Exploring That Funny Feeling:

Bo Burnham's postironic methodology

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Abstract

Exploring That Funny Feeling sets out to do what its titles suggests: exploring that funny feeling, or *feelings*, as they are conveyed through the works of American comedian Bo Burnham, to various results. This thesis focuses on two of his works, *Inside* and *Eighth Grade,* in order to distinguish the practices in which these feelings originate from, in addition to just *how* they are conveyed. These practices, or methods, will be qualified as distinct set-ups and frame-ups that operates through ironic negation, towards something beyond irony. The thesis seeks to contribute to the studies of the metamodern structure of feeling in identifying how said practices operates postironically, presenting a set of distinct postironic methods, as well as suggesting what a postironic condition might look like. In doing so the thesis also touches upon the conception of sincerity as it occurs within popular culture, seeking to illustrate the multiplicity of sincere engagement, and how it is conjured through irony.

Preface

First and foremost, thank you Mr. Burnham, for making me sad on that fateful evening in 2021. If you had not been such a bummer this thesis would not be what it is today.

I would like to extend my sincerest gratitude to my supervisor, Timotheus Vermeulen, if it were not for him, I might not have been introduced to the concepts and ideas on which this thesis rely. I am also thankful for his glowing encouragement, direction and enthusiasm, all which made the work on the thesis much more fun, and a great deal easier. I would further like to thank all the other good people at the *Screen Cultures* programme, students and teachers alike, for two of the most profoundly interesting years of my life.

Thank you to my friends, family and partner for their resolute encouragement throughout all the facets of my life, and for remaining enthusiastic on my behalf even at times where my own enthusiasm was wavering.

Thank you, dad, for your unconditional love, support and understanding through all my ups and downs. Despite not quite comprehending everything I have done these past few years; it would not have been possible without you.

Lastly, but by no means last, I would like to thank my mom. To paraphrase a line from one of the segments in the thesis: *I'm still figuring out how to keep living without you, it has gotten a little better, but it's still hard.* I would give anything to have you back with me, to greet me with open arms at the end of the journeys I make, regardless of how I emerge. I like to believe that you live on through me, as long as I am, so are you, and that is my biggest motivation and pride. I love you mom.

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All figures are retrieved from *Inside* and *Eighth Grade.*

Introduction

The Case: Why am I not laughing?

In the spring of 2021, I was inside like everybody else, confined to a small apartment with three other people in it. The global pandemic was at this point waning, but cautions were still to be taken, and the fatigue of lockdown would linger on for some time longer. One evening where I was lucky enough to have the apartment to myself (my roommates where probably out breaking lockdown restrictions somewhere), and looking to distract myself, I decided to put on a stand-up special on Netflix. Although half an hour went by on merely deciding which one to watch, as is a streaming service ritual at this point, I finally made a decision. The choice fell on *Inside* (2021)[1] from American comedian Bo Burnham, as I was familiar with his earlier work and his brand of comedy had never failed to strike a chord with me. Only this time, he partly failed. *Inside* was not what I expected. Whereas regular stand-up routines rely heavily on the trust and relationship between an audience and the stand-up comic,[2] *Inside* does not feature an audience, it only features a spectator, you. Furthermore, it does not feature a stage, as it all takes place in Burnham's former guest house,[3] a small blank space, only filled, apart from Burnham himself, with technical equipment and wires. As the special unraveled in this miniscule space, I sat there witnessing segment after segment, featuring song after song. They featured gleeful satire and social commentary which mostly made me laugh, but ultimately left me in a rather downcast, and contemplative mood.

The special did tickle my funny bone, but not entirely, because it also tickled something else. This "something" is hard to define, because it is not easily tickled, nor would you expect a comedy special to tickle it. It is difficult to pinpoint exactly what is tickled, as *Inside* walks a fine line between aloof sarcasm and all-too-real melancholy, really hammering home the question he asks at the beginning concerned with whether one should be laughing in times like these. He really works to cover these times as well, referencing the internet, social media presence on several platforms, depression, capitalistic exploitation, Jeffrey

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[1] Bo Burnham, *Bo Burnham: Inside*, (2021, US: Netflix). https://www.netflix.com/watch/81289483?trackId=14277281&tctx=-97%2C-97%2C%2C%2C%2C%2C%2C%2C81289483%2CVideo%3A81289483%2C

[2] Daniel Abrahams, "Winning Over the Audience: Trust and Humor in Stand-Up Comedy: Abrahams" in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Volume 78, Issue 4 (September 2020): 491. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/jaac.12760

[3] Kim Renfro, "The house where Bo Burnham filmed his Netflix special `Inside´ is on sale for $3.25 million" in *Insider*, October 22, 2021. https://www.insider.com/bo-burnham-inside-nightmare-on-elm-street-house-sale-photos-2021-10

Bezos, the state of comedy, anxiety, Jeffrey Bezos again, cancel culture and a whole array of other weighty themes. They are treated comedically despite their weightiness, but the parody never manages to entirely distance the subject matter from the spectator, as Burnham habitually hits sincere emotions in the midst of all the irony. This set of terms, sincerity and irony, are key to this thesis, as they are important in order to understand just how Burnham achieves the feelings of delicious sadness in *Inside*.

There seems to be a balancing act, or rather a tension between the need to emotionally distance oneself from the near-incomprehensible magnitude of worries in the world, and the desire to constructively address them. The former, Burnham achieves sardonically, as he gleefully dissects an extensive range of social phenomenon, but also himself and his part in them. The latter Burnham achieves through meticulously sprinkling the special with glimpses of genuine emotion. He will make sudden detours into underlying anxieties or perils concerning the subject he was previously joking about. The result is somewhat similar to the aesthetic category of zany, as it is an "ambiguous intersection between cultural and occupational performance",[4] where Burnham's professional doubts as an entertainer is contextualized within a fast-paced and volatile cultural landscape. Sianne Ngai claims that zany performers are "constantly in motion and in flight from precarious situations in particular",[5] a motion, or flight, that is distinguishable in *Inside*'s constant juggling of sincere and ironic sentiments. Burnham seems to always be evading the other, never letting ironic snark remain unchecked, while never letting his sincere excursions become studies in full-blown sentimentality. *Inside* is always in motion, as such, one can experience something similar to a physical bombardment[6] of impressions, funny and emotional alike.

At the core, is the relationship between irony and sincerity. On a surface level, qualifying their presence is not too hard. Irony, in a simplified explanation (there will be a not so simple one), involves the communication of what one does not necessarily mean, like taking on intentionally flawed outlooks for comedic effect.[7] This does not necessarily have to be verbally communicated, as I will get deeper into further down, as dissonance and juxtaposition in general is the name of the game. Dabbling in said dissonance, however, apart from producing comedy, also makes possible a certain critical distance from the topic at hand. Much critique has been levied upon irony for these exact capabilities, as it has been

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[4] Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, cute, interesting,* (2015, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press). p. 182.
[5] Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, p. 182.
[6] Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, p. 184.
[7] James MacDowell, *Irony in Film*, (2016, London: Palgrave Macmillan). p. 4.

come to be perceived as seeping into other facets of our cultural lives. David Foster Wallace, for one, levied critique upon irony as the dominant logic of a cynically cultural landscape brought on by postmodernism, that furthermore renders it difficult to discern sincere engagement.[8] Postmodernism, came to be often associated with the passing of grand narratives and meaning, with irony and deconstruction replacing the belief in narrative progress.[9] Accompanying this came criticism towards "blank" styles of expressions in artforms such as film, as well as accusations of nihilistic attitudes,[10] which were all tied to a prevailing sense of ironic detachment. Following such criticism, irony in its conception aligned with postmodernism, has come under scrutiny for its supposed exertion of influence on our everyday lives. There has sprung out several responses to this conception of irony in the wake of such critique in the 90's, some of which will be addressed in the thesis, often with emphasis on the re-introduction of sincerity into cultural expressions.

Sincerity, as the other half of the dichotomy, deals not necessarily with an "old" conception of sincerity, as "a form of uncritical naïveté"[11] that belongs to the early modernistic period. Rather, the sincerity that is often conceived in relation to irony, is a part of the equation through its *alignment* with irony. Allard den Dulk explains how sincerity's relation with irony effects its perception as such:

> *The difference between opposition and incorporation goes to the heart of the misunderstanding of the concept of sincerity. According to that dominant misunderstanding, sincerity is a necessarily outdated concept, originating in the early modern period. It is seen to equal a direct, outward projection of inner truths, and as such to require a conception of subjectivity as static and essentialist. Defined in this way, sincerity will indeed strike us as an anachronism that goes against most of our contemporary views of subjectivity and selfhood.[12]*

I argue that the concept of sincerity in the context of a recent work like *Inside* needs to be contextualized as incorporated in irony in order to be distinguished from the modernistic one,

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[8] Lee Konstantinou, *Cool characters*, (2016, Cambridge: Harvard University Press). p. 6.
[9] Gry Rustad & Kai Hanno Schwind, "The Joke That Wasn't Funny Anymore: Reflections on the Metamodern Sitcom" in *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect and Depth After Postmodernism* (Ed. Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons & Timotheus Vermeulen)*,* p. 144.
[10] Jeffrey Sconce, "Irony, Nihilism and the New American Smart Film" in *Screen* 43 4 (2002): 349. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/43.4.349
[11] Allard den Dulk, "New Sincerity and Frances Ha in Light of Sartre: A Proposal for an Existentialist Conceptual Framework" in *Film-Philosophy*. 24 (2020): 143. DOI: 10.3366/film.2020.0136
[12] Den Dulk, "New Sincerity and Frances Ha in Light of Sartre", p. 145.

as it develops a new nature through such contextualization. Just as irony, in said context, not necessarily must create emotional detachment in its connection to sincerity.

These terms will remain important to the thesis, but as mentioned, it is not their mere presence that is often of interest, but *how* they unfurl. Take Burnham's song, late in the special, named "That Funny Feeling",[13] for example. This segment is staged like a campfire song, with an artificial fire, and Burnham, sat next to it with an acoustic guitar. The song covers a wide range of social happenings and anxieties in a manner reminiscing of Billy Joel's "We Didn't Start the Fire" (1989) or The 1975's "Love It If We Made It" (2018), in that it consists of listing said phenomenon up in rapid fashion. The contents of the list are ironic of nature, referencing stark juxtapositions such as gift shops at gun ranges and mass shootings in malls, obeying traffic laws in GTA V (2013) where you notoriously play as criminals, and getting self-help books delivered by drone from a big, indifferent corporation. In spite of this, the tone of the song resembles that of a protest song, and carries a melancholic tone that hints at real anxiety towards the admittedly strange contents of the verses. The ending of the final verse speaks of the "quiet comprehending of the ending of it all",[14] while previous lines of the song reference serious mental states such as agoraphobia, dissociation and derealization, alluding to genuine concern. Just when after he ponders the ending of it all, he returns to the chorus, before closing the song strangely, with an outro that comes across as its most up-beat section consisting of a repetition of the lines: "Hey, what can I say? We were overdue, but it will be over soon, just wait".[15] As this goes on, the song fades out, without ever reaching an overtly ironic tone, but never wallowing in sincere distress either. It features comedic lines all while accentuating a genuinely resigned feeling, a feeling that sticks with you after the song ends. *How* segments like this one, and the entire special, is doing this is the main concern of this thesis.

The Research Question: Set-ups, frame-ups and their influence on spectatorship

This thesis will attempt to distinguish the specific ways in which Burnham fluctuates between irony and sincerity, in order to unravel the workings behind that funny feeling his works provide. In order to do so I will look at particular, identifiable methods in which he elaborately utilizes irony in order to transcend it, and how they are communicated throughout

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[13] Burnham, "That Funny Feeling" in *Inside*, 1:04:36.
[14] Burnham, "That Funny Feeling", *Inside.*
[15] Burnham, "That Funny Feeling", *Inside.*

his works. I will thus take on and answer the research question: *What characterizes Bo Burnham's postironic methods, and what do they convey?* I have previously presented what I believe to answer this enquiry by way of title to this section, namely the postironic set-up, which I will split up and henceforth refer to as *set-ups* and *frame-ups*. These are devices that initially works to evoke a certain feeling that is due to be challenged at one or several points later on in the arrangement. I will perform a close reading in order to identify the characteristics of Burnham's peculiar arrangements, which will be elaborated on and fleshed out below. For the purpose of this thesis, I will limit my analysis to *Inside* and *Eighth Grade* rather than Burnham's entire oeuvre, as these are his most recent, and most acknowledged works. I further believe that they illustrate different postironic approaches, thus lending a wider scope to the findings. The rest of the introduction will present the other literary foundations on which the research question relies, including the term *postirony*, to which it directly refers. The following chapter will expand further on the introduction, by contextualizing the chosen works within the current cultural logic.

I theorize that Burnham applies several types of ironies at the same time, subsuming each other while negating the other's effects. In these ironic roundabouts there are small flashes of sincere sentiments evident throughout. I imagine it akin to the sparks produced by the friction of hitting rocks together, for brief moments you get premonitions of warmth as the rough surfaces come together, producing something entirely different in nature. Like the elusive nature of sparks, I also theorize that the flashes of sincerity differ from time to time, dependent on the catalyzers and their movement. Sparks occasionally becomes full-fledged flames as well, embellishing the cave, or wherever the smashing of rocks took place, in a different light than before. To break the argument free from heavy-handed metaphors, in applying different ironic forms and content from segment to segment, *Inside* produces differing sincere sentiments as well, both optimistic and pessimistic ones. The solution as to how the special does this seems to be intrinsic to its structure, as the answer to the conjuration of diverse and unexpected sincere notions lie within a specific set of schemes within. I have chosen to label these schemes as set-ups and frame-ups.

These terms are typically recognizable within Burnham's work as they make up the infrastructure of works such as *Inside*. Set-ups refers to the way in which segments, in a literal sense, sets up a joke. In this sense, what one would usually associate with a set-up is the build-up in the first part of a joke's structure, with the latter being the *punchline*.[16]

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[16] Graeme Ritchie, *The Linguistic Analysis of Jokes*, (2004, London: Routledge). p. 59.

Linguist Graeme Ritchie explains that the set-up of a joke "creates no particular incongruity that the audience is aware of, but the punchline, at least initially, does not make immediate sense".[17] The set-ups I propose are similar to this explanation, with a notable difference apparent in that they are being applied to a much more extensive structure than a simple joke. Furthermore, the punchline does not necessarily operate as a vessel for comedy, often becoming somewhat similar to a gutpunch at times. The set-up as I conceive it often incorporates, and consists of, several and slighter jokes, as noted with some of the lines from "That Funny Feeling" above. As such, the ambition of Burnham's set-ups does not necessarily lie in comedy, as comedy rather becomes a part of the build-up for the set-up, instead of their manifest destination. I do not mean to remove the potential for a genuinely funny punchline; however, I intend to point out that the punchline in Burnham's set-ups bears the potential for something *beyond* a mere comedic purpose. While it operates on an initial lack of incongruity, it does not dabble in inconsistency to deliver a joke, but to create a certain feeling. Said feeling is varying in nature, and depends on the jokes, in manner and numbers, as to what feeling is manifested. Incorporated in my conception of the set-up then, is the presence of a distinct build-up towards a punchline, as one would come to expect from a comedian. However, the set-up, in Burnham's case, usually sets up the spectator for revelation, as it will typically divert course at the apex of the segment, normally due to the presence of one ironic force interacting with another. Thus, Burnham's set-ups are acts of deliberate ironic subversions of irony itself.

What they do in these ironic subversions, is that they draw away from the original ironic sentiments just enough to reveal sincere ones that are originally concealed. When ironies collide then, there will usually occur what I will from here on refer to as a *sincere break*. The sincere break is *the occurrence of genuine, reflective emotion in the recoil between colliding ironies*. As such sincere breaks present themselves at the ironic zenith of the set-up, and enables the spectator to intuit Burnham's covert sincere ambiguities. They operate similar to what Timotheus Vermeulen and James Whitfield calls "pull back and reveal".[18] This mechanism, like Burnham's set-ups, works within contemporary US sitcoms to baffle audience expectations via withholding important information until the endpoint. The sincere breaks serve as the moment in Burnham's set-up where the reveal suddenly takes

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[17] Ritchie, *The Linguistic Analysis of Jokes*, p. 59.
[18] Timotheus Vermeulen & James Whitfield, "Arrested Developments: Towards an aesthetic of the contemporary US sitcom" in *Television Aesthetics and Style* (Ed. Jason Jacobs & Steven Peacock), (2013, London: Bloomsbury).

place, the set-up however, does not necessitate a pulling *back*, but rather a swerve. Burnham exposes yet unseen facets of the world, revealing that there is more to what the set-up previously alluded to. As such, the sincere breaks within the set-ups reveal themselves as vital components in Burnham's production of emotional ambivalence, as they become his instruments of revelation.

With that being said, they also partake in what I label the frame-up. The so-called frame-ups principally take on the same appearance as the set-up, the difference lying in the nature of the outcomes. Set-ups usually reveal sincere sentiments for the spectator, unpredictably, but at a safe distance to interpret, rather than being engaged with. Shortly put, the set-up functions like a reveal, the frame-up on the other hand, is more akin to an ambush. In his frame-ups Burnham employs ironic negation in an effort to engage the spectator, or spur on contemplativeness. He will make the spectator feel comfortable holding questionable views and attitudes before unexpectedly confronting them for doing so. Thus, the spectator is taken to task for his complacent inclination towards cynically ironic points of view, which Burnham himself adopts in order to make them safe, before sweeping the rug from under his audience.

In the set-ups and frame-ups, I will present how *Inside* succeeds in producing the emotional ambivalence often present via Burnham's work. He applies irony to produce comedy, before negating the initial irony with another ironic turn of events. In doing so, laughter and ridicule is diminished in the face-off with a new ironic turn of event, laughter becomes contemplation. I will analyze a couple of segments in order to exemplify how this occur structurally within them, and how Burnham produces different sincere iterations. The frame-up will also be exemplified through the segment "White Woman's Instagram"[19] which I believe to be the premier example of this particular subgenre of set-up within the special. When I have demonstrated the very structures of these schemes I will look to *Inside's* visual aspects, more specifically the appliance of frames and their formats. This is due to Burnham's constant, and at first glance arbitrary, alteration of them. I mentioned earlier that *Inside* produces a sense of volatility, or instability, which is largely be embodied through the frames it uses. In his play with frames, Burnham reinforces the pullback/reveal dynamic of the set-up via the sincere break, where the spectator is suddenly placed in a different situation than the set-up gave the impression of initially. [20] In analyzing Burnham's frame-play, I aim to

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[19] Burnham, "White Woman's Instagram" in *Inside*, 00:20:24.
[20] Vermeulen & Whitfield, "Arrested Developments", p. 104.

illustrate how *Inside* produces a sense of emotional instability, as well as how this reinforces the emotional fluctuations of the set-ups.

<p style="text-align:center">The Tumultuous and the Slow Burning: *Inside* & *Eighth Grade*</p>

To further develop the set-up, and to contextualize my study of *Inside,* I will also look to another one of Burnham's works, *Eighth Grade* (2018).[21] My decision to do so is due to what I perceive as a fundamental difference in set-up between the two. I believe their set-ups differ in both structure and nature, as *Inside* operates with a pullback/reveal function in relation to the world as a whole, whereas *Eighth Grade* operates in a zooming manner. One breaks away to realize different perspectives, the other zooms in to study a character in-depth. Both however, apply irony in order to produce sincerity, *Inside* in fleeting moments, and *Eighth Grade* via sympathetic connection. They both operate, as I will argue, *postironically*, which is one of the responses to postmodern irony that utilizes incorporation and negation as means to overcoming.[22] I will explicate postirony in further detail later on in the introduction, and further contextualize it in the first chapter as it lies at the very heart of the thesis. I believe that both works operate postironically in that they operate through irony on their way to sincerity in differing ways, showing the possibility for varying postironic outcomes. However, I will begin with qualifying the main differences in the works below.

      Unlike *Inside*, which contains elements from a comprehensive range of audiovisual artforms, *Eighth Grade* is undoubtedly a movie. It contains a conventional plot structure, camera work and is decidedly placed in a fictional reality. At first glance it is not quite structured like *Inside* is. Whereas *Inside* is eccentric and zany in structure, consisting of several lesser set-ups distinct to each segment that produces a frantic sense of instability, *Eighth Grade* sticks to more subtle set-ups that supports a stricter, overarching plot. The film follows Kayla, a girl entering her last week as an eighth grader, and her struggles with making connection to her peers and her surroundings. Kayla creates an ambivalent relationship to spectator, as she is inherently genuine in her attempts at forging connections and fitting in, but this is at the expense of her, social awareness. A prevalent source to her struggles is her lacking ability to navigate her surroundings, which is made worse when coupled up with her apparent anxiety.

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[21] Bo Burnham, *Eighth Grade*, (2018, US: A24).
[22] Lee Konstantinou, *"Four Faces of Postirony"* in *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect and Depth After Postmodernism* (Ed. Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons and Timotheus Vermeulen), (2017: Rowman and Littlefield International, London & New York). p. 88.

One of the most important, and obvious, differences between *Inside* and *Eighth Grade* is that Kayla is *not* Burnham himself. Asinine as this may sound, the former erratically threads the line between fiction and reality, while the latter has two feet firmly planted in fiction. One represents Burnham's scattershot mind, as evident in sheer range of topics and deceitful structure, the other is allowed to maintain focus on one experience. This speaks to the two falling within different postironic genres, which I will cover in the first chapter. However, by way of introduction, I would like to point out the fundamental difference I believe lies within their set-ups. I have mentioned how set-ups rely on an ironic build-up towards a sincere break, that pulls back and uncovers a genuine admission to the spectator. This, I believe, is typical of *Inside*, while *Eighth Grade* slightly differs in its scheme towards sincerity. *Eighth Grade* places Kayla at the center of the narrative, and unlike Burnham, we rarely get explanations on what is going on inside her head. As such, we are placed at distance and made to observe, as the film's tone guides our perception of Kayla. This perception slowly develops from distanced to sympathetic, parallel with Kayla's own development from an adolescent sense of naïveté towards a more informed one.[23] At first, we are made acutely aware that she is in fact a teenage girl, and much of the imagery and plotline revolves around her awkwardness in relation to her environment.

Unlike *Inside,* where we are presented with humorous content to ensnare us in the set-up, *Eighth Grade* presents us largely with awkwardness and *cringe*, which makes the humor more laborious in nature.[24] As a result of the differing approach to a different kind of subject matter, *Eighth Grade* offers another interpretation of Burnham's schematic approach. As the film progresses the initial distance between Kayla and the audience closes in line with Kayla's development, creating an elaborate set-up that evokes sincere sentiments within the story, but also sincere engagement between spectator and protagonist. This is shown in the slow burning set-up, as it creates sympathetic engagement from the spectator, as well as development past irony for Kayla. As such, I will analyze *Eighth Grade* in a separate chapter, to look at the workings of its distinct scheme, as well as visual techniques that showcases the relationship between Kayla's journey and ours. In this I hope to contribute to the notion of postirony, in showing how overcoming irony can produce different, simultaneous forms of sincerity. But first, I will qualify the ways in which Burnham applies irony by way of James

[23] Timotheus Vermeulen & Robin van den Akker, "Notes on metamodernism" in *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 2:1 (2010): 1-14. DOI: 10.3402/jac.v2i0.5677
[24] Pansy Duncan, "Joke work: comic labor and the aesthetics of the awkward" in *Comedy Studies*, 8:1 (2017): 37. DOI: 10.1080/2040610X.2017.1279913

MacDowell's categories of filmic ironies,[25] in order to establish a firm understanding of the working set-ups working components.

Irony as It Unfolds: Situational, dramatic and communicative

In his seminal work, *Irony in Film*, James MacDowell ponders on the presence of irony, as the title suggests, specifically in film. As *Inside*, and subsequently *Eighth Grade* are audiovisual screen media, theorizations on irony as it is expressed on-screen is vital to understanding Burnham's set-ups. MacDowell theorize that film holds the capacity to create several kinds. He tells that "Its pictorial qualities help it depict *situational* ironies, its dramatic and storytelling properties assists in creating *dramatic* ironies, and its narrative dimensions aids its potential to be *communicatively* ironic".[26] All these three categories will be adopted and applied, during my analysis. With these types, comes also certain practices that will be equally important in illuminating the ironies, such as ironic subversion and ironic pretense.

The first of MacDowell's three categories, situational irony, envelops the films' ability to present visual juxtaposition. Point of view and intention plays a key role, as the communication of situational irony is dependent on *where* your vantage point is situated, and *how* the film (director) intends you to see it. The way a shot is framed, and how the mise-en-scène is organized within it, may reveal contrasts which testifies to ironic intent.[27] In this lies the potential for subversion or inversion,[28] which refers to the films potential to undermine audience expectations, or flip them on their head. An example from *Inside* that displays situational irony in its pictorial juxtaposition is a segment called "Problematic", which deals offensiveness and accountability in comedy, and the responsibility and repercussions that follows. Burnham spends the entire song reflecting on things he has done previously that might be taken as offensive, such as dressing up as Aladdin for Halloween, or worse, watching Family Guy (1999-present). The visuals accompanying the song is parodying cinematic training montages, which can be taken as an on-the-nose comment on the prospect of self-improvement to atone for past mistakes. Towards the end of the song, as it begins its outro, Burnham belts out that he is "really fucking sorry", while having a cross projected in light on him, as he mimics hanging on it against the wall, evoking the image of Christ on the

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[25] MacDowell, *Irony in Film*.
[26] MacDowell, *Irony in Film*, p. 202.
[27] MacDowell, *Irony in Film*, p. 28.
[28] MacDowell, *Irony in Film*, p. 4.

cross.[29] This implies ironic intention, as the imagery of Christ on the cross creates a jarring dissonance from the sentiments expressed elsewhere in the song. Self-awareness, becomes self-flagellation, that further develops into self-pity, which again contrasts the selflessness attributed to Jesus for atoning for our sins. The shot implies that Burnham is in fact not "really fucking sorry", but wallowing in anguish from his supposedly Christ-like atonement, thus, self-awareness becomes self-indulgence. As such, it represents situational irony through an intent and point of view that inverts the original sentiment through the creation of juxtaposition between the contents of the frame and the expressed sentiments. This further goes on to raise genuine ambivalence surrounding political incorrectness in humor, and sincere doubts towards the legitimacy of both critique and its reception.

Figure 1: Burnham, Christlike on the cross

Dramatic irony occurs when a film establishes a "discrepant awareness" between the on-screen characters and the audience.[30] This form of on-screen irony often takes place when the spectator knows something that the character in the film is unaware of. Said discrepancies could take place as juxtaposition between any parts of the film like mise-en-scène, camera work, verbal- and gestural expressions. MacDowell notes that a film's capacity for both narrative and dramatic techniques enable its inclination towards dramatic irony,[31] as a film' particular approach to narration yields the potential for illuminating dramatic irony as it befalls, and to further progress the story. Much of the irony in *Eighth Grade* is dramatic, as Burnham sets up a double audience, where the perspective of the audience allows for a

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[29] Burnham, "Problematic" in *Inside*, 00:38:03.
[30] MacDowell, *Irony in Film*, p. 4.
[31] MacDowell, *Irony in Film*, p. 49.

greater understanding of the film's happenings than Kayla does. The third chapter of the thesis will look closer into this, as it presents how *Eighth Grade* at times works through several points of view to establish a double audience to scrutinize Kayla's rose-tinted infatuation with a boy.

The last form of irony is communicative, also often to referred to as verbal irony. This transpires when expression happens via a faulty or naïve perspective, that one adopts specifically to ironize it.[32] Communicative irony is usually the foundation for expressing oneself sarcastically, but also the basis for most parody, as it allows one to assume different ways of perceiving the world in order to comment on it. Communicative irony enables *ironic pretense,* which is the willful adoption of imperfect perspectives, which is common practice throughout Burnham's comedy specials. MacDowell states that traditionally, the lack of distinguishable narrators in films, as is often found in literature, makes it somewhat difficult to attribute communicative irony to film. He maintains however, that the lack of narrator can be made up for through an ironically distanced *tone*, by employing stylistic and generic conventions in ironic fashion.[33] The notion of tone will be explored further in later chapters, but it useful to firstly distinguish it, like MacDowell does elsewhere, as "implicit attitude", or "closer to a standpoint, an outlook".[34] In essence, the tone represents the film's attitude towards what is mediated on-screen; in that sense a film can communicate irony through tonal distance, where filmic conventions becomes vessels for ironic pretense. As such, *Eighth Grade* has the potential to be analyzed through its tonal attitude towards conventions. Having said this, *Inside*'s is not purely a film, it is also a stand-up special, meaning that Burnham himself can be understood as a narrator, therefore making ironic pretense applicable. He narrates *Inside* through playing characters, but predominantly as the lyricist behind all of its songs, which makes up the vast majority of the special. Consequently, the analysis of *Inside* will rely considerably on ironic pretense, as Burnham unquestionably is its narrator.

All three of these categories will serve as my basis for identifying the creation of irony in the works available. They will be referred to throughout as I believe their differing modes and qualities makes up for numerous combinations, which further yields the potential for different sincere reactions. Though I previously commented on sincerity, I will return to it

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[32] MacDowell, *Irony in Film*, p. 4.

[33] MacDowell, *Irony in Film*, p. 68-69.

[34] James MacDowell, "Wes Anderson, tone, and the quirky sensibility", in *New Review of Film and Television Studies* vol. 10 (March 2012): 14. DOI: 10.1080/17400309.2012.628227

briefly further down in order to firmly qualify my usage of the term in relation to the current cultural landscape, and to this assignment as a whole.

Janusian Sincerity, Postirony and Metamodernism

I believe that the sincerity in Burnham's works emerge through the interaction of ironies. The classic definition of sincerity however, is as stated above by den Dulk, an "outward projection of inner truth",[35] making it somewhat subjective, as it needs to be positioned within the individual in order to be projected outwards. Lionel Trilling further explains that the word as we understand it now (or then, seeing as he wrote it in the early 70's), "refers primarily to a congruence between avowal and actual feeling".[36] In these conceptions, sincerity becomes a lone-standing phenomenon, a relation between emotions and truth. As such, it stands fit to oppose irony, which is often attributed with critical distance, and skepticism towards the idea of overtly genuineness. However, it also appears somewhat singular, and therefore somewhat inadequate, as something fixed that is inherently already in the world. I theorize that it may be more elusive in nature, as it emerges in relation to irony, and as I have commented, irony occurs in several forms, dependent on the constitutional factors. As such, the sincerity that arises from the various interactions of irony should also be conceptualized as arbitrary, as it depends on the context from which it arises. The former example of "That Funny Feeling" produces a sincere feeling of dejectedness, while *Eighth Grade* produces a sincere connection to its protagonist. Thus, at the center of sincerity lies genuine feeling, feelings that are not already fixed, but takes shape in response to differing situations. I am not opposed to the idea that sincerity itself is inherent in people or our relations to other people and the world as a whole, I am opposed to narrowing sincerity down to a reductionist term.

My argument of sincerity as an arbitrary result from ironic interaction somewhat places this thesis alongside the concept of postirony. Postirony is one of several responses to the problematic aspects of postmodern, all-encompassing irony, in which the response includes applying irony as an instrument to overcome irony.[37] Lee Konstantinou describes the postironists as highly heterogeneous,[38] in that they seek to explore what a postironic state

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[35] Den Dulk, "New Sincerity and Frances Ha in Light of Sartre", p. 145.
[36] Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, (1972, Cambridge: Harvard University Press). p. 2.
[37] Lee Konstantinou, *"Four Faces of Postirony"* in *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect and Depth After Postmodernism* (Ed. Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons and Timotheus Vermeulen), (2017: Rowman and Littlefield International, London & New York). p. 88.
[38] Konstantinou, *Cool Characters*, p. 8.

could be like, rather than a return to a naïve state of being, to differing results via differing tactics. This involves a dialectical approach to irony, were they come together and interact, negating or absorbing each other, resulting in something entirely new. I believe this process is key to Burnham's modus operandi, as his application of irony is highly similar to how Konstantinou describes postironists. This is because Burnham too applies several forms of irony in his works, which produces something *other* than the original ironic intent.

The quest to move past a postmodern conception of irony, postironic or not, is a widespread cultural tendency. Several theorizations on cultural expressions in the current post-postmodern landscape considers a logic where irony and sincerity are either in oscillation,[39] or balancing,[40] which validates a new cultural logic beyond that of postmodernism. Among the names given to this new cultural logic are *metamodernism*, which is the one I will adopt for this thesis. Metamodernism was coined by Robin Van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen, and suggests a new structure of feeling characterized by a continuous oscillation between irony and sincerity.[41] Furthermore, this new structure of feeling incorporates postmodern modes, and reacts to them without returning to a pre-ironic state. As such, the cultural logic constructs a generational attitude akin to something Van den Akker and Vermeulen describes as informed naivety, or pragmatic idealism.[42] I will dedicate the first chapter of the thesis to further contextualize Burnham's works as expressions within metamodernism, as well as discussing their postironic capabilities further by assessing them in line with Konstantinou's four specific "faces" of postirony.[43]

The Thesis as It Unfolds

Throughout the thesis I will conduct a close reading of segments from Inside and scenes from Eighth Grade. Unraveling the workings which constitutes sincere sentiments, fleeting and often irrational as they can be, might seem strange in relation to such a methodical and structural tool for analysis such as the close reading. However, as Eugenie Brinkema explains, "The turning to affect in the humanities does not obliterate the problem of form and

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[39] Vermeulen & Van den Akker, "Notes on metamodernism", p. 2.
[40] James MacDowell, "Notes on Quirky" in *Movie: A Journal on Film Criticism.* Issue 1. (2010).
[41] Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons & Timotheus Vermeulen, *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect and Depth After Postmodernism* (2017: Rowman and Littlefield International, London & New York). p. 4-6.
[42] Van den Akker & Vermeulen, "Notes on metamodernism, p. 5.
[43] Konstantinou, *"Four Faces of Postirony".*

representation. Affect is not where reading is no longer needed".[44] She goes on to present this notion of the affect:

> *Affect, as turned to, Is said to: disrupt, interrupt, reinsert, demand, provoke, insist on, remind of, agitate for: the body, sensation, movement, flesh and skin and nerves, the visceral, stressing pains, feral frenzies, always rubbing against: what undoes, what unsettles, that thing I cannot name, what remains resistant, far away (haunting, and ever so beautiful); indefinable, it is said to be what cannot be written, what thaws the critical cold, messing all systems and subjects up.[45]*

Sincerity, like Brinkema describes affect, is equally indefinite when envisioned in the modernistic sense as an inwards quality. If it is indeed an outward projection of the genuine, unruly inner, it may be hard to capture in scripture. However, like Brinkema, I disagree with this conception, and the accompanying idea that it is hard or impossible to discern through form. As I will show through the thesis, a form based on postironic operational schemes makes reading of sincerity decidedly possible. The critical cold that Brinkema describes could quite possibly serve as an analogy for irony, as it appears in its postmodern form. I believe a close reading can aid spotting exactly where sincere engagement thaws the critical cold of irony, whether it be through the revelation of a distinct form of sincerity in *Inside*, or if it be a closing in some distance between the spectator and Kayla in *Eighth Grade*. In doing so, reading structures becomes necessary, as they present the results of the thawing, or rather the results of colliding ironies, which I believe to be sincere. If not sincerity, then at least something past ironic, as it invokes a genuineness that irony treats with distance. Through a close reading of these works I will exemplify ways in which they answer the research question, and thus contribute to the on-going inquiries into *how* a something beyond irony looks. The thesis will then not only present how Burnham's postirony operates, but it will also attempt to show the multiplicities in what lies beyond postirony.

To give a brief overview then, the first chapter will serve as a merging between contextualization and literary review. In it I will contextualize Burnham's work within a broader metamodern canon, which will further illustrate how irony might occur differently between the two. In the process I will also present the theories and terms on which shoulders this thesis stands on, and thus, offer insight into the literary background of its inquiry. This

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[44] Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects*, (2014, Durham & London: Duke University Press). p. xiv.
[45] Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects*, p. xii.

chapter will delve deeper into metamodernism, structures of feeling and postironic faces. The second chapter will serve as a pure exploration of the set-ups and frame-ups as I have presented the by way of the introduction. Here, I will analyze two segments from *Inside* I believe illustrates both set-ups and frame-ups, and in doing so, illustrate the differences they exhibit in their invocation of sincere sentiments. The first instance is a set-up that parodies a children's television show called "How the World Works". This segment features Burnham as the host of a children's television show, with a sock puppet as his opposite, attempting to figure out how the world works to dire results. The second segment is the already mentioned "White Woman's Instagram", and will serve as the example of a frame-up. This segment concerns the social media output of white women, how it perceived, and what lies beneath. The third chapter will build on the one before by way of turning purely to Burnham's play with frames. I theorize that Burnham, in applying recognizable frames from different digital screens, evokes a volatility that is essential in recognizing the unruly relationship between irony and sincerity. The final chapter will do the same as the second and third, but will entirely focus on *Eighth Grade*. I believe *Eighth Grade* deserves a chapter of its own due to the different nature of Burnham's approach to set-ups. Likewise, I believe *Inside* serves as the most obvious of the two for identifying, and establishing the structure of the schemes I aim to present, therefore it gets to chapters of its own, to comment on form and visuals. This fourth chapter however, will firstly explore Kayla's infatuation with her school-crush in order to identify how irony counters naïveté. Secondly, the chapter will do a visual reading of Kayla's vlog in order to illustrate her journey through irony, on the way to postirony.

Chapter 0,5

Operating Within a Structure of Feeling: Contextualizing the faces of postirony in Burnham's works

Thus far I have claimed that Burnham offers postironic approaches in his works that are hitherto unstudied. His ironic interplay bears forth a plethora of sincere responses that varies in nature. Therefore, it is not inaccurate to place Burnham within the ranks of postironist artists, people who see the challenging aspects of the ironic ethos of postmodernism and seek to overcome it.[46] Though usually spoken about as a literary phenomenon, Konstantinou states that postirony stretches beyond the world of literature, and into other forms of cultural production.[47] However, he outlines literary forms of postirony that I believe translates well over to the screen. These forms concern themselves with both structure and content, which also is applicable to audiovisual artforms, as I will explain. In this chapter I will contextualize and validate my choice of these particular works. Some basic reasons, before I continue, is due to recency, as both works came out within the last five years, making them highly relevant to the current cultural landscape. Furthermore, they are separated by Covid-pandemic which of course may influence the general attitudes of the works.

Eighth Grade came out pre-covid, and reflects a more positive postironic approach in that irony, while still a challenge, seems possible to transcend. As I will show Kayla overcomes some of her challenges, and the films ends up in a place of resistant optimism. This happens via a character study, a zoom in from the vast, tumultuous world to observe life at microlevel. The film, in the plainest description possible, tells of a week in the life of a socially awkward teenage girl. In a more profound view, it is about overcoming the indifference in the world, learning to rely on oneself and continue on handling the challenges that *will* come. In order to lift this to the forefront Burnham presents irony in order to counter the initial naïveté of Kayla, and like the postironists, present them as stepping stones rather than hurdles towards something beyond.[48] Kayla's struggles are made prevalent through a maintained zoom-in from the rest of the world, and our perspective on her as we join in on her journey produces a sympathetic outcome for us as well. I will further elaborate this in the

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[46] Konstantinou, "Four Faces of Postirony", p. 87-88.
[47] Konstantinou, "Four Faces of Postirony", p. 89.
[48] Konstantinou, *Cool Characters*, p. 96.

chapter concerning *Eighth Grade*, and will contextualize why its handling of irony qualifies the film as a metamodern expression, and furthermore, a vessel for postirony.

Inside, as a piece of Covid-art does not exhume the cautious optimism of *Eighth Grade.* It is a product of quarantine, and this is probably reflected in its frequent moments of desolation and dejection. However, I will not delve deeper into *Inside*'s quarantine-background any further than this. I thought it merely poignant to point out that as a response to a socio-historical context, *Inside* has gloomier circumstances to respond to than *Eighth Grade*. Nevertheless, as mentioned in the introduction, *Inside* habitually work to create more somber glimpses of sincerity. It achieves this by operating oppositely of *Eighth Grade* by instead of zooming in, it pulls back and reveals the worlds to a fuller extent. While *Eighth Grade* evokes larger themes through simple staging, *Inside* directly addresses them. We are not presented with fully fictional characters, but we follow Burnham himself, either in parody or in self-reference. This allows *Inside* to display ironic perspectives, as Burnham's balancing on the line between fiction and reality allows for comments on a wide range of assumed perspectives, but also his own anxieties surrounding them. As such, I will discuss *Inside*'s capabilities for addressing societal challenges while being frequently interrupted by genuine concerns below. As with *Eighth Grade* I will also describe how it fits in as a postironic response to the current structure of feeling. But first, I will qualify what the structure of feeling is, and explain how postirony emerges within it.

Orienting the Current Structure of Feeling and the Changing Face of Irony

Metamodernism is described by Van den Akker, Vermeulen and Gibbons as a structure of feeling,[49] or a cultural logic, which alludes to the term originally coined by cultural theorist Raymond Williams. He explains his usage of the term "feeling" as a way to transcend beyond terms like "world view" or "ideology", as he deems them too formal, but still a consideration nevertheless.[50] The emphasis on feeling is meant to suggest that the eponymous structure references not only the staunch, theoretical political and ideological aspects of the status quo, but also the lived and felt social experiences that it encompasses – expressions, their products, and how they comment on the current manifestation of the world. As such,

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[49] Van Den Akker, Gibbons & Vermeulen, *Metamodernism,* p. 4
[50] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature,* (1977, NY: Oxford University Press). p. 132.

Williams goes on to suggest that one could alternatively name it *a structure of experience*,[51] but admits it to be a difficult term, as he emphasizes that the past tense defeats the purpose of dealing with the here-and-now. As for *structure*, Williams explains it as "a set, with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension".[52] Thus, the structure of feeling is meant to encompass a complex set of cultural and social experiences, interpretations and expressions within a current moment in time.

Metamodernism, as a structure of feeling, references the current, the experience of the right here, right now. It should be mentioned that Williams admits it to be difficult to identify such structures while currently inhabiting them, leaving them more easily distinguishable when examined at a later stage in history. Frederic Jameson, however, applied the term *cognitive mapping* as a way for individuals to situate themselves within a larger socio-historical context, adopting Kevin Lynch's own variation of the term in relation to mental mappings of cities.[53] Whereas different cities call for different parameters to navigation, so too does structures of feeling. In Oslo you can navigate the cityscape by knowledge of its river, the districts, landmarks and parks – the elements that are distinct to the city. You cannot navigate the cityscape of Bergen the same way as there is no opera house by the bay, instead, you can use the mountains that encapsulate the city, which is unique to Bergen, to situate yourself. Like this, argues Jameson, one can also situate oneself within socio-historical contexts, or structures of feelings, in the same way. Some of its importance lies in the remedial effect such mapping of the here and now offers to subjective disorientation, both socially and spatially.[54] Another important aspect of cognitive mapping is that it helps in recognizing markers and reference points of which to navigate from within said structure. As such, one can recognize a metamodern structure of feeling by its distinctiveness in relation to the postmodern one.

It does help that the metamodern project has arguably been going on for a while, allowing for a somewhat decent mapping of the contemporary cultural field. Van den Akker and Vermeulen's seminal paper "Notes on Metamodernism"[55] was published over ten years

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[51] Williams, *Marxism and Literature,* p. 132.
[52] Williams, *Marxism and Literature,* p. 132.
[53] Frederic Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Ed. Cary Nelson & Lawrence Grossberg), (1988, Illinois: University of Illinois Press). p. 353.
[54] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (1991, US: Duke University Press). p. 54.
[55] Vermeulen & Van Den Akker, "Notes on metamodernism".

ago, and David Foster Wallace's call to arms against postmodern irony "E Unibus Pluram"[56] was published even earlier, roughly thirty years ago at the date of writing. As such, there are concrete characteristics, tendencies and sensibilities that are already recognized, as well as concepts that can be developed further. Among these are the re-emergence of affect in within the contemporary cultural logic. Van den Akker and Vermeulen, in their original text on metamodernism, describes it as an emerging structure of feeling, characterized by a constant oscillation between modern commitment, and postmodern detachment, considering it a response to the latter as its own structure of feeling.[57] Postmodernism as a structure of feeling is mentioned by Jameson, which describes it as such in his seminal work from 1991, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.*[58] This structure of feeling deals with the period of late capitalism and its effects on cultural life. Among these are depthlessness, affectlessness, and the effacement between high culture and mass-produced culture,[59] but also an apparent all-encompassing and ever-present irony.[60] Metamodernism, emerging at an even later stage in capitalism, seeks to respond to these elements of postmodernism, in an attempt to alter the moniker "the end of history" to "the *bend* of history", signaling a careful optimism.

The apparent bend of history does not signal the end of all postmodern tendencies, but rather the changing of some of them.[61] The changing of a cultural mindset from one often described as apathetic to something more engaged is of importance to the notion. Moreover, the defiance of history's end, as proclaimed by Francis Fukuyama moments before the fall of the Soviet Union,[62] is central to it. History did not in fact end with the "victory" of liberal democracy, instead it seems to be bending. Such a motion implies continuance, but also a sense of alteration, as bending implies a change of direction. As such, the metamodern emerges from the grounds of postmodernism, adopting some of its tendencies, rejecting others and reacting to some. As mentioned above, discerning the contemporary structure of

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[56] David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" in *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13:2 (Summer, 1993): 151-194.

[57] Vermeulen & Van Den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism", p. 2.

[58] Jameson, *Postmodernism,* p. XIV.

[59] Jameson, *Postmodernism,* p. 6 & 10 respectively.

[60] Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram", 183-184.

[61] Vermeulen & Van Den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism", p. 4.

[62] Robin van den Akker & Timotheus Vermeulen, "Periodising the 2000s, or, the Emergence of Metamodernism" in *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect and Depth After Postmodernism* (Ed. Robin van Den Akker, Alison Gibbons & Timotheus Vermeulen), (2017, London & New York: Rowman and Littlefield International). p. 1-2.

feeling can be difficult, as hindsight supposedly is 20/20 and lends a better vision to the distinctions and tendencies of earlier periods. However, by looking to the arts, past and present, one can more easily pick up on dominant tendencies to the contemporary fields. This thesis will concern itself with the audiovisual arts, more specifically movies, as the works of Bo Burnham presents peculiar ways in which metamodern tendencies and sentiments rears its head. More specifically, these tendencies concern ironic negation, their unfolding in structure, and the subsequent production of something beyond it. While Burnham keeps up an astute sense of postmodern, apathetic irony in his work, he also imbues them with cautious optimism and depth.

The presence of optimism does not erase the irony of postmodernism, but instead engages with it, informs it, and incorporates it. As such, alleged metamodern modes of expression is not without postmodern irony, but seeks to overcome the detachment associated with it. This issue is especially pressing since postmodernism has elevated irony to become our environment,[63] a cultural logic of suspicion and snark. Furthermore, it has become ingrained into popular culture as the hallmark of "cool". Lee Konstantinou explains that irony "is the name for a credibility-building rhetorical appeal",[64] as well as a possible answer to rescue critical thought, and with it, human autonomy in the face of totalitarian, ruthless sincerity.[65] In short, irony became the norm of "cool" as it affords aloof separation and distance, without consideration for potential social outcomes, such as the possibility that distance evolves into apathy. Amongst other things, this has come to be a key point of attention in metamodern studies, namely the prevalence of irony in cultural expressions. However, it is noted that irony still is common in metamodern expressions as well, as such, an important point inquiry becomes *how* metamodern irony differentiates from the postmodern conception of it. A common feature is the tendency to apply irony as means to overcome another irony, in a way weaponizing irony to get rid of the perceivably problematic aspects of another. This mode of within metamodernism is what often is referred to as postirony.[66] Postironists do not seek to rid the contemporary cultural landscape of irony, but rather rid irony of its problematic aspects while maintaining its capability for critical insight.[67] As such, postironic expressions produce a whole other sense of irony than the postmodern one, an attempt to move past it. Postirony is often mixed up, or coupled with a

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[63] Lee Konstantinou, *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction,* (2016, USA: Harvard University Press), p. 6.
[64] Konstantinou, *Cool Characters,* p. 20.
[65] Konstantinou, *Cool Characters,* p. 29.
[66] Konstantinou, *Cool Characters,* p. 8.
[67] Konstantinou, *"Four Faces of Postirony"*, p. 88.

similar term, *new sincerity*. However, Konstantinou notes that new sincerity, despite grounding itself in irony like postirony does, approaches sincerity differently, as it often seems to treat irony and sincerity as opposites, something he disagrees with, stating that it seems arbitrary that sincerity should be the solution if irony is the problem. [68] The idea is that one cannot know with certainty what lies beyond irony, what its negation produces. This uncertainty is what I believe Burnham illustrates through the multitudes of sincere engagements produced in his works. The ambiguous destination that lies beyond irony might be a sincere one, but its nature is difficult to pin down, as the outcome of ironic negation allows for varying results. To develop postirony further, Konstantinou maps out four faces, two of which I argue appears within Burnham's oeuvre. These are *the postironic bildungsroman* as represented through *Eighth Grade* and *the credulous metafiction* as exhibited through *Inside*. [69] Both these modes are illustrative of how affect is manifest in contemporary cultural expressions. Also, they both demonstrates the incorporation of irony, only with different resolves. In what follows, I will contextualize *Eighth Grade* and *Inside* as postironic faces in order to solidify my claim of postironic workings within them.

Eighth Grade: An audiovisual bildungsroman

Kayla's journey through her last week as an eighth grader bears all the features of Konstantinou's notion of a postironic bildungsroman. A bildungsroman, in origin, deals with the education and evolution of a protagonist from adolescence to adulthood, usually ending on a bright note. [70] Konstantinou's reading of Rachel Kushner's *The Flamethrowers*[71] and Jonathan Lethem's *Dissident Gardens*[72] in *Cool Characters* illustrates examples of postironic bildungsromans through stories focusing on the protagonist's journey from a naïve outset, through ironic cynicism, to a postironic state, in regard to their respective settings. Similarly, Kayla, at the beginning of *Eighth Grade*, is filled with wide-eyed optimism, indexical of her adolescent naïveté. She runs a series of vlogs, promoting self-confidence and giving tutorials on how to conduct oneself socially. She envisions a thriving social life, and that she knows

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[68] Konstantinou, *Cool Characters,* p. 38.

[69] Lee Konstantinou, *"Four Faces of Postirony"*, p. 95.

[70] Chris Baldick, "Bildungsroman", In *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, (2015, UK: Oxford University Press). https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198715443.001.0001/acref-9780198715443-e-129

[71] Rachel Kushner, *The Flamethrowers*, (2013, NY: Scribner).

[72] Jonathan Lethem, *Dissident Gardens,* (2013, NY: Doubleday).

how to achieve it. But alas, knowledge does not equal execution. Kayla struggles in her social arenas, appearing angsty and quiet, and every attempt at overcoming her social challenges results in ironic turns. Burnham, as director and writer, faces Kayla with several challenges all-too familiar to others who have already lived through this somewhat difficult, formative time. She attempts at making friends with the popular girls, only to be met with derisive apathy; she romanticizes the school heartthrob, but again, she is dogged by dismissive indifference; and she also attempts at fast-forwarding into maturity by making older, high school friends, but this ends in a rather disheartening encounter with the plights of adult women.

Nonetheless, Kayla mostly keeps up her fervor. The only exception being an attempt at being pressured into mature acts by an older boy, at which point she experiences a breakdown, and spends some time as a shell of the girl she started out as. She subsequently retires her vlog-channel and burns a time capsule containing message from herself at the start of eighth grade, which is recorded with the same naive enthusiasm she started the film out with. The postironic turn for Kayla occurs in the abovementioned scene with her father, which Kayla has been keeping at distance for the entirety of the film. While watching the time capsule burn, she exposes her insecurities to him, telling him that the box contains her "hopes and dreams"[73], and asking him whether she makes him sad too. To this her father makes it abundantly clear how easy it is to love her, and how easy it is to be proud of her, in spite of what she might think herself. He also tells her of his own struggles as a single father, which he has overcome through the staunch belief in that Kayla would be fine. This act of narrative-driven irony negates the ironic distance Kayla has kept between herself and her father during the movie. It is an under-your-nose ironic turn that ends in a place of sincere connection and comfort. Her father, which she shrugs off most of the time, provides her with the assurance and recognition she has spent the entire film attempting to achieve elsewhere. The scene occurs as a peak of profundity, rising above the detachment and cynicism Kayla has faced throughout the film. Her father's caring words, reassuring her that he is confident in that she will be fine, leads her to embrace him, and as consequently embracing her own qualities, and reject the indifference of the world around her.

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[73] Burnham, *Eighth Grade,* 1:17:27.

After the emotional climax Kayla reaches beyond irony, which is shown by her confronting the popular girls at school. She berates them for ignoring her attempts at friendship and proclaiming that they would appreciate her approaches and gifts if they were not so concerned with being cool all the time, while reprimanding them for being mean in their pursuit of said "cool". This particular scene shows Kayla confronting the postmodern notion of coolness, referred to in *Cool Characters*,[74] in that she berates its disagreeable attitude towards earnest expressions, and labels it as mean. In addition to this, she is shown having dinner with the weird boy (by eighth grader logic) that she met earlier on, Gabe. During the dinner, Kayla is more comfortable in leaning into her eccentricities, bonding with Gabe over *Rick and Morty* (2013-present), and being acknowledged for her vlogs. The whole film ends on her newly recorded time capsule for herself in high school. Here she assures her future self that potential hardships will not derail her and that it is "whatever",[75] stressing that she is moving forward, and will continue to do so, expressing something akin to the pragmatic optimism theorized upon by metamodern thinkers.

Eighth Grade as a postironic bildungsroman is thus backed up in Kayla's journey from adolescent optimism to another informed and aware optimism. Towards the end of the film, she is shown to be aware of the faults that lie with the concept of the postmodern cool, even going so far as to openly criticize the apparent aloofness it encourages, with the popular girls serving as its personification. As Konstantinou notes in arguing for Barrack Obama's memoir[76] as a postironic bildungsroman, for Obama to transform into a responsible adult

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[74] Konstantinou, *Cool Characters*, p. 35.
[75] Burnham, *Eighth Grade*, 1:28:46.
[76] Barack Obama, *Dreams of My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance,* (1995, NY: Times Books).

requires him to "grow beyond self-absorption, anger, and cynicism of youth", and move towards sincerity and passionate involvement.[77] Konstantinou further goes on to explain "To move from corrosive irony to reconstituted sincerity is not, for Obama, simply to return to one's former preironic innocence, but rather to harness one's many different voices in a new way, toward new personal and collective goals".[78] Like Obama, Kayla also undergoes such a transcendence during the film. At the end she is not merely returning to her adolescent optimism, but using her newfound experience to reinforce a sense of sincere resilience. Her initial recording to herself in middle school does not include a moral push in case of tribulations, but her new one does, showing that she has harnessed her experiences and are using them to move on. Thus, Kayla displays the wear-and-tear of a protagonist that has dealt with the hardships of corrosive irony, making her the hero of Bo Burnham's very own postironic bildungsroman.

Inside: Bo Burnham's self-probing

Inside is at times perplexing and problematic to pin down. Part comedy special, part social critique, and part self-probing, making the special alternate constantly between the personal and the general, often operating adjacent to metonymic, never fixed in a singular direction, sort of like a weathercock. *Inside* displays considerable reflexivity from Burnham, allowing him to assess his own vices and virtues through the narrative (or lack thereof). This reflexivity, coupled up with the constructed nature of the special, makes it bear resemblance to a postmodern *metafictional* work. These are self-referential, and self-aware works, usually novels that "imitate the form of the novel, by an author that imitates the role of the author".[79] It also "self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality".[80] As such, *Inside* makes itself out to be a comedy special with distinct comedy bits, but it refrains from featuring any conventional stand-up features such as "a single performer standing in front of an audience,

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[77] Lee Konstantinou, "Barack Obama's Postironic Bildungsroman" in *Barrack Obama's Literary Legacy: Readings of Dreams of My Father* (Ed. Richard Purcell & Henry Veggian)*,* (2016, UK: Palgrave Macmillan), p. 128.
[78] Konstantinou, "Barack Obama's Postironic Bildungsroman", p. 128.
[79] John N. Duvall, "Introduction: A Story of the Stories of American Fiction after 1945.", in *The Cambridge Companion to American Fiction after 1945* (Ed. John N. Duvall). pp. 1–12. (2011, Cambridge: Cambridge University). p. 2.
[80] Fanny Geuzaine, ""And That's Immortality": Metafiction and the Importance of Contexts and Co-texts in Neil Gaiman's Short Stories", in *Journal of the Short Story in English* no. 71 (Autumn 2018): 5.

talking to them with the specific intention of making them laugh",[81] which his other specials did. Instead, *Inside* features several knowing pointers towards itself as a (somewhat unconventional) stand-up special, such as the entire opening sequence where Burnham shrewdly sings about delivering his fans, or the audience in general, new content in the shape of the eponymous special, all while alluding to his hiatus due to severe personal issues ("Content").[82] This is then followed by another segment, where he sings and acts out the justification for making another comedy special, while making a point of its seeming triviality in lieu of the dire state of the world ("Comedy").[83]

Figure 3: Inside pondering its own constructedness

Such "friendly fire", where Burnham references the special via the special, often sardonically, occurs throughout. Apparent self-awareness, coupled up with Burnham's tendency to put himself under the loop, may be indexical to what Greg Dember terms *hyper-self-reflexivity*.[84] Dember distinguishes hyper-self-reflexivity from self-reflexivity in that the former is distinctly metamodern, whereas the latter is often a tendency within postmodern literature. Self-reflexivity within postmodern fiction will often work to indicate boundaries

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[81] Oliver Double, *Getting the Joke: The Inner Workings of Stand-Up Comedy*, (2014, London: Bloomsbury), p. 4.
[82] Bo Burnham, "Content" in *Inside*, 0:0:45.
[83] Bo Burnham, "Comedy" in *Inside*, 0:04:04.
[84] Greg Dember, "After Postmodernism: Eleven Metamodern Methods in the Arts", *Medium*. April 17, 2018. https://medium.com/what-is-metamodern/after-postmodernism-eleven-metamodern-methods-in-the-arts-767f7b646cae

such as the constructed nature of the work, or that the beliefs and values communicated through the work is that of an author, and therefore calling attention to that the piece of work is, in fact, merely a piece of work. Hyper-self-reflexivity however, while also emphasizing the presence of an author, correspondingly emphasizes the presence of a reader, and thus the sharing of lived and felt experience between the two, introducing belief into the equation. Wallace, in his metafictious endeavors, would not ask the reader to be aware of the work's fictiveness, but rather in the honesty of the author.[85] Burnham somewhat does the same when he ponders the motif and social value of his own comedy, he wrestles with an honest dissonance within himself in front of our eyes, expressed through a ridiculously self-indulgent song. As such, the "self" is also highlighted through making the special not only a piece of work, but a work reflecting the his inner, lived experiences. In this regard, there is a recognition of the human within the work, and not just constructedness of the work itself. *Inside*'s title does not only reference the fact that he spends the entire special in his tiny guest house, it also invites us inside his head. At one point during "Comedy" Burnham openly considers his status as a white, American male while pondering whether he "should just shut the fuck up?", before doing so, and eventually exclaiming that he is bored before resuming the song.[86] I this is an example of Burnham operating with hyper-self-reflexivity. He openly addresses a problematic aspect behind his craft, and society in general, before ironically setting it aside to further develop the narrative of the segment.

So, when Burnham places himself in the midst of *Inside* as semi-fictional self, he communicates his own emotions and experience, inviting the audience to interpret or partake in recognizing the feelings that the special is trying to convey. He makes no attempt at hiding his status as the author in segments such as "Comedy", where he makes it a central feature. Throughout the segment he portrays himself planning out jokes and scribbling down ideas, alluding to the creation of the special's material, all while contemplating about the impact of his comedy. What makes this explicitly hyper-self-reflexive is that while he jests at creating the very special you are watching, that pokes fun at several problematic aspects surrounding its humor and very existence, he also attempts at engaging with the spectator. He does so emphatically, through conveying felt experience in expressions, enabling the audience to recognize more than just the constructedness of the work, but also the emotions of the author behind it. Therefore, acutely self-aware questions such as "should I be joking at a time like

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[85] Konstantinou, *Cool Characters*, p. 178-179.
[86] Burnham, "Comedy", *Inside*.

this?"[87] serves to invite the audience into the inner workings of the author, and potentially having them share in the sincere sentiments.

Burnham's hyper-self-reflexivity, along with *Inside*'s metafictional attributes, makes fertile ground for claiming it as a piece of credulous metafiction. According to Konstantinou, credulous metafiction is a response to the postmodern metafiction, in that "it uses metafiction not to cultivate incredulity or irony but rather to foster faith, conviction, immersion and emotional connection".[88] Credulous metafiction slots in along with the postironic bildungsroman as one of Konstantinou's four faces of postirony, in that it attempts to reject postmodern content through postmodern forms. This rejection, as Vermeulen notes, often leads to a return to pre-postmodern values and commitments.[89] In *Inside*, as piece of credulous metafiction, Burnham uses self-referentiality, along with quasi-self-biographic depiction of himself in order to negate the cynical features that often accompanies postmodern expression, and instead attempts to establish sincere recognition of the themes he tries to convey.

"Comedy" again serves as a fine example of the credulously metafictional qualities of *Inside*. As already touched upon, the bit is highly metafictional as it depicts the questionable motivations and reasons behind the comedy special through visuals and jokes that pokes fun at himself and special alike. However, while initially using metafictional self-referentiality as a way to lampoon himself and contemporaries alike, he also uses it to bare his self-doubt surrounding his own contributions to the world through comedy, and thus inviting the spectator to recognize the uncertainty behind the work. Additionally, it also leaves him emotionally vulnerable as well, adding a sense of instability, as we can recognize that the mind behind what we are watching is obviously struggling with *something*. The hyper-self-reflexive awareness of a spectator, and the knowingness of shared lived and felt experience makes it possible for Burnham to convey the sincere sentiments behind the comedy. In a way, "Comedy" is an early example of *Inside* probing itself as a piece of work, by ironically jesting about the shallow comedy it produces, and similarly conveying anxiousness about the real threat of accordingly being confined to waist-high waters, with no perceivable depth because of it. Correspondingly, Burnham, as the author, grapples with whether he is able to meaningfully contribute to a world which is riddled with insurmountable heaps of issues.

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[87] Burnham, "Comedy", *Inside*.
[88] Konstantinou, *"Four Faces of Postirony",* p. 93.
[89] Timotheus Vermeulen, "Wallace After Postmodernism (Again): Metamodernism, Tone, Tennis", in *English Literature* vol. 8 (December 2021): 111. DOI: **http://doi.org/10.30687/EL/2420-823X/2021/08/006**

Rather than letting "Comedy" slip into a self-indulged, reductively ironic number, Burnham makes the risk of this happening recognizable. In doing so, it becomes an instance of *Inside* commenting on its own status as a piece of work, while simultaneously yearning for contributing something *more* than being a mere vessel of laughs. Adding a distinct sense of instability, riddled with ironic tussles that in almost every segment ends in a display of sincere sentiments. Thus, the special, in its indecisive nature, leaves its mark on the spectator through a volatile showing of thoughts.

At the end of *Inside,* during the closing number fittingly named "Goodbye",[90] Burnham returns to some lines from the last verse of "Comedy". These lines echoes lines about not panicking when waking up in a house that is full of smoke, but instead calling him to provide a joke, as that would be a remedy for the misfortune. In this instance however, Burnham's house is burning, and *he* is the one urged to telephone for a joke. Additionally, he ponders about being told the same if he were to seep into irrelevance and poverty, replying "oh shit, you're really joking at a time like this?".[91] Here *Inside* comes full circle, and Burnham as the creator struggles with the futility of comedy in the face of looming tragedy, making the special reach a point of sincerity through postmodern, metafictional self-referentiality. Thus, *Inside,* taken as a credulous metafiction, relies on the application of ironic devices to conjure moments of genuine emotion, being acutely aware of its assembled nature, with sincere reflexivity.

Burnham's Postironic Practice and the Following Chapters

This chapter has attempted to contextualize Burnham within the metamodern canon, as well as show exactly *how* he operates within them. The presence of two distinct modes of postirony is also there to show that he does not only operate one way, but several. *Eighth Grade* zooms in on Kayla to observe her hardships with irony, creating a sympathetic relationship between viewer and character along the way, *Inside,* on the contrary, handles irony in a more neurotic manner, struggling with its own relationship to it. Both instances present some sort of volatility, and both instances present schemes in which they operate through. *Eighth Grade* apply different ironic maneuvers to soothe Kayla's overt enthusiasm, while *Inside* applies sincere maneuvers to problematize the ironic attitudes of both itself, and

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[90] Bo Burnham, "Goodbye" in *Inside*, 1:19:51.
[91] Bo Burnham, "Goodbye", *Inside.*

the spectator. However, while *Eighth Grade* works to overcome instability, *Inside* wallows in it, never seeming to be able to land at anything.

The following chapters will focus on the works individually, starting off with the distinct set-ups and functions in *Inside*, before moving on to how the frames support and communicates the volatility of the special. *Eighth Grade* gets a chapter of its own in an attempt to show Burnham's more optimistically oriented leanings. The chapter will deal with how Burnham guides and shapes the character of Kayla from her naïve outset to a matured, postironic state. In doing so I will look at how Kayla's relationship with her crush exemplifies the ironic adversity she faces, before moving onto the visual representation of her growth and our relationship with her.

Chapter 1

"Oh Shit, Are You Really Joking at a Time Like This?": The set-ups of Bo Burnham

A notable recurrence in Bo Burnham's oeuvre is the use of set-ups, mostly for jokes, but also for points in general. Daniel R. Smith likens stand-up comedy with jazz, by the way both hits notes that disrupt.[92] These notes "adhere to rhythm but appear to disregard form"[93], in the same manner, the set-up of the stand-up comedian follows a certain rhythm only to be met with a disrupting note, which may be regarded as the set-up's punchline. While setting up a joke before delivering the punchline is hardly groundbreaking as far as comedians go, the way Burnham does it is particularly trenchant. He frequently provides a cynical set-up, often drenched in communicative irony,[94] making the audience align themselves with a typically sardonic point of view. However, instead of having the joke peak at a sarcastic zenith, Burnham will take a sharp turn and plunge into an unexpected pool of sincerity. This does two things: (1) the audience will be snapped out of the seemingly omnipresent shroud of irony and made to feel somewhat ashamed of their initial disregard for complexity, and (2) the punchline will arrive at sincere point, thereby negating the apparent irony in the set-up. As such, the sincere point, interpreted through Smith's jazz-simile, represents the disruptive note, that disregard the ironic form of the initial set-up. This is a common way for Burnham to operate postironically. This chapter will conduct close-readings of two segments from *Inside*, one in order to capture the essence of the set-up, and another one to illustrate the frame-up, and how these schemes differ.

An early example of a set-up is evident in his stand-up special on Netflix from 2013, *what.*[95] In a segment of the special he initiates a song which he titles "From God's Perspective" which tackles religious rules and practices from the perspective of the titular entity. The first couple of verses and the chorus features him sarcastically putting down religious dogma and ideas surrounding themes such as eating pork (for some) and homosexuality, stating how none of the people that possess these beliefs are going to heaven.

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[92] Daniel R. Smith, *Comedy and critique: Stand-up comedy and the professional ethos of laughter*, p. 14.

[93] Smith, *Comedy and critique,* p. 14.

[94] MacDowell, *Irony in Film.*

[95] Bo Burnham, *what.*, (2013, US: Netflix).
https://www.netflix.com/watch/70295560?trackId=200256543&tctx=0%2C1%2C44af52a6-e54d-4236-8a17-21b67137d772-739799394%2Cunknown%2Cunknown%2C%2C%2C%2C%2CVideo%3A70295560%2CdetailsPagePlayButton

Towards the last verse, however, he slows down the song before shedding the caustic overtones in a lament to how religious beliefs might lead its followers into taking life on Earth for granted. The song culminates with a somber question about whether God believes in us anymore, ending the song on a contemplative note. This is quite exemplary of how Burnham typically sets up his gags, and usually, after a fair bit of mockery, his more extensive bits end on a sincere note. Thus, the initial, cold irony has seemingly withdrawn.

However, having the jokes end up in a moment of sincerity is not necessarily vanquishing irony. For something to be considered postironic, irony will have to be a contributing factor to the negation. The set-up provides this irony, the sardonic build-up towards earnestness is an ironic move in itself. Not only does it undermine the initial train of thoughts, but it also forces the audience to take a long, hard look at themselves. The set-up features a pullback and reveal-function as described by Vermeulen and Whitfield, where Burnham encourages the spectator to indulge in one situation, only to place them in a different one.[96] The pullback refers to the literal pulling back of the camera to reveal something hitherto unseen, expanding the view of the world. While the camera work and frames in *Inside* performs similarly to this, as I will expand on in the next chapter, the set-up mostly metaphorically pulls back the camera, revealing parts of the issue at hand hitherto ignored. The reveal then, is key to the set-up, as it opens up the world and pivots the initial ironic attitude towards genuine contemplation. This does not necessarily erase said attitude, but rather encourages the spectator to reassess it. Burnham ironically negates the initial ironic outlook in order to reveal genuine concerns and anxieties. To do so, Burnham extends an attitude presented via ironic pretense to the audience, only to sweep the rug from under them later on, creating an abrupt change in tone. In a way, some of his set-ups are more akin to what I will refer to as frame-ups, in the sense that they do not simply structure a joke, they also somewhat incriminate the audience while doing so. While a set-up of a joke usually hinges on making someone laugh, Burnham's content often intends to take the audience to task for their ridicule. He is making them "meet themselves in the doorway", as we say in Norwegian, which is a common expression for the uncomfortable sensation of having to deal with one's own faultiness. In this Burnham achieves a sort of irony that ends up at the periphery of irony, but simultaneously at the border of sincerity, tipping back and forth, like a *seesaw,* if you will.[97]

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[96] Vermeulen & Whitfield, "Arrested Developments", p. 104.
[97] MacDowell, "Wes Anderson, tone, and the quirky sensibility", p. 17-18.

My conception of the frame-up combines the regular dictionary definition of frame-up with Erving Goffman's perception of *frameworks*. The Cambridge dictionary provides a definition that lies close to that which will be examined here: "a situation in which someone is made to seem guilty of a crime although they have not committed it".[98] This sense of senseless guilt is key to Burnham's incorporation of sincerity in his material, as it will often occur confrontationally, as if suddenly turning the stage light unto the audience. Goffman's conceptions of frameworks are structuring units, working to organize a near-endless number of experiences and occurrences.[99] He further divides them into *natural* and *social* frameworks, in which the latter is of relevance to Burnham, as it "provide background understanding for events that incorporate the will, aim, and controlling effort of an intelligence, a live agency".[100] This live agency, Goffman asserts, can be coaxed and flattered as social frameworks works as "guided doings", on which an individual opens themselves up to judgement.[101] As such, frameworks can be broken, as they bring with them certain normative expectations which the individual can get engrossed in, rendering them partly unaware of their emotional and cognitive drifts.[102] Burnham's framework is arguably that of comedy, both stand-up and in general, so the other individuals within this framework will experience engrossment in this framework of laughter, ridicule and encouraged cynicism. This is where Burnham's frame-ups combine the dictionary definition of frame-up and the notion of frameworks: by executing the former and shattering the latter. The "crimes" of the audience is of no severe consequence other than letting their moral compass dwindle through a dubious lack of self-awareness within their engrossment in the material. However, Burnham's own deviation from the norms of comedy snaps the spectator out of it as well, shattering the framework in the process. Therefore, the frame-up I will refer to is one that acts as the harbinger of self-awareness to a framework that removes it, and thus, introducing sincerity into a framework filled to the brim in irony.

As a comedian, Burnham's set-ups usually serve a comedic purpose, however, as he has ventured beyond stand-up comedy, the same set-up has been used differently. Burnham's work towards the end of the last decade has moved away from stand-up, with comedy often

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[98] *Cambridge Dictionary*, "Frame-up", accessed 8. May, 2023. URL:
https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/frame-up
[99] Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, (1986, New York: Northeastern University Press). p. 21.
[100] Goffman, *Frame Analysis*, p. 22.
[101] Goffman, *Frame Analysis*, p. 22.
[102] Goffman, *Frame Analysis*, p. 346.

yielding to more profound themes. Both the set-ups and frame-ups have, as I have presented them, tend to involve a sincere climax. However, through the addition of *Eighth Grade* to the analysis, I will also attempt display how the set-ups may also vary in execution. While set-ups are a significant part of *Eighth Grade*, as it is in *Inside*, they are markedly different in that they usually start off sincere. As such, they serve as examples of how Burnham upholds an equal-opportunity oscillation, where the emphasis is not necessarily in holding sincerity as a means to end irony, but for them to cancel out or highlight each other's difficult aspects. What if Kayla in *Eighth Grade* went unchallenged in her wide-eyed sense of sincerity? There would be no personal growth, and no self-awareness. What if you were not taken to task for ridiculing other exclusively based on their social media presence? Again, there would be no personal growth, and no self-reflection. In this chapter, I will address these questions by analyzing the set-ups and frame-ups for both jokes and other purposes within *Eight Grade* and *Inside*, hoping to demonstrate how Burnham's metamodern workings relates to irony, sincerity, and the spectator.

Sock Puppets, Doom & Gloom

Inside unfolds like a map of Burnham's psyche, as well as a critique of the world he inhabits. While being loosely based on himself, like a piece of credulous metafiction,[103] imbued with hyper-self-reflexivity.[104] It also relates him to the cultural snapshot he finds himself in. Over the course of one and a half hour he covers a lot of ground; he ponders the place of comedy in an increasingly messed up world, several elements of digital culture, isolation (due to the pandemic, under which the special was made), mental health, age, and largely how the world works, to name a few. In general, the special, whatever it sets out to be, can be considered to respond to a "clusterfuck of world historical-proportions".[105] Some writers would suggest metamodern expressions emerge from current conundrums as mentioned above, because postmodern sensibilities are left more adequate to a bygone state of the world.[106] Still, this does not mean that a postmodern expressive approach would not still be viable as means to dealing with current crises, it would however approach it with irony, pastiche and

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[103] Konstantinou, "Four Faces of Postirony".

[104] Dember, "After Postmodernism: Eleven metamodern methods in the arts".

[105] Van Den Akker, Gibbons & Vermeulen, *Metamodernism,* p. 17.

[106] Drayton, "Should I be joking at a time like this?", *Medium,* August 2, 2021. https://medium.com/what-is-metamodern/bo-burnhams-inside-as-a-metamodern-response-to-crisis-1cef26dfe8ae

intertextuality.[107] The metamodern would also apply these approaches, but to overcome detachment in search for profundity, while not being quite able to locate it. As such, *Inside* may be Burnham's attempt to make sense of it all through a metamodern comedic approach, which is equally charged with irony as it is sincere. *Inside* tackles this through several segments which all, to a certain degree, adheres to Burnham's distinct metamodern approaches, and most of them ends up on a contemplative note. A fine example is the aforementioned segment called "How the World Works", which predictably is about how the world works.[108] In this sketch Burnham acts as a host of a children's television show, singing guilelessly about how the world works. This is to be taken as a spoof on contemporary children's television, with Burnham's character keeping a gleeful and positive exterior while singing a highly simplified, and easy-to-follow song of the workings of the world.

The first verse of the song has him covering how the world works through cooperation, exemplifying this through matters such as the pollination of flowers and portraying the world as a place where everyone's needs are somehow met. "The secret is: the world can only work if everyone works together"[109] he sings, while maintaining a giddy, endearing eye-contact with the audience. This signals the very beginning of the set-up in a disarming and almost *too* pleasant delivery, albeit largely vacant of any laugh-out-loud humor, except for maybe Burnham's loony demeanor. Regardless, it sets up the premises for the segment, and the overtly docile presentation may serve to raise some suspicions towards the simplified handling of a rather weighty theme. People are largely left out of the first verse, he rather focuses on the global fauna such as "the biggest elephant, the littlest fly, the gophers underground, the birds in the sky. And every single cricket, every fish in the sea, gives what they can, and gets what they need".[110] This simplifies how the world works, and suspiciously avoids addressing the role of people in the grand scheme of it all. The presentation of the world is minuscule, and does not allow any thoughts to wander outside of the fauna and flora which allegedly exists in harmony. The absence of human activity in Burnham's description evokes the cleanliness of a children's book, and avoids recognition of the many activities we are currently engaged in that is actively counter-productive to the world as he describes it. Via ironic pretense, the lack of manmade troubles looms large yet remains conspicuously ignored, as the host refuses to acknowledge it in order to keep up a

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107 Rustad & Schwind, "The Joke That Wasn't Funny Anymore", p. 134.
108 Burnham, "How the World Works" in *Inside,* 00:14:04.
109 Burnham, "How the World Works", *Inside*.
110 Burnham, "How the World Works", *Inside*.

picture-perfect rendition of the world. The pullback is yet to set in, and the flawed pretense of the TV-show still lingers.

Whatever suspicions that are raised by the first verse is largely answered during the song's second verse, where the audience is introduced to a new character, the sock-puppet *Socko*. Socko, devoid of any Kermit-like charm, is an opposite to Burnham's PG-performance from the get-go and adds another level of absurdity to the already zany premise. Not only is the puppet speaking freely, without any mimicry from Burnham, he also responds to questions of his previous whereabouts by claiming that without Burnham's hand, he is stuck in "a frightening liminal state between states of being".[111] In this part of the set-up, there is an observable power-balance, evident through Burnham seemingly being in control of the puppets very state of existence, which will be further explored during the segment's peak. After the brief introduction, Burnham convinces the puppet to share in his wisdom of how the world works, much to Socko's reluctance, resulting in a verse that starkly contrasts Burnham's own. Thus begins the pullback towards the set-ups sincere break, as Socko immediately begins to reveal the world.

Figure 4: Burnham and Socko

Socko, in short, unleashes a verse explaining how the world is built with "blood, genocide and exploitation",[112] while painting a decidedly bleak picture of the workings of the world. It is evident through his verse that Socko is not meant to represent a more realistic point of view than Burnham's. Lines such as "the global network of capital essentially

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[111] Burnham, "How the World Works", *Inside.*
[112] Burnham, "How the World Works", *Inside.*

functions to separate the workers from the means of production", immediately followed by "and the FBI killed Martin Luther King"[113] showcase Socko's extremist leanings, here in the form of Marxist remarks on capitalism, and firm belief in conspiracy theories. Socko displays an almost binary opposition to Burnham's idyllic representation of the world, with a near fatalistic representation of his own, which places people back in the mix, with awful results. Thus, Socko's view of the world becomes equally faulty, his highly contrasting verse is largely rooted in a logic that resembles that of a *doomer*, [114] an unrealistically bleak portrait of the world. While the initial verse by the host is flawed in that the picture it paints is too simple, Socko's verse is flawed in that it paints a picture too depraved for nuance, both represents extremes on opposite sides of the spectrum. Nevertheless, the pullback is in motion as Socko, despite his equally crooked take on the world, succeeds in imbuing the world with nuance, and therefore creating a richer revelation of it than previously seen. He then goes on to finish his verse by resuming the hook in an equally giddy and upbeat fashion as Burnham, underlining a deeply ironic tone, where he hides behind what David Foster Wallace referred to as an "existential poker-face",[115] allowing irony to dull the rather searing content of his verse.

Comrade Socko and the Significance of Dueling Perspectives

These two verses showcase the ironic set-up of the segment, done through communication of ironic pretense, resulting in two equally colliding worldviews. Ironic pretense, according to James MacDowell, is "the pretended adoption of a defective outlook",[116] which can be commonly exemplified through someone noting the weather to be pleasant while not meaning it at all because they are being drenched in an ungodly downpour. This is seen in both instances in the segment, as neither outlook is particularly nuanced, and therefore somewhat defective. The first verse is too gleeful and simplistic, from this point of view everything is as it should be, and any problems that may disrupt this vision are neatly swept under the rug. The other perspective is a tad too pessimistic and misanthropic, the world is a cesspool where the workers are suppressed and governed by a "pedophilic

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[113] Burnham, "How the World Works", *Inside.*
[114] Amelia Bates, "Only 2020 could bring us words like these", https://grist.org/climate/2020-climate-words-of-the-yearf-doomer-net-zero-anthropause/
[115] Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram", p. 171.
[116] MacDowell, *Irony in Film*, p. 60.

corporate elite".[117] These competing perspectives is reminiscent of an ideological collision, where the host through gritted teeth gives a near-utopic rendition of the world which is really a reinforcement of the liberal-democratic status quo. Socko on the other hand, replies with a dystopic fixation on unfair power balances, and comments on the relations between workers and elites that bears Marxist undertones.

A characteristic often attributed to postmodernism is its "end of history" sentiment, that relies on the idea that history had ended with the victory liberal democracy over communism, as such there are no more grand, ideological battles to be fought.[118] However, the host's absence of humans and their failures against nature and themselves is indicative of the very failures of liberal democracy itself – he is happy to divert the attention away from the failures, presumably to protect his own interests. In this case, Socko represents a steadily more protruding criticism levied towards the grievances caused by liberal democracy, all while very much being a part of it and subjugated by it. There is also the possibility that Socko is simply a puppet, he is not equipped with a microphone, but the host is. The possibility of the host using Socko as a therapeutic outlet is likely, and in that case the back-and-forth between them indicates internal conflict and latent disillusion. If the host is to be taken as someone acting on behalf of liberal-democratic values, then Socko might be the manifestation of increasing doubt in the wake of the many errors that arose during the time history had ended.

The appearance of another character, that holds a different point of view is a regular occurrence in ironic pretense; it is done to balance out the initial outlook. Thus, these dueling outlooks produce two different ironic points of view, one delusional through simplification and misinformation, and the other disillusioned through an overtly doomy-gloomy perspective, but both equally removed from reality. This is also supported by the dramatic enactment of the children's television show, where both characters appear silly and cartoonishly giddy. A genre within children's television is the educational branch, intended to both entertain *and* educate, such as *Sesame Street* (1969-present), *Mickey Mouse Clubhouse* (2006-2016) and *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* (1968-2001).[119] These show's frequently feature a host, such as Mr. Rogers or Mickey Mouse, whose purpose is to improve children's education and school preparedness. Burnham riffs on these shows, as they frequently aim to

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[117] Burnham, "How the World Works", *Inside*.
[118] Van den Akker & Vermeulen, "Periodising the 2000s", p. 1-2.
[119] Jessica Taggart, Sierra Eisen & Angeline S. Lillard. "The Current Landscape of US Children's Television: Violent, Prosocial, Educational, and Fantastical Content" in *Journal of Children and Media* 13, no. 3 (2019): 278. DOI: 10.1080/17482798.2019.1605916

teach children of the world, as he himself does in the segment. I believe that the presentation of the scene through the form of an educational television show for children is an act of dramatic irony, as it conjures a narratively driven discrepancy.[120] While initially handling the admittedly hefty theme in a dumbed-down, easily understandable manner appropriate for kids, the introduction of Socko makes it considerably more grown-up, and renders the debate more unfitting according to the format. Socko disrupts the PG-presentation, and changes the tone in a jarring way by introducing grown-up imagery and language, as well as concepts and ideas that is way more complex than those usually thought in such shows. The staging of the segment and the performances of the actor(s) contrast each other ironically in a way that conjures a humoristic quality. Thus, Socko offers as an unruly perspective, breaking the register that Burnham before had built on, and in the process, produces a juxtaposition symptomatic of both dramatic irony and comedy.

The Sincere Break and Jarring Volatility

Towards the end of the sketch the host, seemingly unfazed by Socko's negative outlook, asks what he can do to become a better person and help out with the situation. Socko then rejects the notion of using large, socio-economic issues as a vessel for one's own self-realization, and after some light bickering the sketch takes an abruptly dark turn. After a couple of toned-down threats, like "let's not forget who's on whose hand here",[121] the host attempts to tear Socko of his hand, which appears as torture to the puppet. Like mentioned earlier, Socko, when not on Burnham's hand is expelled to a limbo-like state of being, perceivably a form of prison. The music stops as Socko screams, and the now very serious, almost sinister host asks him if he is going to behave. Socko agrees, but his assurance is not accepted as the host wishes to be addressed as "sir", which Socko begrudgingly does. The music then suddenly resumes, and the narrator re-assumes his giddy appearance and sings the chorus before telling Socko that he hopes he learned his lesson, which Socko low-spiritedly confirms, adding that it hurt. The camera is completely pulled back at this point, and the reveal shows a much more complex, and sinister world than first shown at the beginning of the song. With this the segment hits the sincere break, and the spectator cannot help but witness the rather uncomfortable glimpse into the real workings of the world before them.

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[120] MacDowell, *Irony in Film,* p. 36.
[121] Burnham, "How the World Works", *Inside.*

This break in the song completely alters the mood, and the set-up results in a genuinely uncomfortable moment. The power relations between the two is laid bare before the viewer, and Socko's pessimistic view is explained and somewhat confirmed. This is arguably a sincere moment, not a particularly wholesome one, but a moment where the ironic pretense is dropped for a moment. What is unraveled is that the host somewhat confirms some of Socko's points through his actions. Burnham mirrors the stark power imbalances Socko refers to in his verse, and in doing so he ironically disproves the glossed over representation he originally offered himself. Socko's dystopic outlook shows to be the more accurate depiction of the two, as Burnham's depiction is rendered not only misleading, but apparently *willfully* so. Willfully here in the sense that his suppression of Socko presupposes that he is aware of the points the puppet makes, and the fact that not everything "works" together, which explains his work to maintain the status quo through the silencing of opposing views. Alternatively, he is suppressing his own doubts about the world, as the puppet can be merely therapeutic.

Historically, puppets have been popular as psychiatric tools, since they are "useful for a therapeutic context because they provide opportunities for spontaneity, are easily manipulated, and lend themselves naturally to a symbolic process of self-expression".[122] With this in mind, Burnham violent suppression of Socko might be a display of inner conflict, hinting at a sincere doubt colliding with the current state of affairs that is convenient to maintain. It also fits in nicely with the notion that *Inside* also represent inside Burnham's mind, in that sense, the sincere break also reveals genuine conflict within Burnham himself. The status quo is only implied through actions and lyrics, but if Socko represents an id to his superego, then there might just be something to the ramblings of the puppet, as he speaks from a part of the creator himself. Still, even though Socko's account is somewhat legitimized through the violence he becomes a victim of, it does not feel like a triumph per se, as the depiction of the world in the first verse, even with its too-good-to-be-true presentation, seemed preferable.

In his writings on postirony Lee Konstantinou tells that postirony does not posit sincerity as an answer to irony, and that postirony on the other hand offers several solutions to the problem of irony.[123] I believe this is exemplified here, as the break towards the segment's conclusion drops the ironic façade the sketch had set up until this point. The whole

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[122] Cheryl Hulburd, *Puppet-Assisted Play Therapy: Theory, Research, and Practice*, (2020, New York: Routledge). p. 4.
[123] Konstantinou, "Four Faces of Postirony", 89.

situation, presents another form of irony, something akin to an ironic subversion, where the scene undermines the expectations of the spectator.[124] The familiar and lighthearted tone of the children's television show is the façade, and the glaring contrast of the uncomfortable showstopper goes to make this abundantly clear. In doing so, it also presents the most tonally sincere moment of the segment. Here I refer to tone in the sense that James MacDowell refers to it in his writing on the quirky sensibility in cinema. Tone, according to MacDowell is in a way similar to mood, but where mood is communicated through the emotions on screen, tone is communicated through the inherent attitude suggested *towards* said emotions.[125] In this sense, the upbeat and silly demeanor of the first two verses may be intended to communicate a comedic mood, the set-up, if you will, that caters to the audience's expectations. However, the sincere break goes to establish the tone, where the viewer is pinned up against the wall and forced to consider the actuality of what has been joked about. Said sincere break is marked by the abrupt confrontation; at this point the irony of wildly contrasting views has ceased to mount, and what we are left with is sincere sentiments on which their foundation lies. Whether these sentiments be the realization that the material is no joking matter or disillusion does not matter; the break marks a point in the segment where the spectator is faced with genuine contemplation, uncomfortable as it might be. The simplistic representation Burnham offers and Socko's overtly dystopic one clashes before the audience, resulting in them having to witness a truly vulgar display of power meant to represent real-life exploitation. By dropping the music, and with it, the mood-bearing façade of the children's show, Burnham implicitly asks the audience whether this truly is a laughing matter. He does not expect an answer, but he does expect reflection. The tone remains impartial, it tells us that it is okay to laugh, but encourages us to see beyond the laughter as well.

Thus, the break snaps the audience out of an ironic state that the set-up helped establish, there is nothing funny about the predicament on screen. It bears no comedic effect; it rather serves as an eyebrow-raiser. I believe the application of two equally ironic perspectives produces this uncomfortably sincere moment through negating the other. And the sincerity that occurs could only arise from these two perspectives. Had it been two different perspectives, there might have been a different outcome. The uncomfortable realization materializes out of the ironic negation between these two particular outlooks. One

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[124] MacDowell, *Irony in Film,* p. 4.
[125] MacDowell, "Wes Anderson, tone, and the quirky sensibility", p. 14.

irony arises in their contrast, the other arises in the fact that one of them actually were on to something. The result is unquestionably grim. It is not before the last resumption of the song that the comedic approach of the initial set-up returns, as is a recurring feature of these set-ups. The comedy of the segment emerges in the wake of the sincere break, as the defeated puppet is forced to go along with the blissful neglect of the narrator. Nonetheless, the host emerges "triumphant", as his worldview wins via force. This may leave the viewer laughing, but uncomfortably so, as it is also meant to leave them contemplative. Burnham's presentation of how the world works is meant to raise questions around if such matters truly are to be poked fun at, all while churning out some laughs along the way.

Is This Heaven or Self-Presentation?

In a segment in *Inside* named "White Woman's Instagram" Burnham jests at the expense of the social media output of white women. The segment is made up of another song, and accompanying music video, where he mockingly lists up several tropes about white women's content on Instagram. The tropes include tiny pumpkins, golden retrievers in flower crowns, misquoted lines from Lord of the Rings (2001-2003) and incredibly derivative political street art, with much more.[126] To go along with this the visuals depicts him in shots that are meant to spoof these very posts. He poses with Beyoncé-coffee mugs, lies on the floor with flowers covering his eyes and wears t-shirts with quirky, nonsensical phrases on them. These shots are often heavily filtered, spoofing the use of varying effects often used on Instagram. This is how the first to verses and the chorus goes, he invites the audience to join in his ridicule and apparent bewilderment of white women on social media. With this, he lays the foundations for the frame-up.

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[126] Bo Burnham, "White Woman's Instagram", *Inside*.

Figure 5: Beyoncé is her spirit animal

However, before we delve deeper into the content of the segment, a question should be raised (and answered to the best of my abilities) of whether the intention of the segment is to simply jest at the expense of white women, which I believe to be inaccurate. In line with the rest of the special, I believe this segment to be more concerned with overarching socio-political implications and the trappings of new media, as evident in other segments such as the one above. The focus is on self-representation, privilege and the perplexity that may arise around a social media actors' decision to mediate rose-tinted snapshots of the world at *a time like this,* rather than on the white females themselves. The choice for the women to be white should be rather obvious, as white people (in the West) are often born with privileges most other demographics is inherently without. Burnham's choice of white women however, strikes an awkward note because while they certainly are white and therefore inherit a lot of privilege, women in the west still have to endure a vast array of trials and tribulations that men are relieved of. Thus, this choice may be a seen as an attempt to highlight unfair criticism aimed towards an already scrutinized group.

As Sofia P. Caldeira, Sander de Ridder and Sofie van Bauwel points out in their paper on women's self-representation on Instagram,[127] young women are the demographic most

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[127] Sofia P. Caldeira, Sander De Ridder & Sofie Van Bauwel, "Between the Mundane and the Political: Women's Self-Representations on Instagram" in *Social Media + Society*, 6(3) (2020). DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/205630512094

often stereotypically associated with self-representation through social media. Additionally, they are also, historically, associated as something to-be-looked-at, a visual pleasure, [128] which Burnham arguably plays on by placing himself in the shots instead of actual women. This points to a gendered view of self-representation through social media, with women most likely to be on the receiving end of related criticism. Much of said criticism will often be levied towards the regularly mundane yet aestheticized nature of their output, or praise, but also ridicule, raised towards their attempts at empowerment on social media platforms. Burnham's set-up features both of these elements to a comedic effect that is largely underlined by placing himself, a tall, unkept, bearded man in the shots instead of actual women, in order to disrupt any voyeuristic tendencies related to social media,[129] especially related to women.[130] These tendencies can be understood through feminist cultural theorist Rosalind Gil's work on postfeministic sensibilities, where she discusses, amongst other things, a culturally indoctrinated bodily attention, emphasis on (self-) surveillance and focus on toxic insecurity.[131] These are phenomenon that can be tied to an increasing amount of self-representation in social media, and the negative side-effects associated with it. Burnham's choice of white women may therefore be a subtle comment on the challenges this demographic faces, all while pointing out the ludicrous parts about it along the way.

There is an apparent situational, and therefore pictorial, irony throughout this segment, as Burnham works to showcase the clean, blissful, virtue-signaling and often paradoxical nature of the Instagram-post. While doing so he also presents the well-thought-out nature of such posts, they are not cute and quirky by chance, but rather structured out to appear so. The more political bits in the segment, such as the posts focusing on empowerment, can be read indexical to Gil's findings of postfeministic sensibilities such as self-monitoring and self-optimalization through the carefully crafted, positive messages they often portray. Alternatively, it may be seen as cases of what Gil, alongside Shani Ograd, calls the "confidence cult(ure)", which discusses a trend where women are increasingly encouraged to shift their focus inwards to deal with external, structural challenges.[132] If one

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[128] Caldeira et al., "Women's Self-Representations on Instagram". P. 2-3.

[129] Matti Mäntymäki & Najmul Islam, "VOYEURISM AND EXHIBITIONISM AS GRATIFICATIONS FROM PROSUMING FACEBOOK" (2019): 3. DOI: 10.13140/2.1.1701.6967

[130] Rosalind Gill, "Being watched and feeling judged on social media", in *Feminist Media Studies*, 21:8 (2021): 1389. DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2021.1996427

[131] Rosalind Gill, "The affective, cultural and psychic life of postfeminism: A postfeminist sensibility 10 years on" in *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *20*(6) (2017). DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549417733003

[132] Rosalind Gil & Shani Orgad, "The confidence cult(ure)", in *Australian Feminist Studies*, 30 (86) (2016): 335. DOI: 10.1080/08164649.2016.1148001

then looks at the shot where Burnham flips of the camera while mouthing "fuck you" and wearing a shirt that reads "preferred position: CEO",[133] one can observe a portrayal of a woman doing just this: exuding a constructed confidence that has little chance of making a difference to the genuine difficulties that affects her everyday life. A well-intentioned, but alas, trivial attempt at a political statement, which serves itself as low-hanging fruit for those cynical enough to ridicule it. An offering which Burnham, and subsequently his audience, finds it difficult to refuse.

The chorus of the song knowingly asks the question if this is heaven, or if it is just a white woman's Instagram? The question insinuating that the world represented through white women's social media is almost too good to be true. Burnham thus invites the spectator to share in two points of view during this segment: (1) white women´s laughably aesthetic output, and (2) the extreme privilege they possess, and that they are awkwardly unaware of it. The former is viewed through Burnham's usage of symmetry, color and stereotypically cute imagery in his satirical Instagram-images throughout the entire segment. This calls back to Caldeira et al.'s article, which describes such output as distinctly *mundane*,[134] and that the aestheticizing of everyday mundanity can signal such factors as socio-economic and -cultural background. By doing this, Burnham calls attention to potential ignorance and privilege that may be communicated through such posts, inviting the audience to scoff at it alongside him. This is also relevant to the latter, which is reinforced through some of the pictures Burnham spoofs, such as showing himself in a portrait-shot with a piece of tape that reads "hate" on his mouth, which he then rips off with all the moxie of a rebel. There is also another instance later on in the video, where he has painted one half of his face with insults frequently aimed at women, before turning his head to reveal affirming words of self-love on the other half. These shots display some of the political potential Caldeira et al. attributes to women's self-representations in social media,[135] genuine attempts at commenting on current political conflicts. Yet, this is somewhat undermined by the attempt to align this with the aestheticizing of the more mundane output, and is therefore, as part of the frame-up, showed as somewhat ill-advised and out of touch. In other words, through Burnham hamming it up, something to be scoffed at.

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[133] Burnham, "White Woman's Instagram", *Inside*.
[134] Caldeira et al., "Women's Self-Representations on Instagram". P. 3-4.
[135] Caldeira et al., "Women's Self-Representations on Instagram". P. 3.

These first two verses serve as the set-up, revealing mocking imagery through both lyrics and video, seemingly increasingly removed from reality. The world he portrays through white women's Instagram's is airbrushed to the point where white women (people) are represented as not having a care in the world. This is also partly due to the simpleness of it, he reveals nothing else to the spectator, only the silly posts. The confines of the lyrics and the frames keeps the viewer firmly planted in their sardonic perspective towards the woman. Burnham, however, complicates this perspective in the final verse of the song. He starts off the verse by referencing the white woman's favorite photo of her mom, before revealing through the caption to the photo that the mother has passed away. Suddenly, the satirical irony of the first two verses is drawn back for a moment of earnestness, as Burnham launches into a toned-down, softer verse where the eponymous woman communicates with her late mother through the Instagram post in a nearly remedial way. She reveals to the audience that she is finding a world without her mother hard to adjust to, but that she is trying, echoing the postironic sentiment of overcoming irony's limitations,[136] and the metamodern ethos of perseverance in spite of challenging outlooks, a pragmatic idealism if you will.[137] She has achieved much in life, constating to her mom that "your little girl didn't do too bad",[138] and ends the post by asking her to pass a hug and kiss to dad from her, implying that she is in fact orphaned, and thus delivering the final gut-punch of the third verse.

Burnham subverts the expectation he had helped build during the first two verses, revealing the nuances hiding under the surface of the often overtly aesthetic output of white women's Instagram. This is illustrating ironic subversion, where these issues were hitherto unbeknownst to the spectator and were not calculated into their expectations, but there is also a latent implication that the spectator did not initially *care* to consider this. Leading up to the sincere break of the song, Burnham's sardonic minefield of punchlines on behalf of white women's Instagram output gathers the foundations for his set-up. What removes any nuanced, critical opinion of the song's subject from the audience is this constant barrage of silly imagery which ridicules every last bit of the white woman's Instagram feed. It is Burnham applying a detached ironic stance towards the subject matter in order to effectively have it conclude in a moment of profundity, by applying another irony to outmaneuver it. He

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[136] Konstantinou, *Cool Characters,* p. 8.
[137] Vermeulen & Van Den Akker "Notes on metamodernism", p. 5.
[138] Burnham, "White Woman's Instagram", *Inside.*

effectively makes the spectator laugh with him, before subtly taking them to task for laughing, going as far as making them feel somewhat culpable along the way. What we are left with is yet another example of a disruptive note occurring to interrupt the form of the segment, which up to this point is a deeply ironic one in the postmodern sense, before the reveal.

One can say that the audience is taken to task through some sort of sincere ambush. As the final verse commences, Burnham is placed at the center of the shot while leaning against the wall. When he starts to sing the video alters between said shot and a headshot of him, and like mentioned above, he starts of commemorating a photo of the late mother, yet to reveal her passing. While he sings these first lines his eyes avoid the camera, and they remain gazing towards, and beyond the edges of the screen. However, when the revelation finally befalls, his gaze meets ours, and the screen, which has remained in a common aspect ratio for Instagram starts to slowly widen (more on this in the next chapter). In this moment the titular character directly addresses the audience, and lets us in on her struggles, with a look devoid of the segment's previous glee. In this moment, Burnham (in character) is engaging through direct address with the audience, which is to say that the fictional character, who should be normatively oblivious to the camera, breaks the proverbial fourth wall and speaks candidly to the viewer.[139] Tom Brown, author of *Breaking the Fourth Wall: Direct Address in the Cinema* (2012), writes in a blogpost that direct address may establish seven primary functions, amongst them intimacy and honesty.[140] These two functions serve as key points of understanding how Burnham makes the audience aware of their initial unkindness. Firstly, by altering between shots of him looking directly at us, placed in settings with little else to vie for our attention, he establishes an intimate relation. In this moment, it is just us and the woman. This is further established through his facial gesturing, which is now more communicative of heartfelt emotions, rather than a knowingly, winking smile. Which brings us to honesty, as his more strained expressions, coupled with an awkward, angsty stance lets us know that the woman is addressing matters that leaves her feeling somewhat vulnerable and exposed. These may all be read as subtle gestures, and gestures, according to Elizabeth Cowie, is "an act in relation to an object or person, that communicates: it is expressive,

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[139] Tom Brown, *Breaking the Fourth Wall: Direct Address in the Cinema*, (2012: Edinburgh University Press, UK), p. xii.
[140] Tom Brown, "Breaking the Fourth Wall: Direct Address in the Cinema", *Screens and Stages: Interdisciplinary learning, practice by research*. https://fttreading.wordpress.com/2012/05/31/breaking-the-fourth-wall-direct-address-in-the-cinema-4/

whether intended as such or not".[141] As such, Burnham's direct address, expressive facial performance and body language signals to the audience a tonal shift. The swerve in tone urges the audience to recognize a previously untouched-upon depth to the white woman, while making them feel some kind of way about not considering this when laughing earlier on.

Figure 6: Burnham addressing the spectator directly with a widened screen

In the Wake of the Ambush

It is evident that this breakdown yields a more profound sort of sincerity than in the previous example, arguably humanizing the white woman beyond the role of laughingstock, which she has been assigned for most of the song. The segment's set-up mines for comedy in mediation through social media, resulting in an unflattering depiction of the white woman's output. The final verse, however, looks beyond this mediation and sheds light on the possible hardships behind it, revealing parts of the sender's life that even the retina screen on your iPhone is unable to mediate. In the process, the audience is arguably led astray by the set-up, as it invites for ridicule through Burnham's overtly bantering demeanor. Burnham invites the audience along for the point-and-laughs in an emphatic way, through the pretense of possessing such views himself, making it somewhat safe for the audience to assume the same attitudes that he implicates. This is not to say that Burnham or the audience necessarily holds

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[141] Elisabeth Cowie, "The time of gesture in cinema and its ethics" in *Journal for Cultural Research*, 19:1, p. 82.

condescending views of white women, Instagram or trivial, saccharine output, at least not explicitly – but by pointing towards such stereotypical connotations all while generating comedic effects there is an acknowledgement that such views *do* exist.

These views are arguably conjured by the set-up, as it guides the audience towards them. Konstantinou, in his mapping of four forms of political irony examines the ancient Greek term of *ethos* as a mode of performative irony, and how it points towards a speaker's credence without necessarily reflecting the speaker's background, ethics or beliefs.[142] What Burnham does then, is performing the segment with an ironic ethos that is recognizable for the audience, the sort that allows for good old, no-strings-attached mockery which does not necessarily speak to their personal characteristics. However, with the sincere break, this sort of ironic ethos is put under scrutiny. When the eponymous white woman is finally somewhat humanized. This is done with a noticeable absence of a punch-line. The sincere break itself might signal a set-up for a punchline on the white woman's expense, as the rest of the song has been dedicated to doing just that. The set-up is there, making the audience emotionally connect with the white woman, which would usually beg for a put-down at the end of it. But Burnham refrains from doing so, this *is* the punch-line. Unfunny as it might be, the punchline becomes a gutpunch instead. Through negating the previous ironic jesting with another ironic turn that vilifies the spectator, he arrives at a point beyond the initial cynicism, a point of sincere recognition of the laughingstock's inherent humanity. Burnham then, through the set-up, operates somewhat as a herder does. He drives the audience along in the ironic presentation of white, female social media output before walling them in a closure of (to some) uncomfortable sincerity, making them wonder why they went so merrily along with it in the first place.

Still, the proverbial enclosure is not final in the case of this example. After the sincere breakdown, the song resumes in jesting with the Instagram-tropes associated with white women, as if nothing happened. He mentions dreamcatchers bought from Urban Outfitters, goat cheese salads and "incredibly derivative political street art"[143] before once again subverting the ironic approach with a reference to another post that is infused with sincerity. He bookends the song with the final post being described as a finger with a ring on it from the person whom the titular white woman loves, with a caption containing three little words and a couple of doves. This is probably a reference to a marriage proposal, or engagement,

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[142] Konstantinou, *Cool Characters*, p.18-19.
[143] Burnham, "White Woman's Instagram", *Inside*.

and the unnamed words may spell such phrases as "I love you". With this Burnham once again sets up an unexpected moment of sincerity, not as melancholic as the former, but a more positive one portraying what one can only assume to be a genuine expression of love. I would like to point out that this illustrates the set-up's potential for more than one sincere break, in addition to illustrating how the same set-up can provide to breaks that produces to distinct feelings of sincere engagement. The first break executes the pullback for the break, revealing a much larger portion of the white woman's world than just her Instagram posts. The second does not need to do this, as it has already been revealed. Break number two on the other hand, shies away from incriminating the spectator, it is rather content with revealing how even seemingly mundane output can contain potential for sincere engagement. What I intend to show here, is the erratic nature of postironic negation, as it shows irony's capability of moving beyond itself to something unpredictably different.

What truly sets this last digression into sincerity apart from the song's centerpiece is that there is no noticeable change of tone; rather he sings it in the same melody and tone of voice as the rest of the song. In the first break, the song was slowed down, and Burnham softened his voice to deliver the remembrance of the lost parent. Doing so was possibly to simply accommodate the weighty turn in the song, while keeping up the cheerful demeanor for the proposal-bit acknowledges the latter as more optimistic. Alternatively, one could observe Burnham's change of intonation as signaling the complexity of the sincere breakdown. Intonation refers to the raising and the lowering of the voice during speech, in other words, it refers to the voice's pitch. American linguist Dwight Bolinger regarded pitch as one of the most efficient communicative cues in spoken English, and furthermore heavily relied.[144] As such, Burnham's altering of tone in both voice and instrumental may be a way for him to communicate, or express, the fallibility in the previous jesting. From this perspective, Burnham does not merely accommodate the sincere plunge of the song by altering his voice, it may be an explicit signal for the audience, urging them to join him in recognizing the nuanced person behind the Instagram post. He does not incriminate the spectator fully after the ambush of the first break, he rather extends an opportunity of redemption mere seconds later. Whereas all the previous posts are presented as shallow, privileged, (often willingly) unaware, unoriginal or outright trivial, these examples hint at the person at the opposite end of the screen, and to their humane and perhaps redeeming

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[144] Dwight Bolinger, *Intonation and its parts: melody in spoken English*, (1986, California: Stanford University Press). p. 21-22.

qualities. At the same time, by allowing them a second chance, he accentuates the humane fallibilities as well as the redeeming qualities of the spectator too.

These examples call back to MacDowell's seesaw imagery,[145] where Burnham tips it swiftly back-and-forth between irony and sincerity. Burnham, as the narrator of the song, adopts ironic pretense, a purposely defective outlook, only to momentarily dissolve it in moments of sincerity. Whether or not "sincere pretense" is applicable to these moments of sincerity is debatable, because pretense necessitates irony through the willful adoption of these views. The sincerity apparent at the zenith of Burnham's set-ups, however, offer *transparency*. They pierce through the ironic pretense he relies heavily upon in his set-ups and unravels the underlying, genuine aspects of the subject matter he deals with. Whether it be the socio-economic and geo-political workings of the segment above, or the mediation of surreal representations of reality in this segment, they both swaddle themselves in the fog somewhat dysfunctional outlooks, only to be momentarily pierced through by moments of sincere transparency. Almost like the beacon of a lighthouse carves through fog, Burnham gives the notion of *something* beyond the gray, and momentarily flashes glimpses of what this *something* could be.

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[145] MacDowell, "Wes Anderson, tone, and the quirky sensibility", p. 17-18.

Chapter 2

Unstable Frames: How Burnham visualizes a volatile world

Burnham, throughout his career, has mostly dabbled in stand-up comedy and social media content, however, in the latter part of his career he has moved towards more cinematic work. By cinematic I refer to work that is more aligned with the classic sense of a film, a *movie*. This is evident through *Eighth Grade,* a feature length film which wrote and directed himself, and *Inside*, a special released through *Netflix* which he also wrote and directed, but additionally produced, shot and starred in himself. The latter is not a "movie" per se, but a carefully crafted special that blurs several lines between stand-up comedy, musical, documentary and credulous metafiction. However, both works apply filmic elements, which means that aside from the set-ups that are characteristic to the works, one must also consider the auxiliary visual elements. By visual elements I refer to parts to the frames he uses, and often alters, as well as their contents, meaning the *mise-en-scène*.

Mise-en-scène is a notable term for analyzing films via the contents of the frame. It refers to the contents as they are organized on the screen, which includes entire scenes and singular shots. John Gibbs provides the workable definition "the contents of the frame and the way that they are organized", stressing that both halves of the definition is equally significant.[146] The content at hand may refer to what concretely appears on the screen, that is décor, furniture, lighting, costumes and the actors themselves, amongst others. However, it also applies for factors such as camera movement and framing. The mentioned organization may then refer to interactions between said elements, and further, how they combine to produce a certain style, which is to say a distinguishable expression. As Gibbs tells it, the mise-en-scène applies to what the audience sees, but also to *how* they are invited to see it.[147] This brings us onto to mise-en-scène criticism, which Adrian Martin puts simply as "looking closely at the individual images, their composition, content and staging".[148] Martin further places emphasis on *experience* in his conception of the mise-en-scène, and stresses the importance of what he labels *dispositif*. This refers to "the arrangements of diverse elements

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[146] John Gibbs, *Mise-En-Scène: Film Style and Interpretation*, (2002, New York: Columbia University Press). p. 5.
[147] Gibbs, *Mise-En-Scène,* p. 5.
[148] Adrian Martin, *Mise en Scène and Film Style: From Classical Hollywood to New Media Art*, (2014, UK: Palgrave Macmillan). p. xi.

in such a way as to trigger, guide and organize a set of actions".[149] Furthermore, he describes it as a game with rules, which can refer to the boundaries of structures of a film that is usually adhered to. Martin notes as this explanation may render the idea of the dispositif machine-like in the head of those reading it, but stresses that this does not necessitate a cold sense of mechanism, but can be an "anarchic" or "crazy" machine.[150]

To demonstrate how this is applicable to Burnham, we can look to Martin's own example from Natalie Bookchin's *Testament* series (2009). In *Laid off*, an installment from this series, she groups together several videos from YouTube of people who have been laid off at work, fading them in and out and having them playing simultaneously at similar points of their retellings or at similar phrases. Collectively, these clips glide into each other, and individual stories merge to become societal in stature, almost like an installation from an art gallery. The bits and pieces communicate the theme as a result of their organization and interaction. What is on the surface a video comprised of other videos is really a carefully curated, and cleverly put together piece of social commentary expressed through a unique approach to dispositif. As such, we can see how Burnham also conjures meaning through the use of dispositif, as will be evident in his clever play with the forms and style of digital media platforms, as well as the organization and composition of elements that communicates them. The term form as I apply it is aligned with Caroline Levine's broad definition of the term, which is "all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of recognition and difference".[151] This provides a comprehensive but tangible definition that allows for accurately distinguishing between the formal affordances of a children's television show and those of a stand-up special, and how they interact and shape the content as seen in the previous chapter. As such, Levine's conception also affords one to ask not only what content dwell within the form, but how the organizing principles of the forms are forming the content.[152] By taking Gibbs explanation of the mise-en-scène and adding to it via Martin's notions of experience and dispositif, I will analyze the visual content within the frames, as well as the frames themselves within *Inside*. Furthermore, I will also consider how the mise-èn-scene aids in conveying Burnham's metamodern maneuvers, whether it be set-ups or frame-ups.

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[149] Martin, *Mise en Scène and Film Style*, p. 179.
[150] Martin, *Mise en Scène and Film Style*, p. 179.
[151] Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, (2015, New Jersey: Princeton University Press). p. 3.
[152] Levine, *Forms*, p. 16.

Questions may arise though, as to exactly how they may provide said insight. Parts of the mise-èn-scene might undermine the action of the scene, or possibly add to it. There are also aspects that are specifically communicated through the mise-èn-scene, or reinforcing whatever the scene is attempting to communicate. In relation to the focus on set-ups and frame-ups from the last chapter, the mise-èn-scene also helps to accentuate both of these arrangements. A prime example is Burnham's play with the frames in scenes of *Inside,* as evident in the mention of the widening frame in "White Woman's Instagram" which will be further examined in this chapter. As *Inside* concerns itself a great deal with the digital lives of the contemporary, western world, Burnham often plays with the form of their social platforms. This includes frames and communicational style. Frames references the framing of the screen, its discernible form, the limitations and affordances that accompanies this. Frames are important to the current close reading because, as Anne Friedberg puts it, "how the world is framed may be as important as what is contained within that frame".[153] I believe this to be essential for Burnham, as his presentation of instability through frames is essential to conveying the emotional turmoil that accompanies his set-ups. By this I reference his usage of specific aspect ratios and digital logics belonging to particular forms of (social) media, such as the direct address of a YouTube video, or the voyeuristic qualities often accompanying Instagram-posts. By communicational style I aim to illustrate the specific way of communication these logics allows for, which is to say, how they convey something to the spectator. This references how they, as an example, convey the sincere breaks, or the initial ironic attitudes. The primary examples in this chapter will be "Facetime with my Mom (Tonight)",[154] as well as the already touched upon "White Woman's Instagram", and another segment that spoofs the content on YouTube. These will be read to unravel how the frames alters, how the altering frame displays the intuitive depth of the sincere breaks, how they relate the set-up to the on-screen world, and finally, how these things creates a sense of instability in in the set-ups.

To conclude the introduction, it might be advantageous to point out how the visual elements affect the tone of Burnham's works. The tone, according to MacDowell, is distinguished from mood in that it is not communicated through the mere emotions shown on screen, but rather an attitude oriented towards said emotions.[155] In other words, tone is not necessarily focused on the relationships on screen, but the audience's relationship towards the

[153] Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft*, (2009, MIT: The MIT Press). p. 1.
[154] Bo Burnham, "Facetime with my Mom (Tonight)" in *Inside,* 00:11:03.
[155] MacDowell, "Wes Anderson, Tone & the Quirky", p. 14.

screen. It invites the audience to take a standpoint towards the emotions in play on screen. This raises the question of how the visual gags Burnham make use of contributes to a developing tone. The emotions expressed by himself, or his characters subverts or are bolstered through the visuals, and vice versa – visual elements provide an emotional impact on the scene's plot. What may be of further interest is if the visuals contribute to the weakening of the "quotation marks" of postmodern irony, or if Burnham's visual repertoire subdues any attempt at earnestness. As I will do my best show, it works both ways, and is dependent on the maneuver at hand. Either way, the visual elements of *Inside* are marked by a habitually digital state of being, all of the following segments deals with empathy and volatility as mediated through the digital landscape. On the surface, Burnham examines mere forms of communication or entertainment, but he also examines how these forms come to embody the volatile nature of the world. In this duality between the coldness of the digital, and the potential for interpersonal empathy and compassion it yields comes to the fore. With this, as we shall see, Burnham demonstrates an instability that trembles in the tension between ironic distance and sincere expression, which keeps the metamodern seesaw tipping.

The Pivotal Frames of *Inside* and an Unpleasant Facetime Call

In *Inside* there are several segments which involves a modern medium of sorts. These include the social media platform Instagram, the telecommunications service Facetime, the streaming services YouTube and Twitch, to name a few. These services all have a characteristic aspect ratio to their mediation. These aspect ratios serve to frame the view of the audience accordingly. Screens of the digital age, such as these, are labeled *intimate screens* by media scholar Glen Creeber, as they understand their capabilities to create a close dynamic between audience and image.[156] In most of the cases present in *Inside* Burnham has taken this into account, and at several points during the special he alters the aspect ratio to fit that of the medium in focus. For "White Woman's Instagram" he narrows the screen to that of a smartphone, which Instagram usually is accessed by. He does the same for "Facetime with my Mom (Tonight)" and "Sexting", with the latter also adopting the speech-bubble design of the iPhone to display the would-be-sultry back-and-forth between Burnham and an unnamed woman. In adjusting the frames in accordance to the media featured in the segments Burnham

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[156] Glen Creeber, *Small Screen Aesthetics: From TV to the Internet*, (2013, UK: Palgrave Macmillan), p. 121.

also shapes the audience entrance to sketch, as such, the framing plays an important role in conveying the initial attitudes in the set-ups.

Amongst the affordances of the frame is to provide a separation from its surroundings to the content contained within, but in this case, it also extends a tonal invitation to observe the actor within these particular frames. Moreover, apart from an "ontological cut" between the materiality outside of the frame and what's inside, it also marks segmental separation within the special. The ontological cut of the screen, according to Friedberg, can be likened to that of the cut between the wall and the view of the window,[157] it distinguishes the world within the frame from the world outside of it, and provides a distinction in perspective. Likewise, the meetings of forms in Burnham's segments marks clear distinctions between them; different framings tell of different mediums, different color palettes hints at different moods, and Burnham himself in different get-ups and positions is indexical of difference between segments. Another potential affordance of these newly asserted frames is placing the spectator beside the characters in the segment, rather than from ironic distance. This is a common approach within the quirky sensibility in cinema, where directors will frequently, through tone, close up the distance between viewer and character, as to establish the possibility for empathy rather than ridicule.[158] Burnham's application of social media forms within his segments evokes Creeber's notion of an intimate screen, aiding the spectator in closing in this distance on Burnham as he acts out himself or another character. This marks the tonal invitation, namely Burnham's application of frame-alteration to invite the spectator to observe within the confines of the frames rather than from the outside. He places the spectator beside himself/the character through the sense of intimacy and immediacy that the forms of media he satirizes rely on. This way, Burnham's conveyance of ironic and sincere sentiments is distinguishable through applying modern media forms in an attempt to create intimacy through the screen.

There is then, an argument for Burnham shortening distances between the action in *Inside* and the spectators, and in doing so, invokes a greater deal of empathy with the happenings on screen. This may also work in the favor of an ironic approach to the subject matter. The intimacy of the frames he applies also works to set-up the pullback and reveal-function in his set-ups, as they allow for an initial limited access into the world on-screen. In "Facetime with my Mom (Tonight)" Burnham plays out a would-be facetime call with his

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[157] Friedberg, "Windows", p. 5.
[158] MacDowell, "Wes Anderson, Tone & the Quirky", p. 11.

mother, which turns out to be frustrating experience as the call is riddled with triviality, emotional distance and technical difficulties that arises from inept phone-handling on his mother's part. The call itself echoes Creeber's notion of intimate screens, as Burnham brings the spectator into the phone call with him, showing both a third-persons view of himself, and his mother's view of him. Furthermore, it plays on the modern spectators wish to watch something *authentic*,[159] in that the video deals with a rather everyday task that most people are familiar with. Before the eponymous facetime call Burnham is seen in a room with no other light than the one from the windows, and the frame is presented in the regular, widescreen aspect ratio of a Netflix show (16:9). However, when the call begins the aspect ratio closes in on the screen, before eventually stopping on an aspect ratio resembling that of a smartphone. With this, the call is in motion. The lighting also changes, as Burnham is either covered in an artificial blue light, signaling a downcast mood, or the luminous light from his phone screen. The point of view is seen to be somewhat varying, but one can assume that the spectator is often dealt something similar to his mother's point of view, as we frequently view him from up close to his face, akin to an actual facetime call. However, it is not from the point of view of the mother, so we are never meant to take on her perspective, the camera remains close for most of the time however, to establish a feeling of inclusion to the call.
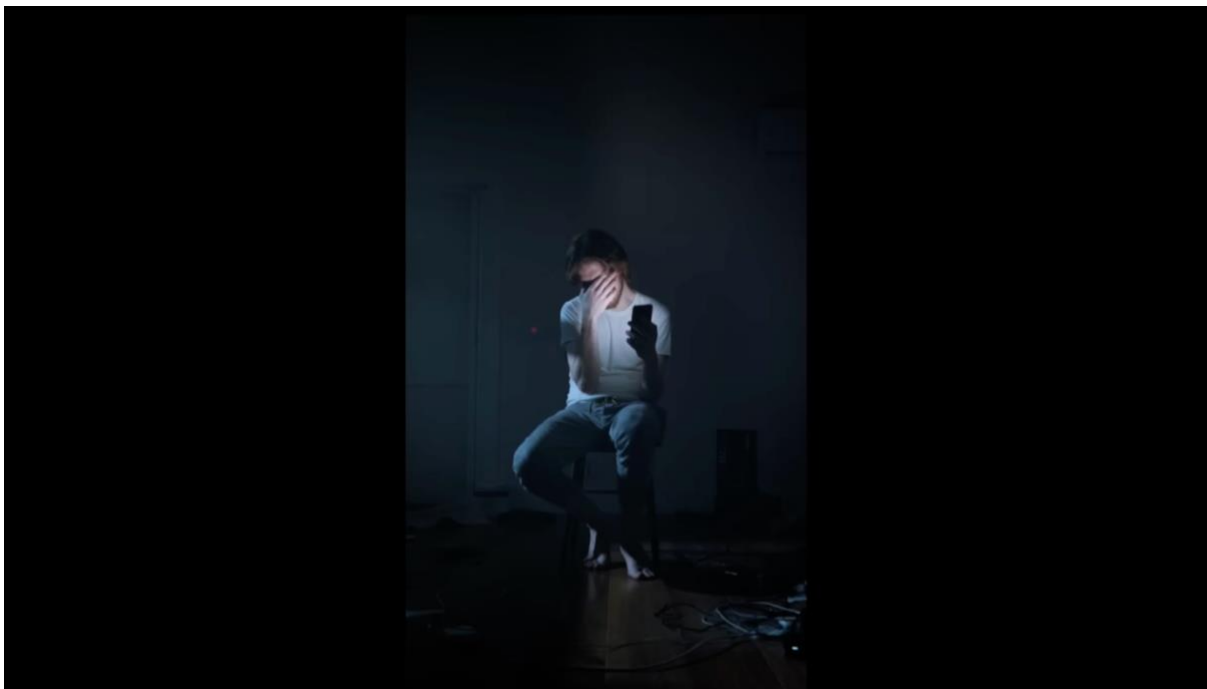

Figure 7: Facetiming with mom, exasperated

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[159] Creeber, *Small Screen Aesthetics,* p. 124.

When the screen is narrowed in, and the call is afoot the segment takes an ironically comedic turn. Like mentioned, the call itself is riddled with trivialities, and while we do not get to see any of it, we get to see Burnham's reactions to it all. He mostly maintains a lethargic demeanor, slouched over in his chair, with dropped eyes and little to no facial mimicry, while reacting pretty deadpan to the antics of his mother. These antics includes eccentricities such as loquaciously sharing everything that happened during the season six finale of *The Blacklist* (2013-present), covering the lens of the camera with her thumb and making Burnham reluctantly greet his father. These eccentricities cause Burnham to act increasingly annoyed, and the narrow format of the video works to constrain this frustration. The curbed frustration also serves to illustrate the ironic dissonance at play within the segment. This is evident in Burnham's reactions to facetiming his mother, in that he remains largely uninterested in a task he himself sought out to do. In fact, through the lyrics he emphasizes that he rejects his friends in favor of the call, and that the forty-minute call is "essential".[160] In doing so, Burnham sets-up a discrepant tone, inviting the spectator to share in his lack of enthusiasm. Saying one thing, while showing the opposite may also be a feature of ironic pretense,[161] telling us through the visuals of the segment that the Facetime is not as important as the lyrics initially makes it out to be. This dissonance adds a detached tone to the entire call, as Burnham acts highly irritable and negative throughout.

As explored in the last chapter, these visuals aid in establishing a set-up, one where a searing irony is apparent in the tonal juxtaposition. The happenings within the frame bolsters the lyrics, showing the frustrations he tells of through them, while the framing itself lets the spectator take part in the call themselves. Furthermore, as with last chapter's examples, this example too contains a sincere break towards the end. During the segment's climax, where Burnham deals with his mother's covering of the camera with her thumb, the screen changes. As the song reaches its coda that repeats the line "my mother's covering her camera with her thumb, I'll waste my time facetiming with my mom",[162] the camera turns to black before returning to the same frame as before. However, in line with Burnham's increasing frustration, going from lethargy to full-on rage, the screen splits into three separate pictures. All three of these pictures' features Burnham in a third-persons view as he angrily gesticulates towards his phone to make his mother remove her thumb from the camera. What

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[160] Burnham, "Facetime with my Mom (Tonight)", *Inside*.
[161] MacDowell, *Irony in Film*. p. 4.
[162] Burnham, "Facetime with my Mom (Tonight)", *Inside.*

these split signals is Burnham's emotional outburst, the initial narrowness of the screen coupled with the large chunks of empty screen contained his frustration, this division multiplies it, covering the entire screen with his previously suppressed feelings. Furthermore, while it literally breaks the screen into three different images, it also pulls back the camera, again to reveal parts of the world that previously remained unexplored.

At this point the spectator is served with unexpected, and perhaps uncomfortable emotion, as it brings familial trauma to the foreground and displays the inner workings of another family before them, something that is usually kept out of the public. Additionally, it problematizes Burnham's character, as he initially seemed simply aloof, but with the screen widening it becomes apparent that he harbors some serious ill-will towards his parents. What potentially makes this worse is that we do not get to see the mother's side of the whole ordeal, we only get insight to her through Burnham. Additionally, this insight only points towards her being whimsical and technologically inept, nothing suggests that she should be the target of such a heated outburst, so maybe the uncomfortable feeling generated by the segment hints towards a problem that does not necessarily lie with the mother, but with the son. Nevertheless, the division of the screen conveys emotion that alters the tone from detachedness to engagement, from barely perceiving to contemplating. The spectator is spurred on to realize that the facetime reveals serious issues in Burnham's familial relations, rather than the distant, eye-roll-inducing relations one may come to develop with one's parents through maturing.

The Representation of the World On-Screen and Premonitions of Depthiness

"Facetime with my Mom (Tonight)" displays one of several ways *Inside* sets up sincere breaks visually, as well lyrically and narratively. In this case, the framing of the screen aids in accentuating emotions previously contained by the very same device, helping Burnham convey a certain depth, rather than merely a postmodern sense of depthlessness.[163] At first glance, and pretty obviously, the screen does in fact not deepen with its fracture, but is broadened instead. Admittedly, this makes my assertion of depth seem fallible, but I believe that by revealing the full breadth of the of the screen, that the extensiveness of its content becomes more accessible to comprehend. He reveals the world to a fuller extent, showing more than just the initial surface level. However, it does not merely broaden, it splits

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[163] Jameson, *Postmodernism,* p. 6.

up into several equally large frames. Staley Cavell points out that "splitting the camera does not overcome, but multiplies, or fractures, the somewhere of the camera",[164] cognitively speaking, the splitting, or fracture, of the frame in the segment may have a similar effect.

To elaborate, I will borrow from Deleuze, via Iddo Dickmann, when he speaks of crystals in Deleuze's quest to fulfill his "mobile mirror" metaphor, which deals with the changing nature of reflection due to continuous reflection.[165] The crystal is capable of "hosting simultaneous reflections, the facets of the crystal embody an "exchange" between the actual and the virtual, the fact that "there is no virtual which does not become actual in relation to the actual, the latter becoming virtual through the same relation".[166] Like the crystal, Burnham's frame in the segment bear simultaneous reflections that remains in constant change from one another. The main difference from the crystal is that they move asynchronously, rather than differing in say shape or size. However, I argue that they reflect each other thematically even if they do not physically, because even though the different frames all act differently, they do so while expressing the same emotions. The reflections amplify the sense of anger within them by showing Burnham at different stages of the outburst simultaneously. They also convey the volatile nature of said outburst, through both "cracking" the screen and assaulting the spectator with angry gesticulation from three different angles. In a way, like the reflection of the crystal, the virtual on-screen becomes actual to the spectator through a sense of realness which is brought on by the frame's alteration. Said realness is distinguishable through the ironic presentation of the previous part of the song, where Burnham acts apathetic to comedic effect, which heavily contrasts the emotional outburst during the break.

This realness rests on the foundation of sudden, recognizable sincerity from Burnham, with the reflections working to express the comprehensiveness of said sincere outburst. The outburst is marked by his increasingly agitated body language, going from slumped over and annoyed to full-on screaming at his mother, gesticulating like a madman as well. This distinction in body language acts as part of the disruptive note in the set-up, with the splitting of the screen as the other, and visually most jarring one. Dickmann, shortly after bringing about the quote above, tells that "Phenomenologically speaking, the crystal shares its "depth" with the double mirror",[167] which implies a near infinite possible reflections. The "depth" he

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[164] Stanley Cavell, *A World Viewed*, (1979, Cambridge: Harvard University Press). p. 143.
[165] Iddo Dickmann, *The Little Crystalline Seed: The Ontological Significance of Mise en Abyme in Post-Heideggerian Thought,* (2019, New York: State University of New York Press). p. 12.
[166] Dickmann, *The Little Crystalline Seed*, p. 149.
[167] Dickmann, *The Little Crystalline Seed*, p. 149.

speaks of is the same intuition of depth I argue that the splitting of the screen brings about. The split results in a mirroring of changing reflections, expressing anger we only get less than a minute to perceive. It hints at a depth to the world and characters portrayed in the segment that may be much more multifaceted than first assumed. While the split broadens the screen in a physical sense, it imbues the contents within the frames with a sense of complex extensiveness that could also be perceived as depth.

Figure 8: A most volatile phone call

Vermeulen refers to the metamodern mode of perceiving depth through a metaphor involving snorkelers.[168] He writes that postmodern expressions are riddled with a "new depthlessness",[169] a sense of superficiality, and therefore can best be explored through the notion of surfers – a field of vision that is constantly moving along the surface and rarely or never glancing below the waves (unless forcefully plunged beneath them). As a matter of fact, the entire point of the surfer is to not plummet beneath, he is "the horizontal man".[170] This implies that depth is never searched for, nor always recognized, and the surfer is content with slashing through the waves, reveling in the thrills the surface has to offer. Snorkeling, however, requires one to constantly acknowledge depth, as one is continually facing

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[168] Timotheus Vermeulen, "The New "Depthiness"". E-flux Journal #61 (January 2015).
[169] Jameson, *Postmodernism,* p. 9.
[170] Alessandro Barrico, *The Barbarians: An Essay on the Mutation of Culture* (Trans. By Stephen Sartarelli), (2015, New York: Rizzoli International Publications). P. 111.

downwards underneath the waves. So, for the snorkeler, depth is always present, always real, but unfortunately also always beyond reach. A snorkeler does not have the means of a deep-sea diver, meaning that they do not have the required equipment to sustainably explore the elusive facets of depth. The snorkel would eventually fill with seawater, forcing the snorkeler back to the surface. As such, the snorkeler is inevitably constrained to simply ponder and wonder at what lies yonder, rather than being able to fully engage with it themselves.

This intuited depth is what Vermeulen refers to as "the new depthiness",[171] a response to "the new depthlessness" that restores the possibility of depth. Burnham's visual frame play, like in the example above, aids the spectator in perceiving what lies beyond. When the screen splits towards the end Burnham bares just enough of the human and domestic struggles that may lie beneath the shallow façade and everydayness of a Facetime-call. He allows the viewer to catch just a large enough glimpse of what lies underneath the formerly mundane task in order to emphasize that there is more than meet the eye, even with such simple actions. Like with the set-ups of *Inside*'s segments, the splitting of the screen presents the disruptive instance within the cadence of the segment, indicating to the spectator that *something* is afoot. This something is the hitherto unexplored depths in the relationship between Burnham and his mother, which presents a sudden brush with sincerity. Though, he does not linger there, and when the spectator might come around to intuit this depth, he pulls them back to the surface level observations that the initial screen ratio presupposed, reducing a full-blown deep dive to an exercise of depthiness. In line with Vermeulen's metaphor of snorkelers one could say that Burnham's visual aid provides us with a proverbial snorkel, allowing us to submerge, though not plunge, into the depths of the happenings on screen.

The Frame and the Out-of-Sight

Through this sense of unexplored depth, the frame also calls attention to parts of the action on-screen we do not get to fully indulge in, the happenings of the world *within* the screen. "There is always an out-of-sight, just like there is always an off-screen" V. F. Perkins tells us, before stating that "out of sight cannot be entirely out of mind: we may not know what lies beyond the horizon but we do know that there is a beyond".[172] This "beyond" is partly revealed through the allegorical pullback during the break, as well as the emotions

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[171] Vermeulen, "The New "Depthiness"", p. 8.
[172] V. F. Perkins, "Where is the World: The Horizon of Events in Movie Fiction" in *V. F. Perkins on Movies: Collected Shorter Film Criticism* (Ed. Douglas Pye), (2020, Detroit: Wayne State University Press). p. 278.

displayed within it. By broadening the screen in order to present bottled-up family conflict Burnham calls attention to parts of the on-screen world that is out-of-sight, but in contrary to what Perkins stated, the spectator may not have imagined a beyond. This is due to the limited insight the frame initially grants the spectator, leaving little room for imagining an extended world outside of Burnham's guest house. The setting of the call itself aids in diminishing the thought of something beyond the frame through the sparse mise-en-scène, which only features a darkened room, a stool, a phone and Burnham in the center. With such a meagre mise-en-scène, there seems to me to be an obvious reading of this iteration of Burnham being in a poor mental state. No lights, except for a damp, blue one in couple shots, and no furniture or decorations. Contextually, poor mental state is a prevalent theme throughout *Inside* as well, leading to the possibility that the Facetime is an attempt to either brighten the mood, connect with someone or reach out for help, which his mother buries in a flurry of eccentricities.

Apart from this, there is also the metafictional aspects of *Inside*, blurring the line between real life and fiction so it becomes uncertain whether the world off-screen is merely the world of the spectator, and not a separate, virtual one. With such blurred lines, maybe it is both, if so, then the volatility of the off-screen world in this segment reflects the possibility of equal volatility in the real world. Not only does the splitting, and broadening of the screen, call attention to the out-of-sight world outside of the frame, it also imbues it with a sense of depth that is transferable to this world. After all, as Dickmann said, "there is no virtual which does not become actual in relation to the actual",[173] as such, Burnham's fracturing on-screen in a semi-fictionalized world can be meant to represent actual fractures in the real world. Not so much visible fracturs as on screen, but mental, emotional and societal fractures. In short, the splitting of the screens calls attention to the unexplored world within the frame, which further adds a sense of depth to said world, and in a way reflects the instability also present in the real one.

Further, Visualized Depthiness

Whereas the Facetime-segment indicates depth, there is another example that explicitly places depth within the frame of the segment. The segment in question is not a quasi-music video as much of *Inside*'s content is, instead it is sketch that is parodying YouTube's *reaction*

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[173] Dickmann, *The Little Crystalline Seed*, p. 149.

video genre. This is a performance genre on YouTube where a YouTuber, or *creator*, as they are oftentimes referred to, watches other videos, usually pieces of pop-culture such as music videos or viral videos, and present their reactions to it along the way. As Byrd McDaniel notes "They take media reception as their subject, allowing users to narrate, sensationalize, and exaggerate the feeling of listening to popular music".[174] He then adds that these video's is rather akin to listening to music or watching movies with friends, which somewhat echoes Creeber's notion of the intimate screen as they seek to establish a stronger relationship between creator and audience.[175] Accordingly, Burnham, armed with a set of headphones and a laptop, is seen "reacting" to a short musical number that plays before the sketch, sarcastically narrating the life of an unpaid intern.[176] The musical number is his own (naturally), and depicts him wearing sunglasses in a monochrome shot backed by a jazzy instrumental to which he sings about the hardships of being a novice to the world of neo-liberal employment. What follows is a conventional reaction video that quickly whirlpools into a state of bedlam for Burnham, depicted through a matryoshka layering of self-referencing reactions that piles increasing discomfort on him.

The reaction video starts off in the wake of the musical number, with Burnham assuming the role of the creator commenting on his own work. Burnham appears within a frame that bears similarities to a standard YouTube-video, with a similar, smaller frame in the top-right corner that depicts the number he is reacting to in "real-time". He continuously maintains direct address with the spectator through speech and looking directly into the camera, gesturing, or conveying to the spectator the intimacy of the video. This intimacy may be seen in Burnham's constant alternation between directly addressing the audience and looking at his laptop. Human gestures can be explained as "particular movements of the body, or the face",[177] or "those actions that are employed as a part of the process of discourse, as part of uttering something to another in an explicit manner".[178] As Burnham continuously turns towards the spectator, and addresses them in a friendly manner, he works to establish an intimacy that establishes a sense of community ("hey *everybody*")[179]. Furthermore, he also continues to address the spectator while reacting, like he is establishing a dialogue, which

[174] Byrd McDaniel, "Popular music reaction videos: Reactivity, creator labor, and the performance of listening online", in *New Media & Society*, 23(6) (2020): 1625. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820918549

[175] Creeber, *Small Screen Aesthetics,* p. 124.

[176] Bo Burnham, "Unpaid Intern", *Inside*, 00:26:10.

[177] Nicholas Chare & Liz Watkins, "Introduction: gesture in film" in Journal for Cultural Research, 19:1 (2015): 1. DOI: 10.1080/14797585.2014.920189

[178] Adam Kendon, *Gesture: Visible Action as Utterance*, (2004, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 1.

[179] Burnham, "Unpaid Intern", *Inside*.

further adds to the informal and companion-like mood of a reaction video. As such, Burnham's body language plays an essential part in this segment's visual landscape, as he acts as a creator would in inviting the spectator along for his activity through dialogue as, well as bodily indications. Furthermore, it is notable how his gaze, when facing the laptop, also lands on the smaller frame, as if prompting the viewer to direct their gaze towards it in tune with him.

As he reaches the end of the musical number and moves towards wrapping up the video, the plot thickens. In lieu of reactions that offer very limited observations such as a banal explanation for the song's inspiration, and droll observations on his beard, his ending is cut short by another frame that engulfs the other. The small frame in the top-right corner now presents the video we just saw, his initial reactions to the musical number, which is now reduced to an even smaller frame within the other frame. Burnham is visibly taken aback by this, but keeps on reacting nevertheless. However, this time around, he adopts a more cynical and self-deprecating approach, commenting on the banality of his explanation of the song's background, and deriding himself for needing to come off as intelligent. He slowly drops the cheerful demeanor he originally had as the video progresses, and unluckily, he is not off the hook when it ends. As the video of his initial reaction comes to a halt, another frame consumes the previous ones, and a new video of him reacting to his previous reaction starts playing.

This time he explains his criticism of his initial reaction as self-defense mechanism, where putting himself down first somewhat shields him from the criticism of others. As this video approaches a halt, he is visibly distraught and uncomfortable, as he now only occasionally engages with the viewer rather than habitually. Furthermore, he also adopts a tense body posture as his eyes are now firmly fixed on the screen, and his reactions evolves into reflections on his own behaviors. Not long after the final loop of the segment starts, he exclaims that he wishes the loop to stop, before finally stopping it. He then reassumes the more collected demeanor of the creator, smiling to the camera and thanking the spectator for watching. This last direct address of the creator inverts the segment back into ironic pretense, as MacDowell explains it via Thomas Elsaesser, "highly emotional situations may be *under*played to present an ironic discontinuity of feeling".[180] Burnham's creator-character does exactly this, he underplays the self-examination he just endured by ignoring that it ever happened. By discontinuing the reactions as they had started to change nature, he shelves the

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[180] MacDowell, *Irony in Film*, p. 145.

possibility for self-realization as well. The *potential* for self-improvement is there however, as he shows self-awareness, but with contempt, by the way he starts peeling back the layers of his own character. By returning to the to his initial demeanor, pandering to his audience, he also returns to the surface, content with keeping his head above water.

Figure 9: Burnham reacting to himself, reacting to himself, reacting to himself.

The On-Screen Depthiness' Relation to the Mise-en-Abyme

This entire visual gag can be taken as an analogy for depth, or rather depthiness. The segment follows the logic the of the set-up, as it starts off in ironic parody before breaking off into a relatively uncomfortable and oddly confrontational sincerity. As Burnham's own reaction video starts playing and he is forced to react to it, the tone of the segment changes. Only, whereas some other segments in *Inside* demands of the spectator to confront himself in the doorway, this one does the very same thing to Burnham, as he is continuously urged to take a profound look at himself. With every layering of the frame, he spirals further into self-deprecating and sober realizations, which causes him discomfort. As such, the layering of the video offers quite literal layers of depth to Burnham's reaction. Each layer forces him to delve deeper into his own character. The first re-loop has him confronting himself on pretentiousness, while the second has him challenging the last reaction, labeling it as a self-defense mechanism which does not absolve him of being a "douche". Just as the third one starts, and he subsequently stops it, he has started to analyze his appearance, noticing that his

hair is starting to thin out while proclaiming that he does not like looking at himself like this. While this can be taken as a critique to the insubstantial nature of this genre of entertainment, it is also Burnham demonstrating depthiness through the earnest self-probing of the creator-character. The depthiness is apparent in the gradually increasing level of self-examination, and the fact that this depth is not fully explored as the loops, that could have gone on forever, are ended before he could explore further. Depth is there, but it is not there to indulge in, Burnham's snorkel quickly submerges, forcing him back up. The possibility of depth is visually displayed via the increasingly deeper fissure of reaction videos within the frame, while being supported by the gradual discomfort building in the creator-character. Taken together, they exhibit a veiled sincerity in the depthiness of the segment, only just enough for us to intuit it,

The layers themselves showcase a *mise-en-abyme* structure within the mise-en-scène. Dorrit Cohn, via André Gide, mentions the mise-en-abyme as a "structure without an end".[181] In literature, it is a narratological concept, "denoting a segment of the work that resembles, mimics, or is even identical to the literary work of art as a whole",[182] which is what the looping reaction videos is, identical, lesser pieces of the video within the video. Like the reflections of one self in a hall of mirrors, the mise-en-abyme adds a sense of endlessness to the self-referencing structure. Said endlessness is an implicit possibility in the segment, as there can be no knowledge of how deep the frames could have gone if Burnham did not end the loop. The endlessness manifests as literal depth, as the frames, steadily shrinking in size, forms a cavity on the upper right of the screen. Visually, these looping reaction videos begin to resemble a chasm, while it narratively come to symbolize self-referencing, as Burnham is made to continue on examining himself as the chasm develops deeper. However, the mise-en-abyme is purely applied to illustrate depthiness by teasing depth through the visual chasm on-screen, but not dabbling any further in it through Burnham's rejection of it. The mise-en-abyme becomes an integral part of the segment's set-up, as it teases the notion of depth visually, and breaks with Burnham's rather shallow reaction video from before. It also marks the return to the initial irony when it is cut. The deepening of the frames initiates sincere self-assessment, while their removal altogether restores the initial satire. If anything, it even strengthens the initial irony of the segment, through aforementioned adoption of ironic pretense at the end.

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[181] Dorrit Cohn and Lewis S. Gleich, "Metalepsis and Mise En Abyme." in *Narrative* 20, no. 1 (2012): 108. DOI: 10.1353/nar.2012.0003

[182] Dickmann, *The Little Crystalline Seed*, p. 1.

In applying the notion of the mise-en-abyme to substantiate depthiness to Burnham's visuals throughout *Inside* one can see how they illustrate the sincere breaks in the set-ups. They often work as support for the breaks, and as the examples above shows, they also often alter the very image in a way that underlines the emotional register that hides just beneath the surface. In "Facetime with My Mom" this register is revealed through a multiplication of the screen, displaying Burnham's cathartic vexation towards his mom which points towards a dimension of familial dysfunctionality we do not get indulge in, but only glance at. What marks this as a sincere break in an otherwise ironic set-up is the lethargy and detached fun Burnham pokes at the notion of mundane tasks, generational grievances and digital togetherness. This is all shoved to the background when the screen splits, and for brief time we are looking at sincere emotion, rather than mere distanced apathy. Additionally, it also blurs the lines between the diegetic world and the non-diegetic one, as the rupturing of the screen unravels an instability in Burnham's relations, physical cracks that speaks to the volatile nature of relationships that translates into the real world.

In the YouTube-segment depthiness is established in the actual, physical depth of the screen, marked by the layering of reaction videos in a mise-en-abyme structure. A frame, according to Friedberg, marks an "`ontological cut´ - between the material surface of the wall and the view contained within its aperture".[183] However, in relation to the world out of sight as mentioned earlier, Perkins states that "the extended world is continually manifest in the ways in which things enter and leave the space of the frame".[184] Even though the frame borders the material and the immaterial, it also encloses the audience's view of the diegetic world, shaping which parts we see of it, but also always suggesting that there is something more to it. Therefore, it works as a way to physically enclose the world on-screen from the non-diegetic world, but it also contains the endless possibilities of the on-screen world, and as such, yields the potential for further depth to it. I am not going to further theorize on the frame as a border between materiality and virtual immateriality, though I would like to extend these ideas understand the aforementioned segment. For if the initial frame of the screen marks the cut between the spectator and Burnham, and then again Burnham and himself as he appears in the musical number and so forth, then the endless incarnations of Burnham as they start to appear disturbs the existing taxonomy of frames. The frames we start off with presupposes the familiar – the spectator, the creator, the content, and the

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[183] Friedberg, *The Virtual Window*, p. 5.
[184] Perkins, "Where is the World", p. 280.

aesthetic indicators of the user-created YouTube-video, such as a technological fascination with video and an emphasis on face-to-face interaction.[185] However, the continuous addition of frames with unexpectedly looped content disturbs this order, which is indicated in Burnham's reaction to it, and the zany discord it creates. What was initially superficial content for mindless consumption soon escalates into an uneasily forced therapy session, problematizing aspects surrounding both the genre, its creators and the people entertained by it. All brought by through ontological cuts upon ontological cuts, forcing deeper layers in the mise-en-abyme, while making Burnham (and the spectator) face the inherently defective elements of every frame. These cuts also add to the unpredictable and volatile presentation of the world that *Inside* conveys, adding a feeling of instability to the segment overall.

Inside and the Instability of Irony

Ironic instability, as seen through the other segments, becomes a recurring feature of *Inside*. The sincere sentiments are both revealed and concealed by this instability, and therefore never allowed to fully take centerstage. Irony becomes problematic in that it covers up *Inside's* sincere core, never allowing it to breathe. Like Ingmar Bergman's *Summer with Monika* (1953) is "about sex without containing any sex",[186] *Inside* is sincere without fully immersing in sincerity. The former's titular character imbues the film with a sensuality that remains mostly boiling under the lid, never seeping over onto the screen, apart from a brief glimpse of derriere.[187] As the sensuality of *Summer with Monika* never develops into sex, the sincerity of *Inside* is never allowed to develop into full-fledged emotional displays. Sincerity rather becomes a specter that looms over the special, sporadically entering the frame in different iterations. As such, the ground Burnham sets up never feels solid, as he fluctuates from sardonic comedy over into bewildering sincere emotion only to ironically end up back to baseline again.

The sincere detours often sour the comedic effect of the irony when one returns to it. The lethargic Burnham calling his mom is no longer funny, nor do you see his sparse living room as a comedic element when he comes down after the emotional eruption. Instead, you

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[185] Jean Burgess & Joshua Green, *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture*, (2018, UK: Polity Press), p. 146-47 & 151.

[186] Diana, "Ingmar Bergman, Summer with Monika: "Erotism and Defiance"" in *Cinema's Muse* (August 19., 2016). https://cinemasmuse.wordpress.com/2016/08/19/summer-with-monika/

[187] Gregg Kilday, "Woody Allen Pays Tribute to Ingmar Bergman: `His Approach Was Poetic´" in *The Hollywood Reporter* (retrieved May 17., 2023). https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/woody-allen-pays-tribute-ingmar-95679/

feel fairly bad for him as the screen widens and he is left hanging with his head in an empty, dark apartment. His initial aloofness made it easy to laugh at him, but as he dropped the ironic façade, his perils become hard to ignore. Likewise, with the YouTube-creator, his schtick is not as endearing and comedic as it initially was after he has been forced to face his own insecurities. Once again, you cannot help but feel a little sorry for him, as his internal struggles plainly plunges a steadily deeper hole in the frame. In this, I do not necessarily think that Burnham's objective is to make us explicitly feel bad for him or his characters, but to recognize the depthiness, or multiplicities, of living in this point in time. For *Inside*, as seen across its many segments, the goal is recognizing that everything not necessarily is a laughing matter, and cannot be merely scoffed at or dismissed. The ambition rather becomes to recognize the instability that arises from attempting to stow away the often uncomfortable and confrontational nature of the sincere.

Thomas Elsaesser wrote in 2008 about the term *constructive instability* that "one of the points often made about self-regulatory systems is that they are inherently unstable".[188] Irony is in many ways self-regulatory as it is sarcastic and cynical to the point where diagnose and ridicule dictates ambition rather than the possibility of redemption. Furthermore, it maintains a difficult relationship with responsibility and decision,[189] opting for a laissez faire-attitude towards pressing issues. This is often apparent at the beginning of *Inside'*s segments, as Burnham often handles the various situations and characters sarcastically, before the sincerity breaks through at certain points and problematizes this. These brief glimpses of sincerity in the set-ups and in the visual's signals that the self-regulatory nature of irony too is inherently unstable. Screens split from the outburst of emotions, frames collapse in on themselves, revealing eternal loops of self-probing. These effects work to reveal the imperfection in irony as primary cultural logic, as sincerity ostensibly, inevitably, will break through. As such, sincere breaks seem to be key to destabilizing irony in the set-ups. I would like to suggest that applying constructive instability as a term to describe the outcome of Burnham's grappling with cultural logics seems adequate. There is recognition of irony as an integral part of our outlook and language, as largely seen in the basis of the segments. However, it is not without unpredictable glimpses of sincerity, as seen with the breaks. The irony always proves unstable once the pullback

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[188] Thomas Elsaesser, "Constructive Instability, or The Life of Things as the Cinema's Afterlife" in *Video Vortex reader: responses to YouTube* (Ed. Geert Lovink & Sabine Niederer), (2008, Amsterdam: Institute for Network Cultures). p. 19.
[189] Konstantinou, *Cool Characters,* p. 6-7.

towards the break begins, as the frame initially only shows a limited view of the ironic outset, hiding the signs of instability beyond the frame. The instability becomes constructive through the near-dialectic back-and-forth between sensibilities, and not landing on either one of them, as is evident in the set-ups, but also in the visuals, as they visualize the reveal. Where the texts display the ironic negation, the visuals bring forth the revelation.

The White Woman and the Effect of the Social Media Frame

In the last chapter, I briefly touched upon the widening lens while examining the frame-up, as it is an important visual cue for the segment's confrontational sincere break. With this I refer to Burnham's herding of the spectator towards sardonic ridicule of white women, and their social media output. The segment, to provide a short recap, deals with the stereotypical connotations afforded to the output of white women on the social media Instagram. Throughout the video, and the accompanying song, Burnham portrays and subsequently ridicules the content of the output for two verses and the choruses. Alongside this he also satirically portrays these posts by staging them with himself as the eponymous white woman, aided by the frame, which has been narrowed in to that of an Instagram post. Finally, when the song hits the bridge in-between the second and the third chorus Burnham opts to depart from the tomfoolery, and indulge in sentiments yet unencountered. As he reveals that the protagonist's mother has passed away the screen suddenly swells, slowly, until finally engrossing the entirety of the screen. As it expands the white woman tells her mom about her life imbued with a heartfelt resilience, baring plights hitherto unexplored by Burnham, and unthought of by the spectator.

 As previously mentioned, "White Woman's Instagram" provides a reflective frame-up. He engages the spectator through the usage of ironic pretense only to sweep the rug from under them later on, leaving them dumbfounded and ridiculed themselves. A vital part of the frame-up happens as the screen widens, as this marks a departure from the confines of social media. As Peter Ward puts it, "Framing for a specific aspect ratio is an inherent part of a production's identity".[190] As such, Burnham's use of the original narrow aspect ratio may be a way of instilling an idea of surveillance that is present in social media,[191] and thus making

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[190] Peter Ward, *Picture Composition for Film and Television*, (2003, UK: Focal Press), p.

[191] Brooke Erin Duffy & Ngai Keung Chan. "You never really know who's looking": Imagined surveillance across social media platforms", in *New Media & Society*, *21*(1) (2019): 121-122.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818791318

social media an integral part of the segment. This further positions the spectator as a voyeur, which "places him/herself in a superior position in relation the ones he/she watches",[192] which is supported by the sentiments presented by the sincere break as it exposes the spectator for assuming such a position. The notion of surveillance is additionally supported by Burnham's portrayal of the white woman, which bares the resemblance of a media logic where women in particular feel the pressure to appear "perfect" on social media.[193]

Accordingly, the framing of the segment can be observed as Burnham setting the spectator up to assume the voyeuristic, monitoring role of a social media user; both narrowing the screen, and the attitude of the spectator. This allows for a fair amount of ridicule through the assumed safety of internet-anonymity. As the sincere break hits during the bridge however, and Burnham's gaze meets the spectator's, this anonymity is erased. Burnham, through direct address acknowledges the spectator, and with the widening screen he momentarily dissolves the pretense of social media, leaving the spectator with an uncomfortable predicament. As the sides of the frame move out, the guise that the Instagram frame provided fades, leaving the spectator vulnerable to the tonal shift that takes place. This vulnerability is in part due to the humanizing of the white woman that occurs in this part of the song, but also partly because of the visual support the frames of the picture provide in calling attention to it.

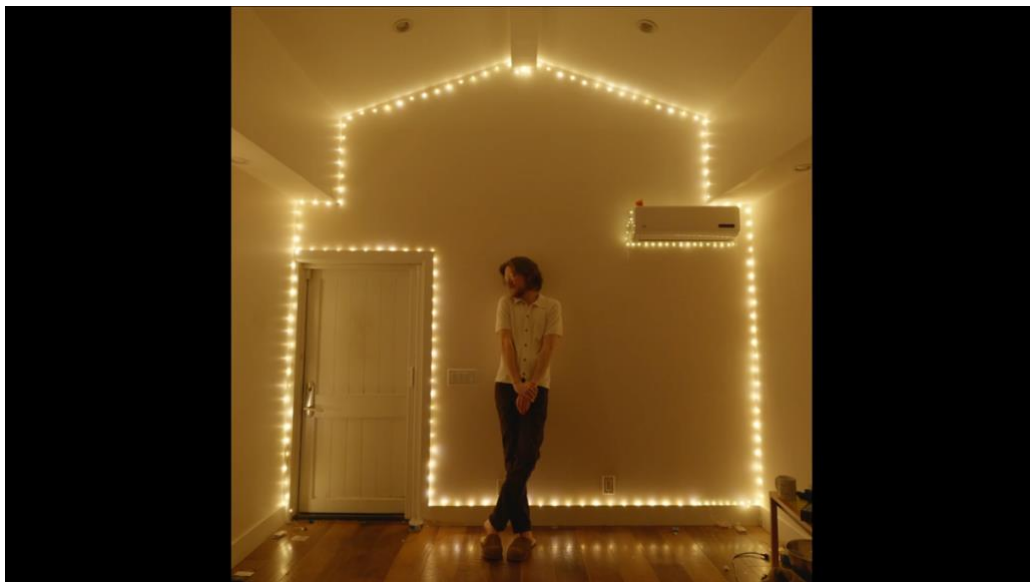*Figure 10 (1 & 2): The widening screen, and the turn to direct address*

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[192] Mäntymäki & Islam, "VOYEURISM AND EXHIBITIONISM AS GRATIFICATIONS FROM PROSUMING FACEBOOK", p. 3.
[193] Gill, "Being watched and feeling judged on social media", p. 1388.

The Frame's Ability to Call Attention

The frame of the film, like the frame of a photography, functions to predetermine the view into the world behind the screen.[194] Since the screen builds on the field of photography, Cavell claims that it has no borders, or at least not in the sense that the edge of the screen cuts of the rest of the world behind it – it does go on, only outside of the cropped viewpoint. Like Perkins conception of the out-of-sight world,[195] this means that there is a whole more to the world in the segment than the limitations of the box-like Instagram aspect ratio let on. These limitations support a voyeuristic, social media perspective, where all you see is encapsulated within a petite box crop, there is no room for contemplating the unseen context *outside* the frame. But when Burnham widens the screen, he also alters the perspective of what is on it. In doing so, he visually acknowledges the existence of the concealed, extended world of the white woman, which coupled up with the lyrics, fleshes out her character. As such, the widening shows that there is in fact more to the white woman's world than social media, and that the first part of the song which we were hoaxed into jeering at is only a fragment of this woman's lived experience. By opening up the world via the frame of the screen, Burnham shows us complexity of the white woman's world, and makes us reconsider the judgements we initially passed when we could only see a small measure of it. Alternatively, when we would not consider that it was more to it.

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[194] Cavell, *The World Viewed*, p. 128.
[195] Perkins, "Where is the World", 278.

Cavell further notes that "Early in its history the cinema discovered the possibility of *calling* attention to persons and parts of persons and objects",[196] accordingly, the widening of the screen during the bridge is instrumental in doing so here. It removes the pretense of social media, and with it, the humorous angling Burnham initially indulged in to quite literally reveal the bigger picture of the white woman's character. This picture illustrates the sides of the character that is not originally revealed, alternatively, the sides that the spectator would never consider at all, which Burnham in the moment makes them solemnly aware of. Thus, the frame does not call attention to the content within it, but also to the actualities of the content that is latent, that lingers outside the frame. This is supported by Burnham's central positioning within the shots throughout, as well as the barren content of the screen. There is not much on the screen to call attention to other than Burnham's passionate retelling of the white woman's tribulations, forcing the attention of the spectator to imagine the white woman's troubles, rather than observe them. This additionally shows that the screen not only calls attention to its own substances, but also the presence of the viewer. Addressing the spectator in such a way marks the acknowledgment of what Deborah Thomas calls an *offscreen space[197],* which differs from Perkins' notion of the extended, out-of-sight world of the screen, in that it refers to the living room or wherever the spectator might find themselves while watching. This acknowledgement marks a contrast in the frame-up, from the unstated anonymity and oblique voyeuristic leanings of the Instagram frame, to the wide-screened direct address to the spectator. This sudden, non-diegetic contrast is key to the pants-around-the-ankles confrontation of the frame-up, as this is where Burnham negates the irony of the segment to reveal the sincere emotions present beneath it all.

As the frame reaches the boundaries of the screen it retracts as quickly as it enlarged, not even lingering for a split second, returning slowly to the original aspect ratio of Instagram. When it halts back on the point of departure, Burnham resumes the role of rollicking rascal, in a slightly more upbeat manner than before. The spectator however, is left grappling with the morality surrounding what seems to be *Inside'*s overarching mantra: should I be laughing at a time like this? Like with the depth-intuiting set-ups of the former example, the non-diegetic standoffishness of this frame-up attempts to overcome the all-encompassing ironic attitude it starts of displaying. They differ in their approach, as the former allows for the spectator to discern an underlying sincerity, while the frame-up takes

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[196] Cavell, *The World Viewed*, p. 25.
[197] Deborah Thomas, *Reading Hollywood: Spaces and Meanings in American Film*, (2001, New York: Wallflower Press). p. 95.

them to task for the lack of sincerity in their outlook. While not necessarily making sincerity their final stop, all the examples return to their initial starting point in the end, but they offer glimpses of the *possibility* for sincerity beyond. This possibility is nevertheless thwarted by ironic self-regulation, since Burnham checks himself and turns right back to the ridicule of the first half of the segment. However, the foray into sincerity, and the widening screen contributes yet another example of Burnham using the screen to signal instability. Like mentioned, the frame does not even linger at full expansion for a second, and keeps on moving back, it closes down just as fast as it opened up, and the second it is back to regular ratio Burnham launches back into mockery. This calls back to Elsaesser's comment on inherently unstable systems,[198] as the visuals yet again destabilizes the ironic authority that initially looms large in the segment.

Concluding Remarks on the Frames' Role in the Set-Up

There is an emerging pattern of sincere destabilization of what otherwise seems like an unstable ironic status quo. All the segments discussed so far plays off of irony to churn out laugher and ridicule, fostering prejudice and dismissal along the way. Burnham does not let this tendency become dominant however, as he inserts breaks of sincerity to destabilize such notions. Narratively through set-ups and frame-ups, and visually through changing, recognizable frames. Cavell attributes the limitations and capacities of the screen to those of a container, and not so much to the edges themselves.[199] I do not necessarily agree with the notion of the on-screen world as a container, since a container suggests definitive limits and restrictions, and that the off-screen world presupposes that "we may not know what lies beyond the horizon".[200] The out-of-sight yields near-endless potential due to the fact that we do not know more of it other than what the camera allows us too, so how can one confine the out-of-sight to a container when we can never truly perceive its limits? What I do agree with though, and think is transferable to the way Burnham conducts his handling of frames, is that a container allows for different views dependent on the angles of which you peek into it from. In this I do not only refer to the altering of the frames, but also their appearance from the get-go. Using recognizable frames from media the spectator is familiar with encourages a

[198] Elsaesser, "Constructive Instability", p. 19.
[199] Cavell, *The World Viewed*, p. 25.
[200] Perkins, "Where is the World", 278.

particular angle in which they enter the narrative from, as I exemplified through the notion of the intimate screen, and the social media-related voyeuristic stance.

Burnham also presents different angles through the instability of his frames. They split and accentuate anger, they deepen and spurs on self-reflection, and they widen to expand the insight to the on-screen world. They herald alternative perspectives and angles that disrupts and destabilizes those that came before, before being disrupted and destabilized themselves. Thus, *Inside*'s frames aids in picturing the instability of the on-screen, semi-fictionalized world of Burnham, and with it, conjure sincere considerations that transfers into the real world itself. The frames of *Inside*, apart from structurally adding tangible depthiness to the set-ups, also convey the tumultuously oscillating feelings through highly unstable framing of the world, both his and ours.

Chapter 3

Eighth Grade and Transcending Irony: The alternate set-up

Eighth Grade departs from *Inside*'s sense of ambivalence in that it instead opts for assurance. With Kayla we are entering a postironic bildungsroman, a coming-of-age story, which in terms of expression distances it quite a bit from *Inside*. This is firstly due to its dramatization of the development of *one* central character,[201] while *Inside* shifts between a plethora of semi-fictionalized versions of Burnham himself. Secondly, it is due to different treatment of irony. In *Inside* the irony is largely applied for comedic and referential purposes, in *Eighth* Grade however, it becomes a necessary stepping stone for the development of the central character, as is common for the postironic bildungsroman.[202] Furthermore, it is also the matter of mediation, the audiovisual form. For one, *Eighth Grade* is without a doubt a movie, whereas *Inside* is an audiovisual chimera that contains elements from a wide range of visual media forms. As such, *Eighth Grade* presents a more steadfast, traditional narrative, a tangible plot. Where *Inside's* set-ups are akin to the workings of stand-up comedy due its segmentary structuring, *Eighth Grade* does not offer a such an experience. The set-ups however, as I will demonstrate, *are* present. The difference is that here they transpire during scenes rather than in segments, with elements from the set-ups recurring throughout the movie, and as an overarching structuring device.

There is a continuance of the set-up in *Eighth Grade* that the closure between each one of *Inside's* segments erases. This is not to say that *Inside* does not maintain a theme throughout, but as can be seen in such instances as the transition from the YouTube-reaction segment from the last chapter straight into a song that sarcastically praises Jeffrey Bezos,[203] this does not necessitate strict linearity. *Eighth Grade* presents the kind of linearity one comes to expect from a movie, with a progressive narrative structure, and therefore the set-ups from each scene relates in a way to the set-up of another. The plot of the movie is built upon a series of set-ups that Burnham carefully crafts and executes throughout its parts. In the first part of this chapter the character of Aiden will come to exemplify the set-ups in *Eighth Grade*, as he becomes an *ironic counter,* the stepping stone, to Kayla's abundant enthusiasm. The second half of the chapter will focus on the visuals of the film, as they differ from *Inside*

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[201] Konstantinou, "Four Faces of Postirony", p. 96.
[202] Konstantinou, "Four Faces of Postirony", p. 96.
[203] Burnham, "Bezos" in *Inside*, 00:29:15.

in that they do not necessarily convey instability, but encourage resilience in spite of it. I shall return to Aiden shortly, but will first briefly exemplify through Kayla how the set-up structure of *Eighth Grade* differs from *Inside*.

Figure 11: Aiden

Where *Inside* presents sincere cuts in a rather hardnosed manner, with a sense of somber solicitude, *Eighth Grade* provides a more careful approach. Rather than confronting the viewer with sudden fissures of sincerity, it provides sincerity as a starting point. Kayla is an unapologetically sincere character, but alas, sincere in a naïve, adolescent way. This adolescent outset works to evoke both sympathy and awkwardness in the viewer, most importantly though, it raises question marks towards overtly sincere expressions, as *Inside* does to ironic ones. These question marks are visible in the form ironic counters, which is *elements, both textual and visual, that challenges Kayla via irony throughout the film*. The counters can occur several times during a scene, rather than one, as is usually the case with *Inside*'s sincere breaks. They are also not as confrontative, they rather show indifference in a way that cools Kayla's enthusiasm. Although they may hurt her, there are no malicious intent from Burnham towards Kayla, they are rather instruments of necessity. For Kayla to successfully cross the liminal phase between adolescence and adulthood, these bouts with irony comes across as a necessary evil; a stepping stones towards adulthood. They are like the sting from cleaning a wound with rubbing alcohol, it might hurt in the moment, but it is constructive down the line. The difference in sincere breaks and ironic counters also highlights how Burnham means of expression differ. He is no one-trick pony, rather he handles the same sensibilities with a variation that allows him to explore and convey several

different outcomes. As such, *Eighth Grade*'s different adaptation of the set-up serves to illustrate the diverse range of postironic workings as they labors to transcend.

Aiden, the Set-up and the Let-down

Eighth Grade serves as Burnham's first directorial venture, where he remains firmly in the director's seat for the entirety of the film, leaving the spotlight fully to Elsie Fisher, and the character of Kayla. The film follows Kayla's final week as an eighth grader, and can in a sense be regarded as a traditional coming-of-age story. What makes it particularly metamodern, is its qualities as a *postironic* bildungsroman, a postironic mode that rejects both postmodern form and content at once – they revive historic forms to demonstrate their still-standing relevancy.[204] Among these are the bildungsroman, a romantic form of literature centering on *bildung*, or self-realization,[205] that often involves a character's transition from a naïve starting point, through irony, to a postironic condition. This is exemplified through Kayla in a myriad of ways. We are witnesses to her double life as a self-professed confidence influencer and as a socially awkward student, struggling to practice what she preaches online. Along the way we observe her struggles to fit in, complicated relationship with her father, yearning for maturity and navigation through encounters with boys. The latter serves as the main interest in this chapter.

Kayla has three major run-ins with boys throughout the movie; one with Gabe, a dorky albeit good-natured boy who she initially finds off-putting; Riley, an older boy which gives Kayla a callous encounter with adulthood via perhaps the most sinister and uncomfortable scene in the film; and lastly, but I argue most importantly (in the context of this chapter, at least), Aiden, Kayla's dimwitted romantic interest throughout the movie. Aiden is the coolest boy in school, at least from the perspective of an actual eighth grader. He is conventionally attractive, well-dressed (again, I stress, for an eighth grader), highly popular and carries himself as not having a care in the world. Eighth Grade is Aiden's domain, and everyone else is just passing through. However, what I just described is Aiden seen through Kayla's point of view, which serves as the jumping point of analysis. Kayla's infatuation is sincere, whereas Aiden's presence in a scene is often presented ironically, as he never (bar

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[204] Konstantinou, "Four Faces of Postirony", p. 96.
[205] Vermeulen & Van Den Akker, "Notes on metamodernism", p. 8.

once) displays any form of profundity. Nevertheless, Kayla, for the majority of the film, adores him, blissfully unaware of his admittedly simple mannerisms.

For the mature audience member however, he is just a regular teenage boy, or for lack of a better word, a blockhead. This duality in perception of the-really-not-so-complicated Aiden is fruitful ground in the search for how irony and sincerity oscillate in the plot, in his role on the path to the postironic condition. Konstantinou, in addressing four types of political irony, presents H. G. Fowler's notion that irony always creates a double audience.[206] Double audiences consists of one that is aware, and another that is unaware of the irony in motion. In this particular case however, the double audience is not entirely within the actual audience, it is a matter of perspective split between Kayla and the audience themselves. I will therefore adopt the notion of the double audience and transfer it the matter of perspective. In this chapter, the double perspective will be split between Kayla and the spectator, the unknowing and the knowing, the naïve and the informed. The dueling perspectives in between them creates incongruence, as we know that the former maintains an earnest perspective of Aiden, and the latter is, hopefully, able to pick up on the irony Aiden presents. The tone of the film invites the audience to challenge Kayla's opinion on Aiden, as such tone plays a part once more, as it arises through the tension between Kayla's hopefulness and Aiden's aloofness. The tone sets up the double perspective, and furthermore establishes a clear view of the oscillation within the scene. By focusing on the irony in Kayla's rather sincere obsession with such a delightfully detached dingus the set-up becomes apparent, and it is of a different nature than those seen in *Inside*. Here, the set-up problematizes sincerity, and does so through a zooming effect, rather than pulling back and breaking, as we are continually following Kayla. The world we see is through her, and her access to it becomes ours. Furthermore, *Inside* does not offer a double perspective, we are guided by Burnham through the themes and narratives, whereas in *Eighth Grade* we are afforded a more evaluative role. There is no sudden reveal, rather it sets up for a continuing evaluation, as we are not inside Kayla's mind like we are Burnham's in *Inside*, but rather at an observing distance. A distance that will be reduced as the story goes on.

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[206] Konstantinou, *Cool Characters,* p. 10.

Aiden from Kayla's POV

The sincerity in Kayla's character is evident through her childlike approach, views and expectations to her surroundings. Childhood and innocence are recurring themes in the quirky sensibility in cinema.[207] Furthermore, quirky cinema routinely features the struggles of adolescents on the cusp of adulthood, such as Max Fischer in *Rushmore* (1998), Juno in *Juno* (2007), or Molly and Amy in *Booksmart* (2019). Kayla follows in these character's foot-steps, as she struggles to fit into her seemingly nonchalant surroundings. These struggles unfold via the mentioned boys, her seeming disinterest in interacting with her caring father, and longing for connection with the popular kids. Her in-between status also shows in her encounter with the second boy, Riley, who forces her into an uncomfortable game of truth or dare, leading to a woeful meeting with the mature world, which was decidedly ill-prepared for. Through matters like these, *Eighth Grade* can slot into the tradition of quirky cinema through this emphasis on adolescence, innocence, and their meeting with adulthood. It also features characteristics of what Kim Wilkins labels *American eccentric cinema*,[208] which is similar to, and based on some of the same ideas and principles, as MacDowell's conception of quirky. American eccentric cinema may be exemplified through filmmakers that "have been shaped by the `solipsism and fragmentation´ present in postmodern films of the 1980s and 1990s",[209] and therefore seeks to overcome a perceived disregard of sincere feelings that such films present. Kayla's awkward and one-sided infatuation with Aiden serves as an example of how Burnham injects sincerity back into fairly detached surroundings, which may be further exemplified through the very first scene where Aiden is introduced.

The scene takes place in Kayla's classroom, where the children are examining time capsules that they made for themselves during the prior year. This comes about after an assembly where the winners of the "eighth grade superlatives" are announced, which is titles based on personal characteristics that the eighth graders vote on amongst themselves (think "most this"- and "best that"-titles). At the beginning of the scene a teacher enters the classroom and congratulates the superlative winners. He then proceeds to painfully highlight an intergenerational communication problem that rears its head throughout the film by

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[207] MacDowell, "Notes on Quirky", p. 9.

[208] Kim Wilkins, *American Eccentric Cinema* (2019: Bloomsbury, New York & London).

[209] Wilkins, *American Eccentric Cinema,* p. 31-33.

"dabbing", before he asks the winners to come along for a photography session. Amongst the winners of "best eyes" is Aiden, which remains off-screen when first called. Then, when he is called upon again, we see Kayla turning her head towards him with an expression of apparent awe and nervous anticipation, before we get a close-up of the supposed best eyes. When the camera shifts, a pulsating electronic beat ("Future Club" by Perturbator, 2014) engulfs the soundscape, as the camera slowly draws back from Aiden's eyes, as he removes a headset, revealing why he was not listening in the first place. While the camera draws away, we follow him as he makes his way to the front of the classroom in slow motion. In a brief cutback to Kayla, we witness her admiration, with her eyes firmly fixed on Aiden, and her jaw hanging open. As he passes her however, Kayla mumbles "good job" while shifting her gaze from him to her feet. When she speaks the music sharply cuts, and Aiden does not acknowledge her, look in her direction nor slow down, while Kayla herself reassumes her stare only after he has passed, and watches as he leaves the classroom.

Figure 12: Mr. Best Eyes

Here, Burnham balances Kayla's sincere engagement with the obliviousness of Aiden to tip the metamodern seesaw. The set-up of the scene resembles the set-ups examined in *Inside*, except *Inside*'s gags start off in a more sardonic tone before experiencing a reveal via a sincere break. The break marked by Kayla's utterance in this scene however, offers a more acidulous discontinuity, an expression of irony rather than sincerity. This ironic halt counters, or contradicts the sincerity in Kayla's character. This exemplifies an ironic counter, rather than a sincere break, as this yield more of a push-back than a revelation. As such, it does not break something open, or dive deeper into the on-screen emotions, but instead works to level

Kayla's enthusiasm. When the counter hits, the spectator is made aware of the fact that the previous happenings were expressing Kayla's sentiments towards Aiden, as the scene initially asks us to share in her point of view. Wilkins, via Murray Smith in her examination of overtly cinematic characterization, suggests that audiences engage with fictional characters through a "structure of sympathy", involving three levels of engagement; recognition, alignment and allegiance. [210] The latter is of particular importance in the scene at hand, as Burnham works to have us affiliate with Kayla through what he himself labels the "tween female gaze", in the film's commentary.[211] Allegiance "requires the spectator to evaluate a character in relation to the text's moral structures and thereby form sympathetic allegiances to those whose embodied values are deemed desirable or, at least, preferable to others".[212] As such, Kayla's outlook and intentions bears the sentiments of youthful and innocuous infatuation that are easy to align with due to their well-intentioned and harmless nature. As such, the values evident in Kayla's attitude towards Aiden can be seen to spark a sympathetic allegiance between her and the spectator.

The viewers alignment with Kayla begins via the first close-up, allowing us to recognize her emotions, before assuming her view of Aiden as he shuffles to the front of the class. This sequence of images allows the spectator to recognize the apparent feelings for Aiden through her wide eyes and dropped jaw, which might signal awe or admiration. As philosopher Gilles Deleuze pointed out, the "relationship between a face and what it is thinking about is often arbitrary",[213] which makes a probable counter-argument towards my reading of the scene. However, I would argue that we can identify that the face in question is thinking about Aiden through the immediate cut to him after it is shown, marking a clear relation between the two shots. Therefore, there should be no mistake in recognizing that Kayla harbors some hearty sentiments towards him. The slow motion as a technique is another method that reinforces this as a subjective sequence.[214] The effect augments our view to match Kayla's emotional register, presented as a literal slowing of time when Aiden is moving towards her. Burnham uses slow motion here to present her affection towards Aiden in a way comprehensible to us, the audience. At the same time, the slow motion in the scene could also work to ironize this perspective. As Cavell points out, while referring to slow

[210] Wilkins, *American Eccentric Cinema*, p. 93.

[211] Burnham, *Eighth Grade,* 00:26:01 (director's commentary).

[212] Wilkins, *American Eccentric Cinema*, p. 93.

[213] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Moving Image*, (1986, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press). p. 90.

[214] David Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies*, (2006, CA: University of California Press). p. 85.

motion as a "fast touch of lyricism",[215] slowing down something that is already slow only thickens it, and Aiden is by no means rushing. Slowing down his already tardy walk may conjure the opposite effect int the other part of the double audience. While Kayla infuses Aiden with a sense of cool, the adult audience sees through the effects, and recognizes Aiden as just another teenage boy. The sympathetic allegiance we may have established with Kayla does not diminish our perspective as the "knowing" audience, we understand that she idealizes him, but we do not get it. The set-up of the segment does not move towards sincerity, it rather applies techniques in order to not wallow in blatant naïveté.

The music is a further cue for us to empathize with the sugarcoated outlook of a teenage girl. As ethnomusicologist Giota Eftaxia tells it, "In cinema the combination of sound and image evokes certain emotions in viewers at certain times. This can be observed, for example, at a moment in a film, when the music comes to the fore and can be intense and loud or impactful".[216] In essence, the pulsating electronic beat that dominates the sequence underpins a certain "coolness" to Aiden's character, or at the very least, how *cool* Kayla thinks he is. I emphasize "cool" as I believe it supports my claim of a sincere outset in set-up, as this hints towards a juvenile form of infatuation. The music makes this point evident, as the choice falls on a techno-beat that one could expect to accompany a "cool" character, such as an action-protagonist like the Driver in *Drive* (2011), instead of a warmer and more sentimental tune, like the use of Elvis Costello's "She" (1999) in *Notting Hill* (1999). With emphasizing the "coolness" of the love interest through the soundtrack, instead of accentuating the romantic undertones, Burnham may be stressing that we are in fact dealing with teenagers, who are yet to reach a more mature understanding of romance. It also works ironically to counter Kayla's infatuation, as the aloof "cool" Aiden radiates during the montage is indexical to a postmodern sense of cool, that allows for ironic distance.[217]Furthermore, MacDowell claims that the combination of image and sound is a key source to cinematic irony.[218] The dissonance between the picture's dull action (walking) and the boisterous nature of the soundtrack aids in creating the incongruity that is often so central to ironic expression. At the very least, the music gives the spectator a look into Kayla's perception of Aiden, assisting in establishing an alignment between the spectator and her point of view. At the same time, our recognition of Aiden's aloofness sours our point of view,

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[215] Cavell, *The World Viewed*, p. 133.

[216] Giota Eftaxia, "The Powerful Role of Music in Cinema", *Radio Art,* October 1., 2021.
https://www.radioart.com/blog/the-powerful-role-of-music-in-cinema

[217] Konstantinou, *Cool Characters,* p. 29.

[218] MacDowell, *Irony in Film*, p. 99.

that juxtapose Kayla's, and establishes an on-going dramatic irony through the discrepancy in knowledge. This illustrates the main difference between *Eighth Grade's* set-ups and those of *Inside*, as these set-ups do not break ironic pretense, nor do they apply it, they counter sincere naïveté by means of ironic juxtaposition. As such, we as the audience, are ensnared into the set-up of the scene by dipping into the narrative through Kayla's sincere point of view, only to evaluate through a highly ironic contextualization.

Aiden from Our POV

Kayla romanticizes Aiden, but Burnham works effectively to challenge this rose-tinted view, mainly by showing the fallibilities that Kayla fails to notice. When the music breaks, and Kayla attempts at an interaction with Aiden, he carries on stoically. There is of course the possibility that Kayla's utterance was too muted, or perhaps he simply ignored her, nevertheless, this marks a change in the scene. What is left when the "montage" from Kayla's viewpoint cuts is an awkward silence, only just relieved by some background chatter from the classroom. Kayla's sincere outlook is met, and engulfed by the indifference of her surroundings (Aiden included), creating a stark juxtaposition to what was just witnessed. Wilkins states, through MacDowell, that an ironic position necessitates ironic intention from the creator.[219] As such, Burnham, through the application of contrast in the scene, deviates from the assumed perspective shared with Kayla, and urges us to notice the irony in Kayla's crush. The irony being that Aiden does not care, whether he is unaware or simply not wanting to is not really important, as it nevertheless bluntly contrasts Kayla's romantic sentiments. This juxtaposition is distinct in the split between the heavily stylized sequence where Aiden first is presented, and how it differentiates from the toned-down latter part. What Burnham establishes is a very different point of view on Aiden, a more somber one from the perspective of the mature spectators. Through such shifts in points of view, akin to MacDowell's mention of situational irony's capacity for subversion of expectations,[220] we are presented with a more indifferent and detached Aiden, which counters Kayla's idealization.

Not only is Aiden aloof and unaware, he is also quite daft. He is shown to not concentrate in class, whether it be by listening to music, playing on his phone or placing all his effort into making asinine hubbub with his mouth. In addition to this, he is also revealed

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[219] Wilkins, *American Eccentric Cinema*, p. 32-33.
[220] MacDowell, *Irony in Film*. P. 4

to be quite crude. In a scene where the school practices emergency measures in case of a school shooting, as is unfortunately a completely natural thing in the United State, Kayla makes her way across the classroom to grab his attention. She has learned from another girl in the school hallway that he, charmingly enough, ended his last relationship due to an absence of dirty photos from his partner, all while ogling him as he is toying with his gum (up his nose). This spurs an attempt from Kayla to get his attention by lying about having some dirty photos of herself on her phone. Later that same day, as the class partakes in another shooter-drill where they are to turn off the lights in the classroom and hide below their desks, Kayla sneaks over to Aiden's table. Here she reveals the existence of her imaginary dirty photos after stumbling through the first half of a one-sided conversation with him. Aiden, who spends the majority of the interaction playing on his phone, does not really pay Kayla much attention before the mention of said photos. At this point though, his eyes are firmly fixed on her, and he is attentive and speaks with urgency. Here, we are not at any point afforded Kayla's perspective, we are instead offered a third persons point of view. As George M. Wilson puts it, the cinematic point of view shapes the readers epistemic access and understanding of the narrative.[221] If the last scene ushered us into a narrative understanding of Aiden from Kayla's point of view, then this scene offers us a perspective from a decidedly neutral one. This allows us to see a more cynical side of Aiden, as Kayla's genuine attempts at gaining his interest is somewhat stifled by Aiden's one-sided attention for something else. The ironic counter, again, arises from the discrepancy between Kayla's futile attempt at engagement, and us recognizing that Aiden's interest is grounded in the lewdness that so often accompany teenage boys.

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[221] George M. Wilson, *Narration in Light: Studies in Cinematic Points of View* (1986, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press). p. 3.

Figure 13: A very one-sided conversation

Before Aiden's head perks up, puppy-like at the mention of Kayla's dirty photo folder, she has attempted to engage him in conversations about high school and the hypothetical happening of an actual school-shooting at their school. He responds mostly with relative disinterest, the only exception being when he asserts himself as proactive in an imagined shooting, claiming that he would not hide under his desk "like a pussy",[222] to which Kayla responds affirmingly. The irony of Aiden's shortcomings is presented here through further dramatic irony, as the audience possesses information that the characters themselves do not.[223] The scene presents Aiden, a boy in his early teens, who claims that he could overpower a gunman, which Kayla responds positively to. The audience however, might rightfully harbor doubts. Self-representation, as explained by sociologist Erving Goffman, is an individual's requesting of the observer to take the impression before them seriously.[224] If this is also true of the characters on screen, then Aiden is projecting and impression of himself as capable to an extent far beyond his age. Kayla naïvely leans into this impression and accepts it, as evident in replies such as "Yeah, you'd fuck him up",[225] the audience might conversely find this impression harder to accept. They will catch the irony in such a statement coming from a scrawny little boy, but in the process, they also become acutely aware of the caveats accompanying unbridled enthusiasm such as the one Kayla exhibits towards such

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[222] Burnham, *Eighth Grade,* 00:38:13.
[223] MacDowell, *Irony in Film*, p. 38.
[224] Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1990, UK: Penguin Books), p. 28.
[225] Burnham, *Eighth Grade,* 00:38:22.

statements. She does *not* seem to question the claims, seemingly letting her sentiments diminish her critical judgement. Burnham then challenges her enthusiasm by having Aiden himself become an ironic counter, that essentially becomes indexical of his own falsehoods. In this sequence, the irony Aiden presents starts to convey what the set-ups in *Eighth Grade* structures themselves to do, keep an unbridled naïve enthusiasm in check. One of the positive qualities of irony is critical distance, allowing for a more informed perspective on varying issues. This is something the postironists attempts to maintain,[226] and so does Burnham through these set-ups. He does not vanquish Kayla's naïveté, but he cools it by countering it ironically. This is again a departure from *Inside*, which seemingly struggles to achieve a clear view beyond a more imposing form of such irony, highlighting Burnham's skepticism to towards both extremes.

Kayla's attempt at capturing the attention of her crush does succeed to a certain degree, as Aiden shows *some* sort of interest. As soon as he has established eye-contact with Kayla, he questions her about what the photos are of, what she is doing in them, and quite bluntly, if he can see them. Kayla rebukes this, telling him hintingly that they are reserved for her boyfriend, while also letting him know that the position is vacant. He then proceeds to, after some deep thought, ask her whether she "gives blowjobs".[227] As Kayla, quite stumped, struggles to find an answer, the lights in the classroom comes on again and she is forced to return to her seat, ending the scene on a note of discomfort. Kayla is left none the wiser with Aiden, and on top of that, spends the next scene researching blowjobs, as she was blissfully unaware of what that is. What this might show is how Aiden acts as an ironic pivot of sorts in scenes where Kayla acts on sincere premises. Alternatively, he becomes a physical iteration of an ironic counter, which effectively resists the implications of sincere optimism. This is not, however, accomplished through Aiden being knowingly cruel or neglecting, but simply through an air of indifference. He does not acknowledge her in the first scene, and in the second he displays a greater interest in carnal desires than in interacting with Kayla. Whenever interaction with Aiden in these scene's happen, or could potentially happen, the scene ironically pivots from quirky or sincere sentiments over into indifference, or aloofness. Kayla, continues to strive for Aiden's attention despite of this, taking her seat on the metamodern seesaw, with Aiden on the other end, dipping back and forth between irony and sincerity.

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[226] Konstantinou, "Four Faces of Postirony", p. 88.
[227] Burnham, *Eighth Grade,* 00:39:52.

In the analysis of *Inside* I highlight how Burnham often offers breaks of sincerity within his otherwise sardonic comedy. With *Eighth Grade* I seek to showcase, through the character of Aiden, how Burnham also applies irony to alleviate sincerity. As with irony, sincerity is not an answer in itself, neither acts as the "solution" to the former. However, they work to stabilize each other, in order to achieve, and perhaps encourage, an attitude of informed naïveté or pragmatic realism.[228] The difference in set-ups is a way to discern how Burnhams methods is decidedly postironic, as they show that he (1) does not seek to rid himself of irony and (2) that he uses irony against itself in order to transcend it. What we are left with differs in nature. *Inside* presents different sincere sentiments through reveals, while *Eighth Grade* does something entirely different. Here we see the sincere sentiments in Kayla's constant chase after them and her slow development towards a postironic condition, which is something that is still unspecified as of yet.[229] This first part of the chapter does not seek to show here full journey to a postironic state, I have rather attempted to show how irony works as stepping stones towards via Aiden as he constantly functions checks her naïve outlook

Kayla chases sincere engagement throughout the entire film, as the spectator watches from an in initial distance, being slowly drawn into a closer sympathetic view of her as the story progresses. The distance between spectator and Kayla is molded by her enthusiastic awkwardness, which transpires as equally ironic and profound in its persistence towards is goal.[230] Awkward enthusiasm describes a certain lighthearted enthusiasm that remains stubborn in the face of opposition,[231] which could accurately be attributed to Kayla throughout the majority of the film. Timotheus Vermeulen, through an analysis of a scene from *Mr. Deeds* (2002), points out a duality to the enthusiastic awkward character as they appear within scenes. This is the conflict of interest the character offers to the spectator, their vulnerability and authenticity evoke sympathy, but the less-than-enthusiastic responses from the surroundings signals that their endeavors are plainly silly or inane.[232] As such, we

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[228] Van den Akker & Vermeulen, "Notes on metamodernism", p. 5.
[229] Konstantinou, *Cool Characters,* p. 8.
[230] Jörg Heiser & Christina Ricupero, "Enthusiastic Awkwardness" in *Ridiculously Yours?! Art, Awkwardness and Enthusiasm*, (2022, Berlin: Distanz). p. 33.
[231] Jörg Heiser & Christina Ricupero, "Enthusiastic Awkwardness", p. 33.
[232] Timotheus Vermeulen, "The Doer and the Done-to: The Politics of Enthusiastic Awkwardness" in *Ridiculously Yours?! Art, Awkwardness and Enthusiasm*, (2022, Berlin: Distanz). p. 52.

sympathize with Kayla's sincere engagement, but also cringe at her awkward appearance in the scenes.

Cringe, according to Pansy Duncan, is able to blur the line between the comic and the non-comic,[233] as such Kayla's awkwardness makes her ambiguously endearing. In the scenes examined her pursuit of sincere connection is largely due to naïveté in her approach to romance, simply put, she is just a girl standing in front of a boy, while not being too sure of what to do. This causes an awkward approach to the manner, as the events that ensues from her interactions with Aiden results in awkwardness. Kayla comes off as socially awkward in her attempts at connecting with her surroundings. According to Adam Kotsko this is because "We are only able to identify someone as awkward, however, because the person does something that is inappropriate for a given context".[234] As such, Kayla becomes an awkward presence through her futile attempts at engaging sincerely with predominantly indifferent contexts. She does not conduct herself properly in accordance with the norms of said context. This also goes further to set up the dramatic irony that is evident through the duality of perspectives, where the spectator realizes something that Kayla does not. It is the tension between these perspectives that presents us with comedic relief, awkwardness, and cringe, maybe also a minor epiphany in regards to the attitudes on screen. For instance, in the first scene, while the immediate moment after Kayla's constructed little montage is awkward, it is also so jarringly dissonant that one cannot help but to snicker to themselves. While snickering along one also realizes that Kayla's infatuation is faulty to a certain extent, but so is Aiden's detached appearance, encouraging us to reconsider both. Burnham's set-up seeks to highlight the faultiness at the extremes of sincerity and irony, through breaks that reveal a jarring discord in tone that is as awkward as it is thought-provoking.

An ironic negation is apparent in that we recognize Kayla's sentiments as ironic due to Aiden being the doofus that he is, but our own ironic attitude is negated by the fact that Burnham will not allow us to simply scoff at her. We are at several occasions invited into the narrative through her and therefore, we are also made to sympathize with her, rather than dismiss her endeavors. Kayla being completely overlooked in the first scene and reduced to an object of desire in the second should be deeply disquieting, especially seeing as she is young and therefore vulnerable, and Burnham allows us to see this. He never presents neither character in a negative way, as is common in quirky cinema. While Kayla may be a little

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[233] Duncan, "Joke Work", p. 38.
[234] Adam Kotsko, *Awkwardness: An Essay*, (2010, UK: Zero Books). p. 12.

misguided, and Aiden is a bit daft, none of them are "bad", nor does Burnham treat them as such. MacDowell, in discussing how director Wes Anderson treats his characters, notes quirky cinema's tendency to cheer their characters on instead of veering at them with ironically.[235] No matter how odd, dumb, awkward or doomed the endeavors of the characters may be, they are still treated with sympathy, albeit still with some ridicule. It is the enthusiasm of the characters that spurs both directors and audience alike to cheer them on. While Kayla's infatuation with Aiden seems destined for heartbreak, we are nevertheless encouraged to cheer her on as she enthusiastically stumbles along the way.

Enthusiasm then, is at the center of Burnham's set-ups in *Eighth Grade*, as they revolve around Kayla's awkward attempts at making herself at home in the world. This brand of awkwardness relies on the normative expectations to behavior in social context, to which Kayla's enthusiasm is seemingly vulgar. Such enthusiasm is largely absent in *Inside*, or just barely visible in the form of sincere breaks, like the white woman's strong-willed focus on the winnings in her life despite the loss of her parents. Nonetheless, a common denominator for the set-ups in both works is that they never let the initial logic, whether it be irony or sincerity, remain unchallenged in whatever scene or sequence they appear in. Burnham rarely lingers on either too long, but just enough to draw spectator into the narratives. As we see in this chapter however, is that they do differ in arrangement and approach. *Inside'*s set-ups are usually similar to those of the stand-up world, where he builds up towards a punchline, which in this case becomes more of a gutpunch. *Eighth Grade'*s set-ups does not adhere to world of comedy, but rather sets up perspective on the pursuit of sincere engagement, only to highlight how irony makes it difficult. It is postironic in the sense that irony negates an ironically sugarcoated outlook, which usually results in awkwardness or cringe. These are indexical of the stepping stones on Kayla's journey towards a postironic condition, but they are also essential in building relations between the double perspective of the spectator. I have attempted to display this via Aiden in this part of the chapter, I will now turn to how *Eighth Grade*'s visuals plays a role in displaying Kayla's growth from the naïve to the postironic.

Eight Grade's Visual Elements: The Path to the Postironic

Eight Grade, like *Inside*, features visuals that support Burnham's set-ups, and helps convey their workings. *Inside*'s visual set-ups radiates volatility in the unpredictable nature of their

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[235] MacDowell, "Wes Anderson, tone, and the quirky sensibility", p. 18-19.

frames, where their fleeting nature hints at a depthiness beyond a shroud of irony. In *Eighth Grade* however, I argue another approach to instability that symbolizes the maturation process Kayla is undergoing, resulting in a slightly more optimistic tone than the one in *Inside*. This instability is visible through the zoomed in perspective of the story. Where Burnham pulls back and reveals to contextualize in *Inside*, the story stays zoomed in on Kayla and her experiences with the volatile conditions of her surroundings in *Eighth Grade*. Where the former is a postironic grapple with the current moment in history, the latter becomes more of a character study. In this case, the visual focus will be on Kayla's vlogging, which is reoccurring throughout the film. These will be examined through a close reading of a couple of scenes where the content on screen supports the erratic experience of maturing in today's digital climate. However, while the mise-èn-scene is a contributing factor to *Eighth Grade*'s visual evocation of awkward youth, one must also acknowledge how the usage of social media logics plays into this.

As will be explored, Kayla attempts to find her place within an environment of digital creators, like the Burnham character from last chapter, that seeks to create communal connections across social media platforms. A key aspect to this chapter is how Kayla awkwardly attempts to fit into this branch of social media presence, in her pursuit of social connection, and in her journey towards adulthood. Additionally, Kayla's liminal status between adolescence and maturity ties her to the postironic bildungsroman, as her education is key to the story, which also emphasizes ironic negation in the visuals as it is necessary for Kayla in her journey towards a postironic state. As such, this chapter will look at four vlogs to visualize Kayla's postironic journey. The first will present her childlike naïveté through the first vlog of the film, the second will build further on this by addressing the tension between the juvenile and the mature, the third will present a major bout with irony that informs the final vlog, which shows her overcoming it and reaching a condition of postirony. When this happens, she will have moved on from enthusiastic awkwardness into a form of informed enthusiasm.

Once again, the features of quirky cinema will be relevant as often features its fair share of visual gags. This includes, but is rarely exclusive to, deadpan acting and line delivery, slapstick humor, and awkward body language.[236] The last feature will be the most relevant in this part of the chapter, as it conveys the awkwardness that Kayla exudes in social situations. Moreover, in *Eight Grade*'s case, the quirky cinema's juvenile lens may be

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[236] MacDowell, "Notes on Quirky"

especially prevalent and conveyed through the visuals, as it introduces us to its fair share of cringe. Duncan says that cringe "engage the spectator in an unusually onerous kind of labor, labor that converges on our endurance of a state of 'awkwardness' whose negative phenomenological effects extend from psychic unease to real physical pain".[237] The sensation of cringe will be explored through Kayla's vlog-posts, as they indulge in their fair share of awkward imagery and content.

Kayla's Vlogs: The different phases of Gucci (towards postirony)

Eighth Grade is bookended by Kayla's monologues, some aimed at a marginal, nearly non-existing audience, and other ones exclusively for herself. At the beginning of the film, it is a vlog through her YouTube channel, at the end of the film it is a recording she makes for her future self. These monologues are ever-present to the film, as Kayla rarely misses an opportunity to bless her marginal, on-screen audience (and her real, off-screen one) with wisdom she attains through her real-life efforts. They are pretty straight-forward in that she simply talks upliftingly (and all over the place) into the camera, and always ends with her catchphrase: "Gucci". The latter is an obvious, and ham-fisted attempt at launching a slogan, as well as an awkward execution of a previously established slang word.[238] As such, "Gucci" becomes a prevalent display of awkwardness that transcends into cringe, as the audience cannot simply laugh it off, but must endure it as well.[239] The catchphrase also comes with its own gesture, which simply is Kayla holding her hand up in front of her face, while connecting the index finger with the thumb and stretching out the other fingers. While an attempt to make her catchphrase more memorable, akin to other popular vloggers/YouTubers own gestural catchphrases, such as PewDiePie's "brofist",[240] it also serves as a positive note at the end of her vlogs.

Whether the vlogs are particularly successful or not may be put up for debate, but Kayla, forever the optimist, forwards her discoveries nevertheless, while always threading a line between earnest motivational speech and self-therapy. These vlogs-cum-monologues are usually transpiring as visual progressors, or transitions, in the story. They often take place

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[237] Pansy Duncan, "Joke work", p. 37.
[238] Jaboman101, "Gucci" in *Urban Dictionary*, February 26. 2017. https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Gucci
[239] Duncan, "Joke Work", p. 38.
[240] PewDiePie, "BROFISTING STRANGERS ON THE STREETS – (Fridays With PewDiePie - part 26)", *YouTube, April 27, 2012*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P04dWshDFMs

after development, regardless of said development's nature. Additionally, they are often marked by substantial dissonance between text and visuals, presenting the metamodern seesaw with equilibrium to such a degree that Kayla is seemingly unable to plant her feet firmly on sincere ground. Burnham anchors Kayla's sincerity with irony, so she does not embellish everyday life to the point where it becomes a tad *too* saccharine. After all, one of the positive aspects of irony, callous as it might be, is the sense of realism that it offers. Kayla's recordings during the entirety of the film, make up an arch that showcases her journey through irony towards a postironic state. The more steadfast narrative deviates from the scattershot approach of *Inside*, showing nuance in Burnham's postironic approaches. I will attempt to illustrate Kayla's journey via analyzing her vlogs, looking at Burnham's visual work within them in the process. It is not so much the frames that become the point of inquiry here, but rather how the scenes evoke a zoomed in effect that allows for assessment of this particular part of the world.

Frames are not left entirely irrelevant however, as the vlogging-sequences often picture situational irony by presenting jarring juxtapositions within the frames.[241] They also rely on juxtapositions in the *relations* of the frames, such as Kayla triumphantly overcoming anxiety to perform karaoke, only to pan back to the mostly skeptical reactions from those witnessing it.[242] Such contradictory imagery is vital in displaying the intentionally ironic patterns of the scenes, as well as being as staple for comedic effect in movies.[243] Thus, Kayla's triumphs and tribulations are rarely unaccompanied by some form of ironic consideration from Burnham in his director's seat. They mostly occur situational, as in the abovementioned example where the text and subtext differed during Kayla's exultant karaoke showing. Here, the text showed what was explicitly taking place before us, while the subtext showed other potential meanings lurking in the undercurrent, like how Kayla's big showing was showed to be of significance to only her (and Gabe), while others seemingly found it off-putting.[244] However, pictorial irony is also common during these sequences,[245] where the frames contain contradicting elements, such as Kayla dishing out a make-up tutorial while shown to be following another one by someone else. The act itself is genuine, as Kayla eagerly seeks to both obtain make-up know-how, and subsequently pass it on. However, an

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[241] MacDowell, *Irony in Film*, p. 29.

[242] Burnham, *Eighth Grade,* 00:31:27.

[243] Marc Blake, *Writing the Comedy Movie*, (2016, London: Bloomsbury). p. 53.

[244] William Beard, "Text and Subtext in Commercial Movies: An Educational Perspective." *The Journal of Educational Thought (JET) / Revue de La Pensée Éducative* 16, no. 3 (1982): 212. https://www.jstor.org/stable/23768322

[245] MacDowell, *Irony in Film*, p. 29.

ironic effect is achieved in that Kayla, in attempting to teach make-up routines, is herself taking advice from others. Irony work to scrutinize her genuine intents rather than countering them, it contextualizes parts of her character, letting the spectator in on her own insecurity. As in *Inside*, Burnham rarely allows for the action to remain on one pole or the other, and Kayla's sincerity is regularly ironically scrutinized in some way or the other. Just as I have presented the ironic counters of the set-ups in *Eighth Grade* during the first part of the chapter, I will attempt to show how Burnham's visuals contextualizes Kayla's sincerity within her ironic surroundings in order to guide her towards postirony. For example, the less-than-enthusiastic crowd from her karaoke showing considers the fact that it really just means something to her, irony curbs the sincere potential. Similarly, her following another make-up tutorial while making her own somewhat scrutinize her YouTube-persona, while displaying her inexperience against her faux confident appearance. Thus, this chapter will focus on visualizations that aid Burnham's set-ups, inform them, and contextualizes them.

Kayla's Introduction and the First, Enthusiastic Gucci

The very first shot of the film is a grainy one, and the content we are presented with is Kayla's face zoomed in to an absurd degree where the entire screen is covered with her face. As the scene develops however, the shot progressively pans out, still revealing nothing more than Kayla and a bright, floral background. As the zoom is being gradually undone, Kayla reveals that the video is about "being yourself", before stumbling through a simple instruction on how to do so. As with some of the segments in *Inside,* Burnham utilizes prevailing forms associated with certain mediums in order to satirize them, such as the usage of conversational vlogging in this case.[246] This brand of vlogging usually features a simple set-up where the vlogger is central to the camera, and the content is typically monologues that inclines a conversational tone between creator and audience, which is what Kayla mostly does throughout the film. The intimate dimension that Creeber associates with internet is yet again apparent in this form of vlogging,[247] as this opening shot works to create a close dynamic between Kayla and the spectator.

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[246] Oya Aran, Joan-Isaac Biel and Daniel Gatica-Perez, "Broadcasting Oneself: Visual Discovery of Vlogging Styles" in *IEEE Transactions on Multimedia*, vol. 16, no. 1 (2014) : 201. doi: 10.1109/TMM.2013.2284893
[247] Creeber, *Small Screen Aesthetics,* p. 124.

Figure 14: Kayla's very close opening of the movie

The grainy camera and subpar camera-work goes on to support the "liveness" often attributed to the webcam,[248] adding a certain authenticity to the shot. The liveness is supported by the fact that user-created videos often lack the traditional structure of a beginning, a middle and an end, frequently starting off in medias res, like Kayla's does, with the sudden appearance of her enlarged face. They also often bear little to no indicators of spatial or temporal context,[249] as seen in the video's minimal, DYI (do it yourself) mise-en-scène. Said authenticity is also a part of the ironic workings of the scene, as it counteracts Kayla's naïveté by calling attention her lack of decent equipment and limited experience, furthermore undermining her motivational speech. The use of childlike imagery such as the bright flowery background (later revealed to be a bedsheet) is typical of quirky cinema to accentuate adolescence or naïveté. Alongside "naiveté", MacDowell also presents "simplicity" and "purity" amongst the terms to describe the visual and musical styles of quirky.[250] Simplicity in particular speaks to the scene at hand, where both monologue and visuals are inflicted with being a little too uncomplicated. The former is evident in the fact that the advices provided for being yourself in Kayla's video can essentially be boiled down to "just be yourself", and not listening to other people "because, like, people suck".[251]

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[248] Creeber, *Small Screen Aesthetics,* p. 129.
[249] Creeber, *Small Screen Aesthetics*, p. 123.
[250] MacDowell, "Notes on Quirky", p. 9.
[251] Burnham, *Eighth Grade*, 00:01:48.

Additionally, halfway through the video, Kayla somewhat digresses into a defense of her own impression as a quiet kid, with all the eloquence one would expect of an early teenager. The latter is evident in her constantly breaking eye-contact with the camera to read of a script (which she acknowledges) and stumbling through her dialogue, taking continual breaks where she is shown to actively ponder on how to continue. The visual simplicity is also evident in the mentioned liveness of the video, with the low quality of the video and the DIY-characteristics of the set-up.

While these are hallmarks of the displayed vlog-form, they are also indexical to limited funds and lack of experience in, therefore rendering it all slightly juvenile. These elements underline a certain genuineness to Kayla's video, because at the end of the day, it is simply a good-natured plea to whoever is watching (and herself) to remain earnest and to *try*. According to Jean Burgess and John Green the vlog is a rather easy to produce, all it requires is a webcam, a good sense of timing and some decent editing skills,[252] Kayla only shows one, the webcam. The other two are absent in the video, as she lacks timeliness in her address which is evident in her stumbling and digressions, and that the video bears no signs of editing. As such, Kayla's sincere attempt at motivation and advice falls somewhat flat, as the audience recognizes the lack of maturity and the mediocre execution of the video. This last bit becomes apparent when the camera switches from Kayla's camera to Burnham's, and we get to see a messy, low-lit room, bearing all the marks of an early teenager. What the frames of Kayla's camera excluded comes to the foreground within the frames of Burnham's. As Kayla's anxious and inexperienced appearance is contextualized, and explained, by way of her room, Burnham shows us Kayla's adolescence explicitly, supporting the suspicions that arise from her appearance in her own video.

The presence of ironic counters that was previously exampled in the form of a lethargic teenage boy, transpires here as zoomed in contextualization of Kayla, as shown through the visuals of her vlog. This is aided by Burnham's application of the conversational vlog form, that is intentionally executed unexceptionally, and bears the mark of ironic intention.[253] What this first vlog does is establishing Kayla as a character, through a sense of enthusiastic awkwardness that becomes awkward through her surroundings. Had she been more confident in her speech and body language, shared thoughts on another subject, or

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[252] Burgess & Green, *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture*, p. 151.
[253] Wilkins, *American Eccentric Cinema*, p. 32-33.

executed the vlog more professionally it might have been different. Instead, we are presented with a well-meant enthusiasm that ironically transpires within confines that subdue it.

The Juvenile, the Mature and Problematizing the Gucci

Mere seconds after the first vlog ends, we are subjected to a sequence of Kayla getting ready for school, and running parallel with this is yet another vlog. In this vlog Kayla wants to share the routine for her "going out" look. While in the last example the vlog was the main focus of the scene as a character introduction to Kayla, this one does not show the video. Instead, we watch as Kayla wakes up, does her skin-care routine and make-up, before eventually getting some insight to her social media usage. In this instance, it is not Kayla's camera that governs the viewer's insight, but Burnham's. Cavell points out that the camera predetermines the spectator's amount of view into the on-screen world,[254] giving the camera a sense of agency, an ambition in display. Kayla's camera was static, only showing her in a centered shot in front of the bed-sheet she used as her background. Presumably, this is what *she* wanted to show in an attempt to support her mediated vlogger-persona. Burnham's camera is less restricted, allowing us to veer into parts of Kayla's life that was previously veiled, parts that she does not necessarily want the audience in her world to see. Again, the visual serves to create dissonance between the content of Kayla's vlog, and the actuality of her life. The content of the vlog is yet again lighthearted and intended to be helpful, however, the contents of the frame work against Kayla's earnestness, and starts to unravel some unhappy and ironic truths.

      The mise-en-scène is densely packed with little clues pointing to Kayla's adolescent traits. For one, as the camera pans upwards alongside Kayla's bedroom-mirror there is a large cluster of post-it notes that all serves as motivation or reminders to Kayla of some kind. Amongst the motivational ones are some that reads "Shine like a star", "OWN who you are", "learn new joke every day" and "don't stop believing".[255] The reminders are mostly linked to looks and make-up, often in relation to her vlogs, such as "put a little lip-gloss on cheekbone for shine" and "for make-up tutorials: always face at angle".[256] These are at once supportive evidence of a Kayla's genuine commitment to making an effort, but also highly ironic in that they highlight the very same insecurities in her that she wants to help others with. The notes

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[254] Cavell, *The World Viewed,* p. 24.
[255] Burnham, *Eighth Grade,* 00:03:36.
[256] Burnham, *Eighth Grade.*

also work to undermine the faux self-confidence she displays in her videos, as they are highly indicative of the absence of said confidence. To further build on the detracting irony is some notes with rather ominous undertones, hiding amongst the others. One reads "be sexy", which is uncanny if one considers Kayla's age (13), and another one reads (partly covered) "hide braces" with a faded, almost eerie, smiley face underneath.[257] Such messages carry undertones of the unhealthy bodily focus that often follows women on social media,[258] but they also further articulate deep-lying and mature insecurities in Kayla, reminding us that she is on the cusp of adulthood, despite her childish mannerism. Having the camera hovering over these notes while Kayla starts her video blog, creates a dramatic irony by creating a stark contrast between what Kayla preaches to what she evidently practices.[259] As such, this first look into the mise-en-scène of Kayla's room provides the spectator with plenty of ironic, visuals cues and insights to Kayla's character. Going back to the notion of ironic counters in Burnham's sincerity-based set-ups, it becomes evident that the post-it notes serves a similar purpose in this instance.
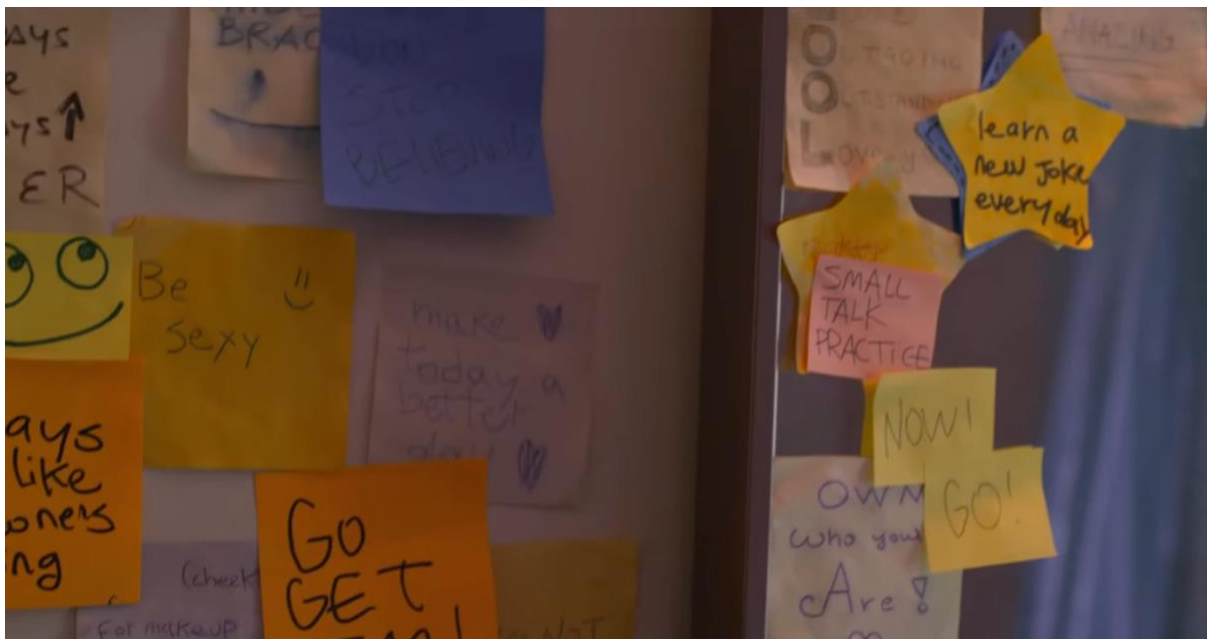

Figure 15: Some of Kayla's post-it notes

As the scene moves on from the edges of the mirror the camera finally lands on Kayla herself, as she applies her own make-up. Her gaze flickers between the mirror and what is revealed to be another vlog that shows a make-up tutorial. The video she watches has just

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[257] Burnham, *Eighth Grade.*
[258] Rosalind Gill, "Being watched and feeling judged on social media" and "The affective, cultural and psychic life of postfeminism: A postfeminist sensibility 10 years on".
[259] MacDowell, *Irony in Film*, p. 40.

under two million views, and the girl giving the tutorial, while young, still appears older and more experienced. Burnham continues the irony of the post-it notes by having the audio of Kayla's make-up tutorial layered on top of a shot showing herself following another tutorial. This works ironically to further establish Kayla's adolescent insecurity in a liminal stage of her life. MacDowell stresses that quirky cinema frequently feature "adolescents who represent an uneasy tension between youth and its imminent loss",[260] and through the puberty-littered mise-en-scène this tension becomes vivid. The shots accompanying the vlog shows signs of youth, as well as early markers of adulthood. The aforementioned notes are written sloppily and crudely, and features drawings of childish nature. Apart from this, her room is correspondingly shown to feature cartoon posters, bright colors and stuffed animals, all pointing towards an adolescent inhabitant. Loss is never explicit in the scene, but it is hinted at. Blurred behind Kayla as we see her apply her skin care are a bunch of other skin care products, and towards the end of the scene Burnham shows us Kayla's preoccupancy with social media, via Snapchat. We see her toying with different filters, before hesitating to post one that reads "Just woke up like this… ugh (several emojis)".[261] She blackens the screen of her phone as she is about to post it, leaving it ambiguous whether she did or not. Nevertheless, in contrast to her childishly decorated room, her social media activity points toward a more mature awareness of self-representation, a premonition of adulthood, and the loss of innocence it brings with it.

The contrasts between youth and adulthood in the scene bears a comedic effect, as protagonists in comedy films is usually flawed in ways that they are themselves unaware of, or simply refuse to acknowledge.[262] As such, the irony becomes a tool, an instrument for Burnham to accentuate the amusing aspects of a tween would-be self-help guru who herself lacks the necessary maturity and social traits to convincingly be one. However, Burnham never treats the character in a cruel manner, he is as much her guide through irony as her storyline is. He acknowledges and elevates Kayla's sincere outlook through the storyline, but he also problematizes it through irony. Like other directors that works within the quirky sensibility of cinema, he stands beside her, cheering her on, rather than mocking her from "some distant Olympus of irony".[263] This is how the set-ups transpire, and this scene applies its visual cues to complicate Kayla's admittedly naïve sincerity, so it does not remain

[260] MacDowell, "Wes Anderson, Tone & the Quirky", p. 9.
[261] Burnham, *Eight Grade*, 00:04:15.
[262] Blake, *Writing the Comedy Movie*, p. 26.
[263] MacDowell, "Wes Anderson, Tone & the Quirky", p. 10.

unrestricted. If it were to be unopposed, there would be no development as Kayla would have muddled gleefully in her own counterproductive, rose-tinted worldview. As such, these visual means to contribute ironic turns to the scene is vital to recognizing Kayla's odyssey towards a postironic condition.

Incidents in Cars and the Saddest Gucci

After a couple of highs in the shape of the aforementioned karaoke triumph in front of a rather befuddled crowd, and some new and older friends, Kayla hits a breaking point. While getting a ride home from one of the older boys she has spent the evening with, he abruptly stops the car, gets in the back and initiates a game of truth-and-dare with suggesting intents. He manipulates Kayla into playing, as well as pressuring her into giving the answers he wants, answers that becomes increasingly sexually tinged. Kayla eventually puts an end to the game by refusing to remove her shirt like he has done by this point, and he takes her home. He berates her along the way, claiming that he was being nice and doing her a favor so her first time would not be bad, willfully disregarding how awful he has made her first stroke with adult relations.

This scene serves as the point in the film's overarching plotline where cynicism forces sincerity on the ropes. The boy, Riley, comes to embody the heedlessness of irony as he seemingly acts out of sheer self-interest. When he enters the backseat, Burnham covers him in the shadows of the car, so one can barely make out his face. As a matter of fact, Burnham avoids showing a clear shot of Riley's face at all throughout the scene. John Gibbs tells that "The organization of light, actors and camera makes possible a series of successive readings"[264] in relation to the mise-èn-scene. The organization in this scene places Kayla closest to the camera, with Riley farthest away from it, and the dark of night as a shroud between them. As such, Riley full face is never discerned, as the scene applies a dimly lit variant of Rembrandt-lighting[265] that works to convey his sinister motivations. He is almost dehumanized in order to convey the distrust he is radiating. To further add to the uneasy mood in the scene's mise-en-scène, the shots vary between the claustrophobic backseat and close-ups of Kayla's distressed look. The feeling of being trapped is inescapable and Riley ignorantly dismisses the inappropriateness of his actions through futile attempts at humor.

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[264] Gibbs, *Mise-en-Scène*, p. 6.
[265] Patrick Keating, *Hollywood Lighting from the Silent Era to Film Noir*, (2010, New York: Columbia University Press). p. 31.

The scene remains zoomed in within the car, forcing the spectator to sympathetically share in Kayla's anxiousness. Riley's self-referential, and at times self-deprecating, superficial ramblings throughout the scene resembles those of postmodern irony,[266] and this entity-like teenage boy marks Burnham's most sinister ironic counter to Kayla yet. Through Riley, she is in an unpleasant manner faced with a much heavier indifference than she has before in the movie. Her sincere outlook is literally drowned in the sparse lighting of the car, as this ironic contextualization goes above and beyond to check her. Despite her attempt at keeping a positive tone, she is soon overcome by the malevolence of the situation. After this, she experiences a breakdown at home with her father that subsequently leads her to record a final farewell-vlog.

Figure 16: Riley's game of truth or dare

This vlog is marked by Burnham flipping the script from the previous ones. Whereas the other ones were marked by ironic visual contextualization to counter and challenge Kayla's sincerity, this one is unique in its absence of such prompts. The audio of the vlog starts playing during a scene showing Kayla's father comforting her in the wake of the mishap with Riley. The audio continues over shots of Kayla sitting alone in her room and at school, lacking her usual sense of enthusiasm. She looks utterly defeated throughout the shots depicting her at school, and is seemingly resigned. The latter part of the vlog is notably shot from just above the back of the laptop-screen, rather than through the webcam, as in the first

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[266] Gry Rustad, "The Joke That Wasn't Funny Anymore…", *Notes on Metamodernism*, February 10, 2011. https://www.metamodernism.com/2011/02/10/the-joke-that-wasnt-funny-anymore/

example. Furthermore, whereas the first was zoomed in through her webcam to create an intimate feel, this one is zoomed out a bit, to accentuate the lack of intimacy, as she is no longer attempting sincere engagement. This shot remains for the rest of the scene as Kayla explains to the viewers why she perhaps is not the right person to listen to when it comes to life-advice. Throughout the last bit, there is a notable absence factors that counter and problematize sincerity, this time it is just Kayla. In *Eighth Grade*'s storyline this marks a definite part of what Lee Konstantinou deems the "ironic phase"[267] in the postironic bildungsroman. Her naïve outset has been met and, for the time being, overcome by the irony that accompanies maturity. The lingering shot on Kayla's face displays a sense of apathy hitherto absent in her character, and ironically enough, she has realized the liabilities in her motivational-influencer front that Burnham would earlier poke fun at. The last remnants of sincerity are vaguely evident in her utterly defeated demeanor, and the lack of ironic counterpoints in the frames and in Kayla's monologue is Burnham presenting the spectator with the real threat of disaffect. In familiar Burnham-fashion, the spectator cannot help but feel downcast and a bit guilty, as Kayla delivers her saddest "Gucci" to end her final vlog, this time without the accompanying gesture.

Postironic, Reinvigorated Enthusiasm and the Last Gucci

After the final vlog entry Kayla goes through some major development. She has a heart-to-heart moment with her supporting father as they burn a time capsule that she received in beginning of the movie, she confronts some girls that have acted dismissive towards her and she has a dinner-date with a boy she met earlier in the film, Gabe. In true coming-of-age style she learns to value those she overlooked in the shape of her father and Gabe who has been rooting for her along the way. Additionally, she stands up to the mean girls in a short, awkward confrontation that (almost) eloquently confronts the concept of postmodern irony as well. She tells them that "when someone is nice to you, you're supposed to be nice back" and urging them to "stop trying to be cool all the time".[268] This indicates a change in Kayla, where instead of suppressing her own sincere nature, she accepts it without bending it to the will of those around her, urging them to simply care more. Towards the end of the film, Kayla rediscovers her enthusiasm. She no longer attempts to adjust to fit into a mostly

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[267] Lee Konstantinou, *"Four Faces of Postirony", p. 86.*
[268] Burnham, *Eighth Grade*, 1:23:53*.*

disinterested context, she instead opts for defying it, Sisyphean as it might turn out to be. This is reflected in her final "vlog", which is really a recording for herself for a new time capsule.

Visually, this last recording mirrors the very first one we see in the film. The grainy webcam is back, and instead of steadily zooming out, it now zooms in, bookending the film with a similar shot as it started out with. Whereas the zoom in the beginning indicated the opening of Kayla's world for us, as it gradually unfolded from her, this one signals the closing. As she speaks to her future self, we as viewers are afforded a sense of closure, literally, as the camera closes in on Kayla. Additionally, some of the imagery from the two first vlogs reoccur, such as the mirror with all the post-it notes and the make-up tutorial. However, this time, the notes are all blurred and the laptop is nowhere to be seen. Instead, the shot shows Kayla giving herself a content look. Whereas the earlier scene displayed Kayla's preteen insecurities and how she reflected that unto her surroundings, this shot exemplifies her development towards more secure, and grown-up version of herself. She does not need that sort of motivation anymore, indicating a maturation that has taken place alongside the events of the film, as she does no longer seeks connection with others to validate herself. This is backed up in her monologue, as she speaks to herself in the future, mapping out all the changes that will happen and how frightening they might be, but that it ultimately will be fine, because she is more than capable to navigate through it.

This deviates from all the other vlogs in that she for the first time explicitly addresses herself. I say explicitly because, as I hinted at in the introduction, the other vlogs oftentimes come off as thinly-veiled motivational monologues for herself. Regardless, the vlogs have usually been aimed at an audience in search of a feeling that she has developed a sense of self-reliance. Her body language also bears marks of further maturation, as she no longer stumbles (at least not abundantly) or reads from a paper, she also manages to keep her eyes fixed on the camera, which adds a sense of security to her speech. Her awkwardness has somewhat faded, as she no longer seems to be normatively out of touch with er context.[269] On the contrary, the last couple of shots showing her happily spending time with herself and her father points towards a newfound assurance, a sense of peace with her social context. With her awkwardness dampened, the effect of cringe that resulted from her inability to master the role required of her to connect with her contemporaries has also faded.[270] This is evident in

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[269] Kotsko, *Awkwardness*, p. 13.
[270] Duncan, "Joke Work", p. 39.

the way she delivers her final "Gucci", with an almost sarcastic intonation and a telling smile, informing us that she has shed her awkward enthusiasm in favor of a more pragmatic one.

Through the introduction of awkward enthusiasm and the subsequent contextualization of it within an ironically tinged context, Burnham illustrates another mode of ironic negation. This one transpires as a steady transcendence, emphasizing the necessity of irony along the path towards it. *Inside's* revelatory set-ups bemoaned the irony in which it was encircled by, but *Eighth Grade* shows the necessity of it. In this sense, the ironic counters and contextualization presents a different set-up, and with the contrasting ones form *Inside*, Burnham's nuanced approach to the metamodern oscillation becomes evident. He shows that it occurs on large and small scales, rapidly and unhurried, but also its abundance of potential results and destination. Throughout the thesis I have covered examples that ends in dejection, but also in hope, in an attempt to illustrate the intricacy of the metamodern structure of feeling; its ambiguity reflects the general uncertainty of the time, thus making a fixed outlook hard to develop. Burnham's postironic set-up illustrates this, by showing the arbitrariness of the tension between irony and sincerity that entails our contemporary cultural landscape.

Conclusion

The postironic project is, as of now, an open-ended one. There is some clarity as to what the project is, as referred to mainly through Lee Konstantinou's conception. The only certainty is that it seeks to transcend irony, through irony, to reach something beyond, often thought to be a form of sincerity. Exactly how it transcends irony varies, and as of now there is no textbook answer on how to operate postironically. By examining the characteristics of Bo Burnham's postironic techniques, I have sought to contribute to this *how*, in that I have identified distinguishable structures within popular cultural expressions that deploys irony on itself in the search for something else. These are the set-up, and the frame-up. These devices characterizes Burnham's postironic approach through the conveyance of arbitrary feelings based on the components of the given set-up. Alongside the set-up, I present the under category of the frame-up, which assumes an orientation towards the viewer, as it works to incriminate them for any ironic sentiments they might assume. The set-up is seen to vary in form between the tumultuous, comedically oriented ones apparent in *Inside*, and the slower, more focused set-ups of *Eighth Grade*. Within these also appears different mechanisms labeled *sincere breaks* and *ironic counters*. The sincere breaks disrupt the present irony in a set-up revealing sincere sentiments that lie latent within. They work similarly to a pullback and reveal-function, which works to reveal parts of a world to the viewer that they were priorly unaware of. Like this, the sincere break opens up the possibility for intuiting depthiness to the world on-screen. There will be a brief recap of the set-ups and frame-ups as they appeared in analysis below, but first I will address some concerns that may be raised toward to my analysis.

Addressing Some Potential Limitations

While I am confident in the work and results of the thesis, like with any work, there are some conceivable limitations to the analysis I have conducted. For instance, I limited the analysis to feature only two works out of Bo Burnham's extensive catalogue. This is due to me wanting to focus on the most recent and relevant in his oeuvre, as they pertain a more accurate representation of the latest stage in his modus operandi, and more recent examples of postironic works. Additionally, I chose to include *Eighth Grade* as it offered nuance to the analysis that would have been lost if only *Inside* were examined, as was first planned. The thesis has however illustrated what *Eighth Grade* offers that *Inside* does not, and I therefore

remain confident in my choice to include both these works, with no other subsidiaries. As the thesis have shown, this has proved to be enough material, as any other works added would have derailed the focus that I have dedicated to these two projects, and potentially weaken the findings. This brings me to another possible limitation, which entails my choice of segments and scenes for analysis. For the purpose of the assignment, I have chosen those parts of the works which I believe to be the most appropriate to answering the research question at hand, those who best illustrated the postironic set-up. Both works at hand yields potential for a longer, and an even more comprehensive study, in many different approaches and topics other than those that I have analyzed myself. This segues into the third and final possible limitation I will address, which concerns the findings themselves. I do not limit these approaches to Burnham nor to postirony, rather I have studied his work because they are prevalent enough in his work to accurately examine. I would not be surprised if similar structures and techniques were to be found in the work of other artists, or in other mediums as well. On the contrary, I hope they do, as part of the ambition of this thesis were to distinguish them so they may contribute to discerning postirony beyond Burnham. If the work this thesis have done is able to be of assistance in any further inquiries into the vast subject that is postirony, or to the complexity of metamodernism, I will be very content. Even if it does not, I am still confident in the findings and the relevancy it presents.

The Set-up, the Frame-up and the Characteristics of Burnham's Postirony

As is well covered by now, I have attempted to unearth two distinct variations in the set-ups that Burnham applies. They yield different intents, but maintains the same premise. As seen in many examples throughout the text is the presence of a cadence that establishes a certain tone. The tone addresses the audience, presenting them with a certain outlook they are encouraged to share in. In the example's from *Inside* this preliminary tone invites for ridicule, whether it be through absurdity as in the case of Socko, or the referential with the white woman. In both cases, Burnham seemingly sets the audience up for a good time. However, as the set-up progresses, they reach a point where initial expectations are subverted, I have chosen to call these points *sincere breaks*. These breaks present an abrupt reveal within the segments, which opens up and comments on the depthiness of world to the spectator. Burnham disrupts the cadence he spends the majority of the segments nourishing in order to snap the audience out of the sardonic auto-pilot he coaxes them into in the first place.

This is akin to what I referred to as the disruptive note from the jazz-simile in chapter one, a note that rhythmically continues, but alters the experience.[271] This disruptive note reveals aptitudes in the rhythm that was previously unexplored. It flirts with intuition, encouraging us to perceive complexity in the circumstances of everyday life that would before be cloaked in postmodern depthlessness, where they no longer could be discerned due to an over-abundance of cultural stimuli.[272] However, they never completely allow the spectator to fully immerse themselves in it either, as Burnham usually ends the segment on the same notes that he would start them off on. By not ending the segment on a continuation of the disruptive note, nor lingering on it for too long, Burnham presents his material with a sense of depthiness, which allows for perception beyond the postmodern surface, via postmodern methods.[273]

While the above-mentioned set-ups offer sincere breaks, the set-ups as they appear in *Eighth Grade* provide the opposite. The character of Aiden is emblematic of how these set-ups work differently before Burnham vanquishes him into an oubliette, never to be seen in the film again. Like mentioned above, these set-ups do not ensnare the spectator through tone or appeal, but rather through the notion of dual perspectives and points of view. The dual perspective works to create two distinct points of view, the unknowing one as evident in Kayla and the knowing spectator. In this set-up we are invited to assume Kayla's enthusiastic outlook that is somewhat plagued by the adolescent innocence of a quirky character, but also actively made aware that said enthusiasm comes off as awkward in its inability to adhere by the contextual norms. Each time Kayla seeks to make genuine contact with Aiden she is met with indifference, and every attempt ends up in awkwardness. As such, we are asked to sympathize with Kayla, but challenged by ironic counters, which keeps us at a critical distance. Nevertheless, Kayla overcomes the irony she is faced with, and as she becomes less awkward, our allegiance to her strengthens in a set-up that uses irony in order to progress the growth of the protagonist, as well as forging a stronger allegiance between her and the spectator.

The set-up represents a metamodern approach as it constantly oscillates between irony and sincerity, affecting the attitude of the works. Aside from applying irony in layers of negation with an unanticipated profundity underneath, they also apply irony to contend

[271] Smith, *Comedy and critique,* p. 14.
[272] Alison Gibbons, Timotheus Vermeulen & Robin van den Akker, "Reality beckons: metamodernist depthiness beyond panfictionality", *European Journal of English Studies*, 23:2 (2019): 173. DOI: 10.1080/13825577.2019.1640426
[273] Gibbons, Vermeulen & van den Akker. "Reality beckons", p. 175.

overtly sincere enthusiasm, as apparent in *Eighth Grade*. As such, Burnham does not tip in either direction, but highlights the positives and negatives in both. It is important though, to note that Burnham never attempts to *dictate* the feelings of the spectator while watching his content. He does not engage in the creation of a post-emotional subjectivity that follows mediated cues as to when one should exhibit a given feeling. Stjepan G. Mestrovic explains these cues as pre-packaged emotions that one can activate as one pleases, that furthermore makes them "detached from genuine moral commitment and or meaningful social action".[274] Burnham attempts no such thing, as he does not tell you how to feel, in fact, he does not tell you anything at all. Instead, he *shows* that there are possibilities for genuine moral commitment, as well as a healthy sense of critical distance. This could be to *really* consider how the world works, to be conscious of reality, and on the basis of that, perhaps provide attempts at positive change. It could also simply be to not pass judgement so quickly on social media, as one does not really know the persons behind the screen. Finally, he also presents challenges with excessive sincerity, in naïve enthusiasm, as *some* ironic reserve is necessary so we do not greet the world too naively, and consequently let it tyrannize us into apathy.

Unstable Frames vs. Steady Transcendence: The conveyance of uncertainness

In the second chapter I attempted to display how the visual aspects of Burnham's set-up built up under them, and what they would convey. I did the same for the visuals in *Eighth Grade* in the third chapter, to different results. *Eighth Grade* did not so much rely on the frames physical form as *Inside* did, it rather highlighted what was within them. With that said, *Eighth Grade* does employ recognizable frames from newer digital media as well, with the most discernable being the webcam. The webcam bookends Kayla's journey and presents both a physical and representational significance in that symbolizes a narrowing of the world. In *Eighth Grade* the frame only allows us to see a small part of the world, it is Burnham's set-up on a microlevel, showing that even there, it remains significant. Through the zoom we are invited to review Kayla, and watch as she threads the stepping stones of irony towards a postironic condition. As such, the visuals of *Eighth Grade* serves to somewhat align the notion of the set-up with the narrative of a postironic bildungsroman, as they both feature markedly naïve outsets and bouts with irony to reach a postironic condition.

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[274] Stjepan G. Meštrović, *Postemotional Society*, (1997, London: SAGE Publications Ltd). p. xi-xii.

Inside on the other hand, deals in the macro. It tackles a host of issues, with a lot of different frames, and in doing so, displays the sheer magnitude of postirony on a larger cultural scale. *Eighth Grade* is content with displaying how postironic transformations seeps into even the smallest facets of life, *Inside* uses the frames within Burnham's limited guest house space to illustrate its overarching impact. These frames are all markedly unstable and unpredictable, as they widen and narrows, split and reshape. They usually alter in line with the sincere breaks and reveal the constructive instability in irony's self-regulating capabilities. As such, the feelings *Inside* conveys are decidedly more pessimistic than *Eighth Grade*. Ironically, that funny feeling referenced in the song of the same name is not that funny at all. Instead, it is a complex result of volatile ironic encounters, resulting in equally turbulent registers of feelings. The question surrounding postirony then, proves not only to be "what lies beyond?" or "what *is* the beyond?", but also "*how* many variations of beyond might there be?". Burnham proves that there might be numerous answers to those questions.

Concluding Remarks

I present the findings above to answer the research question: *what characterizes Bo Burnham's postironic methods, and what do they convey?* In addition to this, I have attempted to contribute meaningfully to the consideration of cultural expression within the current structure of feeling. Furthermore, I believe it goes to show that studies of metamodern sensibilities and methods still has a lot to offer. The oscillation shows little sign of yielding just yet, the human navigation and understanding of an increasingly unstable world will be invaluable going forwards. Hopefully, the findings of this thesis can be beneficial in unearthing how such comprehension is expressed. As I have borrowed and adapted several terms from the world of literature to the world of film, perhaps others can apply them to other expressions within the larger media landscape. If anything, the notion of the postironic set-up is certainly applicable to further audiovisual research as a valuable tool in discerning the conveyance of contemporary feelings, whether generally as in *Inside* or specifically like in *Eighth Grade*. Regardless of scale, I believe the findings to unravel fertile ground for further research.

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