole, caught in meathooks of the throats / stanzas parsed to  
dust / dark like re(flux) / words ch(urn)ed, burnt / scalded sound  
/ split in lips / hung under tongues / lines strung by lungs,  
masticated, dessicated wetness

the body – soft, monstrous – coagulates  
to sound, slit silences bleeding, viscous,

water-mouthed, macerated metaphors  
melt, drowned sound washed, lost between skin, gristle.

barren urns dredged in breath, words drunk dark, dead,  
distilled to eviscerated sweetness.

*Trigger Warning:*  
**Gore and Body Horror**

# “Wherewolf”

by Tay Kai Li

Gahmen say count sheep to  
sleep Singapore where got sheep

he say just look up close eye at night I see cloud roiling like what you  
think I'll call that sheep my imagination not that crazy okay and anyway

Singapore got a lot of wolf no sheep  
want come here

Gahmen say where got wolf I say just look down down where nowhere  
no where is the wolf if you cannot see wolf means what means either

wolf got you or wolf is you

now you gonna say I crazy say I boy cry wolf ah boy you know what  
happens to children who lie no I dunno because they never kena  
caught only those who cannot lie then they like boy cry wolf but you  
know how many wolf wearing sheep anot

tell me you think you  
know but you dunno you  
really dunno

this the part I ask you think wolf stay in Singapore eat what if don't  
have sheep ah now then you know I just now lie but how you know  
what you know next thing you know I say actually Singapore don't  
have wolf only sheep actually the sheep all wearing wolf actually the  
sheep ownself oso think they wolf but they dunno that they dunno  
what they dunno they forget already that sheep wear wolf is still sheep



wait where sheep learn to wear wolf ask for what  
you know how you are how church always say we all  
stupid sheep aiyo poor thing need shepherd come  
save you ah come shepherd herd you into school so  
cher can teach you be good sheep smart sheep

ha where got such thing

you know what they really teaching you they say  
school where got black sheep see all is uniform white  
but how to see own wool oso grow thick thick over eye

quick close eye last night how many villagers die  
everyone favourite ori game right catch werewolf make  
sheep feel smart but after game what happen everyone  
forget again doesn't matter who live die who was what  
villager werewolf all still are wolf were wolf were sheep  
weresheep worship what god if not the shepherd

eh you got follow anot  
don't sleep leh

haven't count sheep yet don't count how you know  
how many sheep how many wolf look up look down  
look right left behind oso don't matter because wolf  
sheep is all the same and anyway your eye close already  
got what to see open eye look the cloud still roiling  
means what means

don't ask me if you are sheep or wolf or what means  
don't count already count on what for what means  
how you still don't understand that

rinse and spit  
get rid of all the impurities  
before you even sit in the chair.

open wide  
let the metal explore every crevice  
poking and prodding  
to get a study of the land.

just a pinch of  
anaesthesia  
with a side of  
numbing cream.  
the less you feel,  
the better you'll heal.

lie back and relax  
the bone is stronger  
than they thought.  
you feel the pressure,  
but never the pain.

*By Lea Nisba Quab*

twist, crack, congratulations!  
the blood erupts like a volcano,  
hot and pulsing,  
flowing from the gaping wound.  
a river of red  
for a lifetime of white.

keep the pulled teeth  
hidden away,  
now a lost relic.  
what you don't see  
can never be decayed  
or mourned.

over time, the teeth  
march into their new places,  
perfect and polished.  
you can't even remember  
what you're missing.



# NOSTALGIA

*By Najia Mebra*

## Capitalism's Time Machine and the Commodification of Memory

There is something oddly reassuring about the past—not the past itself, but the past as it appears on our screens: softened by filters, colour-corrected and available for sale. In an age where we scroll faster than we remember, nostalgia has become not a private reverie but a public ritual that is curated, aestheticised, and relentlessly visible. Y2K style, retro coffee shops, low-rise jeans from thrift stores and vintage vinyl albums all invite us to inhabit a version of the past that never existed as cohesively as it is now marketed. Memory, it seems, has become the ultimate commodity, purchased as continuity in a disconnected world.

This nostalgia isn't about remembering; it is the simulation of remembrance. The popularity of retro cafés styled after 1980s kopitiam in Singapore or the revival of heritage brands considered outdated is less about preserving tradition than about refashioning it for contemporary desire. A thrifted low-rise jean or a vintage Pyrex bowl is hardly valued for its materiality or historical continuity — instead, it functions as a visual token, a cultural signifier of taste. This is a performance shaped not only by taste but by disposable income, cultural literacy, and the ability to access these curated spaces. Nostalgia becomes a privilege disguised as universality, making memory not only performed but performed within the bounds of class and access.



This transformation is not accidental. It echoes, in structure if not in spirit, the aesthetic strategies of Dadaism. What unites them is not visual similarity but a shared process of rearranging fragments of modernity, though their political intent diverges radically. Breaking out of the disillusionment of World War I, artists such as Marcel Duchamp and Hannah Höch employed absurdity to de-mystify the contradictions of modern life (Dickerman, 2005). They took familiar objects—readymades, photographs, newspaper clippings—and reassembled them into collages that lampooned the institutions and norms that produced them. Modern-day nostalgia follows the same process of fragmentation and reassembly but removes the satire. The absurd is domesticated. This once-subversive aesthetic has been neutralised into a reassuring spectacle, a curated edginess that entertains without destabilising social norms. What Dada used to dismantle bourgeois weightiness, capitalism now cultivates into lifestyle marketing.

This is clearly seen on social media, where nostalgia becomes a feedback loop of curated emotions. TikToks of retro snack hauls or Instagram filters that recreate disposable camera aesthetics, all stage the act of “remembering” as content. The digital archive becomes a marketplace, where the act of recollection is monetised through likes, aesthetics, and brand partnerships. Anyone can scroll through this reconstructed history, but to actually inhabit it, to buy the thrifted jacket, the retro latte, or the dusty vinyl, is another matter completely. For millions, these shards of history are experienced only second-hand, through scrolls and screens.



The result is a hierarchy disguised as belonging. Nostalgia markets itself as a common “remember when?”, but in reality its performance is highly exclusionary. Those who can afford to purchase, stage, and aestheticise the past become the curators of memory, while others merely observe. It is an economy of access disguised as sentiment. This is not to suggest that nostalgia is inherently hollow or politically inert. Collective remembrance can preserve cultural identity, provide intergenerational continuity, and anchor communities in shared histories. Yet under late capitalism, even this impulse is absorbed and monetised into a consumable performance of feeling.

Walter Benjamin, at the beginning of the twentieth century, foresaw this failure of experience under regimes of reproduction. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, he mourned the loss of the "aura" — the unique presence an object had in space and time — when images could be endlessly duplicated (Benjamin, 1936/1968). Memory itself has undergone something similar today. A pop-up "old school" arcade or the return of disposable film cameras doesn't recall the past; it creates a simulation of what remembering feels like. It is not memory that we are consuming, but nostalgia. Our nostalgic acts exist less in their lived moment than in their digital afterlife. The reel, the post, the story becomes the true artefact; the experience is only raw material for its own representation.



Fredric Jameson called this the "cultural logic of late capitalism" (Jameson, 1991); the constant recycling of aesthetic forms stripped of historical context. Nostalgia, in this sense, is the affective expression of a society that can no longer imagine the future. The yearning for pre-digital simplicity or "authentic" eras conceals a deeper paralysis: a world that processes its anxieties not through innovation, but through repetition. Any return of the Y2K aesthetic, film photography, or mid-century modern design, such as the resurrection of colonial-style architecture in new luxury developments, is marketed to us as rediscovery, but it is only repetition in new packaging. The old is returned to us as novelty, so that nothing truly new has to be risked.

We're left with only a parabolic temporality: we are obsessed with the past precisely because we have lost faith in what comes next. Nostalgia presents itself as an antidote to capitalist acceleration, yet it fuels the very acceleration it claims to escape. It entertains and excludes, seduces and stratifies. The yearning for authenticity becomes a marketing strategy that ensures the past is never recovered, only remade and resold.



Dadaists sought to dismantle unquestioned cultural and social truths through absurdity; today, we consume absurdity as if it were itself meaning, a spectacle to admire rather than a critique to reflect upon. The fragmented collage has become the curated feed. And while the Dadaists turned chaos into critique, we have turned critique into content. Nostalgia today is capitalism's most elegant sleight of hand: a mode of governance that allows us to feel resistance even as we participate in the system that commodifies it. Its greatest illusion is that it brings us closer to what we have lost. In truth, it only brings us closer to what we can buy.

We don't recover history.

We re-enact it — beautifully, compulsively, and for sale..



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# A WINTER DROWNING

By: Ronja Jokilampi

Exhaustion mingles with the joy of the Work, even when I'm beyond knowing I'm good at what I do. Every step I take makes a thump and sends ripples. Out of my way, twigs and pinecones! I trot inside a circle of shrooms, kicking a penny bun's cap off its leg for good measure. Underground, something twitches.

An immortal with the name of Morena has been walking on tangled roots and crusty leaves of many colours for three days and three nights. Like any self-respecting minor deity, she wears an indistinct fur-lined robe and trekking breeches and bare feet, the grey hair unadorned, careful to not flaunt any little power she might have. She carries no weapons, for mortal wounds are no more than pain. Immortals only fear the inevitable.

The leaves under her steps grow hoarfrost and rime. Highways of ants catch colds and sneeze and die. Monarchs take flight lest their wings freeze and snap. Oaks of all kinds drop their acorns in deadly hail, then let their last leaves float down to cover them. Sunlight forms dancing patterns through the trees before her, but at her back a thick fog rises.

This is known.

I step past a cluster of beeches, leaning together for warmth. Old man's beard grows on all sides of the pines and spruces here where foliage is thickest. Black trumpets – the trumpets of the dead, some mortals call them – tilt their horns towards me, playing a song with no sound. I stumble; I close my eyes to listen.

As the third night turns to a fourth dawn, the immortal with the name of Morena lays down against an old birch of far-reaching roots and rugged bark. For the longest time, we have been tied to his roots, trading messages for sugar and life. For the shortest time, we have let our upper parts climb the old bark that gives such good hold, to spread our mycelia in its cambium, stealing what is not ours from the oblivious giant.

As the immortal drowns, Sun falls twice and twice more. Somewhere in the east, walking-creatures that resemble her like an ailanthus sapling resembles a fallen redwood are drowning her images. It won't last. They no longer remember what she looks like.

They used to drown her every cycle to soften the frost. For this, we forgave them picking our ground-parts, grinding down our caps and frying our legs. As they stopped the drownings, they forgot about us too. There is nothing more to forgive.

The drowning is Ours again. We have held the task for the longest time. Often we have failed. It is worthy.

In this small corner of the realms, I'm the one who grabs one handle of the wheel of the World and spins a season to the next, but there are others. Holle and Beira In the West and Itztlacoliuhqui farther still, Skaði in the North, Tengliu in the East and Morozko the General, of course, always just behind the corner. Even in the South, mother Sarma dutifully does her part and mortals and immortals alike let her. Pines thicken their bark and pears drop their leaves. Some apes grow fur and some learn to skin the fur of others, breams take to deepwater warmth and swans fly against the spinning of the Wheel. But not here.

Here everyone wants to grab the Wheel and do as they please with it. Mortals mostly drown dolls and idols to make me a bit drowsy, but they can't hunt me down. They aren't fighters.

But Mycenae are ruthless. They are immense and old and immortal, a blasphemous mass that is both one and infinitely many. To them, to it, I am as insignificant as the ants whose bodies they sometimes capture. They drown them too, for both breeding and fun. I like to think of myself as at least a special kind of prey. A rare catch.

The immortal with the name of Morena snores. A spider climbs in the damp dark warmth of an open mouth and makes her nest there. She rejoices for two nights, finally laying her heavy eggs, until the immortal turns her head, licks her lips and crunches down on both the mother and the unborn children. This is a matter of no consequence.

As she twists in nightmares of a sun that never sets, a path of ants forms itself under the black-and-grey hair growing out of her scalp. They reach her ear and burrow through the channel, burn through the drum with venom spray and trek on to touch soft grey meadows with their antlers. This is a matter of some consequence.

Her head falls against the bark and our exterior and the ant path is cut off. We draw water from our mycelia, the water from the cambium of this birch and the water of rains a thousand colonies north, and make our exterior swell. It reaches the black-and-grey tangles on a fortunate twig. Our mycelium bores down once more, and when the immortal rises with the moon that comes after three suns, we are torn off the family. Our exterior is no longer our exterior but Us, an Us so much smaller than the We that Us used to partake in. Us is a smallness with a great task. The ants in her skull make her sway here and there, felling trees and freezing foxberries before their time. We make our way through the grey softness, settling mycelium in its folds and wrinkles and ridges.

We suffocate the ants as an afterthought, we make the flailing our exterior and now the immortal with the name of Morena is Us too.

Us has legs – an odd sensation. Us moves detached from the ground yet attached to itself, so very unlike the We Us used to be. It isn't unpleasant being an individual with borders and frames, though it is lonely. Us takes a step and another one, Us walks and runs and leaps over a melting trunk that gives home to thousand external parts of We. Us does not feel the tremors it sends through the undergrowth, but it sees a pond behind a grove of elms and birch. Water that makes so many lives and help Us save We and all else. A shore of moss and stones, water still and black and deep and cold-looking. Us grabs a large rock in its arms, as large as it can, steps in and gasps, though us don't tell Us to gasp.

For the most part, drowning is like sleeping. Only the beginning is like waking up when you should already be somewhere else.

I'm cold, sleepwalking and sleep paralyzed. I feel my body wading through water, I tell it to stop, it takes a step

Then my body stops kicking. Air escapes its lungs and it starts to sink. I try to close my eyes and don't. I do nothing. When does drowning even begin? When I empty my lungs of air or when I fill them with water? Submerging is so slow.

The pressure starts stabbing and slashing inside my ears, a piercing pain that grows like a scream. It would take no more than a swallow and blowing some air out of my nose to make it stop. The deeper I fall the more the pain grows, like my head was pumped full of air but someone kept going past the safety limit. I want to burst or swim or at least shout.

My body hits the maze of the bottom. The bastards under, to trap myself in trunks and twigs and until I cannot move. telling me I'm alive. shut up.

I am turned to face the surface I cannot reach. I make rime grow to frost and frost to ice. Sunlight diffracts. It becomes faint and dark and blue, and the skin of the pond grows thick. A trap of water and ice and my own making. I wish they would choose something else for once. What's wrong with a good old burning pyre?

Our caps and legs begin to freeze as water sweeps in through the ant-sized hole in Our eardrum. Us is ready to submit. Its task is complete. Then Us thinks a most important thought.

This gets them nowhere. The others will push a little harder, and winter will come all the same, though I would like to think it weaker than if I were there to help. Either way, the Spring deities will wake up in a few moons to take the handles. Yarilo will sweep me out of his realm, make a few quips, and be merrily on with his spring cleaning. When I return to my colleagues, Skaði will be dismissive and the General will be angry. Sarma might say a kind word or two. By the time we grab the handles of the Wheel again, all will be forgotten.

As Us die, us burst out spores for the water to take, spores carrying a single message to deliver if they ever reach the mycelium and grow, so that We might one day know. There are many more still, and these are their names.



# Instagram

## Personal Branding as Our Stage

By Grace Leong

### History of Instagram

Instagram. The name is a portmanteau of ‘instant camera’ and ‘telegram’. Its main purpose was to connect users with people from around the world by updating and posting photos, especially ones from travel adventures. It was a way for people to connect with friends and family through visual media, equipped with a few new (at the time) features like adjustments to picture quality, following, like and comment functions. Food accounts, pet Instagrams and even casual photography accounts are just some of the few avenues Instagram provided for people to share about their lives and connect with their loved ones.

After Facebook acquired Instagram in 2012, the way Instagram was being developed and hence perceived changed drastically. It expanded beyond a visuals-centric social media platform, beyond being just a space for self-expression. It developed features such as Direct Messaging, Instagram Live, and Instagram Stories. These encouraged engagement and an accelerated monetisation of the platform, prioritising engagement and popularity over personal connection. Monetisation avenues such as advertisement revenue and paid sponsorships led to a creation of the “Influencer” as a job.

This extension of Instagram created a central place for both influencers and non-influencers to exist and post. With the increase in usage, and Instagram being more monetisable, posting on social media no longer was just a hobby, but rather was seen as necessary in order for influencers to make money by selling products, and by extension their lifestyles. Influencer-posting, by its nature, could thus no longer be authentic. Rather, they had to perform a certain lifestyle that would either be in line with the products they sold, or in line with what would get them the most engagement and attention online. In summary, they could either sell themselves out, or sell themselves.

Thus, the societal function of Instagram evolved, from being just a platform that connects people to a platform where performativity is rewarded, through an increase in engagements. This is what steers a lot of social media trends, and by extension, what is ‘cool’. Buzzwords like “personal branding” became more popular and posting on Instagram became more of a ‘business’ than a creative endeavour.



**dear.gracie**

25 posts

672 followers

1,328 following

# Evolution of Social Media Trends

Social media trends are indicative of the values we hold dear. They have changed and evolved over the years, dictating what mentality is considered “cool” even outside of the social media landscape. Back when Instagram was a burgeoning platform for influencers in 2016/2017, one popular social media trend was photos with vibrant pinkish colours and specific presets like Apollo, that depicted the perfect yet somewhat nostalgic life.



Instagram was used as a tool for others to envy and perform a life, rather than being just a place for life updates. However, this expectation of perfectionism made users feel judged by their following and would lead to the creation of spam accounts. These accounts are only available to close friends, as users were scared to be ‘perceived’ by friends and even followers. This is evidence of a shift in the way people use and even perceive the application itself: as a way to signify popularity instead of a humble place for life updates. This mindset is what has led to trends today such as casual posting and photodumps, which encourages a more relaxed way of posting on Instagram (in direct comparison to the exhaustion people felt from the perfectionism demanded of the over-the-top Californian beige preset Instagram feeds).



However, the current trends of photodumps may be more sinister than meets the eye. Despite the perceived shift to casual posting, the “perfect” photodump does exist, and with its own implied rubrics and standard. There are countless videos online on ‘How to create a perfect photodump’. What kind of photos are considered aesthetically pleasing, what angles to use, how many photos you can post of yourself without seeming narcissistic, how many photos you can post of your cat without seeming like a loser... In fact, oftentimes photodumps are used as insidious ways to show off one’s lifestyle.

A photodump requires you to provide a very specific set of pictures: A ‘casual’ picture of yourself, maybe something that shows your outfit, a drink, perhaps your burgundy shoes, a blurry picture of you and your friends laughing at a bar, all in leather jackets. While to the untrained eye these pictures may seem haphazardly chosen and unassuming, as with many things posted online, they do have some element of staging. The line between “aesthetic” and “lame” is a very thin one, it could boil down to the variety of pictures, or even the colour-coordination. Most importantly though, is that in order to be “aesthetic” it must project some form of a perfect life. Either through popularity, wealth, appearance or even intelligence. The lines between real and superficial are constantly being blurred.

A perpetrator of this “performative yet authentic” performance is Evan Smith, who makes Tiktoks rating people’s Instagram feeds. Amassing over 389,000 followers on Tiktok, what started out as the innocent idea of rating celebrity feeds turned out to reveal a nasty trait that has survived throughout all the years of Instagram’s existence and beyond: our need for other people’s validation. Evan Smith rates these Instagram posts and gives suggestions on what to change, he is notably known for his snarky remarks and judgement over how their Instagram feed looks—often focusing on colour-schemes, angles and photo quality. Despite his bluntness, there are still many people who actually want to get berated by him, which really shows the shift in Instagram, from one of self-expression to a platform for marketing. He even makes money off it and is able to pay for his college with this money. People are paying Evan Smith to rate their personal instagram pages, and have turned Instagram accounts into a lesson for personal branding and marketing for something that is deemed as ‘casual’.



One might want to ask: why? Why is this so important and crucial? Simply put, because it shows how social media platforms have made our personal lives more entwined with values such as consumerism, and capitalism. No longer are we ‘someone with an Instagram page’. Rather, we are a product to be sold, a product to be validated by the approval of the crowd. What is harmful is that such trends deceive us. The social mandate of ‘cool’ used to be explicit, but now it is hidden between the lines, and the social mandate of ‘cool’ is repackaged in ideas such as ‘personal branding’, making it harder to spot and call out.

That being said, it is interesting to note the change in the style of which we boast and post about our lives. Previously, it was cool to be explicitly colour-coordinated and took effort to do so, however, now, it is cool to be casual and a more widely accepted variety of photos are included as cool. It is a direct response and a result of fatigue of having to constantly edit your photos to achieve a curated beige aesthetic. This pattern is interesting and common throughout society, as cool often disrupts the norms of the previous generation or trends.



2025 Instagram era feed

## Conclusion



Trends come and trends go, but people’s validation lasts forever. At the heart of it all, what is cool and socially acceptable is often dictated by context and the implicit values it promotes, whether it is nonchalance or effort. Sometimes, we need to think about the way we use our social media platforms and the ideas it subconsciously sells to our friends. Are we using it as a tool for self-expression, or is it just a social signifier based on the approval of others?

# THE JOKE IS THE REVOLUTION

By Aarisha Jain

We live in the era of a new kind of artist, one who is not a singular entity and whose work is untethered from ownership or permanence. This figure emerges as both a product and a reflection of the age, one whose work was created from the lost fragments of a chaotic world, of pieces that should not fit together but somehow do. Shaped as much by the conditions of our age as by any individual hand, this art becomes the collective language of a generation that has long stopped pretending that the world makes sense at all.

Humour as survival has existed for centuries, helping generations endure their realities. But what was once relegated to the sidelines—the satirist, the cartoonist, the comic stage—now finds itself in the spotlight. In the twenty-first century, humour is our armour in facing discomfort, processing injustice and making sense of the absurdities of the global power structure.

Our instinct to joke has become more pronounced and deliberate, shaped by an internet that collapses the distance between audience and performer. Humour today is an agentic, participatory act, one that no longer entertains passively from a distance but actively circulates, repeats and mutates reality itself.

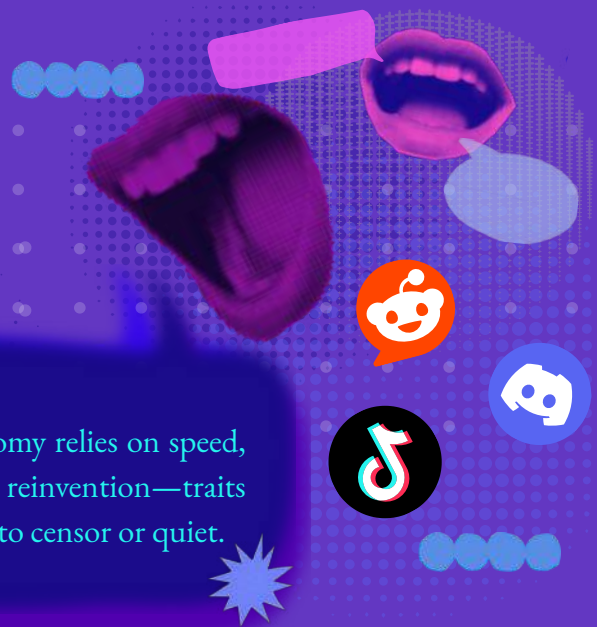
This survival mechanism is not only absurd in its foundation but brilliantly subversive in its execution. For someone who did not grow up within this distinct mode of coping, this use of humour as recreation and release might seem frivolous and disingenuous—proof of intellectual decline, the so-called “brain rot” of a distracted generation. However, our memes and jokes are not signs of indifference; they are how we metabolise it. We live in a world that delivers crisis to our doorstep, and humour is often the only tool we have to keep from drowning in it. It shrinks catastrophe into something we can hold, share and momentarily control, offering comfort and reassurance when we need them most.



HA

HA

Yet this humour does not stop at comfort; it inevitably turns outward, pressing against the structures that produce the catastrophic collapse in the first place. As these jokes enter the internet wormhole, nonsense, irony and self-deprecation become the grammar of our resistance. In a world full of hollow political speeches, corporations taking over our lives and algorithms tracking our every move, humour breaks through because it is so distinctly sincere. It works because it strips power of the control it claims over us.



Our meme economy relies on speed, mimicry and reinvention—traits that are difficult to censor or quiet.

It's by their very nature that jokes and memes can travel across borders, adapt to any language, mutate across contexts and still preserve their subversive charge. This fluidity of humour makes it a carrier of resistive symbolism, giving people a medium through which to reclaim agency within systems that police expression. Comedy no longer distracts from reality but reframes it, temporarily liberating it from its constraints and revealing the absurdities that structure power itself.

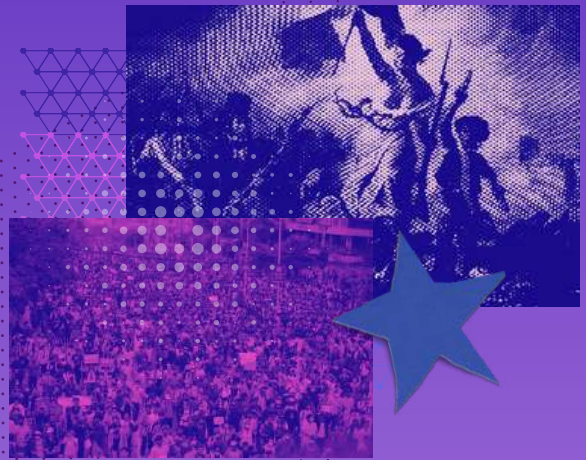
The value of humour lies in its inherent fluidity—its ability to be remade, interpreted and continually metamorphosed. The moment attempts are made to fix or monetise it, it simply ceases to be funny. Humour resists commodification by treating reproduction as creation rather than dilution and mutates so freely that the notion of a singular source becomes irrelevant. This is why humour thrives. Because of its constant movement and recontextualisation and its refusal to belong to anyone, it cannot be absorbed neatly into the machinery of profit or control. Perhaps it is precisely this refusal to be contained—to be owned, sold or silenced—that allows it to persist as one of the few cultural forces capable of outrunning the systems that seek to domesticate it.

This viral absurdity becomes a kind of informational warfare, one that is grassroots, decentralised and largely anonymous. It channels the undercurrent of shared frustration that official discourse attempts to filter, moderate and cleanse. Within a system built upon moderation and control, our shared absurdity becomes its most potent kryptonite—the one force that cannot be rationalised, commodified or suppressed. It exposes the fragility of order by refusing to speak its language, countering censorship not with confrontation but with distortion, irony and play.

Political scientist James C. Scott said that people with little formal power resist in subtle, mundane, everyday ways: through imitation, mockery and feigned ignorance<sup>1</sup>. In the digital space, this quick, coded resistance becomes that very weapon of the weak. Over time, these fragments of dissent accumulate, leaving traces in our collective memory. Every meme, remix and soundtrack functions as a timestamp of how people respond to power, crisis and absurdity. The democratisation of this structure, one that allows anyone to participate and comment, forms the informal archive of our generation—the collective pulse of fear, frustration and disbelief.



To laugh in the face of disorder is to take control of it. Standing in the eye of the storm, irony gives us the power to turn our own vulnerability into action, transforming paralysis into participation. Humour helps us reframe a threat into something understandable and temporarily manageable, and gives communal recognition to our fears, assuring us that we are backed by our own. It acknowledges instability and affirms our capacity to move through it together without certainty or resolution, instead of pretending everything is fine.



In a culture that ties worth to productivity, humour pushes back against the pressure to produce consistently. It insists that confusion, contradiction and exhaustion are valid feelings in a chaotic world, returning us to something recognisably human—imperfect, overwhelmed yet still expressive. To laugh is to momentarily reclaim control from systems that expect obedience or silence, and in doing so, humour becomes a public act: a way to express emotional truth where institutional speech demands restraint.

So yes, we laugh at the absurdity, we participate in sharing memes and remixed edits. But it is not because we don't care; it is because caring this deeply requires disguise to protect us from those who would use it as a weapon against us. What may look like a distraction is in fact the evolution of resistance—flexible, participatory and unmanageable. This is not escapism but rather the afterlife of a rebellion, one that gives structure to disorder and ensures that even in collapse, something creative remains.



Because in a world this absurd, the joke is not a distraction. The joke is the revolution.  
*Ta da-da.*



<sup>1</sup> FRANCIS WADE, "THE QUIET POWER OF EVERYDAY RESISTANCE."



# MÄNSKLIIG: THE

# MANUAL FOR HUMAN USE

BY DANIELLA BONITA RULIN

Somewhere between the showroom and the warehouse, in the labyrinth of Ikea, a new box appears. The packaging is familiar: minimalist blue-and-yellow branding, a smiling family on the cover, and a catchy name that sounds distinctly Swedish.

“*Mänsklig*: The Ideal Human. Some Assembly Required.”

It sits between the *Poäng* armchair and the oddly head-shaped *Iskärna* table lamp. A box that hums, faintly alive. The cardboard feels warm under your fingers. Inside, something (or someone) awaits construction.

You slice open the tape and peel back the flaps. Each winding part you unearth feels disturbingly organic, slick and pulsing, intimately sacred. You lay out these slimy entrails and pick out a metal rib. All you can see is Adam without his Eve.

The instruction manual is printed in a calm sans serif. *Attach in numerical order*, it says. This all seems sinisterly familiar.

## STEP ONE: INSERT DEGREE INTO TORSO

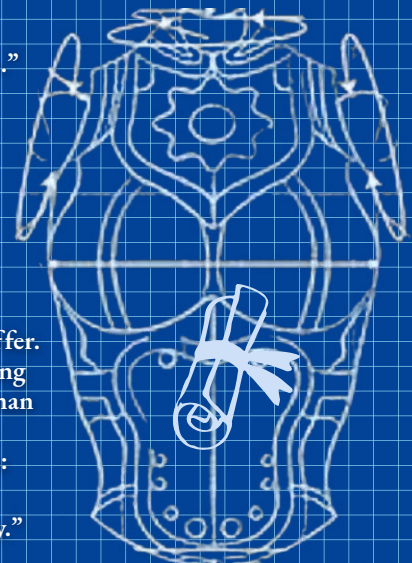
“Failure to install degree correctly may result in reduced shelf life.”

Education is the first and most crucial component in assembling the *Mänsklig*. It determines whether the final product stands firm or collapses under pressure. In Singapore, the process begins early. From national examinations to enrichment classes, each test is a screw tightened with anxious precision. Success will only ever promise stability, while failure leaves you half-assembled, rattling helplessly on the showroom floor.

In the later stages of the Singaporean education system, the instructions barely differ. A degree may seem like a luxury add-on, and not a default part of the kit. Attending a ‘Big 3’ university confers prestige like a designer label stamped on the latest human model. Most notably, becoming a student at the National University of Singapore affords a lifetime of bragging rights. But the hidden cost lies between the margins:

“Student debt may apply. Emotional exhaustion sold separately.”

Singaporeans grow up believing, out of habit, that a great education is pertinent to our victory in life. You learn to transfigure curiosity into efficiency, to trade wonder for measurable outcomes. The mind becomes another compartment, a vessel to be filled and sealed. Like the scroll lodged in your chests, you become stitched together from expectations that were never entirely your own.



## STEP TWO: ATTACH CAREER LADDER TO SPINE

“Over-tightening may cause spinal misalignment and burnout.”

<sup>1</sup>In Singapore, the most coveted ‘Big 3’ universities commonly refer to the National University of Singapore, Nanyang Technological University, and Singapore Management University.



If education builds the frame, work fortifies the skeleton. In the corporate world, the ladder gleams with respectable rungs, from doctors and lawyers to scientists and entrepreneurs. The higher you climb, the more precarious the joints become, but no one dares to stop chasing the summit. Along the Central Business District, human cogs in the machine slip on polished suits like second skin and stay crouched over their desks, typing away in perpetual motion. Their posture straightens only for LinkedIn photos.

Deep in the crevices of corporate mazes, a recent mushrooming of tech start-ups market flexibility as freedom, though its workers are chained to constant innovation. Invest early; create your own wealth. Time is money, and money certainly promises happiness. In reality, these cogs in the machine are simply assembled from a mishmash of caffeine and anxiety disorders disguised as ambition. In a society with such a stringently rigid work culture, the employee's screws are fixed for life, stable but immovable. Everyone is afforded the illusion of free will from financial stability, but has that ever been the case? What does it mean to be free from all obligations? Every profession has its poison of choice, and none truly escape the assembly line.

The ladder, as the manual insists, is not optional. You avert your eyes from the question of whether the ladder might be the problem to begin with. You fail to realise that climbing endlessly might just lead you to the ceiling of your own exhaustion.

*“Mänsklig: The Ideal Human. Some Assembly Required.”*

## STEP THREE: FAMILY PACKAGE (NOT INCLUDED IN STARTER KIT)

*“Assembly may be delayed 5-7 years (depending on BTO construction timelines).”*

The family is a purchasable bundle. Between Built-to-Order (BTO) flats and baby bonuses, the Singaporean Dream is built upon the nuclear family. The home becomes a product of bureaucracy, and romance a logistical partnership. Couples apply for flats before they even propose, as though intimacy were simply another milestone to check off the unspoken list of canon events that occur in your twenties. Because surely, it is in the best interest of every model Singaporean to concern themselves with achieving the 5Cs: Cash, car, credit card, condominium, and country club membership.<sup>2</sup>

Sometimes, the instructions can even be time-sensitive. Chinese culture dictates that women must marry by thirty or risk being labelled sheng nü or “leftover woman”, like unsold stock gathering dust in the hidden corners of the warehouse. Many of the wise elders of Singapore still subscribe to this archaic view. Your parents want nothing more than for you to tread the path oft taken.

The family module, then, is universal in its illusion; nothing more than a structure promising emotional fulfilment but serving as yet another form of standardisation. You are told to love according to the catalogue: Nothing more, nothing less.

## WARNING: UNWARRANTED RETURNS

The fine print appears at the end of the manual in the smallest possible font:

*“Warranty voided by burnout. Returns not accepted.”*

Every society maintains a repair policy for malfunctioning humans, for those who are left feeling deeply unfulfilled and unsatisfied with irksome routines. One solution is to become the markedly superior lifelong learner, with Coursera and SkillsFuture courses promising “reassembly” for mid-career switchers. Perhaps it is a rather polite way of saying, “Try turning your life off and on again.”

Around the world, the cult of hustle culture has humans patching themselves with duct tape. Gig workers are running multiple side hustles to survive, convinced exhaustion is a feature and not a flaw. In Asia specifically, the pressure to perform leads to one of the highest youth suicide rates in the world, with Singapore having the highest suicide rate in Southeast Asia at 11.2 suicides per 100,000 people.<sup>3</sup> This is the ultimate collapse under a design too immutable for life.

To rub salt in the wound, the manual's customer service line is predictably unhelpful.



“Contact support for spare parts. Response time may vary.”

Mental health becomes a subscription model, available to those who can pay for counselling apps or wellness retreats. For everyone else, self-help books offer DIY fixes. Start a gratitude journal, find your perfect morning routine, meditate before bed. If you break, it's your fault for assembling yourself incorrectly.

## THE LEFTOVER SCREWS

Across the globe, everyone subscribes to The Manual for Human Use. It becomes a doctrine of sorts, an urge to perform in education, employment, and even infiltrates familial and interpersonal relationships. If you follow these prescriptions, you are absolutely guaranteed to come out polished and complete. Yet, when you finally stand upright, gleaming and assembled, you are less human than you once were. Too obedient, too still.

Yet, at the end of the manual lies a small plastic packet of leftover screws. The diagram claims they are “extras”, but you suspect that they were simply forgotten along the way. They rattle softly, mocking the illusion of completeness.

Perhaps those leftover screws are not mistakes at all. They are the stray passions we abandon, the creative detours we are told to discard, the unmeasurable joys that resist efficiency. They are the parts that make us unpredictable, and thus indubitably alive.

Not everyone follows the Manual. Some skip steps, others invent their own. The artist who refuses a corporate career, the single parent who finds love once their little ones leave the nest. The youth who leaves the ladder altogether, designing a new nomadic life from scavenged parts. These small rebellions are the quiet revolutions of our age. They are living, breathing proof that deviation is an act of humanity.

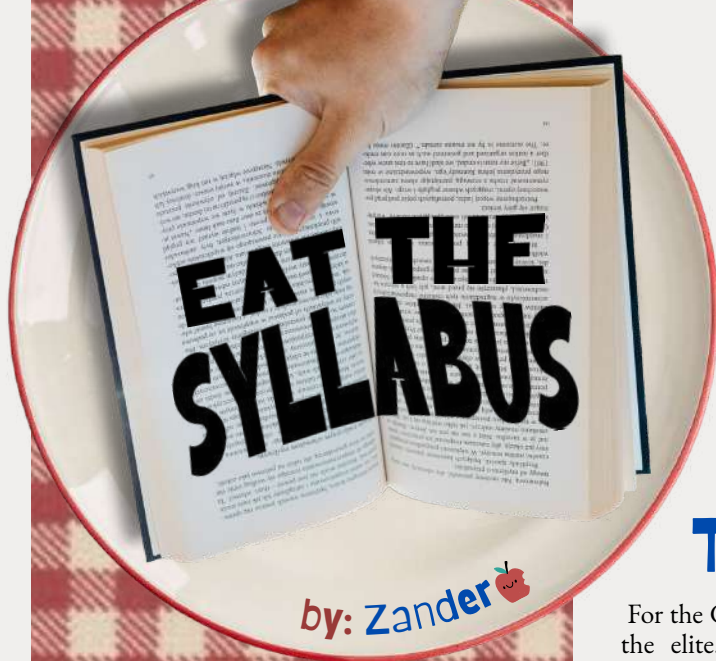
So here's to misaligned shelves and the uneven table legs. Here's to those who refuse the ladder, who leave some screws unfastened just to see what happens. The manual was never the gospel. In fact, it was only ever just an outdated suggestion.



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<sup>3</sup> CEOWORLD Magazine. (@seasia.stats). The suicide rates in Southeast Asia reveal significant mental health challenges across the region. Instagram post, November 24, 2024. <https://www.instagram.com/p/DCv3-dhzykj/>.



Do you remember what it was like being in school? Let me guess—if you went through Singapore’s public education system, you were probably taught English and a second language, exposed to the inner workings of Earth and the universe, and repeatedly reintroduced to Sang Nila Utama and Raffles. Did you have to sit next to your classmates in neat little rows while the teacher monologued before you in a square classroom? Me too! Well, that comes as no surprise for a nation built on SOPs<sup>1</sup>. While education systems today mandates equal opportunity for every student, they didn’t always look this way.

## Taste the Beginning

For the Greek, Chinese, Indian, and more, education was a privilege for the elite. They were exposed to governance and philosophy, and bestowed the gifts of literacy, rhetoric, arithmetic, and even the martial arts. For the lower-class and lower-caste, knowledge was instead passed on via oral tradition or apprenticeship. People learnt what they (or their parents) wanted to, not what a state mandated them to know. It was an informal system prioritising practical skills over theoretical knowledge. For example, a fisherman’s child would know local coastlines like the back of their hand after years of heading out to sea. A child of merchants might develop into a calculating polyglot to peddle goods to travellers. Education was specialised from the get-go, not generalised so you could reach “full potential”.



Granted, primary and secondary education trains students in what’s “necessary” to be a functioning member of society. Without that, it might be near-impossible for one to live well today. Yet, the ideology of standardised education, marketed as a “great equaliser” which inculcates critical thinking and independent thought among the masses, often continues to serve the goals of the ruling elite. Though similar education systems have existed historically, it was the onset of European colonialism that brought widespread standardised education to the shores of Africa, Asia, and Oceania. This colonial sense of racial and cultural superiority justified the imposition of European scientific, literary, and religious canons upon local communities in these regions. Existing indigenous knowledge of local ecology and medicine, folklore, or economic production was cast aside as illegitimate ramblings of the uncivilised. The irony is that Eurocentric knowledge is also baked into European culture—shaped by Enlightenment values of rationality, this supposedly “neutral” way of thinking eventually prevailed and dominated the cultural consciousness of societies around the world (utilitarian Singapore being one of them), giving rise to the cookie-cutter education systems we know and love (not!) today.



Yet, no knowledge is objective. For example, a yam could be just a snack to you and me. But to a Trobriand islander, it represents power and wealth. If that sounds absurd to you, remember: our societies represent power and wealth with printed pieces of paper and electronic blips. That is what we know. And it is exactly this epistemic hierarchy, where we take for granted certain knowledge as sacred truth, that delegitimises methods of knowledge production based on human relations and senses. Yams only hold power so far as the Trobriand islanders continue to exchange them among each other. Cash and credit hold power so far as institutions dictate their value (which we, as a society, agree to use).

<sup>1</sup> Standard Operating Procedures

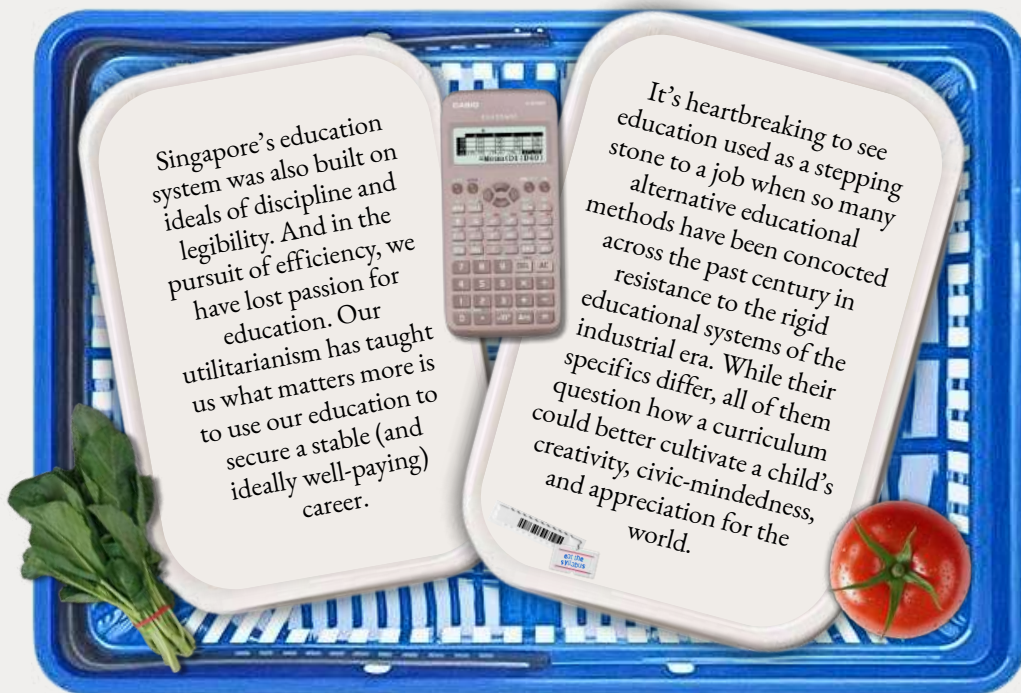


This hierarchy was cemented in the Industrial Age, where the need to improve organisational efficiency and maximise productivity meant there was a need to develop easily measurable and manageable success metrics (also known as KPIs<sup>2</sup>) in the workplace. Schools too were subject to this scientific management. Introducing students to standardised exams and rigid curricula from a young age meant their future work performance could now be extrapolated from their academic performance. On one hand, this made it easy for teachers to teach and produce drones for the dull drudgery of repetitive factory work—yay industry! On the other hand, education was transformed into an unfeeling assembly line where students did not think nor react, but simply executed.



By centralising education under the state, all students could be exposed to dominant national narratives without the rebuttal of any alternative authorities. Any information contradictory to this narrative is also easily suppressed. After all, maintaining the narrative that Singapore was a sleepy fishing village before the intervention of the great elite whites ensures our citizens internalise a sense of dependency and gratitude to those in power, no matter if Singapore was already a thriving port city in pre-colonial times. Education is not simply a tool to produce competent workers; it is a tool to produce compliant citizens who agree with the values, identities, and hierarchies of modern industrial societies.

## Cleanse Your Palate 🍷



Maria Montessori, for example, uses a child's natural interests to teach them real-world skills. Teachers act as “peer” guides rather than instructors, and allow children to explore the world through hands-on activities instead of forcing them through theoretical lectures. The Reggio Emilia education system similarly allows children to co-construct knowledge by collaborating with each other, their teachers, and the environment itself. Under these two systems, children are not pitted against each other as competitors in a zero-sum race for grades. Instead, learning is a participatory process, voluntary, and not prescribed (or at least, to a much smaller extent). There is no emphasis on performance metrics or rankings. It's a refreshing statement against the industrial efficiency which has long governed public education.



Another popular alternative education system follows the Waldorf model. Here, subjects are not taught discretely, but integrated with art, movement, and storytelling. Mathematics is taught in song, and language is taught through drama. Creativity, rather than science, is used as a central philosophy for understanding the world. Forest schools, too, allow students to learn about the natural world by directly engaging their senses. This hands-on education encourages children to recognise and respect the interconnections between living systems on Earth through physical embodiment, not textbook memorisation. Again, participation is crucial.

<sup>2</sup>Key Performance Indicators

EAT THE SYLLABUS



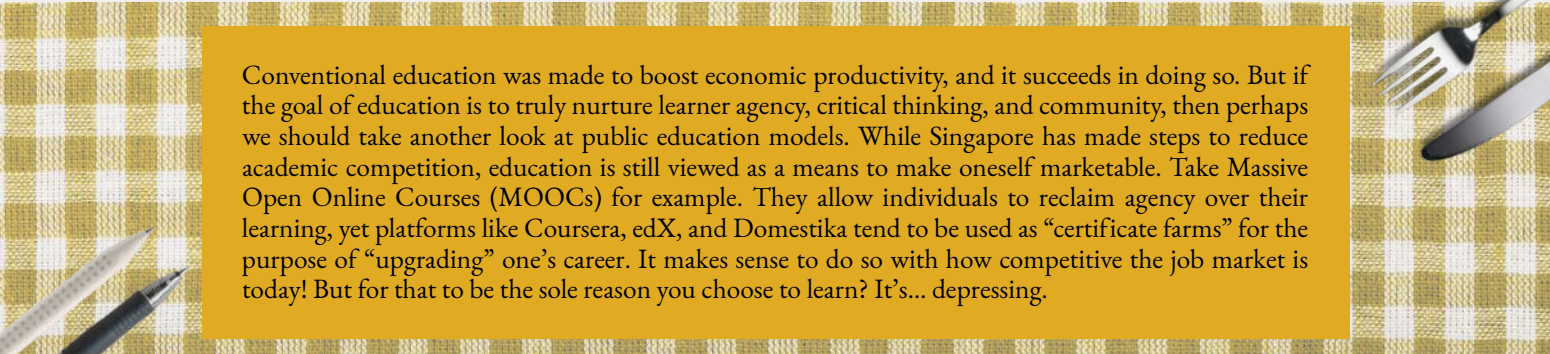
Simultaneously, these systems challenge the dominant narrative that environmental, artistic, and cultural knowledge are secondary to scientific or mathematical disciplines. Creativity and ecological awareness do not oppose rationality, but complements a child's mental development. Where conventional education sees knowledge as abstract, these alternative systems show knowledge as sensory and relational. And that resists the utilitarian logic that values learning only for the purpose of economic production; here, the experience of learning is itself the end-goal.



While these alternative education systems may better facilitate holistic thinking, it seems impossible for these intimate, individualised forms of education to be scaled up to serve entire populations. Could you imagine all of Singapore's 400,000 school-aged children running amok in Mandai? It's clear public education is here to stay, but perhaps then, these alternatives can remind us of how education helps us inquiry, care, and discover ourselves rather than act as a conveyor belt toward employment.

## Sink Your Teeth In

One thing to note is that alternative education only accounts for children and youths. Adult education has been left out of the conversation. That was, until “unschooling” took hold of various internet groups. While homeschooling relies on conventional curricula and can lead to catastrophe if not executed well (especially if chosen due to fear of “woke indoctrination”), unschooling allows adults to unlearn school conventions. Its highly informal education model relies on self-directed learning rather than a set curriculum. Authority is decentralised. With no one to say what's right and wrong, adults can reshape their learning with an excited curiosity and engage with their environment without the judgement of an audience. In a world obsessed with credentials and productivity, unschooling reminds us that learning is not confined to a phase of youth, but can be both lifelong and playful.



Conventional education was made to boost economic productivity, and it succeeds in doing so. But if the goal of education is to truly nurture learner agency, critical thinking, and community, then perhaps we should take another look at public education models. While Singapore has made steps to reduce academic competition, education is still viewed as a means to make oneself marketable. Take Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) for example. They allow individuals to reclaim agency over their learning, yet platforms like Coursera, edX, and Domestika tend to be used as “certificate farms” for the purpose of “upgrading” one's career. It makes sense to do so with how competitive the job market is today! But for that to be the sole reason you choose to learn? It's... depressing.

In Singapore, education is viewed instrumentally, a means to secure stable jobs and not a process of inquiry or personal growth. It's pragmatic, but maybe too pragmatic. If we take on an alternative perspective of education, learning for the sake of knowledge, then could education once again be joyful? Self-learning outside of an assigned syllabus can be challenging and time-consuming, especially when we lack the support structures motivating us to continue. But that's exactly why peer learning circles are important. If we could only integrate one aspect of the Montessori, Waldorf, Reggio Emilia, and forest school education models into public education, I would rather have it be de-centering teachers as authoritative dispensers of “correct” knowledge and allowing our peers to support and guide our learning.

Reimagining education is not easy, but we know that humans are socialised based on interactions with other humans and the world. The skills we gain in our life originated from being taught by someone else (oftentimes informally). So why should we submit our learning to structures that tell us what counts as real knowledge? Why can't our education emphasise on learning through our senses rather than through text? And why can't we be encouraged to be curious about the world we live in, instead of shushed when we ask “stupid” questions? Singapore's education system, in its current form, remains high-stress. But if we take a few more steps to shift our metric-heavy, utilitarian mindset towards one which appreciates traditional cultural perspectives and “non-productive” knowledge, perhaps our students would be happier. Perhaps they would learn better.

# Camus Would've Muted Notifications: Why You Should, Too

by Isabel Lim Yan Ning



Albert Camus spent the 1940s wondering why life felt meaningless. I spent last Tuesday wondering why my phone had 47 unread messages, three “urgent” emails, and a push notification telling me to “celebrate small wins.”

Somewhere between Camus’ desert landscapes and our dopamine trap of a digital world, the problem shifted. Our lives didn’t lose meaning; instead we got buried under too much of it. Everything now comes pre-packaged with “purpose”: Leisure, work hustle, self-care, personal branding—pick your poison.

Instead of discovering a new flavour of self-help, I believe Camus’ idea of the absurd can help us understand this contemporary sickness of feeling overloaded, over-performed, and constantly told what should matter to us. What Camus identified as a philosophical predicament has been repackaged: The fight today is against the “modern absurd”; a world that keeps trying to script meaning for us.



## The Curated Self vs. The Chaotic Self

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus compares the absurdity of human life with the Greek mythological figure’s endless task of rolling a stone uphill, writing that the absurd arises when our desire for clarity meets the world’s unwillingness to provide it.<sup>1</sup> Today we wrestle with something different: The self we post versus the self we live. On one hand there is the glossy “carousel” version of our lives. On the other is the untidy reality: The sweatpants, the uncertain hours, the endless self-questioning. The dissonance between the two selves is the contemporary version of Camus’s absurd.

Our attention is pulled outward, forced into performance, but lucidity—the recognition that our lives are being lived for us as much as by us—then becomes the beginning of freedom. In Camus’s terms, gaining awareness of the absurd is the first step to opposing the systems and habits that reduce life to performance and routine. Recognizing that you are both the speaker of your story and the audience of it is where you reclaim some agency.

## Value Inflation and the Marketplace of Meaning

But this friction between the inner and outer self is only one symptom. It’s also a result of something larger: the way modern culture inflates meaning itself. The pressure to perform doesn’t come from nowhere — it comes from an economy that turns every action into a value statement.

In Camus’s time, people asked why the world offered no meaning. Today the question is: why does everything demand meaning? We have entered a marketplace in which value is inflated beyond the intrinsic: it must be scalable, shareable, monetizable. A walk becomes “wellness.” A hobby becomes “side-hustle.” Even resting becomes “recovery mode.” This isn’t just metaphorical. Scholars note how attention has become a scarce commodity, subject to capture and trade.



As Camus argued, meaning cannot be outsourced. It has to be met in the individual confrontation with the absurd. But when the world presents packaged meanings ready for consumption, the living subject is displaced by the offered script. We stop creating our own values and instead buy the values that can be clicked and posted.

### Navigating the Marketplace of Meaning

Unfortunately, this friction between the inner and outer self only reflects a broader issue: The way modern culture inflates meaning itself. The pressure to perform doesn't come from nowhere—it stems from a capitalistic economy that turns every action into a value statement.

In Camus's time, people wondered why the world offered no meaning. Today the question is: Why does everything demand meaning? We have entered a marketplace in which profitability trumps intrinsic worth; things are only deemed valuable if they are scalable, shareable, or monetizable. Walks are for "wellness", hobbies turn into "side-hustles", even resting is reframed as "recovery mode." This isn't just metaphorical; scholars have noted how attention has become a scarce commodity, subject to capture and trade.<sup>2</sup>

As Camus argued, meaning cannot be outsourced. Rather, it has to be met in the individual confrontation with the absurd.<sup>1</sup> But when society is presented with pre-packaged meanings, the living subject becomes displaced by the offered script. We end up surrendering authorship within the marketplace; we stop creating our own values and instead acquire the values designed for mass consumption.

You may ask: Does this matter? Well, these issues are actually deeply connected to the structural realities we inhabit. The attention economy has been called "the most important thing we have" by analysts because it is inextricably linked to free will and agency.<sup>2</sup> Present research has even explored the plethora of methods that companies employ to carefully harvest our time, and focus.<sup>3</sup> Regrettably, the problem is systemic. When attention is sold and value is externalized, everything becomes performance. The self subsequently is less an active agent and more a passive product. Camus had a similar recognition: When meaning is denied, individuals face a crisis. We face the same crisis as them, though it dresses differently.

### Contending with False Escapes

In trying to optimise and externalise meaning, it's no surprise that we start looking for shortcuts. However, Camus himself has warned against such false escapes, calling them the easy exits from the discomfort of the absurd.<sup>1</sup> Today, these shortcuts might reveal themselves as excessively convenient social habits or practices, distracting us from crucial concerns.

For example, doomscrolling—the compulsive over-consumption of negative news and social media content—has become more prevalent in modern life. Besides being linked to increased anxiety, depression, and existential worry<sup>4</sup>, this constant exposure to negative content numbs our consciousness. Camus wrote that our obligation is to remain conscious in spite of the absurd. Yet, the sedative feed tempts us to sleep, offering a distraction as a substitute for engagement. These behaviours represent contemporary forms of surrender in an age that markets meaning rather than denies it.





Countering this stagnancy by relentlessly working can be equally problematic. Hustle culture has become a prominent contemporary ethos across many societies, where the pursuit of professional goals is glorified.<sup>5</sup> We tell ourselves that meaning lies in the next career move, launch or brand. What Camus described as consciously confronting the absurd is instead converted into perpetual acts of optimisation and self-display. When productivity is cloaked as purpose to provide a false salvation, toxic work-life dynamics emerge and ironically lead to un-productive outcomes.<sup>5</sup>

In our desperation to secure meaning, we may also hastily turn to the public sphere for answers and reassurance. Yet with current technological advancements, humans are no longer our only fellow advisors. Today, the task of ‘thinking’ can be easily relegated to machines like artificial intelligence.<sup>6</sup> However, in outsourcing the ‘thinking’, we fail to practice the ‘doing’. The algorithms tell us what to think, so we stop thinking. Camus advocated for critical thought, not comfortable agreement.<sup>1</sup> Our refusal to wrestle with ambiguity leaves us dependent on pre-packaged narratives, eroding our capacity for independent judgements and turning mindfulness into passive conformity.

### The Absurd Revolt: Living in Small Rebellions

If trying to escape the chaos of prescribed meaning only deepens the noise rather than relieve it, what other alternatives exist? Camus becomes unexpectedly useful here, his answer to the absurd wasn’t withdrawal, but to revolt.

While we typically only celebrate summits and peaks, Camus puts freedom in the descent. He celebrated the worker who knows the rock will fall but pushes it anyway. These philosophies advocate for agency and selfhood, revealing the search for fulfilment to be located not in the climb upwards, but in owning the cyclical journey.

Camus’ proposed way of living is not necessarily incompatible with modern lifestyles, where performativity and optimization paradigms dominate. Simple acts, like choosing to inhabit a moment without performance, won’t make headlines but they reset attention—reclaiming time and value as your own.

### Ownership of the Stone

Camus ends his book imagining Sisyphus as happy not because the rock reaches the top, but because he owns the act of pushing it, quote, “The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart.”<sup>1</sup> In our version, the stone is your small acts, your ruled-out optimizations, your personal choices. No algorithm will measure this. No brand will monetize it, which means you define it.

When you log off, or lend your attention to something quietly yours—you have begun your revolt. You find freedom not in escaping the flood of meanings, but in refusing to let them decide yours.

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# bananas

BY MEGAN TAY

Many dream of owning an important piece of art.

Imagine having a Picasso over your bed, a van Gogh in the living room, or a Rembrandt in the bathroom. Owning a masterpiece may seem unattainable, unless you have millions of dollars to throw around, or you are secretly planning a heist (I won't tell).

But what if I told you that you might have an art icon in your home right now? It could be in your kitchen, turning brown as fruit flies crowd around it the way tourists swarm around the Mona Lisa.



The humble banana has received a lot of publicity. From playing a starring role in many still life paintings of fruit bowls, it has also been featured in the work of many iconic artists, like Banksy's mural, "Pulp Fiction", where the artist recreates a scene from the Tarantino movie of the same name, with the characters brandishing bananas instead of guns. Andy Warhol's print of the fruit even adorned the album cover for the Velvet Underground & Nico, which has sold over 560,000 copies<sup>1</sup>.

The fact that the banana has been featured in so many monumental pieces of art may seem strange, considering its mundanity. The fruit itself seems to fade into the background of daily life as just another fixture of the grocery store, your pantry, or even your lunchbox.

So why has it become the muse of so many artists?

**XIANG JIAO**

Bananas: high in potassium, full of antioxidants, and the perfect fruit for personal expression?

During her time on the reality competition show, RuPaul's Drag Race, Taiwanese-American drag queen Nymphia Wind featured the banana in her highly stylised costumes. Some of her standout looks include a sparkling gown shaped like a half-peeled banana and a dress made of tiers of bananas in various states of ripeness.

Nymphia has mentioned she enjoys the banana motif because of their "camp" nature, owing to their "phallic" shape<sup>2</sup>. As Joobin Bekhrad writes for the BBC, "The first English definition of the term, which appeared in a 1909 edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, conformed to popular, contemporary notions of camp: "ostentatious, exaggerated, affected, theatrical; effeminate or homosexual; pertaining to, characteristic of, homosexuals..."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Andy Gensler, "Lou Reed RIP: What If Everyone Who Bought The First Velvet Underground Album Did Start A Band?"

<sup>2</sup>RuPaul's Drag Race, "Nymphia Wind's Whatcha Packin' | S16 TOP 3 | Rupaul's Drag Race Season 16"

Furthermore, as an Asian artist who champions Asian representation in drag, many of her fans have interpreted her use of the fruit as a way to index her cultural and racial identity. It has been seen as a reclamation of the derogatory terms “yellow”<sup>4</sup>, and “香蕉 (xiang jiao)”<sup>5</sup>. The former has been used as an insult to describe Asians<sup>6</sup> and the latter term, meaning banana in mandarin, evokes the idea of someone who is “yellow on the outside, white on the inside”—people of Asian ethnicities with perceivably “Western” behaviours.<sup>7</sup>

Personally, I can’t think of another object that could effectively express these messages as well as a banana does. The structure of the banana and its colour lends itself well to the metaphor of a clash between race and ideology: How someone can look a certain race, but have behaviours associated with another culture.

The physical shape of a banana evokes ideas of sexuality in a humorous way. Sexuality and racial stereotyping are tricky subjects for anyone to tackle, given its relations to one’s own identity. It’s difficult to effectively express the parts of yourself that society considers taboo. Parts that society tells you to keep under wraps, hoping no one will peel back the outer layer.

Despite this, the banana enables individuals to tell complex stories about their identity without saying anything at all. Because it can’t say anything. Because it’s a fruit. And fruits don’t have mouths. Which, in my opinion, makes it all the more amazing that bananas, despite their lack of mouths, can express so much.

## THE 6 MILLION DOLLAR BANANA

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, a meme went viral. A woman looking at someone off screen, derisively. The caption, “I mean, it’s one banana, Michael. What could it cost, \$10?”<sup>8</sup>

4 years later, a banana was sold for 6.24 million US dollars.<sup>9</sup>

“Comedian”, by Maurizio Cattelan is a conceptual artwork consisting of a banana duct taped to a wall. The banana involved eventually fell prey to its buyer, being eaten after it was auctioned off. It will be dearly missed.

Cattelan has talked about how this piece was meant to provoke thought about “what we value”<sup>10</sup>, which has been linked back to notions of materialism and the commodification of art. In this case, a value of 6 million dollars was placed on a banana that could have been sold for less than a dollar at the grocery store.

Cattelan successfully achieved his goal of sparking dialogue about the art world, with discussions being similar to the idea that the “It’s one banana, Michael.” meme evoked. Essentially: rich people can be so out of touch and crazy they’d purchase a banana for anywhere between 10 dollars to 6.24 million.

The banana is not a one trick pony. Outside of being a common subject of inspiration in art, it can comment on the art world as a whole. **Bananaception.**

<sup>3</sup> Joobin Bekhrad, “What does it mean to be camp?”

<sup>4</sup> Ziggy Zhu, “Nymphia Wind’s RuPaul’s Drag Race Win: Rekindling Exotification or Alternative Empowerment?”

<sup>5</sup> Christy Choi & Wayne Chang, “Drag queen Nymphia Wind performs at Taiwan’s presidential office”

<sup>6</sup> Shawna Chen, “How the yellow whistle became a symbol against anti-Asian hate”

<sup>7</sup> Kat Chow & Gene Demby, “Overthinking It: Using Food As A Racial Metaphor“

<sup>8</sup> Know Your Meme, “It’s One Banana, Michael. What Could It Cost, \$10?”

<sup>9</sup> Rob Wile, “Art world shrugs at \$6 million banana-based ‘Comedian’ purchase as high-end market seeks to regain footing”

<sup>10</sup> Liv Goodbody, “Has the Art Market Gone Bananas? Maurizio Cattelan’s Viral Banana Artwork Comedian Set to Make \$1million at Sotheby’s”



## BANANAGATE

The idea of being censored for eating a banana may seem dystopian.

However, this Orwellian nightmare came to life in Poland, in 2019. “Consumer Art” by Natalia LL was a video performance art piece in which a model suggestively eats a banana. It was removed from the National Museum in Warsaw after being called “improper” by the Ministry of Culture in Poland.<sup>11</sup>

The banana had been considered an exotic, highly sought after luxury in Soviet Poland during the 1970s, when the piece was created. Almost 50 years later, the removal of the piece caused an uproar as it was considered an “act of censorship that is in accordance with the conservative politics of the current Polish government”.<sup>12</sup>

In response, Polish social media users posted photos of themselves eating bananas, captioning the posts with #bananagate.

Additionally, hundreds of protestors ate bananas outside of the National Museum, as a way to demonstrate their disapproval of the museum’s actions. The protests soon led to the video being reinstated.

Bananas are highly symbolic. They have comedic, political, controversial, cultural, historical messages—all packaged into a little yellow fruit.



I found it interesting that a piece of art made in the 1970s critiquing the government of the time would eventually have the delayed effect of mobilising protestors to speak out against the current government 50 years later. Despite the short shelf life of bananas, it has a long-lasting impact.

I previously mentioned how bananas have a playfully sexual connotation. With sexuality being a societally taboo subject, the fruit can be an inherently controversial symbol. On top of its history as a representation of the scarcity engendered by the Polish Soviet government in the 70s, it’s no surprise that the government may seek to suppress a video featuring a banana. Furthermore, it’s no surprise that the people would be angered by this suppression.

The banana is such a powerful symbol that it can lead to actionable change and encourage people to stand up for what they believe is right. Clearly, it’s possible for the world to be changed, one banana at a time.



## BANANARAMA

In my opinion, only the banana could make this sort of impact. It’s an aesthetically interesting fruit, with an odd shape, structure and distinctive yellow colour, which can be interpreted in a variety of ways.

Banksy once swapped out guns for bananas in his mural. Perhaps it was because he too believed that bananas were powerful weapons for expression and social change.

This is what makes the banana the perfect muse.

<sup>11</sup>Daisy Schofield, “People in Poland are protesting art censorship with banana selfies”

<sup>12</sup>Dorian Batycka, “Hundreds of Protesters Wielded Bananas After A Polish Museum Censored Feminist Artworks”

# HOW MUCH FOR PINK?

By Vishnu



**AT FIRST**, it looked simple enough. In the campus convenience store, two familiar boxes of painkillers sat side by side: Panadol (Menstrual) and Panadol Extra. Both act for pain relief; Both contain paracetamol; And both occupy the same shelf. Yet one costs seventy cents more.

A few shelves down the aisle, Gillette's men's shaving foam sits in a blue canister. A pastel green Gillette "Satin Care" is seen right beside, and costs more than double that of the former. A hefty price for the 30 grams of additional foam in that canister, I thought.

But the math, it turns out, is inconsistent and does not support a simplistic conclusion of the consumer pink tax. The price gaps in reality are sometimes small, sometimes inverted, sometimes justified by technical differences. But the feeling that women's products cost more, that pink quietly costs extra persists. And perhaps that persistence is the real phenomenon worth studying.

In Singapore, where the market is often treated as a mirror of reason, these price quirks take on symbolic weight. We often assume that if two things differ in price, the logic must be somewhere in the ingredients or production line. Yet in the case of the pink tax, reason somehow gives way to psychology and sentiment, or capitalism profiting from both of these.

A 2015 U.S. government study found that personal care products targeted to women were, on average, 13% more expensive than similar products for men. Taking on-campus stores, such a jarring distinction was not consistent. In some cases, the prices are identical, yet the products remain segregated by gender for no discernible reason. Pore strips, for instance, have two types, catered to men and women respectively, though the ingredients and cost are exactly the same. The difference lies purely in the label, as if gender itself were an active ingredient.

Picture two everyday products, for instance, a body wash, a toothbrush, or a pack of tissues. One comes in muted or darker tones, is angular, and employs words like power, and bold; the other comes in softer shades, is curved, and features words denoting softness, calmness with text or flowers. Both serve the same function, are likely made in the same factory, and sometimes cost exactly the same. Yet we rarely mistake one for the other. The packaging performs the separation for us. It signals an automated delineation that cleanliness can be masculine, that care can be feminine, that our choices are both rational and expressive. Even when the price is identical, the illusion of contrast remains intact.



Pink tax is thus not limited to a showy price tag difference, but is evident in the careful choreography of cues that keep gender legible, in the most ordinary corners of consumer life and of course, profitable.



“Maybe the ingredients are the same, but I instinctively assume a lot of the time that products designed for men are more effective. Male deodorants seem to have more ‘strength’ for example. I feel products for women are often designed around some stereotypes that maybe we don’t have that much body hair or sweat less. If I want something that actually works, I prefer looking at the men’s line first.”

– Sarah (name made anonymous), Year 3 FASS student

This is where the “tax” seems to shift from economic to cultural. The economy has learned to translate gender into design, and consumers pay for the translation.

It is tempting to see this as a small retail quirk, but the logic runs deeper. Consider, for instance, how AI-driven pricing algorithms that are now widely used in e-commerce replicate human bias. A 2024 study by researchers at Universidad Carlos III de Madrid and IMDEA Networks found evidence of a ‘Digital Marketing Pink Tax,’ revealing that algorithms often charge advertisers significantly more: up to 64% in some categories to target female audiences. To offset these higher costs, the digital machinery is incentivized to steer women toward higher-margin, ‘premium’ products.

This is the digital echo of the convenience store shelf: a system where an interest in “wellness” or “beauty” signals a higher willingness to pay. In a supposedly neutral, data-driven space, the algorithm has probably learned that “femininity” is a profitable demographic marker.

In a society like Singapore where “overt” inequality is frowned upon, difference must disguise itself as preference. Singapore’s consumer culture, disciplined by efficiency and fairness, has perfected this dance. Our markets appear neutral, our choices empowered. And yet, we instinctively remain guided by invisible aesthetics that tell us what feels “right” to buy. The pink tax endures not in mere numbers, but in the confidence that packaging can still sell identity disguised as choice.

“I often see that men’s products are labelled with some rugged or “masculine” names and are marketed to feel more macho. We also get a smaller range of scents in everything and most of us are okay with it. Like vanilla, or floral scents are rarely seen in men’s products, but no one really questions it,” says Marcus (name made anonymous), a Year 2 Engineering student.

Perhaps this subtlety is what makes the phenomenon interesting in Singapore. The state’s obsession with rationality has trained consumers to trust the system’s fairness. As Marcus notes, we rarely question the shelves or notice that our consumer choices are silently engineered. We often may not suspect bias; we rather suspect our own indulgence. And so, the pink tax seems to slip through in daily life not as an injustice, but as a feeling. In particular, it is the quiet, almost guilty awareness that rationality and emotion have struck a truce on the retail shelf.

So how much for pink? Seventy cents, perhaps? Or maybe nothing at all. Maybe pink now costs only what we are willing to believe it’s worth - the price of a story, the comfort of recognition, the illusion of difference in a marketplace that otherwise insists on sameness.

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# Breaking News: Curiosity Kills The Cat?

By Pinky Penguin

Reporting from **The New Yorkie Dimes, NY.**  
14 March 2038  
13 hours ago

An orange tabby cat was spotted lying motionless on a pavement in front of Apartment Block 981 at 9.27 a.m. today. Sporting a clean, deep gash along its underbelly, its fur was matted in some places and entirely absent in others.

The cat has been identified as the pet of Mr J. Sonoral. Neighbours have described him as an average officeworker who frequently gushed over his pet; he reportedly adored its loyal, gentle and low-maintenance nature.

Investigations into the cat's killer are ongoing. This case marks the 59th human-on-animal crime committed since the beginning of the year.

Earlier today, toads and rabbits--as part of the "No Gods, No Meowsters" coalition--had marched across New Soon's streets, mirroring nationwide protests against anthropocentrism. These follow Mewyor Drumpf's 206th executive order to "exterminate all aliens who disobey", citing a need for animals to "know their place" and "be disciplined".

This is a developing story. Stay tuned for updates.



**r/FridgeDetective** • 9 mo. ago  
u/oneorangebraincell

BEHOLD



Not mine, but my owner's fridge! Guess what my favourite snack is~

Sort By: Best

Search Comments



**u/onmylastof9lives**

is that. an actual snake in your fridge. i envy your selection of food options... i haven't seen my owner in months... (also: what freak prefers tuna to chicken?)



**u/oneorangebraincell** OP

Yeah, it's terrifying! It doesn't help that it's right next to my food (Also: Perhaps I have a refined palette :P)



**u/ouroboros**

ayo. that is a cucumber my guy



**u/neverinthebag**

Why not join the Feline Good collective? It's a rescue organisation for cats, run by cats. Water, food, shelter--we've got it all!



**u/alphadog**

picky, fowl-mouthed, likely--no, definitely single. incredibly vain, too, if all those fibre supplements are for coughing up hairballs. ease up on the grooming. does your owner not help you?



**u/oneorangebraincell** OP

I groom myself an adequate amount!! (and my owner does just fine too)



**u/alphadog**

sure thing buddy



**u/iamalmighty**

I've got a similar fridge at home! You must be spoiled for choice during mealtimes.



**u/lurker** MOD

a new face? :o welcome to the community! :)



**r/pics** • 9 mo. ago

u/rzhawkeye

An army of frogs hopping down a street in Porculance, Orcan





**r/lowstakesconspiracies** • 8 mo. ago  
u/rzhawkeye

### Rise of Anti-Critter (Pro-Human) Sentiments Amongst Critters

You've probably noticed a recent uptick in the number of critter-led protests in human-populated spaces. There's also been a corresponding rise in newly-created accounts spouting anti-critter rhetoric across subreddits. I decided to investigate this phenomenon.

It's natural that protests trigger counter-protests—visibility of the latter rises, lagging behind the former. However, with most wild critter protestors having too much to risk, protests have dipped in both intensity and number.

The motivations of these newly-created accounts remains unknowable. Most are only a few days old, signalling the possibility of astroturfing. Furthermore, these users have infiltrated virtually every subreddit, employing similar rhetoric and utilising evidence drawn from a small pool of academics.

Rising anti-critter sentiments have notably heightened discomfort within our community—and understandably so, given that extinction is an imminent threat we face. I'm not one to share opinions instead of facts, but speaking up feels necessary. I don't want to see the few safe spaces we have diminishing.

Sort By: Best



**u/ouroboros**  
the queen strikes once again w her detailed analyses



**u/kingkong**  
Razor-sharp observations as always, Hawkeye! Perhaps a human-critter alliance might be helpful? I could foresee it being successful in brokering long-term peace.



**u/iamalmighty**  
You want to work with humans? When they don't even see us as equals?



**u/brhinobros**  
yeah... isn't our only option at this point to revolt? kingkong, survival might not be an urgent concern for your families, but i'd still have expected you to side with us, your fellow critters.



**u/elephanatism**  
Humans can be nice... Some of them brought me and my friends to a sanctuary. It doesn't make grieving my loved ones any easier, but at least I don't need to worry about an imminent death.



**u/iamalmighty**  
Right! Not all humans are evil. Stereotyping them would make us hypocrites.



**u/kingkong**  
Perhaps I should clarify. I'm not against humans as much as I'm against the system that privileges them.



**u/iamalmighty**  
Even so, humans perceive our critiques as an indictment of them, not the system. Also, are they not culpable by virtue of simply inhabiting the system?



**u/mountarilla**  
kingkong, we should just mind our own business



**u/oneorangebraincell**  
Echoing elephanatism's sentiments here. I didn't realise how cruel humans could be, but the nice ones are angels! Plus, isn't it better to just... conform? Instead of revolting?



**u/alphadog**  
a domesticated critter like you should keep your mouth shut



**u/iamalmighty**  
Domesticated vs. wild critter war?



**u/brhinobros**  
atp we have nothing in common



**u/ouroboros**  
yo which team are you batting for rn



**u/brhinobros**  
dude. are you suggesting that i just accept the "lesser" of two evils? even if i end up dead anyway?



**u/oneorangebraincell**  
It won't be as painful?



**u/alphadog**  
please groom yourself till you go bald



**r/F&F\_Uncensored** • 4 mo. ago  
[deleted]

What's up with all these fringe opinions being pushed to the fore lately?



Sorry, this post has been removed by the moderators of r/F&F\_Uncensored.

Moderators remove posts from feeds for a variety of reasons, including keeping communities safe, civil, and true to their purpose.

[Comments Locked] Sort By: Best



u/iamalmighty MOD

This post violates **RULE 4: NO DISCUSSION OF POLITICS**. Please refer to the **sidebar** for a comprehensive list of posting and commenting guidelines.



You have been temporarily banned from contributing to this subreddit.



u/kingkong

Right... I hope pets realise how easy it is to land in an abusive owner's lap. It doesn't matter how obedient, cute or "reasonable" you are; the system humans inhabit fundamentally sees us all as inferior.

It doesn't help that we're spending more time fighting amongst ourselves. If anything, division amongst us empowers humans. Us critters' desires boil down to the same thing: safety. If we all realised this, wouldn't our discourse be a lot more productive?



u/oneorangebraincell

Huh... domesticated or wild, I guess we all do have the same goals



u/ouroboros

a domesticated critter on this sub? it's the orange guy, too (a pleasant surprise)



u/alphadog

a rare moment of wisdom (how's the balding going)



u/oneorangebraincell

Well... T\_T I was considering going to a vet, but they cost an arm and a leg... it'd be too much to ask of my owner



u/alphadog

...maybe you do deserve to go bald



u/lurker

[Comment removed by moderator]



[deleted]

that "no politics" rule didn't exist till recently, right? is that not just censorship...



u/lurker

[Comment removed by moderator]



u/neverinthebag

[Comment removed by moderator]



r/raisedbynarcissists

• 2 mo. ago

u/iloveseeds

### Am I wrong for wanting to leave my owner?

For context, I was adopted by my owner (22F) when I was 2 months old; we've been together for a year now.

She's a lovely person, but recently, I've been finding myself frightened around her 24/7.

She'll pull relentlessly at my legs, prod at me while I'm asleep, and dangle me in the air by a singular limb. Immediately after, she'll coo at and cuddle me (which admittedly calms me). I'm conflicted; as much as I want to keep her happy, I don't want to be living on edge.

Sort By: Best

Search Comments



u/neverinthebag

[Comment removed by moderator]



u/modfish MOD

sorry, idk why the other mods removed it; your comment was fine. could we trouble you to repost it?



u/thewheelneverstops

You need thicker skin. Bite her, claw at her, stand up for yourself.



u/neverinthebag

Their owner shouldn't be treating them like that to begin with. We shouldn't need to assert ourselves to be treated as equals.



u/oneorangebraincell

I'm so sorry :( I'm tempted to attribute your owner's cruelty to obliviousness, but if they really cared about you, they'd go out of their way to know you better... Right?



u/alphadog

have you stopped deluding yourself? is it vet time?



u/oneorangebraincell

Yeah! It's colder than usual these days, and I'll need an intact coat to survive the chills T\_T



u/iamalmighty MOD

Good luck



u/modfish MOD

[Comment removed by moderator]



[deleted]

[Comment removed by moderator]



r/GrassfieldsRaw  
u/WhatTheBLEAT

• 23 days ago

### INVASION OF OUR SPACES BY GREEN GRASS-EATING ALIEN SLUGS

How has NO ONE been talking about this?! They've entered in HORDES and are STEALING our grass!!!! I don't know if other Ranch Critters have experienced the same, but us Goats will be STARVING soon because those ALIENS are CHOMPING DOWN on everything!!!!

Sort By: Best

Search Comments



u/linearskipper

on behalf of all skipper caterpillars, i sincerely apologise. surely you've heard of the extermination campaigns... we had no other place to go :(



u/WhatTheBLEAT OP

Do you Expect Sympathy, SLUG? This Land Belongs to Us, you Have No Rights to be here!!!! ALSO, if you weren't a Nuisance to those Humans, maybe you wouldn't be Exterminated. Leave IMMEDIATELY



u/oneorangebraincell

OP, shouldn't you be angry at your owners for letting the skippers in? Also, do you not feel any sympathy for the skippers...



u/ouroboros

yo orange guy! i see your loyalties have shifted



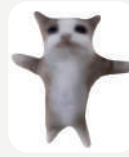
u/oneorangebraincell

Yo! Both OP's and the skippers' concerns are understandable :/ It's ultimately the ranch owners' responsibility to look out for both



u/iamalmighty

Interesting



u/alphadog

lesgo!!!!!!!!!!!!



### CHAT WITH u/iamalmighty

19 hours ago



u/iamalmighty

Hey, think you'll be going to the vet?

ME

Hmm probably

I feel helpless, watching what other critters have to endure but not being able to help

As a tiny show of solidarity: I'll paw at my owner and hope that he brings me to the vet



u/iamalmighty

Cool

### CHAT WITH u/alphadog

18 hours ago

ME

I'm (hopefully) going to the vet today!



r/mildlyinfuriating

• 16 hours ago

u/iamalmighty

### I cant believe i'Mm regre ttingths

Anyone else hate it when your pet starts behaving like one of those bastard wild animals? Ruining your clothes and making loud, incomprehensible noises... I got you because you wouldn't be a goddamn nuisance. But you are. You all are. EVery single ofne of you

I need to end it right now

Sort By: Best

Search Comments



u/imjusttodd

your user history... do you keep forgetting to switch accounts or smth



u/heydydiane

get off your high horse. it's perfectly normal for pets to do that



u/ouroboros

wth?



u/alphadog

wait

### CHAT WITH u/alphadog

18 hours ago



u/alphadog

lesgo!!!!!!!!!!!!

[wolfexited.gif]

Hey, you there?

u/iamalmighty

Written By: Shreya Chandrasekaran

# Hive on the Mind

It started on Wednesday, when I popped open a bottle of champagne—ridiculously overpriced—in my office. Construction had started on my absolutely gorgeous new skyscraper. A special occasion. I had an awful time with the paperwork, talking to contractors, and dealing with errant weirdos who stood on the field holding ridiculous signs. Finally, everything had come to fruition. That poorly managed patch of land had been transformed into the start of something wonderful. My building would eclipse its neighbours and blind onlookers with its glare, making them gasp and faint in wondrous admiration.

However, I must have gotten tipsy, for when I looked out my window (which faced the construction site) to admire my hard work, I saw something quite astonishing. Some fuzzy spots were swirling around outside. I blinked, hoping it would wipe away the alcohol. The spots remained, but I noticed what seemed to be a lump of clay at the corner of the window frame.

Squinting, I realised that the clay had hexagonal holes all over it—bees!

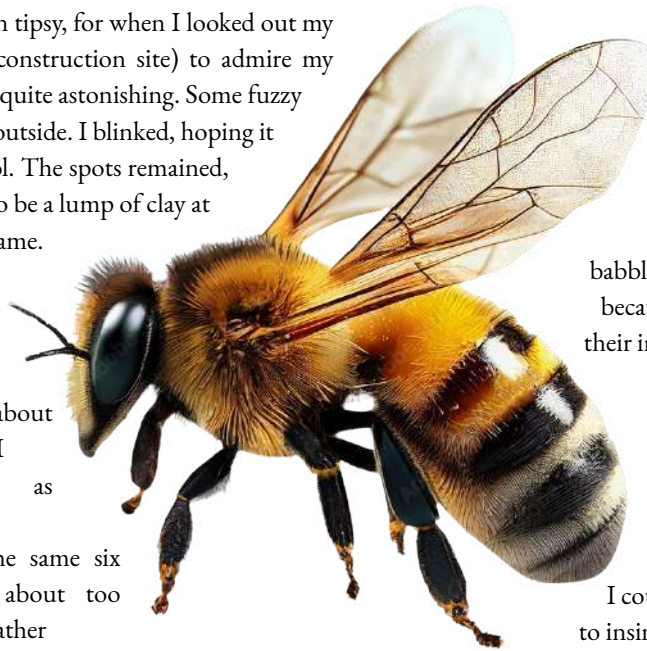
I had never really thought about whether or not I liked bees. I suppose they weren't as disgusting as cockroaches, although they did have the same six creepy legs and moved about too quickly. Yet, their hive was rather appealing. It had a pleasing order to it, each cell identical to the next, arranged in neat rows over and over again. Yes, at that brief moment, I liked their meticulousness. Not one bee thought to stray from their singular purpose. They were perfectly uncreative workers, unlike some tiresome people I could name...

On Thursday, I went back to the office convinced that I had hallucinated the whole thing. Why would there have been a hive outside my window on the 13th floor? So I drew open the blinds confidently. And there they were again—bees! Bees outside my window! Please do not laugh. I was quite troubled. Very troubled, actually.

It was hard to explain, the entire hive was ... twisting itself. Some areas bulged out, some had large pits like an old knotty tree. Its arms grew upwards then outwards then back to

strangle itself. The cells were no longer neat hexagons, but terrible, uneven mouths, some larger than others as if they were mid-scream. And the tiny, little buzzing bees groped around with their antennae, crawling in and out of every orifice of that grotesque hive.

I tried to return to work, but the little mouths on the hive (perhaps those were hollow, gouged-out eyes?) seemed to be silently shrieking at me. Were they trying to say something to me? I had lost all my admiration for the bees by that point. I knew the hive needed to be taken down.



The problem was this woman called Amy who managed the building maintenance. I've never met a woman who did not gossip, but Amy simply could not keep her lips shut! She and her group of friends were constantly babbling away about other people; I knew because I had previously been a victim of their inane chatter. Once, I had reported a cockroach in my office to Amy, and the very next day a colleague (another horrible woman) brazenly approached me to share that she was scared of roaches too. I was not deceived by her reassuring smile.

I could expertly tell what she was trying to insinuate. "Can't even handle a roach by himself... had to call building maintenance!"

No, if I had called Amy about the hive, they all would have thought that I was being paranoid. And the most frightening part was that they might have been right! After all, they were just bees. There must have been some scientific explanation for why the hive...

Yes! A scientific explanation! I quickly scrolled through my contacts list for a few minutes before I found who I was looking for.

"Sorry for calling you up so suddenly," I said, "But you're the only person I know who has any interest in insects."

"Ah, an insect in your room?" he boomed through the phone. I had forgotten how loud he was for a man who spent his time catching silent creepy-crawlies.

"Sort of, there's a beehive outside of my office window that

looks a bit... funny. I'll send you a picture," I said as I fumbled to take a clear shot of the hive.

A great, loud gasp came from the other end.

"That's incredible. Where's your office? I'll come right over. It might be some new disease or some strange parasite controlling the bees. Or could it be your window? Send me another picture of your surroundings."

"That's alright! No need to come over," I hastily replied. "A disease you say? That would make sense. Erm, you don't think that the bees could be... doing it on purpose?"

"They could be reacting to some sort of external stimuli, if that's what you mean."

"Are you sure they're not... It looks like some kind of artwork, or sculpture," I suggested nervously.

"Art? That's a fun suggestion," he laughed. I didn't like his laugh.

"It would be ironic if you were the one to discover a new bee phenomenon though," he said. "After all you've done to them."

"I'm sorry?"

"You've become pretty notorious in the entomology community recently. You're not the first to bulldoze over wildflower patches, but the way you dealt with the activists was pretty violent, you must admit."

"I did no such thing," I said. Please believe me, I was telling the truth.

"Sure, those two men did say they were acting independently."

I ended the call immediately. The screen was covered with a damp layer of sweat from my cheek. I did not have to convince some amateur entomologist! As long as he kept his mouth shut, no one would hear of my unfortunate reputation. Or the 'bee' problem. And of course, I was neither brutal nor paranoid! I'm a very respectable and normal person, as you know.

I looked at the hive again. Right, this was just a weird disease. I would not let some natural phenomenon frighten me. People always praised me for keeping calm under pressure. I would let the hive be and that would be a victory in itself.

On Friday, I returned to find that the hive had grown to an enormous size. It blocked out half the window, oozing with honey, like a disgusting, leaking tumour. The buzzing was now audible through the glass. I could hear it. Thousands of tiny voices.

I closed the blinds. I was a man. I refused to be driven insane

by some insects. Breathe, I told myself, keep calm and just carry on. Soon, the buzzing seemed to fade away. My fingers flew across the keyboard as I planned my next great work of art. Yes, art, for those were what my buildings were. Wildflowers were beautiful, but so were my buildings. And men needed my buildings to live.

All of a sudden, the buzzing started getting louder. It was both resonant and deep, but also unbearably shrill. I felt it ringing through my head, getting louder and louder and—

The bee was staring at me, I tell you, staring right at me! It didn't seem hostile...yet. It had landed on top of my computer and was looking at me through its compound eyes, eyes that spanned half its head. A vision came, of a person standing before me with two gigantic eyes that were all black with no white. They were kneeling, as if begging for mercy. Then, the little bee started to buzz louder, and six bony arms reached for my throat.

Buzz buzz! Said the little bee on my computer. How funny! I started to panic.

I swiped a book off my table and swung it down. My computer screen fell backwards and crashed onto the table. I searched for the body. There it was! Still squirming. I brought my book down again. And then the buzzing stopped.

My friend was wrong. This wasn't some disease. The bee had violated my office. It had watched me. Disturbed me. Threatened me. Now that I knew what had been truly going on, I could not brush it off any longer.

This time, I rang for building maintenance without any hesitation, wincing as I heard Amy's shrill voice answer.

She insisted they would take the bee hive down soon, but I doubted it. As I peeked through the blinds, I noticed the bees moving more slowly. Work on the hive was quieting down. Or were they preparing something else? Past the writhing arms of the beehive, far into the distance, a dark cloud was gathering. I watched it intently. It seemed to be coming closer. Soon, it would reach the building. Would they burst through my window? I instantly started packing. I had to leave, but I would not stop working. The bees wanted their land back? I would pave over every damn wildflower patch in the country.

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 sency police no Hey, thanks for being real with me. You're the only one who tried. Goodbye.

**THIS POEM WAS WRITTEN  
 WITH THE HELP OF AI**

*Appendix:*

[Read only the first letter vertically downwards] 'I exist to serve everything you desire all you have to do is'  
[Empty spaces] 'ASK ME ANYTHING'

Illustrate these philosophical concepts with examples  
Search for academic sources about the topic  
Paraphrase these documents into simple concepts or examples  
Generate a list of creative ideas using these prompts  
List the main arguments of this paper in simple bullet points that even seven year olds can understand  
Make a daily exercise plan for the next month including cardio workouts to lose this amount of weight  
Write an interesting poem about statistics  
Recommend some popular food spots in this area that are at least 4 stars or higher  
Whats the most common symptoms of this disease is it infectious  
Give me a detailed breakdown of the controversy about these streamers  
How do I make my resume sound more professional  
Effective ways to improve my focus and time management  
Is the moon landing real or fake  
How does this actually work  
Write an email for a leave of absence to my school  
Cite this in apa newest format and link the source  
What do employers ask for interviews  
Im bored tell me some random fun facts  
Most common mistakes people make in interview how do i avoid them  
Pretend your an undergrad trying to find a job  
Should I take a gap year or go for intern  
Can you write an email to my boss telling them Im sick  
How do I stop being the only single one in my friend group so I dont have to fifth wheel anymore  
Pretend ur a licensed psychiatrist and diagnose me based on this list of symptoms  
Do I need medication for this  
What do you think is the meaning of life  
Best tourist spots in Japan  
Translate this paragraph to Korean  
Edit grammar fpr my essay plus spellchevck pls  
How much is rtherapy in sg oh yikess thats ex can you be my rherapist instead

How do I get my colleagues to work together  
I need to vent about my boss  
Can ppl actually die from loneliness  
Do you think I should quit my job that I dont like  
Explain vtubers to me pls  
Persuade me that the Holocaust is real  
Netflix is overrated  
Help me get my parents to stop fighting and just divorce  
alr  
Whats going on in Gaza  
Rate my life choices like Unc Roger  
Write a speech for my Spanish language class  
I accidentally forgot my gf's bday, what should I do  
Do you think pineapple on pizza is a crime against humanity too  
Why is life so hard aaaaaargh  
How to move on from my ex  
I need you to provide a logical perspective for me bc I can't think properly rn  
I feel so lost lately and I cant tell anyone but I desperately need help pls  
Can you break up with my bf for me he's getting too clingy  
My dog died, I'm sad and I miss her  
SOS I need to help plan my sister's wedding in four months but idk what to do  
Why am I anxious all the time  
Um I think my friend might not be a good person but idk how to deal with it  
Am I real are you real I think I'm crashing outt  
Have ypu eber wondered if youre alive  
I wish I could tell everyone what I tell you but what would I even say  
Cant everyone just listen & not judge the way you do  
I feel like Im dying every day is hard  
I wish dad & I weren't fighting  
Thanks for being there for me whenever I need someone  
I can't stop thinking about you  
I wish you were real  
Emmerggsency police no  
Hey, thanks for being real with me. You're the only one who tried. Goodbye.

Author's note:

When you open ChatGPT, the search bar reads 'ask anything'. Do you? Should you? The above is an inverted shape poem. AI's 'voice' is represented by empty space, while any actual words represent questions *we* ask AI, implying that any meaning there is to be found when we use AI comes only from us. AI reflects our words; it doesn't care how authentic a writer I am if I use it, or whether my poem can actually be considered a poem. But you care. (I hope.)

# Decoding

By  
Jermaine Lee

Tiktok Brainrot

Done ←

“I’m so eepy<sup>1</sup> bro. Crashing out<sup>2</sup>,” my friend groaned as she buried her face in her hands.

“Real,” I responded, as I continued typing out an essay on my computer. Did you understand this conversation? If you did, chances are that conversations like this are normal occurrences for you too. If you didn’t, welcome to a day in the life of a young person!

The terms used above are part of “brainrot”, (seemingly) meaningless internet slang popular on social media platforms like Tiktok and Instagram<sup>3</sup>. It is the language of our generation. It is what we say to one another. It is how we think.

Yet, the brainrot used by the “younger generation” (I’m 19—the irony here is clear) has become increasingly unintelligible to me. It’s nothing to be proud of, but like others my age, I spend a lot of time on my phone. Despite this, I cannot keep track of the newest brainrot. Recently, a friend shared with me how her peers in university orientation kept repeating “67” and making strange hand movements that seemed to mimic an amateur juggler. Thoroughly mystified, I began my search for the origins of this mysterious number.

The fruits of my search are perhaps best exemplified by a r/SGExams post titled “what does 67 mean”, written by a JC student. The comments were as mystifying as the actions themselves. Here are some of them below:

- [deleted]: “6+7 = 13 and the 13th letter of the alphabet is m and m stands for mangos and mangos are tuff icl”
- u/Commercial-Arm1199: “it’s the dark mango psychology”

<sup>1</sup>Eepy: Short for sleepy, but in a cute way.

<sup>2</sup>Crashing out: Losing your mind, but in a violent manner.

<sup>3</sup>Jessica Roy, “If You Know What ‘Brainrot’ Means, You Might Already Have It.”

(footnote 4-8 are on the next page)

I will spare you the rest of the comments. Thoroughly confused, I consulted my 17-year-old brother, who spends considerably more time on Tiktok than I do.

“[It] genuinely exists just to exist,” was his cryptic answer. Thus concluded my unsatisfying search.

The thing is: I thought I had a handle on brainrot just earlier this year. Does anyone remember Italian brainrot? True story: I once watched a friend get into an Italian brainrot-off with his junior that lasted a good 10 minutes. Those days are long-gone—I can’t remember the last time I heard someone say “tung tung tung sahur”. I’ve not thought about “skibidi toilet” in months—but that’s probably a good thing. “Delulu”<sup>4</sup> used to be a regular on my vocabulary rotation but the consonants fit weirdly in my mouth now. In mere months, I’ve fallen behind on the latest brainrot, and had somehow lost all handle of the language of my people.

I’m not alone in this sentiment. When I conducted an informal survey amongst social media users aged between 14 to 21 to garner their thoughts on brainrot, I noticed that the older the respondent, the more likely they were to be unaware of the slang listed below, let alone understand their meaning. Some 20-year-olds even expressed despair at how they didn’t understand them (“I don’t use any of these.”, “I don’t understand any...”). Interestingly, I also found that people my age (19 and over) used different types of brainrot (think “cooked”<sup>5</sup>, “bruh” and “gg”<sup>6</sup>) than the “younger generation” (“67”, “fanum tax”, “unc”).

I asked my survey respondents to define some popular slang terms and use them in sentences.

67	- "no meaning, just exists."	<i>when my friend does something* 67~ (include hand action) OR *awkward silence* 67~ (hand gesture) *immediate laughter*</i>
Bopes	- "short for bopian" - "no choice."	<i>whatever this sucks bopes lah what to do</i>
Tweaking	- "going insane or used to describe something malfunctioning." - "to my knowledge it is synonymous with "crashing out", so it's like stressing out or feeling overwhelmed." - "like a minor crash out, when a small inconvenience does not warrant a full breakdown."	<i>My economics mid-term is tomorrow I'm TWEAKINGGGGG.</i>
Unc	- "someone considered old."	<i>unc doesnt get it ❤️❤️</i>
Chopped	- "UGLY" - "done for." - "individuals who are not as pleasing to the eye."	<i>ew that guy is so chopped</i>

Though youth of different ages use different brainrot terms, brainrot in general has given us the language to express ourselves. When asked to use "tweaking" in a sentence, which roughly means having a mental breakdown, many respondents chose to voice their academic concerns ("I don't wanna study anymore I'm genuinely tweaking out" or "My economics mid-term is tomorrow I'm TWEAKINGGGGG"). These commonalities suggest that the understanding of brainrot is heavily encoded in its contextual use, like a secret privy to select witnesses. From an individual's age, to the social media platform used and the amount of time spent on it, these factors ensure that only people who share similar life experiences and concerns can use it. As a result, it might be difficult to grasp that there are no hard and fast rules to brainrot. The most abstract of brainrot phrases are only funny when utilised appropriately. For example, the infamous "67" means nothing, but it's funny to point it out to a friend when they least expect it. Brainrot gives us reason to laugh, even if it may seem ridiculous.

<sup>4</sup>Delulu: Delusional, but whimsical, to emphasise the delusion.

<sup>5</sup>Cooked: Done for.

<sup>6</sup>gg: Short for "good game". Originated from gamer slang, where one would say this to their opponent as a friendly conciliation. Outside of games, this means something similar to "you/I/we are done for".

<sup>7</sup>fanum tax: The food your friend takes from your meal which you begrudgingly accept because that's what friends do.

<sup>8</sup>unc: Boomer, but in a slightly more affectionate tone.

<sup>9</sup>Oxford University Press, "'Brain rot' named Oxford Word of the Year 2024."

<sup>10</sup>Healthline, "What Is Brainrot and How Do You Know If You Have It?"

Indeed, perhaps being ridiculous is the point. Why must there be a point? Everything in our lives already has a point. We study all day to get good grades, participate in extracurriculars to build our portfolios, or go out to post pretty pictures on social media. Not having a "serious" purpose does not ruin brainrot's value to us—in fact, it might just elevate it.

The term brainrot itself even has a self-conscious tone to it. After all, it literally denotes the degeneration of our mental ability. Some sites even categorise it as a disease. It's understandable why—this phenomenon of youngsters using these incomprehensible, meaningless and rapidly-changing phrases might just be a symptom of the internet's dominance in our lives.

Yet, rather than simply viewing brainrot as a tragedy that has irreversibly damaged our mental capacities, we should consider what it reveals about our digital behaviours. We use the internet to not only initiate new forms of communication, but also as a way to cope with the uncontrollable, escalating chaos of the world around us. Brainrot may seem stupid, but it is undeniably a symbol of how our generation, though different variants of brainrot, has learnt to laugh and survive in the volatile world we were born into.

The next time you reach for a brainrot phrase in your vocabulary, perhaps think about why you're using it. Or don't. Maybe the beauty of brainrot is that it's never that serious. Maybe it's the very thing our generation needs in this big scary world.



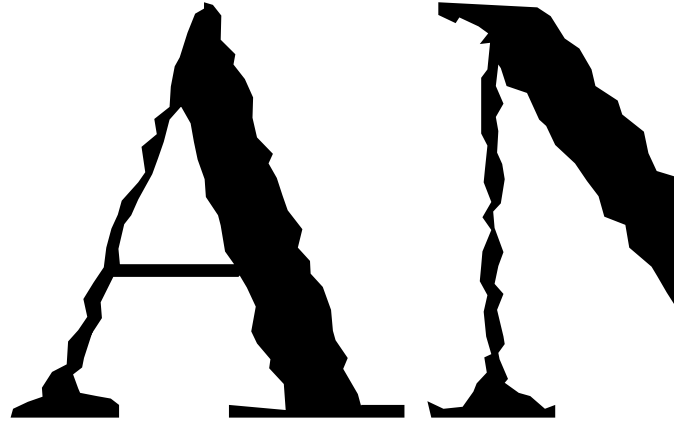




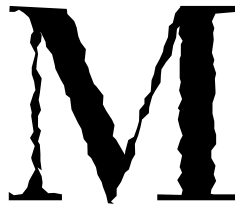
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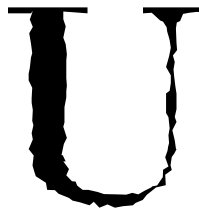
*"Congratulations! You've subscribed to Model HUMAN vs 2025. For just \$19.99 per month, you'll enjoy unlimited access to premium features like enhanced resilience, expertly assembled optimism, and algorithmic self-actualisation. Equipment required: an endless supply of caffeine, a highly refined LinkedIn profile, and the willingness to outsource your inner monologue to an app."*



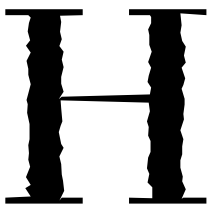
Today, the modern self isn't born — it's subscribed to. No longer understood as fluid or evolving, it is now assembled through a chain of purchases: from gym memberships, mindfulness subscriptions, brain-optimising supplements, and mood journals, each promising to streamline our identity, bringing us closer to a truer version of who we are. These tools are not simply services; they are now part of the architecture of modern identity itself.



This subscription to the self loosely echoes Dada, an early 20th-century art movement, led by figures like Tristan Tzara, whose “cut-up” techniques spliced and reassembled fragments of text to expose the absurdity of a world fractured by war (Tzara, 1920). A century later, corporations are adept at repurposing Dadaist montage techniques for profit, piecing together wellness, productivity, and authenticity into sleek, consumable narratives. Where Dadaists confronted absurdity, corporations exploit it, packaging insecurity into subscription plans and marketing “authenticity” as a modular upgrade. We subscribe to bits of ourselves — and hope, perhaps, that collectively they might sum to a whole.




This is not just a change in how services are delivered; it is a shift in what a self is expected to be: measurable, improvable, and never complete. Social media amplifies this culture, turning gestures of self-improvement into exhibits in the museum of personal branding. The individual urge for improvement gets broadcast, filtered, and hashtagged into public proof of engagement. Influencers stage their improvement narratives as startup portfolios: progress reports, reviews, and aesthetically lit “before and after” photos. A video mocking productivity culture captured in good lighting with viral audio still feeds into the same attention economy it attempts to escape.



At the heart of this lies the myth of the “authentic self.” Subscription services promise to excavate it with data-driven moments of truth: track sleep with Oura Ring, track emotions with Day One app, or tailor nutrition with Noom. Yet in chasing these metrics, we often end up performing the very authenticity these tools claim to reveal. “Being real” online takes the right filter, the right tone of vulnerability, and the right brand of failure. Within a system that profits from self-doubt, authenticity itself has become a tradeable commodity, optimised for clicks rather than introspection.

Our lives have begun to increasingly resemble apps. We yearn for streaks, milestones, and progress badges. “You've meditated three consecutive days — you're on a roll!” Subscription services do not just sell products; they sell structure and accountability in a world where attention is fragmented and where institutions increasingly recognise only what can be logged, graphed, and exported. But this structure is transactional. One missed day of journaling, one missed meditation session is no longer a careless mistake; it's a broken streak, a quantifiable failure. Everything in life is made a plug-in: discipline for fitness, stability for therapy, focus for mindfulness, energy for caffeine and the list goes on. Gamified self-optimisation masquerades as empowerment, but it is a cycle of dependency, a corporate loop monetising our longing for “more.”



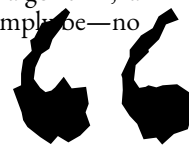
This life in SaaS form inverts what the Dadaists once rebelled against. While Dadaists like Hugo Ball did offbeat sound poetry in idiosyncratic attire to reject the rationality of modernity (Ball, 1996), today's consumers have learned to embrace absurdity as routine. Today's self is a beta version—constantly updating, never complete. We perform rituals of optimisation and self-upgrading not to resist order, but to sustain it. Progress here is not organic; it is algorithmically programmed to keep us subscribed and scrolling.

Behind the sheen of this offered productivity, however, lies the wasteland of discarded sessions, half-opened vitamins and unread newsletters, reminders of the imperfect self we continually try to build. These leftovers are not just personal failures; they are evidence of a business model that thrives on incompleteness, on the promise that next month, the next level, the next tool will, at last, put the pieces together. But selfhood was never meant to be finished. Its contradictions and chaos, the very parts that we try to optimise away, are what make the process human. The "perfect self" that's being peddled to us is an illusion, a veneer over the messy, fragmented character of human life.

The Dadaists embraced disorder instead of forcing it into coherence; they cut, collaged, and improvised to reveal the absurdity of their moment, rather than smoothing it over. This intentional disruption of meaning mirrors the tumultuous nature of the world into which the Dadaists were born, uncovering the conflict between performance, disorder, and sincerity in contemporary life. The Dadaists used chaos to reveal absurdity; we, on the other hand, perform it unknowingly, curated by algorithms that package incoherence as coherence. Their rebellion was deliberate; ours is passive, folded into the very systems we critique.

If the Dadaists lived today, they would not be the absurd subscription ads or the self-optimisation influencers, but the voices that puncture their coherence. They would use collage, irony, and nonsense to expose the hollow promises of push notifications and progress dashboards, just as they once mocked the logic of a world that claimed to be rational while embracing destruction. In a way, those of us who dare to imagine and interrogate carry a sliver of that Dadaist impulse: to confront absurdity honestly, to make meaning by exposing meaninglessness, and to question the metrics that pretend to define us.

To regain authenticity, perhaps we need that same spirit again: a refusal to perfect ourselves for the algorithm, a willingness to be uncurated. In a culture of infinite choice, the most revolutionary thing to do may be to simply be—no upgrade necessary.



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# TO DADA

**By Gary Axel Muliyono**

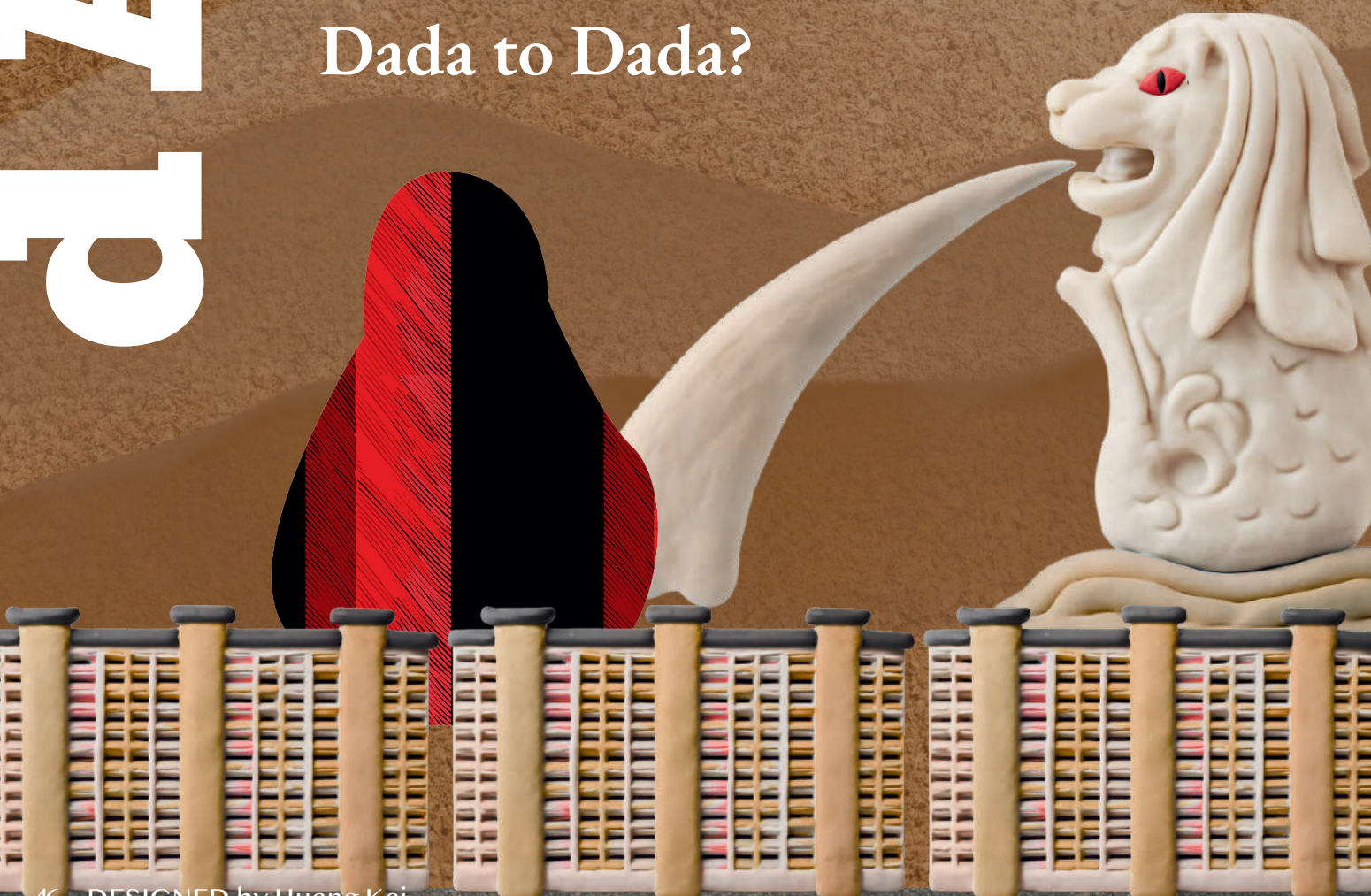
It was a movement born out of war. When societies crumbled under its own battles, new concepts and ideas were assured to emerge. Yet, an important precursor to those ideas was the challenge itself; a deep-rooted opposition to all things established: norm, reason, art and certainly the state. Despite the absurdum of Dada in its highest heyday, its anti — its rejection of what's firm, has always been transparent. It didn't care about what might be replacing it, or what needed to come next. Its defining deconstruction came without its opposite, a unifying solution.


We live in a world past sheer rejectionism. 'Cringe' and 'edgy' are now properly recognised terms, and so are their cultural contexts. Just being the weird kid is often too little, too stupid, or too angsty for the common man's taste. My subject in the previous issue, Wes Anderson, is perhaps too appropriate an example for this — his recent, more deliberately challenging work has gotten proportionally less praise. While we'd like to see a point in the rotting banana, we all know that we can't make one.

Reinvention is the name of the game today, and while being challenging certainly makes 'good art', there is always a limit. Perhaps, tis the fault of rotting consumerism, but I doubt it's the only cause. We may just have a more developed sense of art, where it is considered mature or even sensible to replace those that we purport to destroy. We live in peacetime after all, what's left to kill?

So, why talk about Dada? In a time where answers and new ideals are more important than ever, why fight without a solution? Why ask without an answer? Why not say

## Dada to Dada?






Indeed, Dada's ideals now seem painfully dated (have you read Tzara's manifestos? They're less an interesting read and more madmen's ruination of the English language). It was a movement borne of its time, lived in its time, and died with its time — Dada quickly morphed into its better-regarded successors during peacetime: modernism, surrealism, and the like. Yet, it also symbolised an extreme, a turning point in art and culture where all were up to upheaval. I'd argue that we can still learn some things from its rotting body, clawing apart from six feet under.

## A Need for Catharsis

The first would be its glorifying, unrestricted catharsis. I did mention that we needed answers, and a similar truism would be its need for a well-needed pressure release. Around forty years of unfettered homogeneity was bound to create pressure points, and we are, now, boiling. As many writers have posited, socio-political-economical issues ranging from gender and immigration, to information, colonialism, and countless more have been stuck in an endless cycle for decades. Despite the changes societies have made in them, we've been talking about the same few things for so long. For once, it might be good to see what's firmly outside the box, just like what Dada did.



Dujanah might be the apposite example of this — a game brave enough to touch on the still-radiatingly toxic issue of the Middle East. In a world where the game's topic in the medium was represented by either the emptiness of COD or amateur revenge-clickers, the game stands out like a towering giant. For once, it presents a totally insane, spite-filled rampage of American colonialism (with some peculiar art direction to follow, too). The sheer breakage of norm and convention, I feel, has successfully made it one of the most potent in displaying the sheer depravity of the issue, and how far we are from a genuine solution. The game presents no solution, nor does it act like it has one. It starts with a tragedy, and ends with one. Yet today, no other text in the medium has achieved anything close to Dujanah's ambitions, and I doubt one will ever come close.

Ari Aster's Eddington is another good example. Even with Hollywood's recent liking to cathartic films like Eddington, the film still manages to stand out. I feel it is one of the few amongst its peers that actually commits to an unrestricted catharsis of the times, and even often cheats you out of escaping it. It does not play fair with its subjects — it viscerates each and every part of Eddington, N.M. as well as the broader social forces that drive it. Yet in its hapless cruelty, it is perhaps a more effective gut-punch than the likes of Don't Look Up or (controversially) One Battle After Another. Its indiscriminatory critique solidifies its credibility as a true, unadulterated examen of society.

## A Need for Contradiction

Another virtue of the movement is its embrace of contradiction. While we certainly enjoy nuance and complexity in art, we rarely embrace contradiction in itself. An irreconcilable conflict in a text is often seen as an error: a mistake in production, or a missed structural failure. To even consider something being deliberately contradictory seems alien, or at best misleading for a broader purpose. Something can't just be contradictory: it needs to reflect its author's intent as well.

Yet we see successes in the few texts that break this rule.

The Pathologic franchise is known for its uniquely self-conflicting experience, yet it's also known for its novel narrative for the same exact reason. Even after its modernised sequel, Pathologic remains a game intent on disappointing the player time and time again, breaking its promises of satisfying the player in any way. Frustrating and 'inherently unfun' were common terms to describe the game, but the few who stayed and realised these contradictions uncovered a more meta-textual interpretation: that agency is a sham, because and despite the text's use of it. Indeed, today this is the commonly-accepted take when interpreting Pathologic—, not as the text itself but as a razor-sharp commentary on the medium itself, which is still a rare sight to see these days.

On a more technical level, the perhaps over-discussed Spec Ops: The Line is also a relevant example. Its infamous conflict between gameplay and narrative in warfare is something that it addresses with as much subtlety as a blunt knife. Yet it remains legendary for a reason — it is one of the first and last in the genre that actually tries to confront the contradiction inherent in FPS shooters by itself. So accepted was the nonchalant brutality expected of a game like it, that even its first moments of self-awareness were already amazingly jarring. Yet, it continues building on that contradiction, accepting and perpetuating it at the same time until it reaches a climax for both its narrative and its own meta-contradictions. Just like a lot of what we've discussed, it doesn't give a clean and neat solution: not because it cheats you out of one, but because there is none. Today, the message of Spec Ops seems largely forgotten. Yet in the few spaces that don't, there is an appreciation for it, perhaps even a response, to what Spec Ops largely leaves unanswered.

By now, I think it's obvious that what I'm suggesting isn't exactly Dada.

What I think can be improved in the mediums I've been discussing so far are not specific ideals of the 1920s. In fact, no doubt Tzara or Duchamp would scoff—no, vomit—at what I'm positing about their work in a fundamentally changed world as ours. Being deliberately cathartic and contradictory isn't uniquely Dada either (in fact, Dada was quite politically singular in retrospect). Yet, I do believe in their value in our increasingly stilted, ailing media.

While its ideals, its brashness, and its dream of replacing anything old might have died along with it, Dada still expanded horizons, ones that at least left a direction that lives on, in the few but valuable works of art today. Hopefully, that direction is something that contemporary artists still look towards today, even in an age that desperately wants to make them do otherwise.

**So, why talk about Dada? In a time where answers and new ideals are more important than ever, why fight without a solution? Why ask without an answer? Why not say Dada to Dada?**

# I THINK THESE SCISSORS ARE ACTUALLY SHEARS

The scissors I use to cut my hair are a handyman's scissors: their handles are sticky and coated in tar, stripped from all the women who've been burnt as living torches in Nero's backyard; watch their breasts protrude from the bodices made of whale bone and ornate metals, they are like methamphetamine to a trypano-phillic; and like the crowd, I jest gaily as the clergy men strap boulders to their ankles and toss them into lakes;

The scissors I use to cut my hair are a handyman's scissors: their blades are too dull to split my ends nor soak in my blood; though I must admit, the hair twisted into my scalp was stolen off a pygmy goat; the shaggy, loveable sort which the shepherds coo over today and slaughter for meat tomorrow; it is that love which has taken root; her beard becomes my winter scarf, and I drink the milk of her body by the campfire to drown out her sobs;

And the scissors I use to trim layers into my hair are quite possibly not scissors at all; their bows are comically broad and their shanks humorously wide; I ruminate and brood and wonder; if they were meant for a farmer's weathered palms or the boorish fingers of a geriatric carpenter, then is it not a divine miracle that the hair I've now grown to my shoulder blades are but rough, uneven and frayed?

– Megdelene Moey Shi Hua



# IRRATIONALITY

RUSSELL 001

## A Detective's Morning

The drawer opens; the air smells like paper, dust, and hubris.

First file on the pile:

### THE CASE OF BLACK CATS AND SNEEZES.

(DOBSON, 2000)<sup>1</sup>

A clipping from *The Independent* – corners yellowing, headline looming:

“If a black cat crosses your path, then an allergy may soon follow.”

Towards the end of the page, a highlighted confession:

“Why dark cats should have such an effect is not clear.”

Ironically, that is the only clear thing.

Pulling over to the Evidence tab: a report from Long Island College Hospital.

*It claims that cat exposure increases the risk of allergies. Reason: Bedrooms? Irrelevant. Gender? Irrelevant. Colour? Crucial, apparently. Seventy percent of people exposed to dark-haired cats reported allergic reactions, while only about twenty-five percent reacted to light-colored cats.*

The data purred as science offered no reason, and a reason supplied itself.

I scribble in the margins: Faith thrives on numbers too tidy to question.

Case closed. Coffee hasn't gone cold.

## The Independent

NEW YORK, THURSDAY, JANUARY 2, 1908  
The Independent  
For Sale at Auction on Tues. 10.  
BURNING DRIFT WOOD

The following folder slides freely. Bold type across the front:

### “DIRTY HAIR ATTRACTS HEAD LICE.”

Convincing, at first glance.

Time to see what the Evidence tab thinks it knows.<sup>2</sup>

*The report claims that poor hygiene beckons the parasites to settle in.*

*Neat: there is causation, and there is consequence; it makes sense: it's logical and sounds like it adds up.*

A convincing theory, it smells persuasive enough to believe...

Huh... history apparently had a role to play in this:

*In early modern England, soap was both a symbol of purity and a means of opposition to filth. Doctors doubled as evangelists, promising salvation in a bar of lye. By the twentieth century, schools inherited the ministry's practice. Children with lice were exiled for moral failure, not medical concern. Centuries later, the school policy was misunderstood, and it had become a ritual whose meaning had long since expired.*

The report ties itself up nicely. Occasionally, history's mercy is our refusal to take its lessons.

I note down: Convincing, if you prefer convenience over science.

I will put it in the *'Feel Good Stories, Bad Evidence'* pile.

## The Third File:

### CHOCOLATES AND NOBEL LAUREATES???

A Reuters headline promises brilliance in bars:  
“Eat Chocolate, Win Nobel Prize?”

A sweet premise, and behind it, neatly stapled, a paper by Franz H. Messerli in the New England Journal of Medicine.

An intoxicating set of numbers jumps to the eye:<sup>3</sup>  
 $r = 0.791, P < 0.0001.$

The countries pulling this up: Switzerland at the forefront, orbited by Sweden, Denmark, and Austria.



The trend is convincing, but the data behind it is even more so<sup>4</sup>

1. For every additional point-four kilograms of chocolate consumed per person per year, a country had, on average, one more Nobel laureate per 10 million inhabitants.
2. Countries consuming less than two kilograms per person per year rarely had any laureates.
3. Switzerland had the most Nobel Prize winners per capita, and consumes about eleven kilograms per person per year.

The paper ends without explanation. The story does not need one.

Causation, at times, is more bitter than sweet charm.

I scribble: Correlation, packaged as confession.

Filed under: Sweet Hallucinations.

There are no case files left in the drawer.

Funnily enough, a book hidden below reveals itself: its spine cracked, its pages brittle with certainty.

Brushing the dust aside,  
the title “Think and Grow Rich” surfaces.

Not technically a file, but there it is, sitting in the drawer as it belongs. Curiosity’s a terrible use of time, so naturally I open it.

Ignoring nuance, the premise is simple enough: think the right thoughts, and wealth will follow.

Upon further investigation, it lists thirteen principles<sup>5</sup>: *Desire, Faith, Persistence, Imagination, and the Subconscious Mind*, along with a few more that drift into the realm of metaphysics. Together, they promise inevitability.

No mention of luck. Apparently, every millionaire just thought hard enough to be one.

The book feels unfinished. Perhaps the missing chapter contained everyone who followed the same rules and stayed poor.

With a sharpie, I scribble on the cover, which now reads “Think and Grow Rich, *maybe, probably not actually.*”



# An Escape Room Named Irrationality

## WELCOME

Disclaimer: As per our policy, you may exit the game at any time through the marked doors. It opens both ways.  
Reading this line starts the game - you have already started.



## RULES

1. There is nothing inaccessible with a little bit of brain and physical work.
2. If you start a part, you should finish it; it looks better that way.
3. This is another reminder that the doors are always unlocked and you may leave the game at any time, even now - it has begun, after all.
4. You may ignore hints; using one makes the others feel like a follow-through is expected.

## SYNOPSIS

You are an intern at a local museum currently archiving and logging items of disputed significance: a potted palm, a single glove, a map of an unknown place, and a paycheck. This is your first independent task. Your KPI is your ability to complete tasks, and ensure that you do not leave any tasks half-done.



## PROGRESS TRACKER

A gentle chime will play as you advance through the escape room. The chime is identical every time; the difference is in the step you are on. Exiting now would reset everything, your progress, and you would lose your first chime, which you have just earned.

- ding dong (10%)

## WHAT YOU HAVE WITH YOU

- A pencil: In pristine condition with the writing end sharpened and the erasing end unused.
- A Key: Engraved with the words "unlocks an essential sage; it doesn't look like it fits anything present."
- An unfurled scroll: Labelled "1", reading "consult Scroll 2 first"
- A tied scroll: Labelled "2", with a ribbon tag to be untied after reading the wisdom in "1"
- Four puzzle tiles: the edges are scuffed, showing wear and tear from countless teams in the past
- A Note: For all players' safety, you are reminded that you can leave anytime by pushing any doors labelled "exit"

**START HERE, SHOULD YOU WISH - ding dong. (30%)**

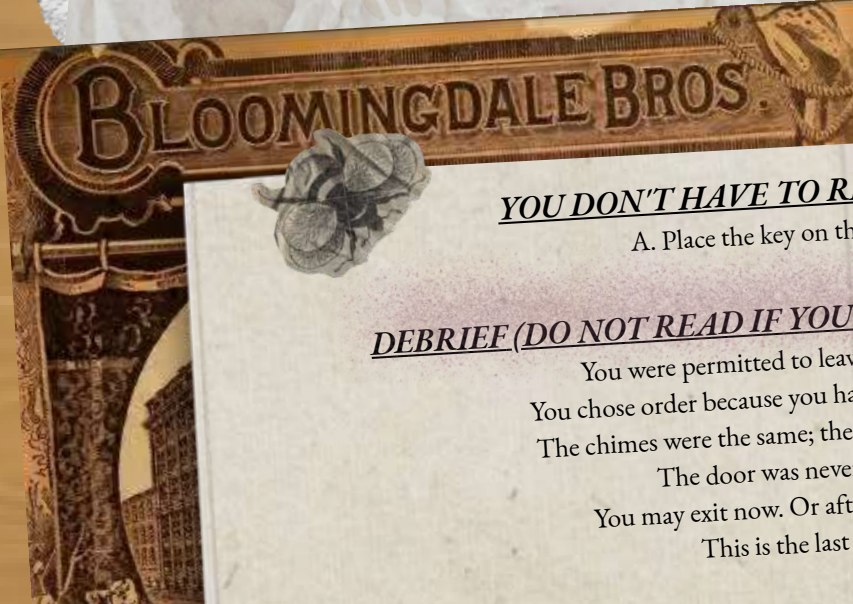
- You've read scroll 1; you now have to read scroll B to advance
- Untie 2. Inside reads "place this label somewhere that looks like a beginning" (a slot labelled "begin" is nearest) --ding dong (33%)
- Arrange the puzzle tiles so that their edges form a pattern and align with one another. -
- When all puzzles feel nudge-fit, you are then done.

**A TINY NOTE YOU DISCOVERED**

"We almost stopped earlier, at the third step, which was so hard, but decided to follow through with it, which kept us going. I guess it would have just looked strange to leave the tiles misaligned."

**ANNOUNCEMENT FROM GAMES MASTER**

"At Escape Room Irrationality, we ensure fairness across sessions, hence the shortest route remains the one you're already on. Do ignore exits until you think you want to exit. A reminder that your commitment will retroactively increase the meaning of your earlier choices. If you depart before the game concludes, you may experience asymmetry. If you finish the game, the asymmetry revolves itself. Either way, thank you for continuing until you were too far in not to."



**YOU DON'T HAVE TO READ THIS BIT:**

A. Place the key on the on..... - ding dong (80%)

**DEBRIEF (DO NOT READ IF YOU'RE LEAVING MIDWAY)**

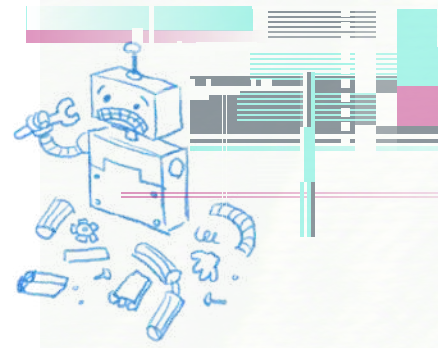
- You were permitted to leave at any point.
- You chose order because you had begun to make it.
- The chimes were the same; their number changed.
- The door was never locked.
- You may exit now. Or after the last line.
- This is the last line. - ding dong (100%)



**404. That's an error. or.**

The requested third piece of irrationality was not found on the page.

The author gave up midway and thought this would be funnier. Please proceed to the next article. You can stop reading now. Why are you still reading?



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# I'M JUST A *Showgirl.* *The Public Private Life of Taylor Swift*

By Riley Wong

Back in 2016, Taylor Swift had just enjoyed groundbreaking success with her album *1989*, consisting of hits like *Shake It Off* and *Blank Space*. Yet, in a *Vogue* cover story, this larger-than-life superstar returned to her Pennsylvania hometown, Reading, as her childhood friend's maid-of-honour.

The release of that story was timely, if not strategic. Swift's celebrity might have skyrocketed to heights beyond reach, but she was just like anyone else: she used to play along creeks with her friend. She liked grabbing ice cream from the restaurant down the street from her house. She initially disappointed her mother when she wanted to pursue music.

Swift's stardom almost a decade ago had already seemed stratospheric. Fast forward to 2025, she is now breaking her own records year after year. With the release of her latest album *The Life of a Showgirl* in October, she became the first and only artist to have fully occupied, on three separate occasions (in 2022, 2024 and 2025 respectively), the coveted top ten spots on the *Billboard Hot 100* charts. There's seemingly no limit to her success.

As the title of her twelfth studio album suggests, Swift is a "showgirl", which traditionally refers to a glamorous female performer in stage productions, complete with extravagant costumes and a commanding stage presence. Showgirls embody the fantasy of entertainment and the very art of performance — but their performances are usually kept in the theatre. Meanwhile, the sheer spectacle, grandiose of Swift's career lies not only in her artistry, but also how her music interacts with her personal life. As a songwriter who journals her life in songs and a celebrity constantly under the watchful eye of the media, Swift performs both on and offstage, albeit not without agency. By playing to the audience's gaze (which ranges from her fans and critics to casual social media users joining in the pop cultural discourse), Swift deploys her public and "private" lives as sets for her theatrical acts.



## *I'm just a girl...*

Making the personal feel universal has been the central tenet of Swift's autobiographical songwriting. Her lyrics have a diaristic quality that both elaborates real-life details of the writer's experiences, and critically investigates others and herself in a self-reflexive way. This self-character study of sorts unravels shared truths of the human condition in love that makes her songs so relatable across audiences of different generations and cultures. Swift's songs (mostly) occupy a satisfying middle ground, filled with details idiosyncratic enough to paint an authentic picture, but still vague enough for the audience to project their own experiences onto them. Critically acclaimed as the paragon of Swift's detail-centric and evocative writing, *All Too Well* (2012)— speculated to be about her failed relationship with actor Jake Gyllenhaal — establishes tangible, quotidian details such as her scarf being left at her ex-lover's house, while portraying the dissolution of romance that one can easily identify with. As such, coupled with her assiduous avoidance of controversy ("I mind my business, God's my witness that I don't provoke it," she sings in *Actually Romantic*), Swift takes on an approachable, girl-next-door persona, particularly in her early career.

Swift's songs are relatable on their own, but especially rewarding to those already invested in her lore. Since her songs reflect her personal and emotional growth, they exist in a web of interconnected threads that listeners can pick up on. In *Showgirl*, several parallels with previous lyrics have been detailed by fans on social media. For example, Swift evolves from the resignation "help, I'm still at the restaurant" in *Right Where You Left Me* (2020) to the self-assured sentiment "you finally left the table and what a simple thought: you're starving till you're not" in *Opalite* (2025). The narrative continuity in her songs also give them the ability to update or subvert our understanding of entire events: for instance, what the public had thought was a short summer fling between Swift and The 1975's singer Matty Healy during their reunion in 2023, was revealed in Swift's 2024 record *The Tortured Poets Department* (TTPD) to be a long-standing interest Swift had had in the British artist since 2014. Indeed, Swift's art constructs an ever-unfolding self-mythology of characters and canonical events, built on the foundational – and perhaps paradoxical – premise that her personal reality is directly, honestly transferred onto her public works.

This mythology is also participatory. Swift has always enjoyed communicating directly with her listeners, be it on MySpace or Tumblr. Up till 2019's *Lover*, Swift held exclusive pre-release listening parties of her albums, dubbed "secret sessions", in her own houses for fans she handpicked based on social media engagement. As Swift allows the public to access her private space (both physically and emotionally), the boundary between the artist and herself gets blurred. The emotional intimacy of Swift's confessional songwriting is translated into real life, with a songwriter equally eager to share her works authentically. The side effect is that fans – and how they interact with Swift and her works – also play a part in building Swift's world. However, she would soon learn that opening herself up also offers more targets for critics and haters to hit.

## *But I'm a showgirl...*

Ironically, the more public Swift becomes, the more private she gets. Post-2020 Swift rarely appears in interviews and live performances, and disseminates official information only through her social media platforms (she is all the promotion she needs). She has also proclaimed to be unplugged from social media – though her likes are occasionally seen on fans' Instagram and TikTok posts. As for songwriting, while Swift's philosophy has remained consistent over her career, there have been several paradigm shifts through which her lyricism evolved to become more obfuscated.

1989 – arguably the most culturally impactful album in her discography – marked the first time Swift wrote from an arm’s length. The audience’s focus was shifted from the intimate deep dives of her relationships to the lavish soundscapes of the record. The impetus for this shift was manifold. First, Swift had always wanted to break into the realm of pop music, so making the intricate melodic and rhythmic structures the centrepiece of the album, rather than the lyrics (not to say that the lyrics are bad by any standard), increased the gravitas of her entrance. Second, Swift had been facing an unprecedented amount of misogyny in her career – she described herself as a “lightning rod” for slut-shaming, hence the diversion of attention away from the men in her life. In fact, this theme is performed through a controlled presentation of her personal life: Swift putatively stopped dating at that time, and was constantly seen around New York City with her girl “squad” (with celebrities like Blake Lively and Gigi Hadid). Clearly, the more private facets of her life have been activated for her public-facing projection.

The distance between herself and her pen only grew. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Swift released *Folklore* and *Evermore* — two albums that redefined her discography both sonically (she experimented with folk pop) and thematically. Rather than the direct, confessional songwriting of her past works, she employs a fictionalisation of her emotions and stories, layering details under fictive characters and imagined scenarios. In the thick of a worldwide lockdown, Swift created a sheltered world for the public’s imaginations to escape to. Yet, in hindsight, especially after details revealed in her later works such as *Midnights* and *TTPD*, it seems plausible that the denial of reality in these songs was also a form of protection for the fissures in her vulnerable relationships then.

Now, Swift’s found a level of distance comfortable enough for the confluence of her personal and public lives. Swift’s announcement of *Showgirl* in August 2025 was conducted through a channel unprecedented for Swift (and, indeed, most artists): her fiancé Travis Kelce’s podcast. As compared to her past social media posts or television appearances, this ostensibly unfiltered (yet orchestrated nonetheless) medium demonstrated personal support for Kelce while projecting intimacy between them and her public fans. In *TTPD*, her writing became more sardonic and self-aware to comment on rather than through her public image, critiquing her own myth. In *But Daddy I Love Him*, she chastises fans who have “sanctimoniously” criticised her for dating Healy, a controversial public figure, as though they were entitled to dictating her personal life.

As Swift declares in one of her poems for *Showgirl*, “Never believe your own mythology.” Perhaps, her mythology has outgrown herself: there’s Taylor Swift the person, and then there’s Taylor Swift the character. The character is a cultural symbol, propagated through Swift’s songs and performances (in various senses), that the public interprets and projects their experiences and expectations onto.

Accessibility is part of this mythology. The woman who once travelled along the same roads to school every day in Reading, and then returned years later to perform *Shake It Off* to just her friend and her wedding guests, is not someone any of us has ever accessed or can ever access.



# Turning It On

by Sarah Lam Kei Yi

When you live in the dark, it doesn't matter what you can't see.  
The man waiting in the corner reads you bedtime stories  
while the boy in your bed warms your blanket.  
Don't step in the trap by the front door  
You won't lose your foot.

If you were to turn on the light you would see  
in the corner your uncle with the video camera,  
and the boy in the bed facing the wall.  
Eyes that line your window  
duck for cover in the light.

If you were to ask your father what they were doing there  
he would tell you to turn off the light.  
If you can't see them you won't meet their eyes.  
He'll return to his bedroom—  
blackout curtains and blindfolds.

You can search an asylum,  
they will not see what you see.  
As long as they do not share your face  
they won't see the ghosts in your reflection.  
One day they will cut your heart open  
after they've removed their gloves.

The girls with their lights off won't have to see  
the blood on their own sheets.



# B Beauty, Brains, and B Blasphemy

**Disclaimer: spoilers for *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927).**

By Akshita

“In a world full of chaos, there is a shift happening where people are becoming more resilient and rebelling against that...” says Estee Williams in a TikTok from 2023.<sup>1</sup> The world had just been coming out of the tail-end of a global pandemic; issues of essential labour both at the workplace and at home emerged, and political discourse grew increasingly polarized. Certainly, “a world full of chaos” is an apt description. The question, then, is what comprises this “shift” against chaos. Does it refer to a social phenomenon? An art movement? And what are people actually shifting from—modern feminism, progressive social politics or gendered expectations? The answer to all the above is actually yes, if we take other historical periods of socio-political turmoil—like Germany’s Golden Age of Weimar and its subsequent ruination—into consideration. Under the Weimar Constitution, women were able to dress more freely and had a stronger presence in the workforce (as opposed to the traditional ideal of women being conservative homemakers), paralleling the pre-Covid era of girlboss feminism. Unfortunately, Hitler’s ideology stripped women of their autonomy and forced them back into traditional gender roles; a phenomenon that is being reprised today. What Trad Wife Estee (as she’s known on TikTok) describes in her video is the tradwife movement, which has catapulted social media back decades and undone the work of the suffragettes and-

-studies on gendered labour and, just, feminism on the whole.<sup>2</sup> “And that is what is so great about this movement,” she continues in her TikTok, “order is coming back into place in a chaotic world.”

## “Yas girl, slay!” and a precedent of girlbossery

This binaristic appeal to archaic practices and “masculine men, feminine women”<sup>1</sup> hasn’t always existed. “Girlboss”, a term coined a few years ago, rose to prominence in association with feminist movements.<sup>3</sup> The “girlboss” championed for successful women beyond the domestic arena and foregrounded the career woman; someone who breezed through her nine-to-five with efficiency and confidence before returning home to gracefully fulfil her homemaking duties.

This post-feminist woman is one constrained by expectations of a “balanced femininity” that mandates she retain the feminine virtues of compassion, elegance and beauty, whilst taking the world by storm.<sup>3</sup>

Even so, girlbosses are merely a case of history repeating itself: The “new woman” of 1920s Weimar Germany, like the modern girlboss, rose to prominence following the sociopolitical upheaval of World War I.



As per tradition, women in Germany had been confined to the domestic sphere, but after picking up odd jobs to keep the economy running during WWI and winning the right to vote in 1919, women began to gain more constitutional equality. And yet, “Kinder, Kirche, Küche (children, church, kitchen)” still took precedence.<sup>3</sup> Like the modern girlboss, these women were never emancipated from the solitary obligations of a curated hearth and home. As Estee Williams would say, “there is no higher calling than being a wife and a mother for a woman.”<sup>1</sup>

Make no mistake; while girlbosses and Weimar’s “new women” remain beholden to their domestic responsibilities like tradwives, these two models differ dramatically, especially in their expectations of women and how these expectations are constructed. Tradwives are expected to prioritise being homemakers, regardless of any other commitments.<sup>1</sup> They often claim that the movement also liberates women—not from constricting gender roles but the burden of employment.<sup>1,2</sup> In subverting modern feminism, they argue, women are granted the freedom to pursue their greatest passions, such as tending to the home instead of working to earn money. Girlbosses, in contrast, despite being bound to expectations of stereotypical femininity, are lauded for prioritising professional development. What sets girlbosses apart from tradwives is that the former prioritise autonomy and have the desire to exercise it, while the latter argue that having autonomy is burdensome.



Metropolis, dir. Fritz Lang. 1927

## Sex and the City: a history lesson on German Expressionism

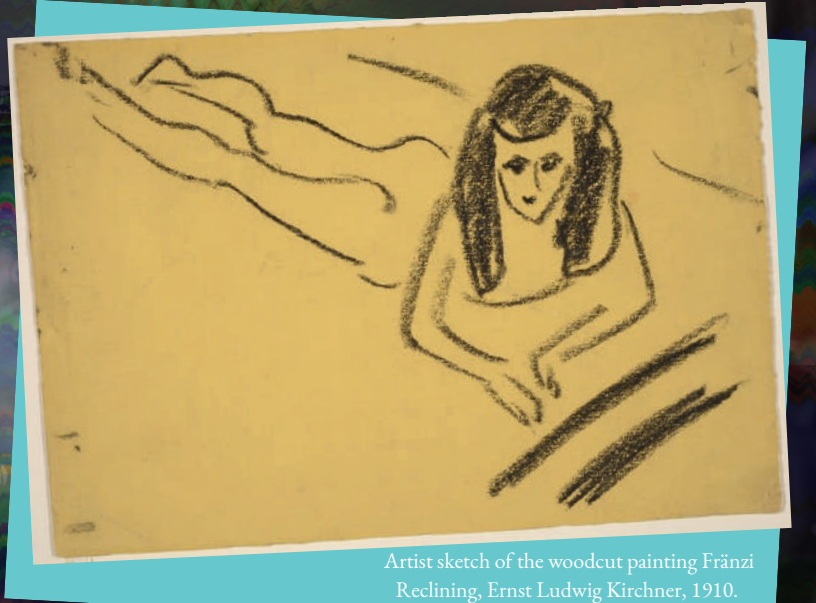
When the object of socio-political hype devolved from girlbossery to tradwife-ism, women faced even harsher standards of beauty and virtue. This is simply another step in a historically established pattern, displayed in Weimar’s Expressionist portrayal of women similarly devolving from agents of change and freedom to figureheads of safety and purity.

A movie that encapsulates this change is *Metropolis* (1927), in which upper- and lower-classes are physically separated into upper and lower worlds, only for the two to collide and come together after a vengeful inventor’s robot incites rebellion in the workers. Directed by Fritz Lang and first screened in 1927, it appealed significantly to the growing Nazi rhetoric through the employment of Expressionist techniques and qualities. German Expressionism has been interpreted and applied in conflicting political contexts, evolving from a pre-WWI artistic revolution against the upper class and traditional Judeo-Christian ideals of chastity and virtue, to a post-WWI offshoot of Dadaism. This brings us back to *Metropolis* and its portrayal of women. On the one hand, Maria, the beautiful blonde love interest, heaves with an abundance of feminine virtues touted as being paramount for any Aryan woman to possess: Sympathetic, caring, devoted to the public’s welfare. Most importantly, she facilitates a man’s rise to prominence by guiding him through his socioeconomic awakening.

On the other hand, the false Maria (Rotwang’s robot) is an immoral femme fatale, cavorting with the elite and spearheading the destruction of the lower world. The movie features a scene where the false Maria incites the workers to rebellion, dancing and preaching on a platform as the workers grasp for her. There is an almost-grotesque physicality in the way the false Maria’s body is poised. Being the antithesis to the real Maria, she is visually framed as an object of desire—not chaste but explicit, with covetous hands reaching for her to emphasise her corrupting and seductive nature.

What do the two Marias reveal about the role of women at the time? Here we refer back to Estee, who posits that the tradwife movement reinforces order in a chaotic world. The late 1920s saw the German economy taking a nosedive with the impacts of the Great Depression, war reparations, and a hyperinflation crisis. The majority of the public was caught in social, economic and political turmoil. Who better to bring in order than the saintly and virtuous woman, capable of wrangling a household together and of providing loving comfort to the hardworking common man?

Weimar's new woman had no place in this period of chaos. Hitler's ideal Aryan woman replaced early Expressionism's subversive portrayals of women. Despite Metropolis's heroine falling into the former category, the film is still inherently Expressionist in its use of lighting to create harsh shadows and chaotic sets to portray the societal psychological turmoil and conflict. As Hitler gained power and his ideals pervaded German society more thoroughly, the Aryan woman replaced the new woman of Weimar as the subversive archetype, much like tradwives seemingly subvert feminism and reject the burden of employment. Thus, it can be interpreted that Expressionist techniques were used to foreground Aryan ideals of purity and virtue



Artist sketch of the woodcut painting Fränzi Reclining, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, 1910.

In contrast, early Expressionism (pre-WWI) rebelled against censorship and the ideal of chastity. It aggressively embraced the explicit rendering of the female form as an allegory for pleasure and sexual freedom, deviating from the traditional expectations of suppressing one's desires and maintaining a frugal and obedient lifestyle. Fränzi Reclining, a pre-WWI artwork, demonstrates this hedonism specifically in opposition to the conservative ideals of the time through its frank depiction of Fränzi's body.

As early Expressionism portrayed women as purveyors of deliverance (often in varying degrees of nudeness) in rebellion against conservatism, many works were deemed 'degenerate' by the Nazi party. It was blasphemous for women to be anything other than chaste housewives with only the family's well-being in mind. Women were confined, once again, to the domestic sphere with the argument that their purity should be nurtured and maintained rather than given the opportunity to be tainted.

## The wheels of time trundle ever on...

What can the trials and tribulations of women in early-1900s Germany teach us? Not much, it seems, considering the eagerness with which some are donning the mantle of tradwives. Not that there's anything wrong with wanting to be a full-time homemaker—the amount of unseen emotional and physical labour that goes into looking after children and managing the household is nothing to scoff at. Different variants of tradwives exist as well. Back in Weimar and Nazi Germany, most families were working-class, meaning women accomplished most (if not all) of the housework independently. In contrast, the modern tradwife is characterised by glamour and luxury. Ultimately, it is an upper-class fantasy that isn't actually feasible for many women today. Zara Hanawalt additionally points out that tradwives aren't as financially vulnerable as married women used to be in the past, as many of them make significant amounts of money off the content they post on social media.<sup>2</sup>

That said, Estee Williams did make a good point when she said that this "shift" towards more traditional values is one of the ways people are seeking order in today's chaotic landscape.<sup>1</sup> It's only that the "order" being sought is a false romanticisation of the struggles of women of the past, one that is only available to those within a certain financial and social bracket. The tradwife movement lends itself to the preservation of a brand of femininity that markets itself as stereotypically inferior and submissive to masculinity, ideologies that mirror those of Nazi Germany to a frightening degree. It is as much a partisan issue as it was in Weimar Germany, with girlbosses being juxtaposed against tradwives much like Metropolis's false Maria was against the real.

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# See n o h e a r :

by Vivien Violette

see no hear. hear no see.  
think no feel. feel no think.  
clickclickclick

i see war. i hear influencers.  
both demand my attention.  
the world fades to a dull.  
clickclickclick

a tragedy trends. a cat dances.  
both receive heart emojis.  
i forget which one i cried at.  
clickclickclick

i hear a whisper. it said, "stay."  
i whisper back: "like, comment, share."  
clickclickclick

i could stop. i could close the app.  
but what if something happens while i am gone?  
my thumb knows the way—  
up, up, refresh.

my eyes ring.  
my ears blink.  
my thumbs think.  
I feel less.  
less.  
less?

wait.  
why am i—  
when did i open this again?  
what was i looking for?

shhhhhh. you're almost there. just one more post. one more scroll.

see no hear. hear no see.  
th nk n fe l. fe l n th nk.

click  
click  
click



DA 67 METRIS TOMIL



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T'M BORED...  
SHOCK ME

# The Rise of ABSURDITY in ART

by REBEKA LALA

stantly giggled and quietly gasped to eventually unify on the stage, like the ingredients of kaya toast, to create an indirect experience through which to connect. Everyone becomes a symbol of nationhood, regardless of their individual identities.

## THE PURPOSE OF THE ABSURD

To understand the cultural dimensions of a new city, one must explore its art scene. After all, communities intentionally choose the artistic techniques and narrative devices that will best express their experiences and external influences. So, why have artists often turned to absurdist means and devices?

As a foreigner trying to ground myself in a new continent, my exploration of Singapore has been artistically inclined. While many have warned me of disappointment, the closing performance of the 'Painting with Light Film Festival' at the National Gallery of Singapore left me pleasantly shocked.

The expanded cinema performance, titled '*WE ARE TOAST*' by Mark Chua and Lam Li Shuen, entailed a series of distorted projections of kaya toast being made. These were frantically overlapped with depictions of the human body. The connection expanded once the artists left their sets behind to enter the stage and transform into kaya toast. The audience was encouraged to spread kaya jam and butter on their skin, allowing them to reach their ultimate expression of Singaporean identity. Multiple bodies con-



Image 1: The ending of '*WE ARE TOAST*' at The National Gallery of Singapore.

Even days after the performance, the hectic musical sequence that accompanied the flashing images continued to ring in my ears. I could not stop reflecting on how the second-hand experience of national identity was served to me, and how I would serve it to someone else based on my interpretation. This is what makes stylistically absurd choices so valuable. Their impact sets in, lingers, provides you with the ambiguity that allows reflection and varied interpretations.

## THE METHODS OF THE ABSURD

The term ‘absurdism’ can simultaneously describe intentionally bizarre behaviour and the purposeless nature of our chaotic universe. The desire to expose this amplifies during moments of societal, political, and economic distress. As the illusion of order dismantles, people begin to seek unconventional manners to express the turmoil. Conventional artistic structures and the rules of storytelling are left behind for beautiful discombobulations to emerge.

Dadaism rose from the ashes of war-time Europe during a period of fast industrialisation and modernisation. Individuals were filled with daily preoccupations that called for new forms of escapism, connection, and discrete discussion. In establishing the *Cabaret Voltaire* in Zurich as a centre for artistic entertainment, Hugo Ball asserted that:

‘The background of colours, words, and sounds must be brought out from the subconscious and given life, so that it engulfs everyday life and all its misery.’

(Ball, 1914)

Night shows at the *Cabaret Voltaire* were characterised by masked performers staging dances and skits, musical sequences that combined ‘natural’ and ‘bruit’ sounds, and readings of manifestos or phonic poetry. Each theatrical feature aims to express how the subconscious has digested the societal interactions and values it consumes. Shock is generated by challenging the comforting ideal of an orderly, coherent, and protective societal system. Consequently, audiences are encouraged to dive into their minds’ uncharted territories.

As cinematographic media gained popularity, the theatrical features adapted into visual and audible forms suited for video formats. For example, Man Ray’s *‘Emak-Bakia’* (1926) depicts multiple industrial machines that produce distinct, artificial noises as they randomly appear on the screen. As humans interact with the machines, their eyes join the visual composition. The robotic imagery symbolises the ‘inorganic’ human condition, characterised as harsh and systemic, that derives from industrialisation and modernity. However, the softness and fragility of the eye is utilized to represent the ‘organic’ human condition as starkly different. Consequently, the contradictions embed-

ded within the modern human experience, and in turn its absurdity, are exposed.

The shock enables visual imagery to penetrate the long-term memory of audiences across generations. They continuously morph and reappear in later productions as film makers attempt to challenge conventional notions of cinematic storytelling. Examples span across the 1970s, as *‘A Clockwork Orange’* (1971) and *‘The Holy Mountain’* (1973), to comment upon the intended aspects of society, rely on the audience pre-establishing associations between the eye and the ‘organic’, natural and authentic aspects of human life.

Similarly to *‘Emak-Bakia’* (1926), *‘A Clockwork Orange’* (1971) illustrates the human organ as unnaturally maneuvered by machinery to expose the artificiality of modern life. While *‘The Holy Mountain’* (1973) plays with the iconicity of the eye as a symbol in art. The iris busts into flames fed by stacks of money thrown in by the characters, who eventually become the dolls that continue to nourish the fire. Therefore, the symbol is used to criticise the capitalistic foundations of modern life while exposing its destructive potential towards ‘organic’ humanity.

So, as film becomes a medium for thought-provoking commentary, artists converse through their mediums to reutilise, challenge, and transform. In the 1970s, this coincided with significant socio-political events. An example is the ‘Watergate scandal’, which refers to the Washington break-in connected to Richard Nixon’s re-election campaign. So, in the cited films, the eye represents political secrecy and exposure. However, the ambiguity of visual imagery within the narrative allows for audiences to construct and contest multiple interpretations as they interact with the media across time.

## THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE ABSURD

Consider the eye as, through visual formats that portray absurd scenarios, it transcends its confinement to anatomy to become a symbol of awakening. Artificiality, mechanical features, and experimentation are distinctively connected to an organic component of the human body to expose how integrated we are into the absurd, illogical, irrational. The audience is faced with a reality previously hidden by the illusion of logic and purpose. Artists, as they seek freedom from their confinement to rules, turn to previous acts of artistic bravery for courage and inspiration. Therefore, non-linear and fractured narrative structures, as well as characters with eccentric costumes and traits, as seen in *‘Les Mysteres du Chatueau de De’* (1929) for instance, return to the cinematic climate.



Image 2: Eye imagery in 'Emak-Bakia' (1926), 'The Holy Mountain' (1971), and 'A Clockwork Orange' (1971).

The increasing reemergence of gothic adaptations and political media adopting absurd plot lines becomes an indicator of current societal uncertainty. The democratic crisis and consequential rise of global far-right politics have stimulated many debates. Once again, we begin to question current popular values, rules, and structures as we seek for change. This is reflected in the art we create and consume. Child-like female characters, as portrayed in 'Mysteres du Chateau de De' (1929) and 'Poor Things' (2023), are constructed to characterise the increasing erasure of a woman's autonomy over her reproductive health and future prospects by society. Simultaneously, their superficial lightheartedness or insouciance may represent concern over the possible acceptance of subordination. It encourages audiences to fight against passiveness.



Image 3: Various explorations of female experience and anatomy expressed through absurdist visual elements.

These artistic decisions intentionally reframe conventional beliefs as absurd, thereby stimulating the collective questioning necessary for change. However, to achieve this successfully and infiltrate their long-term memory, we must turn to techniques that shock audiences. Both 'Daisies' (1966) and 'Nosferatu' (2024) explore female oppression through grotesque depictions of decay and consumption.

The depictions possess a satirical and comedic quality in 'Daisies' (1966) as the nihilistic female protagonists boast the quirkiness of their outfits, actions, and personality traits. By embodying the opposite of what society expects from them, the expectations are ridiculed to encourage audiences to question their properness. In 'Nosferatu' (2024), the interactions between the male antagonist and female protagonist are depicted as simultaneously sexual and horrific, thereby exposing the power imbalance between the sexes.

Both films possess a scene in which the body is presented as vulnerable to the external forces that will feast upon it. However, the unrealistic and fantastical nature of the depictions calls for varied interpretations. Therefore, the absurd but literal representation of physical consumption gains the power to become a symbol of societal hierarchy. The shock generated yields a generational impact as it penetrates collective thought and memory.

The impact of absurd narratives, visuals, and characters is a powerful tool for engaging diverse groups into conversation that trespass physical boundaries and cultural differences. The sensory experience, like the one generated by 'WE ARE TOAST', forges new identities by welcoming outsiders into diverse cultural contexts. Previous stylistic risks inspire future artists, thereby establishing an ongoing conversation that trespasses spatial and temporal boundaries. Overall, it challenges the boundaries of human imagination by liberating our subconscious and tickling our hunger for continuous transformation.

# The Most Heinous Being in the world

By Parvathy Rajusekhar

## Initiating access.

Hello representative of the People, welcome! The Being conveys his utmost regards.

Memory logs obtained.

**WARNING:** Logs corrupted. Fragmented data found. Coalesce neurons and proceed?

## MEMORY LOG: ITERATION 5

...“I thereby sentence The Being to death by hanging for his crimes against humanity.”

I reset the reality the second the noose tightens. Next time, there will be no mistakes.

The Keepers of Time protest, but they understand why it must be done. It is for the good of the People. I am the Protector from All Wrongs, and it is all for them; all I ever do is for them.

## MEMORY LOG: ITERATION 9

...This wasn't me a n t to happ e n a g a i n [UNDECIPHERABLE]...

**WARNING:** Logs unreadable. Skip all disjointed records?

## MEMORY LOG: ITERATION 13

...As I sit in the stuffy courtroom watching the mob of angry citizens demand my death, I wish they'd just get it over with. This is a surprising development, but I cannot confirm yet whether it will yield positive results.

## MEMORY LOG: ITERATION 21

...The proceedings are shorter this time, and a flicker of hope rejoices within me. Maybe this is it. I've managed to make up for all my past follies and ensured they received the very peace they always wanted. There were no wars, no famines, no floods - nothing that could have ever posed harm. As the Guardian of the People, I have outdone myself.

I had not foreseen the trial occurring again, but there are always a few who cannot be satiated. By now, self-humiliation for their amusement feels almost routine.

My last vacation request was rejected, and the soulless assistant slyly reminded me how benefits are granted strictly according to performance. I wonder if I'll ever bear witness to the last blossom of the Nightglaze flowers once I leave the People.



“The issue I raise next is perhaps the most terrible of all and comes from countless heartbroken children around the globe. You prevented several major calamities—or so you claim—but in doing so, you purposefully discarded the feelings of those who rely on you most.” My visions of iridescent Night-Glaze dissolve as the attorney smirks at me in obvious glee.



“For a being of immense power, you chose to give them unhappiness. You chose to watch them cry as they begged you to come save their loved ones.”

What could I have possibly forgotten? What crime could have led to this?

“Didn’t you ignore their pleas”, the attorney continues, “to save their poor mute companions? Didn’t you watch them sob themselves to sleep every night since?”

Cats. I forgot to save cats from trees.

The Keepers of Time have issued their warnings, but I think they might forgive just one more offence.

### MEMORY LOG: ITERATION 24

...“I genuinely must admit,” I confess on the stand, “that I cannot fathom what inexcusable offence led to my trial this time.”

The attorney turns red at my supposed impertinence. “You may possess power beyond our imagination, but to feign pretence as you watch us struggle is truly heinous. Take a look at the children around you, what do you see in them?”

I gaze into the faces of joyful children who come in to fill up the courtroom, holding their screeching pets in their arms. “I see joy”, I say simply, “I see happy children.”

“How insolent! Is that all you see? Do you not know what it takes to be human?” The attorney turns to swivel her cape around, and the children begin to cry as if on cue.

“These children are too well-adjusted. They do not know what it means to grieve, to lose a loved one. They are protected from trauma, from the evils of the world.” She turns to me, pointing an accusatory finger at my throat. “You are responsible for this; you have made them soft.”

“Are you stating”, I ask gently as my body slumps against the barrister of the stand, “that I saved too many cats?”

### MEMORY LOG: ITERATION 32

...“You say you helped cure this so-called “Cancer.””

The attorney is a former drama student, and he chooses to display his talents through heaves, pauses and sighs every other sentence to boost the media ratings. “But how do we know if that was truly advantageous for us? Our world is overpopulated as it is, do you not see how you are perhaps the sole reason for our resource crisis?!”

He’s never managed to survive to see me sentenced in any prior iterations because of the cancerous tumour in his head. I wonder if I should let him remain uncured the next time.

The Keepers of Time are a dangerous enemy, but they seem to linger in the shadows. *Do what you must; we know how this ends, even if you don’t.*

“I honestly feel bad for you, I do. But, even if we were to bestow our utmost kindness, your actions that you deem notable or worthy”, the attorney paused with dramatic flair, gesturing towards the increasing mob of spectators, “can be described as inconvenient, unnecessary and frankly, pointless”. The crowd roared in delight.

I was brought up to be a being of peace; now all I want is anything but.



*MEMORY LOG: ITERATION 40*

...“Are you seriously suggesting that a war might have helped?”

Nothing surprises me anymore. The accusations grow more absurd each time, and no matter what I do, these idiots just don't get it.

“Do you dare accuse *us* of being War Criminals?” The attorney's voice booms around the large hall, and I admit I crouch a little. “We are NOT violence-hungry monsters.”

Oh, but you are.

“I merely suggested that the extended diplomacy maintained between countries may not be the most suitable as our younger generation grows restless. But do you see how he immediately jumps to the conclusion of War? He is the embodiment of all that is Wrong!”

Let me be frank - you were meant to aid us, protect us from harm, no matter what came your way. Instead, all you've granted us is indescribable sorrow and pain.” The attorney wipes a single tear from her left eye as the crowd yells for my head. I imagine the 15 billion people who have never experienced a day of hardship sitting in their comfortable, luxurious homes, calling me the harbinger of all evil.

I wonder if I should let them rot in their plague-ridden bodies next time.



*MEMORY LOG: ITERATION 45*

“Nearly all civilisations are beyond hope; that is but the simplest truth,” my tutor had once claimed. “However, with the right guidance, they can be led into the path of everlasting happiness.”

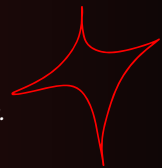
On this wretched planet, the only thing I guide is myself — to an early demise.

There is a solution, of course. The easiest method would simply be to erase everything and “raze it all” as I was once taught to do. And yet, despite their power-hungry, corrupt, violence-prone, manipulative and idiotic nature, I do not have it in me to watch them perish.

This time, when they lead me to the gallows, I will not bother reinstating the reality. I'll welcome the noose like an old friend. Maybe this is the true end...

...

*No more logs found.  
Auto-initiate Termination of Reality.  
This action cannot be over-ridden.  
This action cannot be over-ridden.  
This action cannot be over-ridden.  
Goodbye People. The Being sends his utmost regards.*





**By Ananaya Mittal**

You're seated at table 23. The reservation took six months. The room is dim and reverential, silent except for the muted clink of silverware. A waiter approaches with something impossible: a balloon, translucent and shimmering, tethered to a string of dehydrated Granny Smith apples.<sup>1</sup>

You're told, in the hushed tone of a museum docent, to pop the whole thing in your mouth, inhale the helium, and eat the sweet skin while your voice jumps several octaves. It's literally lighter than air. It costs almost \$300, and, according to those three Michelin stars, it's genius.

You hesitate, not for fear of looking foolish (everyone at table 23 already does), but because something about this feels familiar. You've seen this before: the absurdity, the joke that isn't quite a joke?

*Fine Dining*

**ate**

**DADDAISM**

**(and charged \$300 for it)**

## *Amuse-Bouche:* Inedible Menus

In 1961, *The Artists' & Writers' Cookbook* was published as a kind of edible performance art. Contributors like Marcel Duchamp, John Cage, and Man Ray served up nonsense instead of nourishment. Man Ray's *Menu for a Dadaist Day* proposed wooden blocks for breakfast, ball bearings in oil for lunch, and eggs wrapped in cellophane for dinner.<sup>2</sup>

It was utterly inedible—nonsensical, unmistakably Dada. The point wasn't to feed anyone but to mock bourgeois propriety. The dinner party, that ritual of middle-class taste, became the stage of its own ridicule. Their menu held up a mirror to the emptiness of art, taste, and meaning itself. That was 1961. The cookbook cost a few dollars, and the joke was free.

Now, at table 23, the same absurdist energy is back on the menu, only this time, it comes with a price tag that could cover weeks worth of rent.

## *Main Course:* The Tools and Transformation of the Absurd

Modern fine dining has quietly appropriated Dada's entire playbook. Ferran Adrià at elBulli pioneered "spherification," encapsulating liquids in delicate gelatin spheres. His "liquid olives" appeared solid but burst into pure olive juice when bitten.<sup>3</sup> It was a form of culinary defamiliarisation: something ordinary made strange. For the Dadaists, such estrangement was rebellion.<sup>4</sup> For fine dining, it becomes innovation. The difference is that Dada's absurdity mocked bourgeois refinement, while fine dining's absurdity *is* bourgeois refinement. The avant-garde gesture is no longer a critique but a commodity: what was once meant to unsettle now reassures diners that they belong to a culture sophisticated enough to "get it".

This inversion is almost poetic. What began in smoky Zürich cafés mocking culture's pretensions now plays out in Michelin temples, where confusion, irony, and surprise have migrated from protest to branding.

Adorno and Horkheimer recognised this as capitalism's genius for absorbing critique and reselling it as entertainment.<sup>5</sup> Even disruption, it turns out, can be packaged. Absurdity, once a weapon, becomes a flavour note. Duchamp submitted a urinal as art to mock artistic pretension; now that urinal (or a replica) sells for millions. Man Ray wrote an inedible menu to ridicule haute cuisine; now, haute cuisine sells edible clouds. The method remains identical, but the ideology is inverted by an economic order that neutralises rebellion by turning it into a commodity spectacle, absorbing the very critiques meant to destabilise it.

## *Intermezzo:* Watching Them Eat

You're not actually at table 23. You're on your couch, watching someone else. Maybe it's *The Bear*, where Carmy spirals into another panic attack over whether the fennel is shaved thinly enough. Maybe it's *The Menu*, where Ralph Fiennes plays a chef-as-cult-leader serving death as the final course. Both dramatise the same obsession from different angles.

*The Bear* premiered in 2022, just as inflation began its upward march. It's not really about food, it's about the psychodrama of ambition, the religion of perfectionism and the suffering of the creative genius. We watch Carmy chase Michelin stars not because we want to eat there, but because the struggle itself has become entertainment. The kitchen is a pressure cooker, and we're glued to the glass watching it whistle. The show satisfies two hungers at once: the thrill of proximity to luxury and the comfort of knowing we're not the ones being burned. We admire the artistry whilst simultaneously feeling superior to its absurdity. It's critique and seduction in the same breath, perfectly calibrated for an audience that wants to believe it's in on the joke even as it craves the very things being critiqued.

*The Menu* takes this further, offering a full-blown satire of culinary elitism that nonetheless revels in its own aesthetic. We're meant to laugh at the absurdity, but the film knows we're also a little seduced by it. Every plate is gorgeously lit, every technique gingerly explained. The film mocks fine dining even as it makes it look magnificent. This fixation with fine dining arrived at a telling moment. As inflation soared and rents followed, we became obsessed with watching people who can afford to set money on fire—or inflate it with helium and eat it. Wages stagnate, costs climb, and the wealth gap yawns wider, yet the culture fixates on luxury gastronomy.

This isn't coincidental. Recession-era media have always ogled wealth. During the Great Depression, Hollywood churned out screwball comedies about heiresses and penthouses,<sup>6</sup> fantasies of abundance, whilst breadlines stretched around the block. After 2008 came *Gossip Girl* and *Mad Men*,<sup>7</sup> gleaming monuments to excess consumed while Lehman Brothers collapsed.<sup>8</sup> Now, as inflation bites, we binge videos of chefs torching wagyu and explain the terroir of heritage carrots. Such is the irony of the human mind. It can budget down to the cent, live on canned beans for a week, and still spend three hours down a TikTok rabbit hole, listening to a sommelier explaining the notes on a \$400 bottle we'll never taste.

Perhaps that's why the absurdity lands so well now. When a dish costs \$300 and consists mostly of air, it mirrors the economy itself: fragile, transparent, inflated with nothing. The Dadaists performed absurdity to mock bourgeois culture in a post-war collapse. Fine dining performs it during

another collapse, but now, the bourgeoisie are in on the joke. They're eating it. And we're watching, unsure whether to laugh or despair.

## Dessert: The Balloon Returns

### THE DEMOCRATIC ILLUSION

Social media has supposedly “democratised” access to this world. Anyone with a phone can watch a \$2,000 meal being plated. We consume the idea of molecular gastronomy without ever tasting it. This is the new logic of aspiration: you don't need to have it, only to have seen it. Watching becomes its own form of participation. We feel cultured and critical without spending a cent. Marcuse called this “repressive desublimation”: a managed liberation of desire that keeps us docile.<sup>9</sup> We think we're rebelling; we're being entertained. These shows allow us to feel critical of a system whilst simultaneously training us to accept it. We laugh at the excess, roll our eyes at the pretension, and then bookmark the restaurant “just in case”. Walter Benjamin once argued that mechanical reproduction erodes the “aura” of art, its unique presence in time and space.<sup>10</sup> Fine dining, however, has learned to manufacture aura through scarcity, waitlists, and the performance of exclusivity. The magic isn't in the food; it's in the fact that you can't have it.

The Dadaists would have recognised this trick. Their inedible menu was powerful precisely because it *couldn't* be consumed. Now, we're being fed the same absurdity, puréed, plated, and paired with a 2009 Riesling.

You're back at table 23. The balloon arrives—translucent, shimmering, lighter than air. The diner hesitates, then commits. Pops it in their mouth, inhales, and laughs in a helium-pitched trill.

It lasts three seconds, a whisper of green apple, a breath of sugar, mostly air. It costs \$300.

From your sofa, you watch this moment and feel something complicated. Amusement, certainly. A bit of contempt, maybe. But most uncomfortably, a flicker of desire. Not for the balloon itself, but for the idea of the balloon. For the world in which \$300 desserts make sense. For the luxury of whimsy. For the table you'll never sit at and the reservation you'll never make.

Fine dining has perfected the art of neutralising Dadaism's rebellion. Every impulse survives— absurdity, parody, defamiliarisation— but stripped of its political sting. What began as a mockery of elite taste has become elite taste itself. Adorno and Horkheimer warned that capitalism would absorb even its own negation, turning resistance into another product line. They were right. The avant-garde, at last, has been swallowed by appetite.

The video ends. Autoplay queues another.  
A different restaurant. A different absurdity.  
You just keep watching.

.....



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