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Autofictional Authenticity: Bo Burnham's *Inside*, Netflix Comedy and YouTube Aesthetics

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A close analysis of the Netflix comedy special *Bo Burnham: Inside* (2021). This video essay explores *Inside*'s ambivalent aesthetics of 'authenticity' and self-reflexivity via comparisons with the conventions of other Netflix specials, YouTube videos, metamodern autofiction, and the classic mockumentary *David Holzman's Diary* (1967).





Creators' Statement

This co-created audiovisual essay about the Netflix comedy special *Bo Burnham: Inside* (2021) combines two research specialisms of its authors: Netflix television comedy (Tom Hemingway) and the aesthetics of YouTube (James MacDowell). It explores how *Inside* dramatizes and reflects upon the problem of 'being yourself' on camera, in a historical moment when that problem was being faced by more people than at any other point in human history: the first Covid-19 lockdowns.

The central focus of our close analysis is an apparent tension at the special's heart between, on the one hand, a stylistic rhetoric of 'authentic' self-documentation and, on the other, its more performative and self-reflexive strategies. Seeking to understand what is at stake in its handling of this tension, we first examine how *Inside* navigates a convention common amongst Netflix comedy specials: combining onstage stand-up material with documentary footage of the comedian, which seemingly allows home viewers access to a performer's 'backstage' self. We next consider how *Inside* engages with the aesthetics of confessional 'authenticity' commonly associated with the medium in which Burnham's comedy career began: 'user-generated' YouTube videos. Demonstrating how the special simultaneously embraces and resists tendencies common to both these modes, we finally propose 'metamodern autofiction' as a framework for understanding *Inside*'s ambivalent register (see: Gibbons, 2017).

A growing area of study, metamodernism has been conceptualised as an emerging structure of feeling observable in various strains of art and culture since the mid-nineties (see: Vermeulen/van den Akker, 2010). Most broadly conceived as an oscillation between postmodern scepticism and a yearning for the 'grand narratives' of modernism, metamodernism encompasses a variety of contemporary aesthetic tendencies, such as the literary 'New Sincerity' (eg: David Foster Wallace, Dave Eggers, Zadie Smith), the

‘quirky’ in indie cinema (e.g.: Wes Anderson, Miranda July, Spike Jonze), ‘post-irony’ in literature and online cultures, and so on. We suggest that a metamodern sensibility common to contemporary autofiction, especially, helps contextualise *Inside*’s continual oscillation between puncturing and indulging in ‘authentic’ confessional modes. This insight also serves to conclude the essay’s ongoing dialogue with a foundational mockumentary from a very different media era, *David Holzman’s Diary* (1967), whose sceptical critique of self-documentation Burnham seems both to acknowledge and update for the social media era.

The video essay took around a year and a half to make. Initially intended as a shorter work, its final nearly hour-long runtime has ended up resembling the lengths of many contemporary YouTube video essays more closely than most academic audiovisual essays. This is fitting, since “Autofictional Authenticity” also draws upon the aesthetic conventions of YouTube in many other respects. Most ostentatiously, the choice to make near-ubiquitous use of voiceover clearly recalls media analysis YouTubers, whose long-form, monologue-driven work invariably employs what Christian Keathley (2011) calls the audiovisual essay’s ‘explanatory’ (rather than ‘poetic’) mode. The ways our essay approaches musical accompaniment, chapter divisions, intertitles, as well as its occasional attempts at comedy, were also inspired by YouTube video essayists (some of whom feature in the video). Its musical soundtrack consists of a mixture of original music from Burnham’s work (*Inside*, plus *Inside: The Outtakes* [2022] and Anna Meredith’s score for *Eighth Grade* [2018]), as well as fan-created covers of Burnham’s music hosted on YouTube. Since both *Inside* and our own arguments are heavily influenced by aesthetic and thematic preoccupations common to YouTubers, it seemed fitting to borrow from the expressive language of those influences ourselves.

At a less metatextual level, our approach to form and argumentation also simply reflects our appreciation for what can be achieved using a contemporary ‘YouTube video essay’ mode. The typically generous duration of such work allows for extended, detailed close textual analysis of the kind we were interested in pursuing. Equally, the consistent use of voiceover permits critical arguments to be articulated in a language that remains (hopefully) as immediately comprehensible and accessible as possible. It is also for this reason that we always knew we wanted to host our essay on YouTube itself. As we note in the video, *Inside* has already been the subject of a great many long-form video essays by YouTubers, inspiring much valuable debate and conversation about the special’s themes and approaches. One of our aims with this video essay was to contribute to that critical conversation, thus partially tailoring our video essay’s arguments, expression and location (i.e.: YouTube rather than Vimeo) to that end.

At the same time, we wanted to adapt what we most admired in this YouTube essayistic mode for an academic context, creating a video that could sit equally comfortably alongside the scholarly videographic essays published in a journal such as *[in]Transition*. Interestingly, the reviewers' comments—although complimentary overall—initially cast doubt on whether we had been successful in this aim. Both reviewers asked whether the video could be shortened and suggested jettisoning portions of our close analyses or decreasing the quantity of evidence cited in support of our arguments. Of course, it is true that scholarly videographic work is frequently much shorter than the YouTube video essays that influenced our approach. However, having already spent much of the essay's production period editing down and down, we felt that this version retained only the barest essential evidence required to support our arguments sufficiently. It also seemed to us that the volume of evidence and degree of analytical detail we presented would hardly seem excessive in, say, a 6,000–8,000-word academic article that attempted comparable arguments (which might, after all, require more than an hour to read!). As such, while the reviewers ultimately agreed our video should remain in its original form, their initial reservations seem worth reflecting upon. The question these reservations raise seems to be: is there a place for a mode reminiscent of the contemporary long-form, 'explanatory' YouTube video essay in the sphere of academic audiovisual essays?

In some ways, this mode seems obviously attractive as one inspiration from which videographic scholars might profitably draw. Certainly, YouTube video essays tend to be less typically 'academic' than most videographic work in the precise nature of their critical readings, their frames of reference, and (frequently) their tones. However, in the quantity of evidence they can cite to support their arguments (due to their length), and the degree of explicitness with which they can articulate them (due to their 'explanatory' rhetoric), the most ambitious YouTube video essays often conduct analyses by means that would not appear out-of-place in written film and television scholarship. Yet, of course, it is those same qualities that distance them from more 'poetic' approaches that characterise much of the mainstream of videographic film and television studies. As Ian Garwood notes:

The 'poetic' approach has been influential in determining the qualities of videographic film criticism curated on academic platforms . . . to the extent that, within a specifically academic context, the claim that 'many videographic works' adopt a lecture/written rhetorical mode no longer rings true. [1]

Needless to say, scholarly audiovisual essays made in this mode can regularly include large volumes of audiovisual evidence. However, they will seldom attempt what

YouTube video essays offer as a matter of course: explicitly verbalised arguments about that evidence, articulated in a degree of detail that can recall written scholarship. Meanwhile, videographic work whose approach to argumentation is comparably detailed and ‘explanatory’ will tend either to be significantly shorter than the sorts of YouTube analyses that inspired us or might be divided into separate videos (as in Jason Mittell’s ‘The Chemistry of Character on *Breaking Bad*: A Videographic Book’). Our video seeks to retain the critical impulses and frameworks of scholarly audiovisual essays, while also echoing the contemporary YouTube video essay not just in its accessible style, but also its explicitness and extensiveness. It is this particular combination that is relatively rare and which, more than anything, necessitated its unusual length.

While the resulting admixture is fairly unconventional, we would like to think that it draws in valuable ways upon some of the best that both modes can offer. Of course, in our video, the decision to echo a YouTube mode of address was granted additional self-reflexive justification by our subject matter—thus lending this form a somewhat more expressive dimension than it might otherwise denote. As such, perhaps a question remains as to whether videos made in a comparable mode could find a home in a journal like *[in]Transition* absent justifications of this kind. We think there are good reasons for believing that they should, but for now this is a question that must remain open. [2]

Notes:

1. The phrase Garwood is quoting comes from Keathley and Mittell (2019).
2. A document featuring all notes and citations referred to in the video can be accessed here: <https://shorturl.at/nnYLw>.

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Biographies

Tom Hemingway is Teaching Fellow in Film and Television Studies at the University of Warwick. He has contributed work to the collection *Binge-Watching and Contemporary Television Studies* (Edinburgh University Press, 2021), and is currently writing a monograph about comedy television on streaming platforms.

James MacDowell is Associate Professor in Film Studies at the University of Warwick. He is the author of *Happy Endings in Hollywood Cinema* (Edinburgh University Press, 2013) and *Irony in Film* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2016). His current research concerns the aesthetics of YouTube, and he produces video essays on his YouTube channel *The Lesser Feat*.

Review by Jason Mittell, Middlebury College

I must admit to being a little dismayed upon opening this video for the first time and seeing that the runtime was almost an hour. Given that *Inside* itself is not much longer than that, I braced myself for a barely-academic YouTube-style video essay that was overly indulgent and more invested in keeping viewers watching than having much to say. Thankfully I was proven wrong, as the length is part of the video's form itself, taking on the dominant style of many YouTube video essays from non-academics. As Hemingway & MacDowell explicitly reference in their statement (and implicitly in their video), they are engaging in the vernacular of YouTube aesthetics, which their object of analysis is clearly working within (and commenting upon), and thus this video lightly inhabits the reflexivity of their subject matter.

My initial misreading of the video's mode speaks to the main accomplishment of "Autofictional Authenticity" as a video essay: providing a deep, wide-ranging contextualization of Bo Burnham's *Inside* as linked to a wide range of precedents and referents. Upon its release, *Inside* was framed as a unique anomaly: a "stand-up" special (performed largely while seated) filmed without an audience or crew, a video distinct to the COVID-19 lockdown moment, and a comedy special lacking all of the typical trappings of other Netflix offerings. This video undercuts that hype to demonstrate how *Inside* is instead a continuation of many traditions, from proto-mockumentary experiments to confessional stand-up to the manufactured authenticity of YouTubers, and most of all emerging from Burnham's previous work itself. This deep contextualization is a worthy accomplishment for an acclaimed cultural object, and one that benefits greatly from the videographic form, as we see juxtaposed images and sounds to fully appreciate the connections.

For me, the video's importance grows in the final sections, as it brings in a more academic tone via citations to scholarship on metamodernism. Thankfully, it plants those seeds but then turns to more relevant experts: Burnham's fans on Reddit. The conclusion accepts the ambivalent coexistence between "real" and "fake," leaving a lasting impression on me via this framework for thinking through this pervasive mode across contemporary media forms. Ultimately, Hemingway and MacDowell make a strong case for *Inside*'s place as a work that both is indebted to many key precedents and captures a broader cultural mode of ambivalent expressivity that we see quite often in more "everyday" media forms.

Review by Drew Morton, Texas A&M University

Bo Burnham's *Inside* (2021) is the quintessential media text reflecting on the 2020 COVID lockdown. Its extreme swings in tone and subject matter—from sexting to doomscroll-inspired spiraling to the mundane rhythms of isolation—is equally humorous, anxiety-inducing, and profound. Having watched the film and listened to the album more than a handful of times now and after teaching it a couple times, I'll also acknowledge that it is a slyly dense and complicated text, especially once you get beyond the surface of the subject matter and the kaleidoscope of style that Burnham introduces in his one-man show (engaging in a vocabulary that pays homage to Instagram, Twitch, and YouTube videos) centering on what is authentic and what is “staged.”

On that front, Tom Hemingway and James MacDowell have created what is almost an annotated version of *Inside*. Clocking in at 57 minutes—just about half an hour shy of the text it analyzes—“Autofictional Authenticity” does an incredible job trying to unpack the question of when is Burnham performing vs. when is he “being himself” by tracing the multitude of influences on Burnham's project. MacDowell and Hemingway connect the dots back to Burnham on every front from David Foster Wallace, Dave Eggers and “New Sincerity” to *David Holzman's Diary* and Netflix and YouTube comedy routines.

The piece does a fantastic job of tracing these connections out exhaustively and provides a rich, scholarly, corrective to a lot of the more “hot take” analyses of *Inside* that have been uploaded to YouTube since its airing. And yet, it's accessible and, like its subject, often funny, which allows this piece to pull off an extremely difficult feat with regard to audience: it is accessible enough to hold its own amongst the YouTube breakdowns and generates more than enough new knowledge to function as a rigorous scholarship. I cannot wait to use it in my classroom the next time I teach *Inside*.

