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As society continues to virtualize, popular culture and its influence on our identities grow more viral and pervasive. Consciousness mediates the cultural forces influencing the audience, often determining whether fiction acts as remedy, poison, or simultaneously both. In this essay, I argue that antimimetic techniques and the subversion of formal expectations can interrupt the interpretive process, allowing readers and viewers to become more aware of the systems that popular fiction upholds. The first chapter will explore the subversion of traditional form in George Saunders's *Lincoln in the Bardo*. Using Caroline Levine's *Forms* as a blueprint to study the interaction of aesthetic, social, and political forms, I examine how Saunders's novel draws attention to the constructed nature of identity and the forms that influence this construction. In the second chapter, I discuss how the metamodernity of the animated series *Rick and Morty* allows the show to disrupt status quo consciousness. Once this rupture occurs, viewers are more likely to engage with social critique and interrogate the self-replicating systems that shape the way we establish meaning. Ultimately, popular culture can suppress or encourage social change, and what often determines this difference is whether consciousness passively absorbs or critically processes the messages in fiction.

POPULAR CULTURE AS PHARMAKON: METAMODERNISM AND THE DECONSTRUCTION OF STATUS QUO CONSCIOUSNESS

by

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CHAPTER I

EMPATHY AND CONSCIOUSNESS IN *LINCOLN IN THE BARDO*

Introduction

Whether it is reinforcing gender roles, laundering racism, or exalting imperialism, popular culture oftentimes acts as a self-replicating system that upholds inequitable power structures through reification. Most of the problems in American society are solvable through systemic reconstruction, but many people accept these problems as inevitable because media seemingly representative of the real world present them as such. However, in the twenty-first century, self-aware texts can use ironic detachment to deconstruct tropes and subvert expectations in a way that highlights the absurdity of unsustainable, hegemonic systems. If readers and viewers have a passive status quo consciousness, then they tend to accept the model of reality presented to them. Through repetition and the creation of a closed system, popular culture conditions the consciousness of viewers to become less analytical and less likely to see the possibility for social change. To heighten awareness and engagement, texts can use antimimetic techniques and the subversion of formal expectations to disrupt the process with which we analyze art and entertainment. If viewers might process pop culture artifacts without critical thought, writers who want to express revolutionary content must find a way to interrupt the interpretive process and reduce the level of control that the status quo has over consciousness.

Several critics discuss the way form affects how readers process and understand texts. One particularly helpful critic is Micheal Sean Bolton. In his book *Mosaic of Juxtaposition: William S. Burroughs' Narrative Revolution*, he provides a useful model for studying how experimental form disturbs the interpretive process. Bolton explains that not only did Burroughs construct a narrative form designed to subvert political, moral, and cultural institutions, but he also sought to create change by altering the consciousness of readers (9-10). Bolton argues that Burroughs deconstructs and reconstructs language as a method of resistance because he sees language as a system of oppression that must be broken down and rebuilt. The fragmented form and challenging style of his novels force readers to interact with the text, and through this process, Burroughs attempts to alter the consciousness of readers and effect change. Bolton focuses on narrative subjectivity, claiming that readers should not treat the text as an object from which meaning is discerned, but as a subject that acts upon and works with the readers to create meaning. Building on Jacques Derrida's discussion of *pharmakon*, which Bolton describes as, "the simultaneous poison and cure that creates the possibility of liberation and change through transcendence of the destructive, binary qualities of language" (24), he discusses the function of the "word virus" in Burroughs's *Nova* trilogy:

> Through the notion of the word virus, [Burroughs] institutes a host/parasite binary within the individual's subjectivity. The parasitic other–that is language–works in opposition to its host and establishes the foundations for control and, eventually, transformation or annihilation of the host. (16)

The parasitic nature of the word virus stems from the use of citation as "repetition without difference and, thus, without meaning" (24). If language can act as a virus that seeks only to replicate itself and gain control, then this repetition "eventually eradicates diversity, resulting in homogeneity, stasis, and death" (24). Once Bolton examines the way writing can foster status quo consciousness in readers, he goes on to explain that Burroughs's cut-up and fold-in techniques attempt to engage readers through "a radical use of citation in their appropriation and manipulation of existing texts from a variety of sources" (25). He also argues that Burroughs's books "confirm Derrida's assertion that citations need not create binaries, but that each repetition offers the possibility of a new and singular reading" (25). The form of his novels necessitates reader participation and makes a meaningful individual reading more likely to occur.

In a discussion comparing writing and speech, Derrida observes that, "even while it means remedy, [*pharmakon*] cites, re-cites, and makes legible that which in the same word signifies, in another spot and on a different level of the stage, poison" (98). Through this process, the binary nature of meaning establishes our understanding of a concept while also creating instability in our interpretation. As Bolton explains, "*pharmakon* both creates the possibility of difference that allows the binary and simultaneously transcends the binary" (25). Taking a slightly different perspective on this transcendence, Burroughs supposes that he can "neutralize" the oppositional nature of language, and when this occurs, "language can be used as a means of freeing individuals from ideological and institutional incarceration" (Bolton 25). I agree with Bolton's interpretation of Burroughs's work to an extent, but I want to expand this discussion. Because language is

the foundational tool that allows the establishment of meaning, I propose that we apply the word-virus principle to all forms of art and entertainment. Depending on its application, any merchandized piece of culture can act in one of two ways: either as a parasitic control mechanism using citation and the repetition of tradition to suppress social change or as *pharmakon* with the ability to transcend the poison/remedy binary and expose systems of meaning. Fiction can act as a spark for social change, but since the possible poison always remains, we, as critics, must study the role consciousness plays in determining when cultural artifacts act as control mechanisms and when they provide the transcendence of *pharmakon* by neutralizing those mechanisms. As Bolton stresses, the method of reading/viewing/interpretation often controls whether a text inspires critique or reinforces the status quo. Consequently, artists and critics must address how to intervene in the process our consciousness uses to interpret texts. After all, the most politically revolutionary TV content could reinforce the status quo if a viewer watches the show for mindless escapism because this function of TV upholds capitalism and the culture industry's exploitation of consumers. If we must neutralize popular culture's dominant traditional forms to expose problematic systems, then we must study how this neutralization can occur. To this end, I will examine the methods writers use in *Lincoln in the Bardo* and *Rick and Morty*, two texts that subvert traditional forms of popular culture to encourage social change. According to Bolton, "for Burroughs the function of writing—whether it represents a destructive mechanism of oppression or a benevolent agent of liberation—depends not on the writing itself, but on how it is read" (63). If the act of reading—the process of conscious analysis—is the determining factor, then form is

vital because it can control, or at least influence, the way readers interact with and understand the text. Avoiding traditional structures should prevent readers and viewers from using their standard interpretive processes, but just as likely, many will maintain their usual processes, passively absorbing rather than actively engaging.

While Bolton believes Burroughs's work is a successful example of spurring change through the alteration of consciousness, I argue George Saunders's *Lincoln in the Bardo* provides a better example because he employs similar techniques, but he uses them to encourage empathy, a requirement for any positive social change. To study the various ways his novel explores and manipulates consciousness, I will rely on Caroline Levine's book *Forms*, which provides a method of treating each text as a thought experiment while also tracing thematic threads and conflicting motivations. Levine adopts a broad definition of form, describing it as, "all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference" (3). While many theorists see aesthetic forms as a reflection or response to political conditions, Levine notes, "Some critics have also worried that aesthetic forms can exert political power by imposing their artificial order on political life" (5). This artificially constructed order can influence what the audience views as possible. Levine goes on to detail four categories of forms that critics can use to study how narrative techniques might influence our interaction with texts in a way that can encourage or suppress political and social change. These categories, whole, hierarchy, rhythm, and network, can each have a massive effect on our daily decisions without us even realizing, but her version of formalism allows us to study these effects in an intersectional manner. One of the most significant points she

makes is that the pervasive influence of forms is not stable, meaning any number of conflicting forms can affect our decisions; accordingly, we must examine complicated interactions of countless forms to understand what compels us at both a personal and systemic level. After all, the systems that give our lives structure and meaning are complex networks containing hierarchies and rhythms that guide our actions.

In the first chapter of this essay, I use Levine's lens to examine forms in *Lincoln in the Bardo* while illustrating the mediating function of consciousness. The experimental nature of Saunders's novel encourages readers to examine the social, political, and aesthetic forms that shape identity. It is my contention that he advocates for an egalitarian society by illustrating the necessity of empathy and the difficulty of the fight against traditional hierarchical systems. While the novel still proves a useful form for altering readers' consciousness, I also look to other media to study the interpretive process our consciousness uses to decipher meaning. I turn to TV in the second chapter, examining the recent trend of animated comedy series becoming more postmodern and self-aware, creating more opportunity for systemic critique than in the past. *Rick and Morty* demonstrates this trend through constant references to pop culture, which cite past texts and exploit the nostalgia of viewers. The show skewers or parodies almost every reference, subverting tropes to highlight the absurdity of our systems of meaning, but it also has surprisingly sincere, serious moments. For this reason, Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker's work on metamodernism plays a key role in this analysis. As they explain, "[Metamodernism] oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness,

empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity" (5-6). *Rick and Morty's* metamodernity seeks to transcend the modern-postmodern binary and alter our interpretive process to deconstruct hierarchies to the point that we see socially constructed systems for what they are. These systems attempt to control us to replicate themselves. By exposing their control mechanisms, metamodernist texts can encourage us to be more aware of our processes for assigning meaning and value.

Democracy in the Bardo

Revolutions make great novels, which in turn, contain the makings of revolutions. The interweaving of political and aesthetic forms often steers the development of human society, and novels can use the reflection of social structures to highlight inherent issues. They can also disrupt our understanding of and commitment to cultural traditions, allowing us to envision necessary changes in those traditions (Levine 16). In *Lincoln in the Bardo*, George Saunders sets the story during a time of political and social revolution, and by doing so, he allows readers to study the ethical and emotional consequences of a war that reshaped American society. Saunders highlights the social faults that led to the Civil War and the dilemmas Abraham Lincoln faced during the conflict. Even though the plot takes place in 1862, when the war dominated the political and social spheres of America, Saunders does not focus his novel on the conflict itself. Instead, he describes the events surrounding the death of Willie Lincoln, the president's son. Although Saunders uses elements of historical fiction, the addition of the supernatural defies the

conventions of that genre. Most events occur in the bardo, a transitional state between death and reincarnation. The main characters/narrators are disembodied spirits, except for Abraham Lincoln. They narrate their own experiences, sometimes rambling to themselves, while other times resemble conversation between characters. In rare, climactic moments, their consciousnesses even intertwine. The text also breaks with supernatural conventions in several ways, including the use of a Buddhist afterlife for a cast of Christian characters. At one point, Lincoln even disrupts the conventions established in the text.[1] Other portions of the novel contain excerpts of what Saunders presents as non-fiction, but some are real and some fictional. Through his use of unnatural narrative techniques, Saunders stretches one night in a transitional state of existence into over 300 pages, all the while demonstrating and highlighting the struggle of a changing society.

Many critics regard *Lincoln in the Bardo* as a continuation of Saunders's attempts to inspire empathy in his readers, but what is remarkable is the way that he offers this inspiration in the novel. Empathizing requires envisioning oneself in the place of another, attempting to inhabit that person's space in the social hierarchy, a nearly impossible task because individuals are trapped in and controlled by their own perceptions, which have been shaped, or entirely generated, by cultural influence. To truly imagine oneself in someone else's place, one must understand the entire system of hierarchies and overlapping forms affecting someone else's identity and actions. Levine's critical theory

[1] For the sake of simplicity, I will refer to Willie by his first name only and use Lincoln to refer to the president for the remainder of the essay.

encourages readers to treat texts as thought experiments that allow us to examine the interaction of forms. As she explains, "Narratives are valuable heuristic forms, then, because they can set in motion multiple social forms and track them as they cooperate, come into conflict, and overlap, without positing an ultimate cause" (Levine 19). Viewing *Lincoln in the Bardo* as a social experiment allows readers to study the collision of conflicting forms within the development of democracy. Examining these interactions forces us to recognize the difficulty of breaking down social hierarchies and the importance of empathy in this process. Some might argue that Levine's work does not apply to antimimetic texts since she focuses on realistic social structures in mimetic texts, like *Bleak House* by Charles Dickens and the TV series *The Wire*. However, I argue that *Lincoln in the Bardo* is especially interesting in this context because the nature of the characters lets readers observe the mediating role of consciousness during the collision of forms. Saunders's use of unnatural narration allows him to present these interactions without the traditional constraints of reality, even going as far as showing multiple consciousnesses overlap. In an interview with *Time,* when asked why he is a "slipstream" writer, Saunders explains that using antimimetic elements to temper realistic fiction allows him to express the emotional complexities that he sees in reality.[2] An excerpt from the interview makes his intentions clear:

> I use those elements as a way of honing in on the emotional truth of a situation. When I look at what my life has actually been, to just represent what literally happened is to shortchange the emotional range that I've experienced. In other words, just a straightforward 'realist' representation of life seems to leave a lot of

[2] The interviewer uses the term "slipstream" to denote writers who incorporate sci-fi and fantasy elements into otherwise realist fiction.

> stuff on the table in terms of the real confusions and emotional complexities and beauties and terrors that are experienced even in a relatively bourgeois life like mine. (Begley 100)

Much like the narrative construction of Saunders's past stories, the unnatural elements in his novel emphasize the traditional forms that culture imposes on individuals.

Because *Lincoln in the Bardo* takes place in 1862, American democracy as portrayed in the book is still forming, still in the process of displacing the dominant form of government, a situation that lends itself to the examination of conflicting traditional hierarchies. Saunders presents the social and political struggles that developed during the slow progression toward equality as a relatively new form, the U.S. government, collided with an ancient racial hierarchy. Until this point in the country's history, the hierarchy that privileged whites had imposed itself onto the recently created government, but the war represented a revolutionary shift in social hierarchy. The federal government, attempting to establish itself as the dominant form, refused to allow half the country to continue a racist tradition. This decision advanced the process toward equality, and Saunders—knowing this process continues to present day—sets his novel during this pivotal era, stressing the ingrained, self-replicating culture that we must displace in order to dismantle inequitable systems.

Levine's formalist technique helps illuminate this struggle because politics has always been a battle of forms. Drawing on the work of Jacques Rancière, Levine proposes that organizing and arranging are key components of politics, and in the case of

the Civil War, the core conflict revolves around who belongs in the political sphere.[3] Since the fight for equality continues to this day, Saunders's novel presents a valuable study of the conflicting forms involved. Yet he does not approach this conflict like a traditional war novel. While the war provides context for many events in the narrative, his focus always remains on the speakers and how they process action and thought. In effect, Saunders centers consciousness as a mediator of forms. Many of the characters died before the war, so they do not understand the change happening in the material world of the novel, although some of the characters eventually learn about it. This moment is a turning point in the novel. Two central characters, Hans Vollman and Roger Bevins, intermingle while trying to guide Lincoln's thoughts. Afterward, Bevins says, "So many years I had known this fellow and yet had never really known him at all" (Saunders 172). In this moment, the interaction allows readers to see the importance of empathy as it changes the characters' understanding of how their existence functions. These men have spent at least ten years together, but only when one consciousness disrupts another do they truly know each other.

An earlier interaction with Lincoln provides another example of how one moment, one collision of forms, can break down hierarchical order. The spirits in the bardo subjugate themselves to the living, not because they recognize the distinction between dead and alive, but because they lack the agency to leave like the living. They have learned through repetition that their condition causes the living to distance themselves from the dead, indicating disrespect, which is reinforced when loved ones

[3] See Levine, Caroline. *Forms,* 3, 17.

never visit. Shocking the spirits, Lincoln embraces Willie's body, showing affection and an unanticipated respect. Bevins describes the "vivifying effect" (66) that this subversion of expectation has on the community. After privileging the living for so long, just the thought that the dead deserve respect and affection changes their perception of the world. Once they witness the disruption of an existing hierarchy, the characters have hope that they can change their situations.

Saunders creates a unique experiment by setting his story in the bardo, a mythic realm with its own natural laws where many of the material world's rules no longer apply. Characters in the bardo can fly, morph in strange ways, overlap another's consciousness, yet most of them cannot leave the cemetery, surrounded by an iron fence. They also cannot let go of unfulfilled desires. Longing to complete a task, a plan, a dream, the characters cling to the hope that they will go home to the realm of the living. Most do not understand that they are dead, but they do know that when they let go of their plans, they will move on in a "matterlightblooming phenomenon."[4] In their minds, they might cease to exist when this occurs, so they focus on their desire to the point that it controls both their identity and physical appearance. Early in the novel, Saunders does not make it clear whether characters are doing this consciously or unconsciously, but later in the book, when characters' past memories flood their minds, they wonder how they could have forgotten them, and Bevins explains that "To stay, one must deeply and continuously dwell upon one's primary reason for staying; even to the exclusion of all else." Vollman adds, "One must be constantly looking for opportunities to tell one's

[4] This term is how Saunders describes what occurs when spirits cross over to their next lives.

story" (255). Here, we can see how the rhythm of repetition structures the characters' existence. By repeatedly focusing on their desire to return to life and explaining to everyone why they must return, the characters maintain their place in limbo and become manifestations of their own desires. For instance, after Bevins changes his mind mid-suicide because he wants to continue to appreciate the wondrous beauty in the world, he grows multiple eyes and hands to allow him to observe more effectively. Vollman dies the day he is supposed to consummate his marriage. As a result, he spends his time naked with an abnormally swollen member. An old woman who is obsessed with hoarding her worldly possessions becomes squirrel-like, gathering and stockpiling whatever she can find in the graveyard. This pattern establishes the control that rhythm can have over consciousness. Through repetition, desires turn to obsessions that transform the characters' identities. A leftover form from the material world remains the only thread tethering these characters to their former lives. Similarly, we often continue to replicate restrictive forms from the past and let them influence our identities through repetition of cultural traditions.

The form of the bardo mimics the situation in America at the time. According to Lee Konstantinou, "The novel's plural, contradictory array of voices is an analogue to American democracy." Diverse, disjointed voices constantly interact, talking over each other, deciding their problems are worse than those of everyone else. The characters are thrust into a world that they cannot possibly understand, leading them to re-examine the governing rules of their existence and reformulate an order to make sense of that existence. Each character's interpretation shapes their understanding of this order, and

new arrivals in the bardo must rely on other characters' interpretations of past events to discover the guidelines of their new lives. This process mirrors humanity's flawed conception of social and political structure, which often relies too much on using others' historical analysis in the process of projecting order onto the world. By drawing attention to the interaction between personal experience and the knowledge of others, Saunders shows that both the overall structure of society and the citizens' concepts of their place in that society can be delusional and fictional. In this way, the characters of *Lincoln in the Bardo* could also represent the writers of the modern era, or all people in a revolutionary era, floating in a limbo that they do not fully comprehend, between traditional order and the unknown. Just as those writers came up with multiple ways of reacting to the loss of order, the characters in Saunders's book each have their own personal reaction, making the novel an intriguing study of transitional states and the effects they have on those involved. The development of democracy in America is a continual transitional state, and Saunders's presentation of consciousness encourages readers to observe the conflicts that arise when reconfiguring the order of existence. Because Saunders establishes the happenings in the bardo as a representation of the struggle to achieve democracy, readers should pay close attention to each collision that takes place. These interactions allow us to play out possible scenarios and eventually see the difficulties of the battle at hand. Konstantinou goes on to discuss the moment when a great number of spirits attempt to cram themselves into Lincoln's body to urge him to return to Willie, and this moment emphasizes Lincoln's role as the one person who can unite a divided nation. The spirits do not achieve their goal to affect Lincoln's actions; nevertheless, the intermingling of

their consciousnesses leads them to a grand realization, and perhaps, the core of Saunders's novel. Bevins exclaims, "Though on the surface it seemed every person was different, this was not true," to which Vollman responds, "At the core of each lay suffering; our eventual end, the many losses we must experience on the way to that end" (304). In this moment, we see the heart of any possible egalitarian democracy. The belief that a universal suffering lies at everyone's core is also a tenet in Buddhism, which may explain why Saunders superimposes it onto Western culture, a move to which I will return later in the essay.[5] At this point, I must note the significance of overlapping consciousnesses, an antimimetic plot device that Saunders uses multiple times to stress the importance of empathy. As we saw earlier with Bevins and Vollman, people can only truly know each other when their consciousnesses become one. This departure from reality allows Saunders to emphasize the key role empathy plays in creating equality. In the real world, it is impossible to put oneself in the place of another because culture molds each person's consciousness, which then mediates and interprets the experience of others when we attempt to empathize, trapping everyone inside their own perspective. By stressing the importance of empathy and demonstrating its impossibility in the real world, Saunders illuminates the gargantuan task of establishing true democracy.

[5] Alex Clark, a writer for *The Guardian*, summarizes the Buddhist influence on the novel: "Saunders threads his fragmented narrative with many of the religion's key tenets: the acceptance of flux; of relinquishing all attachments; of repetition and cycles; of the journey away from the self towards an indivisible whole." Though she does not explicitly mention the suffering at the core of humanity, recognizing how we all share in that suffering is a key part of the journey toward an indivisible whole.

Empathy through Disruption

Saunders's emphasis on empathy is nothing new, but the way he goes about it in *Lincoln in the Bardo* is striking. Several critics discuss the prominence of empathy in Saunders's past works and the present novel, and some also suggest that he uses antimimetic techniques to draw attention to our inability to empathize. One example of this trend arises in "The Semplica Girl Diaries," in which Saunders critiques class envy and the justification of social class with an absurd plot that involves middle-class people buying immigrant girls who are wired together and hung, living, as yard decorations. While discussing this story, David Rando observes a pattern present in Saunders's work:

> He combines a devilishly precise ear for contemporary habits of speech and thought with startlingly absurd, dystopian, and often fantastical visions of American life, all while insisting on the importance of empathy and ethical actions. Indeed, his narratives can themselves be understood as empathetic and ethical vehicles that aim to provoke readers to re-examine their assumptions about class, inequality, and self-interest in everyday American life. (2700)

As Rando points out, Saunders often impels readers to think about the many forms that govern their lives, whether those forms are hierarchies like class and inequality in "The Semplica Girl Diaries" or the nation-states to which the readers belong. Layne Neeper also discusses the way Saunders encourages empathy in readers. After explaining that Saunders does not offer simple "prescriptive remedies," Neeper argues that Saunders supplants "the logos of traditional satire, the reasonableness of implied correction, with the pathos of empathetic recognition" (286-287). A clear pattern emerges as we examine Saunders's collection of short stories, but this trend reaches a new level in his first novel.

In a review, Bryce Taylor notes the way Saunders uses unnatural narration to illuminate the role consciousness plays in empathy:

> When a spirit in the bardo passes through another person (living or dead), the former is flooded with the latter's consciousness. In effect, Saunders has constructed an image of the kind of empathy he has advocated throughout his career—and which his writing puts into practice. (63)

Clearly, Saunders encourages readers to look inside themselves and find a way to create real empathy, but how can we ever accomplish this if our consciousness constrains us?

Perhaps the closest we can come is a disruption of consciousness, a moment when traditional order begins to crumble and we must reinterpret the forms that govern of our existence. If in a moment like this we could all recognize the core equality of humanity, then we could possibly achieve full democracy. The role of the bardo becomes vital in this context. Although the most common definition of the bardo is the transitional state between death and rebirth, it can actually describe several types of transitional states.[6] Tibetan Buddhism has conventions and rules about how the bardo functions, but they are not explicitly present in the text.[7] In fact, the only explicit reference to the realm the characters are in is the title of the book. Because of the lack of established guidelines, viewing the bardo as representative of the democratic transitional state seems more significant than dogma, especially regarding the characters' understanding of their existence. Lacking any knowledge of Buddhism, they have no comprehension of what

[6] Taylor, Richard. *Death and the Afterlife: A Cultural Encyclopedia.* 25-26.
[7] Clear references to the conventions of the bardo are present, but only if readers have prior knowledge of Buddhism.

they are going through, leading some to impose Christian ideology onto the bardo, but mostly, the characters focus on the unsatisfied desires that tether them to the material world. For the Reverend Everly Thomas, Christianity creates the desire that holds him in limbo. His consciousness cannot move on because he believes he has committed some grave sin for which he must atone. Interestingly, Thomas is the one character who knows he is dead when the story begins, a detail that amplifies his desperation to atone. While most of the characters are in the second stage of the bardo, known as *Chonyid Bardo,* Thomas's knowledge of his own death combined with a moment when his heart is literally weighed to judge his life imply that he is in the third stage, *Sidpa Bardo*, when the consciousness realizes the body is dead and the soul "sees its good and evil deeds weighed."[8] This collision between Buddhism and Christianity demonstrates to readers that one cultural form, through the power of inclusion and repetition, can influence people so much that they misinterpret the afterlife. Rather than adapting to the order of the bardo, Thomas continues to project his concept of purgatory onto it. In one particularly amusing scene, he describes the events that let him know he is dead. He witnesses two others judged by luminous beings. One goes to what seems like heaven, the other to a hell where humans are flayed. After Thomas sees the fates of these men, the luminous beings judge him and condemn him to "hell." However, Thomas's description of this scene refers to multiple forms from his own material existence, indicating that what he sees is a projection from his own consciousness. Describing the palace of judgment as "reminiscent of Hartley's warehouse, a place I had known as a boy" (189),

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[8] See Becker, Carl. *Breaking the Circle: Death and the Afterlife in Buddhism.* 97-99.

he projects a previously known form onto a new experience, and a second occurrence reinforces this process. When he sees whom he calls the Christ-emissary up close, Thomas says that he looks like a teacher from his old school (192). Again, we can read this as projection. The most interesting moment in this chapter comes right after Thomas has been condemned. An inescapable binary hierarchy controls the logic of the scene. He can go to heaven or hell. Thomas appears to have no choice. The Christ-emissary has decided his fate, and the form that will contain him is set. Despite this apparent certainty, something extraordinary happens. Thomas overcomes the binary by simply running away. A third option, one he did not know existed, allows him to escape and continue his existence in the bardo. He carries this secret throughout the story, wondering what he could have done to deserve hell. The need to atone holds him in limbo and constructs the entire projection in which he actually judges himself. For the remainder of his time in the story, he contemplates his possible sins, but he eventually frees himself. During a crucial moment, he rescues Willie from tendrils attempting to ensnare him, and Thomas tries to carry the boy to see his father.[9] Thomas does not succeed, but he does move on immediately afterward. In a Christian purgatory, his selfless deed may have allowed atonement. However, in the bardo, it is his belief that he has atoned that allows him to move on. Thus, the form of Christianity dominates his existence in the transitional state even though he technically controls his own fate the entire time.

Reverend Thomas is intriguing because he has a greater understanding of the situation than most characters, but studying Willie's process in the bardo allows a more

[9] Tendrils are mutated spirits being compelled to control characters.

effective examination of the transitional state because he is a new arrival, whereas Vollman, Bevins, and Thomas are already in the bardo when the novel begins. Willie has no understanding of what is happening to him when he first arrives. The forms that would normally guide him are gone. Since he emerges into darkness, we see the usual day-night rhythm reversed. Those in the bardo roam at night and sleep in their "sick-boxes" during the day.[10] His consciousness has escaped the form of his body, allowing him to "walk-skim," or hover. His family, the usual network he belongs in, is nowhere to be found as he is surrounded by strangers, who explain to him certain rules of his new existence. Vollman and Bevins take him to see Elise Traynor, a child who did not move on quickly enough and remains trapped in a constantly morphing form. When Traynor first arrived in the bardo, she had her true form, "a young girl in a summer frock." But when readers first see her, she is "manifesting at this moment as a sort of horrid blackened furnace." She then transmutes into "the fallen bridge, the vulture, the large dog, the terrible hag gorging on black cake, the stand of flood-ravaged corn, the umbrella ripped open by a wind we could not feel" (36-37). Using this fantastic example of a consciousness in flux, Bevins and Vollman reveal to Willie that he will succumb to the same fate if he remains too long, falling victim to hierarchy and rhythm in the bardo. Adults can remain indefinitely, but children must move on as quickly as possible. If Willie disrupts this rhythm, he will suffer grave consequences, so he agrees that he should move on soon. However, his father's actions change his mind. Willie's decision to stay sets the main plot in motion. He upsets the (un)natural order, causing the main characters to attempt to

[10] Some of the spirits refer to their coffins as "sick-boxes" since they are unaware of their deaths.

influence Lincoln, which eventually leads to a revolutionary moment for both Lincoln and the residents of the bardo.

If we view the experience in the transitional state as a thought experiment, focusing on the struggle for democracy, we can see the difficulty of moving from the traditional to a new order. The cultural forms of the past continue to restrict the characters' ability to accept change, making it difficult to move to the next state. Just as the country cannot let go of the past, the characters cling to the desires of their previous existence. The transitional state seems to become the dominant form in the novel as the characters trap themselves through the repetition rooted in their former lives. However, Levine explains that "to isolate a single form and assume its dominance is almost always an act of oversimplication" (100). To avoid this mistake, we must pay careful attention to the forms from past lives that cross over the boundaries of the bardo. Whether we study the religious form controlling Thomas, the kinship network that urges Willie to remain, or even the class hierarchy carried over into the transitional realm, we can see that the influence of forms is difficult to predict.[11] We must observe them from as many perspectives as possible to get any semblance of a pattern, and the form of *Lincoln in the Bardo* encourages us to do just that.

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[11] Class hierarchy retains its organization in the bardo. While middle- and upper-class characters reside in the graveyard, lower-class characters' bodies are buried in a nearby mass grave.

Narrative and Consciousness

The most antimimetic feature of the novel is the method of narration. Up to this point in the essay, I refer to the form Saunders constructs, rather than describing the choices of the narrator. This decision is purposeful because narrative voice is almost non-existent in the text. Colson Whitehead describes the form of the novel as, "a collage built from a series of testimonies," and the narrator as, "a curator, arranging disparate sources to assemble a linear story" (22). In the scenes detailing the thought processes of the characters, we have no reason to believe the curator is withholding information. We might not be getting every possible detail, but we have no way to know if any information is missing. On the other hand, in the scenes with non-fictional elements, we obviously do not get every possible account of the situation. Some excerpts chosen by the narrator show a strategic arrangement that emphasizes how individual perception can distort facts. The quoted authors disagree about the moon, whether it is full or crescent, or if it is a dark and stormy night.[12] In another chapter, descriptions of Lincoln's eye color demonstrate the instability of information that consciousness can create. His eyes are dark grey, luminous grey, gray-brown, bluish-brown, blueish-gray, kind blue (196-197). Subjective differences in minor details might seem inconsequential, but the descriptions reflect tone, using the moon to represent mood and eye color to indicate the authors' attitudes toward Lincoln, or perhaps his emotional state. Attitude or mood can influence

[12] Phrases used to describe the moon include beautiful moon, brilliance of the moon, golden moon, no moon, fat green crescent, full moon that was yellow-red, silver wedge, "the moon shone high and small and blue," "the night continued dark and moonless," full yellow moon. 19-20.

our interpretation of more than just minor details, and if the interpretive process shades everything we know, we cannot use fact-based logic to make reasonable decisions without escaping our own consciousness. The only way to achieve this is stepping into someone else's experience, a disruption of one's own consciousness.

Another striking narrative feature in the book that emphasizes the role of consciousness in mediating forms is the style Saunders uses for the sections when the children, Willie and Elise, speak. Willie uses hardly any punctuation because he has not had much time with traditional educational forms and feels little need to replicate standard sentence structure. Elise is slightly older than Willie. She uses more punctuation, but she has far more spelling errors in her speech. Her misspelling could indicate having less education or being a lower class than Willie, but it also emphasizes her lack of experience with certain forms, which leads her to cling to her previous life, keeping her in the bardo:

> Dim rum swoggling plases off bakalleys
> Kome to love them
> Crave them plases. And feel such anger.
> I did not get any. Thing.
> Was gone too soon. (38)

We can see that her desire to experience some of the more lurid parts of life keeps her from letting go. She has no idea what the places she craves are like, but those forms are still powerful enough to sway her. The lack of conventional form in Willie's and Elise's sections illustrates that in their youth, they are still learning, still discovering which forms will influence them the most. This formal decision stresses the role of consciousness as a

battleground on which forms establish their importance to our ideologies. These children are freer than most of the characters in the novel as indicated by the freedom of their form.

The way Saunders handles dialogue throughout the book also shows the importance of consciousness. When characters speak, sometimes it is aloud and draws a response, and sometimes it is an inner monologue. The only times Saunders uses quotation marks to indicate dialogue come when characters describe the words of other characters. Here, Saunders stresses the mediating role of consciousness once more by focusing attention on the interpretation of dialogue. Through his choice of narration—presenting conflicting facts, the power of repetition, and the difficulty of empathy—Saunders continually stresses the importance of consciousness as a mediator of forms. But what type of form is consciousness? Levine lays out four categories of forms in her book, but consciousness does not fit neatly into any single category. It brings together parts like senses and experiences into a unified whole to create perception and identity. Our consciousness mediates the natural rhythms that maintain our lives, helping us decide when to sleep, wake up, eat, go to work, but these rhythms are rarely inherent and more often guided by the repetition of cultural norms. Consciousness creates its own hierarchy by privileging our own experiences and perception. We tend to trust our own judgments and memories while requiring evidence and explanation to support the assertions of another consciousness. Furthermore, consciousness also sorts and ranks the hierarchies around us, as Levine explains in her discussion of *Antigone.* Antigone's consciousness is the site of a struggle between conflicting hierarchical forms including

“public and private, gods and humans, king and people, man and woman, obedience and disobedience, and friend and enemy” (87-93). Levine emphasizes how drama can present the collision of forms in a way that allows readers to observe the struggle. Perhaps the most fitting way to describe consciousness is a network of connections and forms coming together to create our identities. However, we can also view it as a centralized node, the critical juncture in each individual’s network. Saunders envisions consciousness as such a powerful force that it can bridge the gap between the spiritual and material realms, creating a network that allows a multitude of characters to intertwine identities with each other and Abraham Lincoln. No matter how we choose to view consciousness, we cannot ignore its importance in the interaction of forms.

Once we accept the role consciousness plays in mediating forms—the way it alters our view of facts, the way it processes the influence of social forms, the power it has to break down boundaries or use one form to displace another—we can study when and how consciousness overcomes the control of tradition. Examining this type of disruption could lead to a better understanding of how to create social change and encourage the push for the equality that is necessary for a true democracy. Because forms cannot “impose a single coherent order on experience” (Levine 81), we must study the interaction of multiple forms, and the role of consciousness in this process, to grasp the seemingly impossible difficulty of establishing a unified democracy.

Saunders makes it clear how vital empathy is in the struggle for equality, so we must scrutinize the process in the novel that represents empathy, and when we do, the task seems more impossible than ever. The use of intertwining consciousnesses, a

logically impossible action, is the only way characters truly empathize in the story, which strongly implies that true empathy cannot exist in reality. Nonetheless, that does not mean we should not try. I do not mean we should all go out and attempt to read each other's minds. What we can do is accept that we are trapped in our own perspective because we have no way of escaping our consciousness. Understanding the way that consciousness interprets and reinforces certain forms can allow us to break with those forms, but only if we interrupt the pattern of repetition. Unfortunately, the limitations of consciousness tend to prevent of us from being aware of these forms, another reason why Levine's work is so significant. As she explains, "we may intuit the overwhelmingly complex webs of social interconnections in glimpses and hints, but the networks that connect the rich and poor, city and world, the dead and the living, are never fully present to consciousness" (129). Again, we can see that consciousness is limited, restricting our ability to actively change the forms that structure societies. So what does Saunders do? Does he simply show us the seemingly impossible task of progressive social change? Well yes, he does highlight the difficulty in using consciousness to advocate for change, but by grounding his book in historical fiction, he implies an interesting link between his imaginary version of complete empathy and a revolutionary moment in American history.

Several key moments in *Lincoln in the Bardo* come when the spirit-characters enter the body of Abraham Lincoln. First, Vollmans and Bevins enter his body and find they truly know each other afterward. Later, in an attempt to urge Lincoln to return to Willie, most of the characters in the bardo enter his body, and they all experience a similar phenomenon to Vollmans and Bevins, who describes the changes to the

characters at this time as “miraculous transformations” (259). Patterns are broken, and some of the most tragic characters separate from the past lives that haunted them. One particularly powerful example comes in the form of Litzie Wright. Before this moment, Litzie is silent, traumatized from a lifetime of brutal treatment. Mrs. Francis Hodge, a friend, describes Litzie’s story and the horrors she suffered as a slave. The repetitive abuse imposes itself on her identity and keeps her silent until the moment she joins and connects with everyone. At this time, her voice returns, and she thanks Mrs. Hodge for speaking for her. All the characters who join together come out of the situation stronger, but they still do not move on to their next lives.

Willie’s interaction with his father is what finally leads to most of the spirits crossing over to a new state of existence. This striking moment creates a forceful reaction in both Willie and Lincoln. By entering his father’s mind, Willie learns he is dead, and this realization allows him to have an epiphany and eventually move on. Consequently, his father feels freed. Vollman and Bevins experience Lincoln’s thoughts as he walks through them, and we get a glimpse of his revelation. Vollman explains that “His mind was freshly inclined toward sorrow; toward the fact that the world was full of sorrow… …one must try to remember that all were suffering” (303). Dedicating himself to battling this sorrow, Lincoln decides Willie would not want him to let grief hamper his attempt to win the war, and he decides, “The swiftest halt to the thing (therefore the greatest mercy) might be the bloodiest” (307). His decision here is significant because sympathy drives it. Vollman transmits this information to the audience: “His sympathy extended to all in this instant, blundering, in its strict logic, across all divides” (304). Breaking those divides

involves dismantling the borders of repressive, ancient forms. At this point, we see once more the capability of empathy. One critic explains:

> What Lincoln calls (appropriately, for his time) ‘sympathy’ is indistinguishable from Saunders's ‘empathy,’ although the difference in vocabulary marks today's common-sense understanding that there's a difference between merely feeling bad for somebody and making the mental and emotional effort to see the world from their point of view. (Baskin 38)

That emotional effort is fundamental to the kind of empathy Saunders encourages in his audience. By linking the culmination of identity, sorrow, and empathy in Lincoln to his fortitude to win the war, Saunders connects fiction to reality in a clever way of demonstrating the power of empathy, especially vital when battling antiquated, self-replicating systems.

In the world Saunders creates, characters have the ability to merge consciousnesses, but this is not an option for the real world. However, we do have something similar: art. Engaging with artists’ representations of consciousness allows observers to absorb certain parts of that consciousness. When we see art in this way, Levine’s book illuminates the possibility for art to disrupt forms in the real world. She argues, “aesthetic and political forms may be nested inside one another, and that each is capable of disturbing the other’s organizing power” (16-17). Art’s power to disturb political order lies in its ability to interrupt consciousness, allowing an artist’s work to reconfigure the influence of forms on our identity. As Rancière asserts, modernist authors create “a rupture with the representational order and with what resides at its core, the hierarchy of action,” by creating “an unprecedented capacity among common men and

women to accede to forms of experience hitherto denied them" (7). Art often precedes political revolution. The form of the novel can give readers the belief that the hierarchies in the world are not permanent. In this way, modernist literature encourages the breakdown of traditional hierarchies. Similarly, Saunders promotes empathy's unprecedented ability to create equality. To this day, America still maintains an unconscionable level of inequality, but *Lincoln in the Bardo* gives readers a chance to see that if Lincoln can use empathy to begin overturning a socially constructed hierarchy, we can use it to continue the fight. Through his use of unnatural narration, mainly the direct observation of consciousness, Saunders directs us to dedicate ourselves to empathy if we ever want to see real social change.

Breaking conventions has an uncanny ability to amplify the disruption in consciousness that art can create. Writing is especially powerful in this regard. A surprise can briefly interrupt the consciousness's standard process of mediating forms. When unexpected moments arise, they allow the reconfiguration of how forms influence us, a shuffling of sorts. Modernist authors break with traditional verisimilitude, which can shock readers into re-envisioning the order of society. Saunders breaks with traditional narration in several ways, allowing readers to imagine new possibilities of existence. Burroughs creates a "benevolent word virus" to combat the oppressive word virus (Bolton 52). The remedy from status quo consciousness does not come from the benevolent virus displacing the control mechanism of the other word virus. Instead, they neutralize one another and push readers outside of the usual system of interpretation.

Burroughs centers and deconstructs the system of language itself. Readers can momentarily step outside of that system and view the simultaneous poison and remedy rather than interpreting the text as one or the other. This recalibration of consciousness allows us to see the instability of meaning and the importance of understanding the forms that contribute to how we assign that meaning. Much like Burroughs tries to neutralize a dominant system by altering readers' consciousness, Saunders uses experimental form in an attempt to make his novel more *pharmakon* than parasite, but the revolutionary content will be apparent only if disruption occurs. The form of the novel has immense power in demonstrating the potential for social change, but this power exists only if we choose to look for it.

Through the self-perception/delusion of narrators, Saunders encourages readers to see what these narrators cannot see in themselves, and in turn, the overall absurdity of forming an identity as part of a whole (society). Saunders uses the synthesis of mimetic and antimimetic representation to break down our idea of social order. His novel closes on an especially powerful demonstration of this concept. The interaction when Willie enters his body leads Lincoln to commit to the war for equality, and we know he will win the first battle in that war, but we also know that the struggle continues and that we must still learn as a society how to empathize more effectively. By scrutinizing the collision of forms in this war, we can better understand the complexities involved. Saunders even uses America's place in an international network to underscore the importance of the

Civil War and the establishment of democracy.[13] To demonstrate the necessity of America continuing as a functioning whole, Bevins relays some of Lincoln's thoughts:

> Across the sea fat kings watched and were gleeful, that something begun so well had now gone off the rails (as down South similar kings watched), and if it went off the rails, so went the whole kit, forever, and if someone ever thought to start it up again, well, it would be said (and said truly): The rabble cannot manage itself.
> Well, the rabble could. The rabble would.
> [Lincoln] would lead the rabble in managing.
> The thing would be won. (308)

Lincoln knows that this war represents the possibility of democracy or the death of that possibility. If it fails, traditional order will remain intact, but if it succeeds, then we as a country would have proven that the traditional hierarchy of action is in the process of breaking down. This realization strengthens his resolve, and as he lets Willie go, readers know that Lincoln rides off into a future in which he will change the course of history by contributing to the fight for equality and democracy.

Toward the end of the book, we see several instances of forms being broken down. Bevins and Vollman even subvert the rules of the bardo by finding a way to free Elise Traynor from her punishment. The final chapter highlights the breakdown of hierarchy, closing the book on a hopeful note that the war will be won, and not just the Civil War, but also the war for true equality that rages on to this day. Thomas Havens, a slave, narrates the final chapter. He explains that whenever an order was given, "a small resistant voice would make itself known in the back of my mind" (219). As an oppressive

[13]According to Levine, "Politically, [networks] are neither consistently emancipatory— freeing us from a fixed or dominant order—nor always threatening—trouncing sovereignty or dissolving protective boundaries" (115).

society imposes a racial hierarchy on him to the point of removing his agency, his consciousness finds a way to rationalize it because this form dominates his life, giving him no choice. Even though the voice in his head never goes completely silent, he shows how people can be forced to resign themselves to unacceptable situations. However, this mindset changes at the end of the novel. When Lincoln is leaving the graveyard, Havens enters his body, walking stride for stride with him, attempting to imprint the suffering of his people into Lincoln's mind. We do not know if it works, but Havens continues in Lincoln's body as he mounts his horse and rides away. This symbolic ride to freedom gives us one more example of a form being broken down. For most, the graveyard is an enclosed form preventing escape, but because Havens was buried outside the iron fence in a mass grave, he is free to wander, reversing the hierarchy of the material world. As he leaves with Lincoln, Havens closes the novel by saying "And we rode forward into the night, past the sleeping houses of our countrymen" (343). Using first-person plural pronouns, he joins himself together with Lincoln, demonstrating once more the power of empathy that is achievable through a disruption of consciousness, through the active destruction of forms.

Lincoln in the Bardo helps us recognize this process, to see forms like traditional hierarchies breaking down. When we view politics as a method of arrangement, we can see that no single form can hold that arrangement together. Multiple forms are always colliding, conflicting with each other on the battleground of our consciousness. As Saunders urges, we must study the role consciousness plays in interpreting and reinforcing these forms because people quite frequently shift traditional hierarchies and

rhythms to unconscious thought, making them seem inherent to existence. If we see them that way, we will never progress to an egalitarian society. The only way to do that is using empathy, and since we cannot literally absorb someone else's consciousness, we must do the next best thing, engage in a way that allows aesthetic forms to disrupt our consciousness. Our engagement with art gives us brief moments to reconfigure the forms that control us, and Saunders's novel shows us that this disruption is a difficult, continual process.

CHAPTER II

RICK AND MORTY SHATTERS THE GRAND ILLUSION

As technology continues to evolve and permeate every aspect of human existence, it presents us with seemingly infinite possibilities for the improvement of society. Constant scientific progress should provide us with greater certainty about the functionality of social structure and the limitations of progress, but instead, more questions arise every day, and the power of facts and truth seems to weaken with every question. Science fiction in the twenty-first century illustrates this process by speculating future possibilities, testing potential improvements, and warning of an impending conflict, or rather the downhill race to the point when scientific progress faces an inevitable world-ending event. Against this backdrop of technological explosion and impending doom, the aftershocks of postmodernism continue to reverberate through fiction, making much of it more self-aware, socially conscious, and disruptive to the systems that writers deconstruct and reconstruct. Nowhere is this trend more obvious than in animated series, especially those targeting adult audiences. Taking inspiration from *The Simpsons,* shows like *Family Guy, Futurama, American Dad,* and *The Venture Brothers* use a traditionally innocent genre and transform it to display the grotesque results of the cultures they synthesize to create their content. They play out traditional tropes to their logical extremes. Peter Griffin, even while his existence cites Homer Simpson and Fred Flintstone, can challenge the audience in a way these other characters

cannot. *The Venture Brothers* shreds 60 years of comic and cartoon culture, creating an homage while skewering the archetypes of every possible genre. One show epitomizes the intersection of postmodern animation and science fiction's social critique. *Rick and Morty* has a protagonist who treats the fourth wall like a revolving door, and being the smartest man in the galaxy thanks to his ability to travel the multiverse and learn a near-infinite amount of information, Rick Sanchez could use his genius to benefit humanity, but his driving force is a quest for a McDonald's dipping sauce used to promote a Disney movie from the 1990s. The writers often use absurd, shocking moments to undercut the utopian possibilities in the show, and a mad scientist with virtually infinite knowledge creates an abundance of these possibilities.

In this chapter, I will explore the twenty-first-century trend of science fiction presenting the limitations of using scientific progress to create a utopian society. Because authors employ speculative fiction to anticipate possible futures, we can treat these stories as mental experiments to test the limits of human ingenuity. It is my contention that *Rick and Morty*'s metamodernist nature demonstrates how writers can synthesize popular culture, exploit it, and critique it in a way that de-naturalizes the norms and social structures tied to that culture. The show contains the usual postmodern elements in contemporary cartoons: constant references, self-consciousness, direct address of the audience, but more importantly, *Rick and Morty* oscillates between modernist enthusiasm and postmodern ironic detachment to attack socially structured hierarchical systems and make viewers question the limits of scientific progress. After repeatedly seeing the instability of multiple social and political systems, we must question whether it is

possible for society to use science, especially technology, to progress to a functional, sustainable state. Contemporary science fiction, especially *Rick and Morty*, shows us vast technological possibilities but has yet to offer a feasible model for a utopian society, thus demonstrating the limits of progress, while also re-emphasizing that all social, political, and economic systems are, as currently designed, unsustainable.

The postmodern techniques that *Rick and Morty* uses to comment on social systems illustrate the detached irony with which writers present and viewers subsequently perceive the show's content. First, postmodernism allows genre fiction, formerly relegated to frivolous topics, to explore much more serious issues. Science fiction can now examine the most significant problems in society due to postmodernism, which encourages artists to challenge the boundaries of genres. The same expansion applies to animation. While older cartoons that are more traditional provide mainly distraction or escape from boredom for children, contemporary cartoons can address the same issues as "highbrow" literary texts. *The Simpsons* shows the early signs of this trend. The writers use an ironic detachment from the subject matter to allow the exploration of previously off-limits topics. Homer Simpson, for example, is an alcoholic who constantly chokes his son, and this level of child abuse would never make the final cut of a traditional sitcom or cartoon. The writers deploy the gag for comedic purposes, but it could also encourage viewers to question why they find it amusing and imagine others who might not find it possible to laugh due to real life abuse, which highlights the instability of interpretation. *Rick and Morty* uses this same detachment and instability to present several crucial issues, including substance abuse, terrorism, and even genocide.

Postmodern cartoons continue to break with other traditions of animated series, pushing the genre further than the creators of *The Simpsons* imagined possible. Traditional cartoon characters do not age, and their identities rarely evolve, but this trend is fading in the twenty-first century. *Futurama* has an episodic format, but it also has a structured series arc and character progression, and this show can be seen as a precursor to *Rick and Morty* because, as one critic notes, "Like *Futurama,* another spoofy, animated, science-fiction comedy that staged episodes as sad as they were funny, *Rick and Morty* raids countless prior classics for visual and narrative inspiration" (Seitz). *Rick and Morty* continues this tendency of raiding prior classics while also subverting the conventions within them. Although the characters do not seem to age physically, they do develop and alter their personalities. Morty demonstrates this trend more than any other character as his idealism and belief in objective morality fade throughout the show. As he spends more time with Rick, he goes from being non-violent, to murdering a higher being in defense of all carbon-based life, to murdering out of anger, to eventually trying to kill Rick. This progression shows the death of Morty's innocence, but *Rick and Morty* complicates character growth in multiple ways. The use of the multiverse weakens the importance of any single character. As we watch our Morty grow up, we always know that in alternate dimensions, other Mortys remain innocent, or perhaps they develop much sooner or more intensely. The multiverse also creates the possibility of simply leaving characters behind. In episode six of the first season, for instance, Rick causes a chain reaction of mutation that deforms every human on Earth except for his family, and when he realizes he cannot undo the damage, he finds an alternate reality where Rick and

Morty have died.[14] The Rick and Morty that we know jump dimensions and take the places of the deceased ones, which means that any development we have seen between Morty and his family loses all meaning. This point might seem insignificant given that the same Rick and Morty remain the protagonists of the show, but this moment and subsequent episodes let viewers know that many Ricks have lost or abandoned their Mortys.[15] Ricks can even buy a replacement Morty. If the Rick we know might someday move on to another sidekick, then the development we see in Morty does not carry as much weight as it would if we had only one of each character. In fact, some fans, myself included, suspect that Rick has already jumped timelines to a new Morty when the show begins. *Rick and Morty* destabilizes all meaning and certainty through its postmodern lens, and the writers often bury subversive bombs under mountains of pop culture references.

The Culture Industry

Like the Avant-Pop movement of the 1990s, *Rick and Morty* combines a critique of consumerism and mass media with "the avant-garde's spirit of subversion and emphasis on radical formal innovation" (McCaffery xvii-xviii). As Mark Amerika observes in the "Avant-Pop Manifesto," while the Avant-Pop sensibility contains threads of postmodernism and modernism amongst many others, "the major difference is that the artists who create Avant-Pop art are the Children of Mass Media." He focuses much of

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[14] See "Rick Potion No. 9."

[15] See "Close Rick-Counters of the Rick Kind" and "The Ricklantis Mixup."

his discussion on the "emerging youth culture" that provides socialization through mass media rather than family or peer groups. This development continues throughout the 1990s, and as we move past Generation X to Y to Z, the dominance of mass media over youth culture continues to strengthen. This cultural shift can even change the basis of identity. Larry McCaffery points out this tendency in *After Yesterday's Crash*:

> This unprecedented expansion of culture, made possible specifically by the exponential growth of technology, has changed the contours of the world: pop culture has not only displaced nature and 'colonized' the physical space of nearly every country on earth, but (just as important) it has also begun to colonize even those inner, subjective realms that nearly everyone once believed were inviolable, such as people's memories, sexual desires, their unconsciousness. (xiii)

I would add consciousness to this list as well because it mediates every decision, each one a complicated interaction between our conscious and unconscious minds. The colonization of our identities leads to a destabilization of our ability to push back against a dominant culture, but *Rick and Morty* invades these colonies and turns them against the empire by using pastiche to exploit nostalgia while deconstructing and parodying the cultural artifacts for which viewers are nostalgic.

The corporations that run TV networks have long used popular culture to reinforce the status quo. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer coined the term "culture industry" to describe the way mass media turned culture into goods that companies manufacture for profit (94-97). Discussing the result of this commodification, they say, "Culture today is infecting everything with sameness. Film, radio, and magazines form a system" (94). Pervasive and homogenized popular culture acts as a comforting distraction

from economic hardship and establishes desires that only buying more cultural goods can satisfy. Because of the potential for harm and suppression, Adorno advocates for new critical frameworks to analyze the psychological effects of television in his 1952 essay "How to Look at Television." He hopes that new methods will lead to more desirable effects of television, but, considering that the same problems he discusses are still present in today's television, the critical study of TV has not alleviated these issues. We have made small strides, but those who construct mass media systems seem to have learned more about how to deploy psychological effects than the public has learned about how to resist them. Adorno seems optimistic when he says:

> By exposing the socio-psychological implications and mechanisms of television, often operating under the guise of fake realism, not only may the shows be improved, but, more important possibly, the public at large may be sensitized to the nefarious effect of some of these mechanisms. (213)

Critics may focus on these mechanisms, and some viewers can see them, but much of the audience remains in a passive, uncritical mindset when watching TV. Adorno goes on to explain that repeated patterns like character archetypes and familiar plots were established early in the creation of mass culture. This repetition and replication of past mass culture causes the entire system of production and dissemination to become more homogenous and repressive over time. These cultural control mechanisms grow more powerful as the system expands and becomes more profitable. What Adorno calls "rigid institutionalization" allows mass culture to have more psychological control than ever before. He goes on to say, "The repetitiveness, the selfsameness, and the ubiquity of

modern mass culture tend to make for automatized reactions and to weaken the forces of individual resistance." (216). As some viewers become more automatons than individuals, they accept the subtle messaging of TV stereotypes more readily and without critical examination, and according to Adorno, "the message is invariably that of identification with the *status quo*." (220). Serial shows had not become dominant TV fixtures at the time Adorno wrote this essay, but the cycle of conflict, resolution, repeat that comes with each episode teaches the audience to rely on the return to the norm each week. This cycle is especially powerful in cartoons because a family can remain basically the same for 30 years no matter how many adventures they survive. Regardless of what happens, the status quo returns in the next episode, comforting viewers by offering stability and an idea of order that creates meaning. *The Simpsons* has been on Sunday evenings for most of my life. No one five years younger has ever lived in a world without that reliable, stereotypical sitcom family, always there to prepare us for the upcoming week. Having a primetime slot and humor that appeals to both children and adults has turned *The Simpsons* into a cultural force. Many cartoons target a certain age group, and once viewers grow older, they move on to new shows. *The Simpsons,* on the other hand, can keep them engaged through the years. The whole family can enjoy it together. All these elements make the show more likely to influence viewers psychologically and change their worldview, but audience members rarely change through direct imitation of characters. A subtle shifting of expectation is much more likely. The presentation of a middle-class father, Homer Simpson, is the first interaction with the working world for some younger viewers. Much like Fred Flintstone taught my father's generation that most

workers hate their jobs and look forward to drinking as an escape, Homer Simpson prepares one generation after another to trudge through workdays and stay sane by sitting on the couch with a beer, enjoying mindless TV shows. Adorno describes the way writers can subtly shift our worldview in one of his few discussions of TV comedy:

> the script is a shrewd method of promoting adjustment to humiliating conditions by presenting them as objectively comical and by giving a picture of a person who experiences even her own inadequate position as an object of fun apparently free of any resentment. (231)

The humiliating conditions he discusses refer to a starving teacher who endures a hostile work environment. Despite food insecurity and a terrible boss, she keeps her spirits up, and the audience identifies with her because of her optimism, cleverness, and wisecracks. Instead of empathizing with her suffering or seeing a need for change, some viewers might think that if she can still keep smiling, they can too. *The Simpsons* often conveys a similar message even as it satirizes humiliating conditions. On one episode, the plot centers on Homer quitting his job at the nuclear power plant to work at a bowling alley, a decision that makes him immensely happy.[16] But when Homer and Marge get pregnant with their third child, he must leave the job he loves. His jacket, a going-away present, melts in acid rain before he literally has to crawl back and plead for the job he hates. His boss places a sign above his station that says, “Don’t Forget: You’re Here Forever,” but in the end we see that Homer uses photos of his baby daughter to change the sign to read, “Do it For Her.” This moment is one of the most heartwarming in the entire series, but

[16] See “And Maggie Makes Three.”

this sentimentality obscures the brutal reality of the ending. To support his family, Homer must grin and bear the abuse of a humiliating job that makes him depressed and radioactive. Even more obscured is the economic system that prevents a working-class bowling alley employee from being able to support a family. Popular culture teaches us to put up with demoralizing and sometimes dehumanizing jobs. In turn, these humiliating situations push workers toward a desire for mindless escapism achieved through zoning out with a TV show. Not many want to come home from a hard day's work and put energy into thinking about systemic critique, which makes it easier for culture to manipulate viewers. This cycle becomes a vicious feedback loop that gains more power over the public with each generation. Once again, the role of popular culture as *pharmakon* becomes clear. The viewers who seek only escape and relaxation view their entertainment as a remedy to the frustrations of their material conditions when, in fact, the culture industry is poisoning them by conditioning their consciousness to be more passive and accepting of their own exploitation. Adorno's assertion that popular culture's "'message' of adjustment and unreflecting obedience seems to be dominant and all-pervasive today" (227) still rings as true as it did in 1952. These are the type of lessons that the culture industry mass produces, but parody can highlight the absurdity of these tropes. On *Rick and Morty*, Morty's father Jerry carries "adjustment and unreflecting obedience" to a ludicrous level. The show presents him as weak, spineless, and lacking any kind of individuality. He loves his demoralizing job because financial support is the only thing he has to offer his family, but in an unexpected turn, the very characteristics that make him a "good provider" also make his family disrespect him, and he ends up

suffering even more humiliation at their hands. Jerry's family mocks him in almost every episode, so the audience also learns to disrespect him even though he is just doing what TV fathers have been teaching for ages. While laughing at the utter embarrassment of Jerry's existence, viewers could question whether their working conditions and lifestyle choices mirror his degradation, but as Adorno points out, they could also just learn to laugh more easily at their own humiliation. Since the texts I discuss in this essay are all comedies, I must note that Adorno does not see any political utility in humor. He sees only poison, a method to teach the working class to laugh at their own suffering. Horkheimer and he describe laughter as an "instrument for cheating happiness," and fun as "a medicinal bath which the entertainment industry never ceases to prescribe" (112). Their opinion of humor can best be summed up as, "There is laughter because there is nothing to laugh about" (112). Suffering workers must learn to laugh as a coping mechanism because they cannot get true happiness or relief from the culture industry. Although I do not agree, I cannot blame them for thinking that way. If humor were merely a distraction from critical potential, then I would understand the frustration of seeing an industry condition consumers to laugh instead of revolt. I disagree with his analysis for two reasons. First, humor is not the only mode that distracts from serious critical thought. All emotions can function in this way. Second, comedy has changed. Nicholas Holm explains in *Humour as Politics* that the 1990s mark a shift in the way many comedies function. In the past, jokes often centered on a character failing to meet social expectations, but current comedies are much more likely to comment on those expectations (Holm 5-6). He uses *Seinfeld* as an example to discuss the shift from

traditional to a new style of comedy. According to him, "*Seinfeld* explicitly engages with social benchmarks in terms of their construction, maintenance and negotiation" (Holm 5). In other words, the show mocks day-to-day norms by highlighting their absurd and fictional nature. Holm also discusses Adorno's distrust of humor and responds by explaining that no matter how many critics doubt the "political aesthetic role of humour, it is necessary to insist upon a political aesthetics of popular—that is to say 'mass'—culture" (183). The ease with which the culture industry uses humor to exploit the audience is even more reason for serious critical examination. If our goal is to reduce the oppressive function of popular culture and promote a more active consciousness, then we cannot simply express disgust at humor. We must be more vigilant in our research to seek out those comedies that break with tradition.

When Adorno wrote his essay on TV, most socialization still came from family, friends, and education. The latter part of the twentieth century saw this trend shift as TV became a dominant constructor of social norms, and now in this century, we have moved on to the internet being the most influential force for reifying abstract concepts about functional social structure. Even before the internet, critics noted the culture industry's dominance in establishing how consumers view reality. Drawing on Horkheimer and Adorno's work, Jean Baudrillard claims that the proliferation of mass media has led to a "precession of simulacra" in which representation has become simulation, or "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (1). By presenting consumers with models of referents that are no longer real, simulation can establish our ideas about how reality functions while obscuring the fictions that underpin

contemporary society. Baudrillard goes on to explain that to maintain its functionality, the culture industry must create the illusion that society is still real. Labelling Disneyland "a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate in reverse the fiction of the real," he explains that amusement parks emphasize their imaginary nature to obscure the fact that the rest of society is "no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation" (Baudrillard 12-13). Bombarding the audience with models of how society functions allows those who profit from the culture industry to influence the possibilities that consumers can imagine. As the power of mass media grows and viewers spend more of their developmental years in front of screens, popular culture becomes more likely to create a status quo consciousness in viewers, incapable of active interpretation and more likely to accept the inequitable systems of the past. This exponential growth in social control makes forms that disrupt status quo consciousness more necessary than ever. To accomplish this rupture and use the status quo's infrastructure against itself, the writers of *Rick and Morty* push the postmodern impulse in cartoons further than most by constructing a show that emphasizes intertextuality through its use of pastiche. Many of the details in the show originate in other texts. The overall structure models the traditional narrative of mad scientist and sidekick. In particular, the titular characters and their relationship parody Doc and Marty from *Back to the Future,* but this is only the beginning. The family car resembles the station wagon from *National Lampoon's Vacation,* itself a parody of the American trend toward selling family adventure and the accompanying consumer goods through mass media. Even the titles of most episodes of *Rick and Morty* make the parodic nature of the show obvious. Almost every episode's

title riffs on a piece of popular culture. These episodes sometimes take the original text from the title as the framework on which to build the episode, and all episodes contain more than one parodic element. The show inundates viewers with constant allusions and jokes that require knowledge of past popular culture. Sometimes, it even subverts the naming convention. The episode "Something Ricked This Way Comes" seems like it would parody the Ray Bradbury classic or at least the film adaptation, but in actuality the plot pulls elements from Stephen King's "Needful Things," which is most likely part of the joke since the plots of these two stories are not that different. No convention is safe from being torn to pieces and reconstructed for a joke, or to subvert a dominant system, or most likely for both purposes.

Metamodernity and the Utopian Impulse

While the show is thoroughly postmodern in its technique, it also contains elements of modernism, but this tendency simply demonstrates a cultural shift that has become apparent in the twenty-first century. A YouTube video titled "How *Rick and Morty* Caught the Zeitgeist" calls attention to the way the show captures the spirit of today's emerging cultural paradigm. To make this argument, the creators of the video rely on the concept of metamodernity. The video points out that the oscillation Vermeulen and van den Akker use to define metamodernism could also describe the predominant tendency in *Rick and Morty.* The writers use this oscillation to explore the current state of American culture, and both Rick and Morty illustrate the way we tend to swing between various extremes. The show tends to pull the rug out from under viewers

whenever we get comfortable with hopeful enthusiasm or melancholic skepticism. In the season two finale, Rick seems to make a massive change in terms of morality.[17] After being amoral and constantly pointing out the relativist nature of ethics for two seasons, Rick sacrifices himself for the sake of others when he turns himself in to the galactic government so that his family can return to Earth. This massive shift in character gives viewers hope that Rick is becoming more like Morty in terms of valuing others, but the season three premiere undercuts this change. We learn Rick surrenders because he knows the galactic military will interrogate him at a top-secret government facility that he wants to access.[18] He remains as self-centered as ever, or at least for the moment. Later in the episode, he infiltrates the Citadel of Ricks to rescue Morty and his sister Summer. The pendulum swings back to sincere emotion, but Rick also kills the governing council, and as part of a new plan, he teleports the Citadel into the galactic prison to fulfill his original purpose. During a maniacal closing speech, Rick explains that he saves his grandchildren because his daughter would not let him return home without them, indicating some connection to his family or life on Earth, but we never know how much. In the same rant, he goes on to tell Morty that his "series arc," or his "one-armed man," is to obtain McDonald's Szechuan Sauce, a promotional condiment from the 1990s. On several occasions, Rick shows a self-aware understanding of the show's dynamics. He even makes a joke that it might take nine seasons or 97 years to find the sauce, which refers to the long gaps between seasons. This absurd life goal underscores the meaninglessness of

[17] See "The Wedding Squanchers."
[18] See "The Rickshank Redemption."

existence, and the episode ends with no hope that the smartest man in the universe will become a more decent person. Likewise, viewers can lose faith in Morty's morality as he becomes more like Rick throughout the show. During an argument in the same episode, Morty shoots Rick with the intention of killing him. We learn later that it is part of Rick's plan to save his grandchildren, and that the gun has a note on it telling Morty to shoot Rick, but Morty's awkward laughter when Rick points out the note lets viewers know that Morty had no idea the gun was fake when he fired it. Since Morty embodies the moral center of the show, this moment could shake viewers' confidence in the possibility of maintaining ethical behavior. The conflicted nature of the characters presents an interesting way to study the shifting paradigm—what comes after postmodernism—but these metamodernist techniques also amplify the show's subversive message.

Rick and Morty tends to emphasize postmodern irony more than modernist enthusiasm, and this pattern leads viewers to question the construction of social, economic, and political systems. When we attempt to answer these questions, we conclude that these systems are not only problematic and unsustainable but also seemingly inescapable. The creators of the show explain in an interview with *The Guardian* how they revise conventional tropes to challenge traditional systems. According to Dan Harmon, co-creator/writer, in cartoons, "what's subversive is dealing with life and its harshness" (Thielman). He goes on to discuss a specific example to illustrate how the show's writers study science-fiction plot devices so that they can de(re)construct them. Harmon uses x-ray glasses to explain this process. In conventional science fiction, the narrative would likely involve characters seeing things better-left

unseen, leading to suffering and regret. This plot would convey the message that we should not always go digging because we might not like what we find. Harmon asks, “Is that a message that the system tells us because they don’t want us to be empowered?” The show has no episodes with this storyline, but Harmon indicates that he would create a plot with extremely helpful x-ray glasses. The episode “Rick Potion No. 9” exhibits this tendency in the writing by subverting traditional plots about teenage romance. Morty shows an infatuation with his schoolmate Jessica and asks Rick to create a love potion. We might expect the potion to work too well or that Morty’s crush is the wrong person, and his true love will become obvious at the climactic school dance. Instead, the potion ends up mutating everyone at the dance and eventually the entire human race, which leads to Rick and Morty jumping to a different dimension. This tragic ending is far worse than viewers could have expected, and with Rick emphasizing that Morty’s creepy request caused humanity’s downfall, the show calls into question the way that teenage boys can ignore necessary concepts like consent and bodily autonomy. However, this example has a somewhat narrow focus, and *Rick and Morty* has much broader targets in mind.

The show also takes aim at the absurdity of economic and political systems. When Rick tells his grandchildren about his plan to “topple the empire” of the galactic government, Morty and Summer guess that he will reprogram nukes to attack each other or alter the government’s portals to destroy its fleet, but Rick chooses a simpler, more ironic solution. He collapses an entire government by accessing one computer terminal and changing the value of the government’s currency from one to zero. Instantly, chaos

ensues and the galactic president commits suicide when officials realize they have no way to motivate workers without currency. At first, Rick seems like a self-serving terrorist in this situation. Earlier in the episode, Jerry expresses his happiness with the galactic federation's takeover of Earth because he has a guaranteed job. Even though he has no idea what the job is, he continues to get promotions, which demonstrates an obsession with status instead of accomplishment. The other members of the Smith family are not as happy with the new system. Morty complains that pills have replaced food, and Summer hates a restrictive curfew. When their new, seemingly friendly robot butler turns into an attack bot after seeing Rick's portal gun, the fascist nature of the galactic government becomes too obvious to overlook. This point solidifies after Rick's attack because viewers learn that many humans have been living underground to escape government control. In this light, Rick appears more like a freedom fighter than a terrorist, but lest we forget how terrible Rick can be, Morty takes Summer to his original dimension to show her the wake of devastation Rick left behind. Viewers can never decide if Rick is a hero or an anti-hero whose selfish actions sometimes have positive side effects. The Szechuan Sauce revelation at the end of the episode destabilizes his hero status even more. *Rick and Morty* constantly subverts concepts like good/evil and hero/villain.

At one point, *Rick and Morty* spends an entire episode deconstructing superhero mythos. The title "Vindicators 3" clearly parodies the recent wave of *Avengers* movies that dominated both the box office and popular culture. In this episode, Morty wants to help the Vindicators with a mission because they are his heroes. During a discussion with

one of the Vindicators, Morty explains that Rick claims, "good and evil are social constructs." The Vindicator, Vance, responds by saying Rick must think that way to justify his own actions. In this moment, the show presents what seems like a straightforward superhero who believes that all people have the potential to be heroic as long as they "pull for good." Later in the episode, Rick positions himself as the villain by trapping the Vindicators with a set of elaborate tests that parody the *Saw* franchise. This distinction does not last very long. Vance immediately panics, insults Morty, and abandons the group. Of course, a trap kills him, and as the episode progresses, the egotism of each hero becomes obvious. We also learn that the Vindicators previously exterminated an entire planet to kill one villain. The line between good and evil becomes non-existent at this point, especially when Rick notes how easily he could have found that villain instead of killing an entire world. The relative nature of good and evil breaks down the entire concept of superheroes, even going as far as making Morty lose all belief in them. Near the end of the episode, the last remaining Vindicator plans to kill Rick and Morty to keep the events of the episode and the planetary extermination secret. As she explains, it is not the actions of heroes that maintain good in the universe, but the belief that heroes stand for good. Clearly, any system built on concepts of good and evil cannot be sustainable because of the constantly shifting nature of morality and subjective perception.

Since governmental systems tend to become unstable and repressive, thousands of Ricks decide to create their own society outside of history. The main Rick, or "Rickest Rick" as he is known on the show, never joins this society because he knows it makes no

sense to create a government in order to escape government.[19] Even with near-infinite knowledge, Rick understands his limited ability to break with traditional systems, but the Ricks who do attempt to create a free society prove their inability to escape. The Citadel of Ricks appears in the first season, but its most enlightening critique of political and economic systems comes in the third season after Rick destroys it. The episode "The Ricklantis Mixup" shows the citizens of the Citadel rebuilding their society and holding their first democratic election. This episode parodies several plots, including cultural touchstones like *Training Day* and *Stand by Me,* but the most intriguing source of inspiration is *The Wire.* The subjects of the five distinct arcs in the episode correspond to the areas of focus in the five seasons of *The Wire*. Borrowing this setup, "The Ricklantis Mixup" examines the interconnected systems that both serve and control society: criminal networks, police organizations, corporations, political machines, educational institutions, and mass media. An absurd parody of *The Wire* provides an effective model to illuminate the complicated relationships between these systems because as Levine explains, "*The Wire* is a rare exploration of the ways that social experience can be structured and also rendered radically unpredictable by the dense overlapping of large numbers of social forms" (132). While *The Wire* gives viewers a realist critique of social, political, and economic forms, *Rick and Morty* emphasizes the absurdity of the ease with which these systems sustain themselves. Levine goes on to respond to Jameson's discussion of the utopian impulse in *The Wire.* Jameson claims that the possibility of a utopian future occasionally arises before being proven implausible by realism, but Levine

[19] See "Close Rick-Counters of the Rick Kind."

reverses this assertion and says the show makes these utopian moments plausible by grounding them in realism.[20] She uses Jameson's distinction between familiar (realist) and surprising (utopian) plots to argue that "it is the genius of *The Wire* to show that *both* kinds of plot are plausible" (Levine 135). Not every episode of *Rick and Morty* provides the complex network of overlapping forms that Levine recognizes in *The Wire,* but the beauty of parodic reconstruction is that writers can co-opt the theoretical framework of source material. This episode combines *The Wire'*s realism with the gritty examination of police corruption from *Training Day* and the death of childhood innocence in *Stand by Me.* Familiarity with these realist texts lends plausibility to an otherwise absurd alternate reality. Within a completely hypothetical attempt to create a utopia through scientific progress, realist representations of traditional plots, like rookie/veteran cop narratives and coming-of-age stories, create cultural verisimilitude that allows the show to approach certain issues with both sincerity and irony. Sometimes, *Rick and Morty* finds a way to subvert these familiar storylines in a way that lends more gravity to the situation. Casting Morty as the veteran cop and Rick as the naïve rookie breaks from conventional expectations, but the writers do not mine this subversion for jokes. Instead, they show a darker version of Morty, disillusioned and broken by the system. He goes on to uphold the system by breaking other Mortys. His motivation is complicated because he is clearly corrupt but also wants to protect his partner. The climactic scene in this storyline peaks in both irony and seriousness. Seeing the usually amoral Rick refuse to compromise his

[20] For further discussion, see Jameson, Fredric. "Realism and Utopia in *The Wire.*"

integrity makes it even more depressing when he must kill his partner in self-defense. It takes one day on the job for the system to break this version of Rick.

Each of the five arcs in "The Ricklantis Mixup" problematizes the systems they examine in different ways. The criminal/police plotline demonstrates how becoming part of the criminal justice system teaches Morty to stereotype and discriminate against other Mortys. The factory worker plot illustrates how a capitalist system can create class conflict between genetically identical beings. Obviously, Rick's intelligence should allow for the creation of automated factories, but we see many Ricks working the production line, doing nothing but pushing buttons. Near the end of the episode, we learn that a group of capitalists has controlled the Citadel since its creation. To maintain their position of power, they must create a hierarchical structure based on class. The product manufactured in the factory we see also emphasizes the way capitalism controls society. Workers make a snack called "Simple Rick Wafers," which contain a chemical from the brain of a simpler kind of Rick, one who is actually happy because he values his family above his ambition. The working class buys these cookies as an escape from a harsh reality. Here, we can see the capitalist system selling a fantasy to uphold itself. The TV within a TV portion of the episode demonstrates how mass media also uphold the hierarchical class system. Not only do we see a commercial selling a fantasy used to control workers, but we also see how news organizations construct narratives to keep society under control. After one worker Rick snaps because he has worked too long beneath other nearly identical Ricks, he murders his supervisor and attempts to free Simple Rick. During a standoff with police, the Rick worker says, "They told us all we

were special, but they stripped away everything that made us unique." He strikes at the very heart of the manipulative system, but the news anchor reports his comments as, "The suspect claims the Citadel is a lie built on lies and some other s***," and he goes on to say that people should appreciate what they have because life could always be worse, a refrain common in Western civilization, based on the idea that no matter how bad one has it in a first-world system, at least it is not the third world. Both advertising and the news suppress the desire to improve society and help the capitalist ruling class maintain their power. Likewise, the storyline that focuses on education performs a similar function. The Mortys in the school learn to subordinate themselves to Rick, which solidifies their place as a lower class. By stripping away what makes each Morty unique, the school makes them easier to control and less likely to rebel. Each of these arcs shows brief moments of utopian hope before crushing us with skeptical despair, but none of them performs this function as well as the political plot. In these scenes, we see a Morty candidate campaign against the system using the rhetoric of class conflict to inspire the working class to support him. He tears down the border between Ricks and Mortys and focuses instead on the conflict between those who want the Citadel divided (capitalists who rely on class conflict for control) and those who want the Citadel united. Using hope to inspire the working class gives viewers the belief that we can replace or at least improve inequitable systems. However, as the episode progresses, we begin to see how populist campaigns can become problematic. In one scene, the Morty candidate's former campaign manager receives secret files from a Rick dressed in the stereotypical spy trench coat and hat. This Rick tells him that he needs fear instead of faith, and at the same moment, we can hear

the Morty candidate on TV respond to a question about whether he fears for his safety because he opposes the system. He answers, "I'd rather live in hope than fear. If I had to fear anything, I'd fear other people being afraid of fear itself." This line contains a not-so-subtle reference to a certain former American president, but more importantly, the juxtaposition of his response and the conversation draws attention to the manipulation and lack of meaning in the candidate's platitudes. He advocates hope instead of fear, and we learn from spy Rick that we need more fear in order to scrutinize candidates properly. If voters were skeptical enough, they could have learned why they should be afraid. In the end, we find out that the Morty who becomes president is an evil version of Morty from the first season, and when he takes control, he immediately executes several of the capitalists who want to continue to control the Citadel. The show uses fascist imagery on flags draped over palace balconies to emphasize just how dire this situation has become. Evil Morty uses hope and dissatisfaction with class hierarchy to obtain power, but once he has it, he becomes even more terrible than the former system. When voters decide between candidates, they cannot choose based on hope or fear alone. They need both these motivations to be critical of potential leaders. Hope allows candidates to exploit our desperation, which can make us blind to the real policies they wish to enact. Fear can be just as treacherous because the fear of change upholds the capitalist status quo, but in the case of President Morty, not having this fear leads to the establishment of a fascist state. Once again, we see the vital role that the oscillation of metamodernism plays in studying and attempting to improve our social, political, and economic systems.

Rick and Morty presents the utopian impulse in a way that makes us question whether it will ever be possible to use scientific progress to create a functional state—by functional, I mean egalitarian functionality since the current hegemonic systems function as intended but benefit only a small portion of society. No matter how intelligent the creators of society are, they cannot break with the oppressive systems from the past simply because they have no other concepts on which to build. Fredric Jameson discusses this issue in *Archaeologies of the Future.* According to him, "our imaginations are hostages to our own mode of production (and perhaps remnants of the past ones it has preserved)" (xiii). The systems that condition us colonize our imaginations and restrict the ability to conceive of a possible escape. Jameson goes on to say, "at best Utopia can serve the negative purpose of making us more aware of our mental and ideological imprisonment… …and that therefore the best Utopias are those that fail the most comprehensively" (xiii). If the best function utopian fiction can serve is to fail, then the presentation of the Citadel of Ricks accomplishes this purpose masterfully. When Rick destroys the Citadel at the beginning of season three, he can do so because of poor planning. Using a computer terminal to transport the Citadel into a galactic prison, he creates a massive battle that leads to the destruction of the Citadel. The ease with which he accomplishes this destruction mirrors the method he uses to topple the galactic empire in the same episode. In "The Ricklantis Mixup," we see the foundations of the Citadel break down from the inside, but the failure remains comprehensive. The in-depth examination of the network of systems used to manipulate society makes it clear that even the most intelligent man in the universe can be trapped in an ideological prison.

At this point, we must ask whether this presentation leads to an effective perspective with which to examine our current age, an age characterized by a proliferation of mass media that upholds ideological prisons, an age when media narratives have become so powerful that they can displace reality. In his *Manifesto of New Realism,* Maurizio Ferraris provides a critique of postmodernism in which he claims it provides "ideological support" for media populism in the twenty-first century (3). To make his point, Ferraris uses a *reductio ad absurdum* argument to transform postmodernism into a caricature. He claims postmodernists conflate epistemology and ontology, but he obscures the importance of comprehending social constructs in the process. Sure, as he explains, knowing a key will open a door will not allow us to unlock it without the key (27), but just as important, having the key means nothing if we do not understand how to use it. Even though he argues for a new philosophy that balances realism and constructivism, his cartoonish presentation of postmodernism privileges certainty far too much over the comprehension of constructs while somehow not acknowledging that certainty is itself a construct. Although Ferraris argues that postmodernists conflate epistemology and ontology, what he actually seems to push back against is that postmodernism privileges *how we know* what is certain (or more accurately, that we cannot know) above what is certain. Without acknowledging that certainty is a construct, one cannot properly distinguish between certain and uncertain. After all, the methods we use to determine this difference are all constructs, sometimes thousands of years old. How can we separate truth from constructs while living inside them? This issue mirrors a problem Rick runs into in "A Rickle in Time." Having

accidentally fractured the timeline, Rick, Morty, and Summer end up in the realm of Schrödinger's cat, both existing and not existing, certain and uncertain. Rick attempts to merge these two realms together but fails, and eventually a fourth-dimensional being shows up to repair the fracture. He mocks Rick for his foolishness in thinking that he could fix time while standing inside of it. Just as Rick cannot merge two conflicting timelines into each other, we cannot fully understand certainty/uncertainty while standing inside the constructs that determine the distinction. In reality, we do not have a being from another dimension to help us, so we must simply understand the impossibility of separating our concept of truth from socially constructed conventions. The key point of contention between Ferraris's realism and postmodernism is the privileging of epistemology and ontology. Ferraris thinks re-privileging facts over interpretations will somehow change the principle that "the argument of the strongest is always the best" (3). At least, he implies this belief when he claims that postmodernism's focus on interpretation gives the media the ability "to make people believe anything." Those with power and/or rhetoric have always been able to make people believe well-dressed lies, and the evolution of technology has always increased this power. Postmodernism does not create or advocate these principles, but it does acknowledge them and question why people will believe almost anything.

I could also argue that his presentation betrays the religious worldview that underpins his ideology. When he discusses his example about the Shroud, he describes it as a natural object when it is clearly a social object (Ferraris 55). The distinction between these categories could help reconcile realism and constructivism, as Ferraris argues, but

those categorical distinctions mean very little if we miscategorize basic objects. His assertion that the Shroud is a natural object makes it clear that his perspective stems from a cultural construct, which undercuts his premise about the power of certainty. In other words, what is the point of re-privileging facts if one is clearly certain about something that cannot be proven? This problem obscures his entire argument, but even if we allow his assumptions, his parodic critique of postmodernism is not as effective as *Rick and Morty'*s. The show presents Rick vacillating between modernist enthusiasm and postmodern skepticism, but he tends to spend more time on the postmodern end of the spectrum. In these moments, he displays the postmodern perspective of the world pushed to its logical extreme. Ferraris claims that the prevailing mood of postmodernism is a "bipolar syndrome oscillating between a sense of omnipotence and the feeling of the pointlessness of everything" (17). Rick's personality is the embodiment of this description. His scientific genius allows him endless possibilities, but he never finds satisfaction. He understands the social construction of truth and morality and uses it to justify his actions. Nevertheless, when Rick steeps himself in a postmodern worldview, he is miserable, so much so that he attempts suicide at one point. Ferraris writes that a postmodern worldview leads to loneliness, but *Rick and Morty* gives us a tangible image of a man's spirit crumbling into nothingness. We can also view Rick's misery as the root of his substance abuse problem. His postmodern perspective causes multiple downfalls, which is why it is crucial that the show swings back and forth between disparate poles. We get to see glimpses of happiness and satisfaction, even if they are almost always immediately undercut. Through this over-the-top presentation of the downfalls of

postmodernism, *Rick and Morty* provides a more effective critique than Ferraris. What he seems to ignore is that the scientific facts of which we can be certain do not govern human behavior, and this behavior is the root of political strife in the world. Americans are not homeless because we need more homes. People do not starve because there is not enough food in the world. They starve because political and economic systems prevent the free movement of resources. We must interrogate these socially constructed systems with the aim of de(re)constructing them. As Jameson puts it, "this ultimate 'text' or object of study—the master-narratives of the political unconscious—is a *construct*; it exists nowhere in 'empirical' form, and therefore must be re-constructed on the basis of empirical 'texts'" (*Archaeologies of the Future* 283). *Rick and Morty* dissects the political unconscious, and by examining the role mass media plays in maintaining society's underpinning, the show allows us to question our own motivation.

The Absurdity of Politics

Rick and Morty presents enlightening criticism of the current cultural paradigm and excels in skewering the dominant political movements in American society. Rhys Williams claims that, "[the show] exposes the terrible void at the heart of contemporary liberal US culture, while aggressively seeking relief from this knowledge in grotesquery" (147). Even though he focuses on the role of the grotesque as escape and does not believe the writers employ it for sincere political critique, a familiar trend emerges when he explains, "The mark of the true grotesque is being both comic and horrifying simultaneously, without resolving into one or the other" (148). Here, the oscillation at the

heart of *Rick and Morty* once again becomes obvious. The comic and horror elements of the show present a both-neither proposition, a technique that mirrors the way we should view and critically examine human society. Williams goes on to say, “The grotesque is, traditionally, not only an aesthetic but an expression of resistance—a folk weapon against the status quo and its strictures” (149). He contends that the show’s disillusioned, ironic worldview has no clear political purpose, yet he still recognizes the oscillation between laughing at meaninglessness and ontological horror. His interpretation sees the use of the grotesque as a defense rather than an attack. When confronted with the lack meaning in the world, we retreat to crude comedy. Strangely, he goes on to say that *Rick and Morty* shows “a real mark of what contemporary comedy needs to do in order to mean something, even if all it can do is refuse meaning of any kind” (Williams 150). Here, he somewhat undermines his own critique of the show because this conclusion seems to acknowledge the political intent in the show’s focus on meaninglessness and absurdity. Furthermore, the Dan Harmon quotation from earlier in the essay proves that writers de(re)construct past conventions to subvert dominant systems. In this way, writers strike at the heart of the status quo, their attack made more effective by incorporating an abundance of cultural references. As stated previously, *Rick and Morty* infiltrates the colonized portions of our consciousness to de(re)construct systems of oppression. Writers use nostalgia and familiarity to strengthen the show’s appeal and message. Rick’s obsession with Szechuan Sauce, for example, strikes a chord with viewers because of its connection to popular culture. Most viewers would have countless experiences with both McDonald’s and Disney, so the combination of these two cultural forces into one object

gives that object more power. Portions of our unconscious have been colonized by these massive corporations, which means that writers can infiltrate these portions of our minds and exploit them for their own purposes. Still, viewers will develop their own interpretations because of the nature of *pharmakon*. While the joke emphasizes the meaninglessness of existence and advocates for living without some supreme purpose, many viewers miss this point. The power of nostalgia and the lasting influence of the culture industry transform the joke into an actual desire. Consequently, fans started an online campaign to bring back the sauce, eventually leading to McDonald's having a limited return of a condiment that they had not sold for 20 years.[21] Instead of seeing the absurdity in Rick's series arc and the exploitative cash grab, many fans allowed McDonald's to use nostalgia to manipulate them. Corporate executives did not bring back the sauce to make people happy. They did so to bring customers through their doors. While this blatant advertising gimmick and the incompetent rollout after publicizing the sauce for several months highlight the structures of the culture industry, the Szechuan Sauce joke and the resulting debacle do not necessarily provide a remedy to consumer manipulation. Like Burroughs's word virus and *pharmakon,* the episode becomes simultaneously poison and remedy depending entirely on the way consumers' consciousness interprets the scenario. Although it is impressive that a cartoon with a modest audience can organize its base enough to spur action from one of the world's largest corporations, anyone who waited in line for a sauce because Rick likes it

[21] For further discussion, see Viveiros, Beth. "Thanks to Rick and Morty, McD's Brings Back Szechuan Sauce."

demonstrates the weakness of individual consciousness, while the super-fan excitement over Szechuan Sauce exposes the media populism that Ferraris blames on postmodernism. He argues we need to return the power to certainty, but the only certainty in this situation is that a sauce not available since the 90s returned because of *Rick and Morty*. It is extremely doubtful that most viewers have any memory of the actual taste of the sauce, implying their actions come entirely from manipulation through mass culture. But we must remember that these actions do not represent all viewers. Many understand the absurdity and meaninglessness at the heart of the joke, and they can then see how easily corporations can exploit people. Others might decide never to return to McDonald's due to frustration at waiting in line for a sauce they never got to taste. I, however, suspect that for every viewer who transcended the usual interpretive process and saw systems exposed, ten more were happy to wait in line and completely missed this opportunity, and in this way, one cultural artifact simultaneously upholds and deconstructs the culture industry.

Rick and Morty's political intent seems clear, but we must fully examine whether the creators advocate for any solutions to the many problems they present. We have already seen that the show revisits the past without innocence and subverts problematic systems through its use of parody and irony. Fluctuating between hope and despair, comedy and horror, trust and skepticism, the show uses a metamodernist lens to study how systems break down, and perhaps more importantly, why we are necessarily trapped in pre-existing systems. Much like Matei Calinescu views postmodernism as "a perspective from which one can ask certain questions about modernity in its several

incarnations" (279), we should treat metamodernism as a lens with which to view scientific and social progress, to study their interconnectedness, and to advocate for a way to reconstruct the unsustainable, inescapable systems into something that resembles an egalitarian society. While *Rick and Morty* does not really offer possible feasible systems to replace the currently dominant ones, it does train viewers to scrutinize these systems in a way that could benefit social progress. The utopian impulse, or the desire to create a more perfect union, should have a conceivable finish line, but the metamodernist worldview will not allow us to conceive it. The shift between hope (belief in scientific progress) and despair (belief in the inevitable system failure) creates a both-neither proposition wherein our future conception of society is both dystopian and utopian while also being neither utopian nor dystopian. The metamodernist presentation of *Rick and Morty*'s multiverse takes full advantage of the science-fiction setting because "the metamodern should be understood as a spacetime that is both—neither ordered and disordered" (Vermeulen and van den Akker 12). The emphasis on infinite spacetime and the inherent instability of the systems we use to order societies stresses the necessity of oscillating between conflicting worldviews. Any progressive drive fueled by either hope or fear will most likely become myopic and dogmatic. *Rick and Morty* prepares us to explore all possibilities. The several incarnations of modernity that Calinescu mentions become every conceivable outcome in the fictional multiverse of the show, and the metamodernist perspective allows us to view these infinite possibilities with a properly critical lens that incorporates both optimism and skepticism. Although the show focuses more on training a critical consciousness, the political analysis becomes more overt with

each season. For the first three seasons, many fans grumbled as the show became more political. "Why can't people just enjoy things?" is a common refrain among viewers with a status quo consciousness. They question why shows and movies need to contain political critiques at all. With little self-awareness, they complain that fiction encourages people to consider the problems in society. Early in the show, it is unclear whether the showrunners urge political change or if they just tear down tropes to make their show more original, but in season four, the show explicitly attacks fascism while using the multiverse to critique the direction American society is heading. When Rick dies in the main timeline, a machine automatically transports his consciousness into another dimension where he takes control of another version of himself. After several run-ins with fascist societies, Rick asks, "When did this become the default?"[22] Shockingly, the writers also do something that shows almost never do. They criticize and parody a portion of their own fan base. After Rick ends up in an obviously fascist world, including the de-individualizing uniforms and propaganda posters on the wall, he meets a fascist version of Morty. At first, this Morty is eager to help Rick get back to his default dimension, and he even asks to go along with him because Morty is tired of living in an authoritarian society. He wants to go on free-flowing adventures with Rick like many of the other Mortys. Mirroring the viewers who criticize the show, he just wants to enjoy things without having to be political all the time. Morty's desire to escape fascism does not necessarily make fun of these audience members, but the next moment implies that

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[22] See "Edge of Tomorty: Rick Die Repeat."

many people who complain about political critique in fiction do so because they want to avoid defending their own ideology. The moment Rick disagrees with fascist Morty about what they should do, Morty draws a gun and attempts to force Rick into doing what he is told. The character who just wants to enjoy things actually just wants to get his own way. With this shift, the writers not so subtly imply that anyone complaining the show is too political is actually helping to push us toward a fascist society. The fight against fascism must exist in popular fiction because fascism has always used mass culture to exploit citizens and sow division. In the era of mass media, one of the most effective techniques for upholding fascism is simply to make viewers seek an escape in fiction, a world where they can just enjoy things while absorbing the subtle pro-totalitarian messages or avoiding any critique. The encouragement of this mindset is itself a pro-totalitarian message. As Adorno explains, "the majority of television shows today aim at producing or at least reproducing the very smugness, intellectual passivity, and gullibility that seem to fit in with totalitarian creeds even if the explicit surface message of the shows may be antitotalitarian" (222). Even if the messages of the shows have the potential to liberate viewers, approaching them uncritically will result in the shows becoming poison rather than remedy because the passive status quo consciousness wants a distraction from an inequitable world instead of desiring a better world. Another way that popular fiction can obscure and suppress political criticism is by presenting the totalitarian tendency of government leaders as personal character failings rather than exploring the inevitable results of a society that concentrates power in too few hands (Adorno 237). This trend has become a clichéd trope on TV and in movies, so naturally,

some viewers might model their behavior on this narrow analysis. Political systems, fascist or not, can avoid criticism by shifting the center of attention. When Americans discuss the immense strategic failure of the Iraq War, they tend to blame it on the administration's lies. People focus so much on how the president and mainstream media misled the country into a war that few discuss why they were looking for a way to manipulate the public into accepting the inevitability of the war. Neoconservatism and imperialism escape much of the public's attention because it is easier to assume that a leader has a character flaw than it is to accept that we are upholding and participating in destructive political systems. Since average Americans are not experts on politics or foreign policy, much of what they know about politics comes from popular culture. Although many are skeptical of news media's influence on public opinion, few pay attention to how fiction also manufactures consent, and subverting tradition to disrupt the interpretive process offers a chance to make a larger percentage of the general public take notice.

Up to this point, I focus mainly on the role of novels and TV series in this process, but I must note that this trend arises in other forms of media as well. One of the most radical examples comes from political cartoonist Eli Valley. His scathing representations of dominant paradigmatic narratives use classic horror conventions to show the public how we can overlook the ugliness in these narratives. In an interview, he explains his inspiration for using past popular culture to attack present-day ideologies. He discusses a fearmongering anti-Palestinian propaganda letter sent to him by the public-relations wing of the Israeli government, and to counter this dominant narrative, he uses

the style from 1950s horror comics, especially *Tales from the Crypt*, to represent how he sees this ugly propaganda ("Never Miss an Opportunity"). This technique is powerful for several reasons. The grotesque imagery shocks viewers and highlights the ugliness in the text to which he responds. The style he chooses also has the same nostalgia factor as many of *Rick and Morty's* references. Perhaps most importantly, he views the comic books of his youth as an essential part of his Jewish culture, so he draws inspiration from those forms to push back against what he views as a repressive narrative. While *Tales from the Crypt* inspired his reaction in this one instance, early *MAD* comics were more influential to the development of Valley's satirical style. During a presentation at Stanford, he explains that by challenging conformity and "putting a funhouse mirror up to the sacred icons of American culture," *MAD* taught him to de(re)construct popular culture for subversive purposes ("Drawing the Dystopia"). We need artists like Valley to continue this tradition because, as it so often does, the culture industry co-opted the revolutionary content of *MAD* and found a way to maximize profit. Whereas Valley learned to question the status quo from *MAD*, today's younger generations know very little about the comics or magazine and are more likely to recognize *MAD* as a sketch comedy show. Combining several pieces of culture and reconstructing them into art for a subversive political purpose has become more necessary than ever now that our political consciousness is almost completely mediated through texts. *Rick and Morty* may not be as overtly political as Eli Valley's work, but for some viewers, it might present the only critique of capitalism or fascism that they see. In the season three finale, *Rick and Morty* also addresses the Israel-Palestine conflict, but it does so in an absurd way. Just to spite

the American president during a feud, Rick mediates for the Israeli and Palestinian leaders, getting them to sign "The Pretty Obvious if You Think About It Accord."[23] On the one hand, this might seem too irreverent toward a life-or-death issue. On the other hand, it is absurd that apartheid states still exist in the twenty-first century. Perhaps the solution should be obvious, and the only reason the conflict persists is the continued proliferation of inescapable systems built on hierarchical foundations. In a case like this when dogmatic ideology shapes the opinion of the parties involved, a convincing fact-based argument will not win the debate, and sometimes all we can do is mock the absurdity of the situation.

What makes *Rick and Morty*'s critique so effective is its ability to intervene in the feedback loop between the avant-garde and popular culture by exploiting familiarity and nostalgia. McCaffery explains in *After Yesterday's Crash* that the avant-garde and popular culture "coevolved" through the process of constantly borrowing from each other (xix). Understanding this coevolution is a key characteristic of postmodernism, especially Avant-Pop. Because the culture industry can so easily co-opt revolutionary art, it is difficult for this art to maintain its resistant power, but when artists de(re)construct pop culture artifacts, they seize the power back by acknowledging and exploiting the feedback loop. Artists must be careful not to let mass culture co-opt rebellion to use against us, and "The Ricklantis Mixup" presents a cautionary case to warn of this possibility. After worker Rick murders his boss, the owner of the company intercedes to stop the police standoff, and he praises the worker for drawing attention to how blind the

[23] See "The Rickchurian Candidate."

leaders of the Citadel have been regarding the treatment of workers. Rick the factory worker, balding from 15 years of production-line tedium, walks out of the factory a hero as his coworkers cheer him on. The folksy narrator from the Simple Rick advertisements begins to describe the way this Rick lifts the veil and exposes the corrupt system that rules the Citadel, and right at the moment when the hope of change arises, the company owner shoots the worker and uses him to replace the original Simple Rick. The narrator introduces a new product, "Simple Rick Freedom Wafer Selects," with the catchphrase, "Come home to shattering the grand illusion." Building on their business model of selling escapist fantasies, the company commodifies revolution and sells it to workers to satisfy their need to overthrow an oppressive system. In reality, this process is never quite so obvious, but any counterculture runs the risk of being exploited by the culture industry—becoming a face on a t-shirt—so it is vital that we understand this possibility, and the metamodernist worldview that *Rick and Morty* demonstrates for viewers can be used to both "shatter the grand illusion" and deconstruct the mass media that co-opts revolution and the utopian impulse for profit.

The constant satire of possible utopian and dystopian futures leads viewers to question all meaning and the systems we use to establish said meaning. *Rick and Morty* does not present an end goal that provides a conceivable model for utopian society, but it forces viewers to be critical of the methods that systems use to govern behavior, especially through mass media. Instead of arguing for a progression in irreversible time with an eventual finish line, the show buries viewers in infinite possibilities while destabilizing any and all interpretations in the process. The revolution-pop culture

feedback loop continues just like the problematic systems it upholds. Our process of critique must also continue indelibly, and metamodernism provides this model because the oscillation between disparate poles leads us "to pursue a horizon that is forever receding" (Vermeulen and van den Akker 12). Utopia is on this distant horizon, so the concept, the impossible possibility, pulls us forward, even though we will never truly get there, but by tempering hope with skepticism and skepticism with hope, maybe, just maybe, the metamodernist worldview will give us a better comprehension of the interrelationship between ontology and epistemology, and we can finally understand why people continue to believe in systems that constantly prove themselves repressive, unsustainable, and ultimately unstable. As paradoxical as it may seem, accepting and appreciating the meaninglessness of existence can lead us to meaning. Morty sums it up best while helping Summer deal with an existential crisis: "Nobody exists on purpose. Nobody belongs anywhere. Everybody's gonna die. Come watch TV."[24] His point is that we are not part of some grand narrative, so we should do what we decide gives us meaning. Morty's encouragement to relax and watch TV—the immersion in mass media—may seem like a nihilistic escape from reality, but considering the nature of popular culture as *pharmakon,* a subversive show could help construct and shape the characters' political consciousness in the downtime between saving the world and proving the limitations of scientific progress.

[24] See "Rixty Minutes."

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