

# Elegy for a “Special Kind of White Guy”: On Bo Burnham’s *Inside*

written by Guest Contributor | July 15, 2021



Early reviewers describe Bo Burnham’s pandemic special, *Inside* (Netflix 2021), as a smart takedown of internet culture, a meta-cinematic meditation on the powers and limits of comedic performance, and a candid account of one man’s isolated unraveling. *Inside* is all of those things, but it adds up to something bigger. While pandemic conditions inspire the show’s formal constraints, Burnham spotlights inequalities and pressures that predate them. The special takes aim at the desperate and contradictory desire at the heart of contemporary white progressivism: Burnham longs for a way to combat inequality without disrupting any of the structures that give him privilege in the first place. Instead of turning away from this paradox, *Inside* confronts it head on, inventing new techniques to represent the affects and failures of life as a so-called “good” white person.

The show begins by challenging its own premise. Pseudo-quarantined at home in L.A., Burnham spends months writing, producing, and editing a one-man revue, ninety intimate minutes of jokes, songs, and outtakes. Inside Burnham’s backyard studio, his psyche, his corner of the internet–interiors he frames as simultaneously advantaged and agonizing—he has a lot of time to think about what’s going on outside, and it isn’t good: “the world is changing, the planet’s heating up...systematic oppression, income inequality, the other stuff...” Troubled by all this, Burnham poses a version of the question most well-intentioned white progressives are asking today: “What do I do?” After all, he wants to “leave the world a better place” than he found it.

*Inside* stages Burnham’s quest to find an answer. In the early song, “Comedy,” he introduces himself as “a special kind of white guy,” a self-reflective one who is ready to “use [his] privilege for good,” and so he’s ready to try out the first, and most obvious, solution that comes to mind. He’s going to “just shut the fuck up.” This seems like a good start, given how “American white guys” have “had the floor for at least four hundred years.” Viewers, who can see that the special continues on for over an hour after this interlude, will not be surprised when Burnham’s attempt to silence himself lasts about five seconds. “I’m bored,” he announces. He needs to find a way to make a difference “while being paid and being the center of attention.” That’s when he hits on the better solution. Burnham is going to “heal the world with comedy.” He’s going to “make a literal difference metaphorically.” He’s not

going to shut up. He's not going to cede his influential position. And he's not going to redistribute his wealth ("Should I give away my money? No!"). He's going to recode his performance as a social justice project.

This answer is ironic, of course, and so it negates itself. Making a comedy special to solve the world's social and economic and environmental problems is not a thing. It's silly and self-aggrandizing, and it misconstrues the nature and function of creative activity. As *Inside* builds, Burnham proliferates—and excoriates—the many ways white liberals think we're doing something, from expressing ourselves through art, to inventing social justice brand campaigns, to confessing to the microaggressions we've committed.

One might, then, be tempted to conclude that Burnham is promoting vicious and clear-eyed self-critique as one answer to the question of what woke white people should do about big problems like racism, class hierarchy, and climate change. Burnham doesn't want credit for being self-aware, however. On the contrary, he shows how this popular mode centers the white person and his desire to be good, and thus gets in the way of broader movements for more radical forms of change. "Self-awareness doesn't absolve anybody of anything," he says.

"How the World Works," a song that shares its name with a popular collection of Noam Chomsky's writings, plays out this dilemma. Socko, a dirty white sock Burnham wears on his hand as a puppet, joins Burnham to correct the simplistic, altruistic view of the world Burnham has just articulated, one in which every creature "gives what they can and gets what they need." (One reviewer likens this platitude to Marx's famous statement, "from each according to his ability; to each according to his needs," but, because "fish" and "crickets" are Burnham's subjects, we might better root his account in evolutionary economics, a naïve and untestable view of the human that tries to reduce all historical and social phenomena to biological processes.) Socko teaches Burnham that things are more complicated. The private sector and the state, he explains, work together under contemporary neoliberal capitalist democracy to shore up hierarchies wrought out of the West's bloody, colonial history.

At first, Burnham seems ready to reckon with this counternarrative, and he poses another version of his question: "What can I do to help?" Socko, playing the role of the inhuman subordinate othered in relation to Burnham, who can tear Socko off of his hand and consign him back to a liminal state of sleep paralysis on a whim, is frustrated. "Read a book or something, I don't know," Socko says. "Just don't burden me with the responsibility of educating you. It's incredibly exhausting." "I'm sorry, Socko," Burnham says. "I was just trying to become a better person." Burnham lets Socko come closest to articulating an alternative position: "Why do you rich fucking white people insist on seeing every socio-political conflict through the myopic lens of your own self-actualization? This isn't about you, so either get with it, or get out of the fucking way." Here, Socko gestures toward more radical transformations, which might go so far as to topple racial and economic hierarchies in order to redress the problems that trouble, but don't actually materially disadvantage, Burnham. This turns out to be too much for Burnham. "Watch your mouth, buddy," he tells the puppet. "Remember who's on whose hand

here.” When the disenfranchised point out the contradiction at the heart of Burnham’s solipsistic quasi-leftism, the friendly white guy who just wants to be a better person doubles down and neutralizes anyone who would puncture his self-regard, or worse, threaten the material basis of his authority.

Self-reflection can thus be a cover for the very interests it is supposed to expose. It can also create an endlessly recursive loop of obsessive self-laceration, aided by technologies that allow us to preserve, construct, and share our every thought and experience. Formally, Burnham captures life in this echo chamber. He intersperses original content—songs, jokes—with meta-footage of his production process, splicing in outtakes, set-up, commentary, and editing. The special is about making the special, and Burnham’s labor resembles the labor of our daily lives, curating ourselves via online platforms, for fun, for pay, for everything in between. We record ourselves, watch ourselves, alter and distribute ourselves. Then, as we change over time, we’re left to deal with the increasingly robust and endlessly embarrassing archive of what we’ve made.

“Unpaid Intern” discloses the perils of this labor. In this sequence, Burnham sings a song about contemporary worker exploitation, and then, he offers commentary on the song. When his commentary loops back, as if by accident, Burnham next comments on that. As he does so, he becomes more and more critical of both his initial performance and of his previous interpretations of it. He wonders if he’s balding and calls himself pretentious. At work on ourselves behind the bevy of screens we use to record and project self-representations, we risk losing our attention permanently to the futile and masturbatory maw of ever-intensifying self-scrutiny. This is one of many ways Burnham recognizes what should be familiar to those who know the archive of colonial discourse: the violence of an imperial system deforms those at the top, too. It’s bleak inside an exemplary privileged psyche. Burnham is eating himself alive, and there is no outside.

It should come as no surprise, then, that white progressives desperately want a way out of this predicament. The end of the pandemic in the advantaged West, hot girl summer 2021, is not simply going to liberate everyone when it releases us back out into parks and restaurants. Burnham’s personal situation helps us acknowledge this. One of *Inside’s* many ironies is that Burnham made it instead of returning to live performance in 2020, as he’d planned. In 2016, he’d had to retire from stand-up after suffering debilitating panic attacks on stage. These problems emerged long before coronavirus swept the globe, and the pandemic, we can now see, has only exacerbated pre-existing crises.

In “Problematic,” Burnham explores the religious urgency a white progressive’s need for relief can take on. As he confesses to all the “shitty” and “thoughtless” (though “lawful”!) microaggressions he’s committed, he crucifies himself, his pasty body and scraggly beard splayed out on a projection of a cross. He once dressed up as “a Latin” for Halloween. There’s an Aladdin costume in his closet. As a teenager coming up on YouTube, he thought of offensive things and said them (in his first-ever video, posted at sixteen, Burnham bemoans the fact that his family thinks he’s gay). Because he’s never suffered real consequences for these actions,

Burnham begs, "Isn't anybody going to hold me accountable?"

Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* is one important companion text here, itself a formally experimental, genre-defying work. Published in 2014, when, under Obama, many celebrated the dawn of a post-racial America, Rankine's book emphasizes the ways racial disparity still defines life in the U.S., despite the fact that the law supposedly guarantees all citizens equal protection. Rankine collects and catalogues the cruelties people of color endure in bourgeois spaces populated by well-meaning white liberals. (As a white reader of Rankine's book, it's impossible not to generate a shadow list, remembering all of the microaggressions you've committed or witnessed, worrying about those you didn't even notice.) Rankine teaches us that actions of this kind have severe consequences. They shore up a culture sympathetic to state-sanctioned violence and extra-judicial killing.

Burnham admits his complicity with this culture in "Problematic," and he's keen to expiate his sins, but it's important that he is alone, confessing to himself. He's a sinner without a priest to absolve him. His transgressions harmed others, but they were legal, so he can't turn himself over to the justice system, as might a murderer with a guilty conscience. Here, Burnham comes back to the puzzle Socko flagged earlier. Whites burden others when we ask those we've harmed to educate us; when we look for confessors, we demand emotional labor; when we seek forgiveness, we make apologizing a selfish act. We therefore must be the audience for our own generalized shame. No court of law or faith, no friend or colleague, can adjudicate our problematic outfits and exclusionary jokes. (Comedian Milly Tamarez recognizes this predicament in her bit, "White Forgiveness." She offers a system of indulgences whereby white people can pay her via Venmo to publicly forgive their racist offences.)

The song "White Woman's Instagram" delivers precisely the brand of self-lacerating content white progressives are coming to prefer, once we've recognized the unforgivable, impotent position to which our self-interest confines us. Simultaneously aware of our privilege and unwilling to give it up, aware that we've mistreated others and at a loss on how to make it right without making it worse, we prefer to spend money on minimalist trends that disavow their own intrinsic consumerism and to recast our consumer choices as meaningful political projects. I am a white woman on Instagram. Burnham's song works, not because it roasts me, but because it invites me to roast myself. Perhaps it's okay to enjoy my pleasures if I admit that I don't deserve them, that I've harmed others on the way to them, that they might come at another's expense?

Of course, any white person trying to talk about this on the internet faces the same problem as Burnham. Look, I'm being self-reflexive. Look, I'm talking about how white people are problematic, even when we talk about how problematic we are. Here are all the things we shouldn't do. As for what we should do instead, I don't know, maybe socialism? This is why Burnham's formal innovations, which endlessly loop the self as it comments on and evaluates the self, render so perfectly contemporary white progressive ways of being. I'm sorry. I want to do something. I want to do better. Wait, saying that is self-involved; it centers me; it's problematic. Wait,

admitting that doesn't get me out of it! Perhaps I should just shut up? But I don't want to. I'm bored.

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Burnham doesn't explicitly articulate a way out of this predicament. Instead, he concludes with a sublime, orgiastic performance, "All Eyes on Me." The penultimate song may not offer a practical program, but it affectively resolves the contradictions that have been torturing Burnham throughout. We can read the sequence as a kind of elegy for the white liberal subject.

"All Eyes on Me" begins just after Burnham dramatizes a breakdown. "I am not ... um... well," Burnham tells us, and he drops his sobbing face into his hands. As ominous chords swell, the camera pans away from Burnham and slides forward, as if taking us directly inside the lens of another camera, just next to him. It's a trick of space and time, and it moves us into another world, where things go black and a supple laugh track cues up. All of a sudden, we're part of a live audience, clapping and cheering, and we hear Burnham's voice issue from the void. "I couldn't have done this without you guys," he's saying. "I couldn't, really. I, this last year has been, you know... there have been times that, um...but just knowing you're here, you know, *feeling* you here, with me, yeah, thank you." As we stare into blackness, Burnham calls us into being. He makes us, each one of us watching him on Netflix, the very audience he's been imagining in isolation. All this time, he's been alone, talking to us, singing for us, feeling our spectral presence, and now, here we are. We're with him. It's as if we've been sitting in the auditorium at his feet for ninety minutes, for eighteen months.

This is art's magic. Poems can do it. So can painting, drama, film. A work composed in solitude later reaches or constitutes its audience, taking on a unique, nonhuman temporality. But Burnham's medium is live comedy, and he's trying to create, at a distance, the intimate reciprocity of the theater, where the audience and the performer both have something to give. (We confer adulation Burnham transmutes into our catharsis.) "You know I hate to ask, because you've given me so much," Burnham entreats us, "but I need you to do one more thing for me. Can you do that?" At last, he appears before us again, in closeup, looking off into the distance. We can see reflected in his eyes a glint of the apparatus he's using to bring us near, lights, camera. "Get your fucking hands up," he croons, his voice autotuned deeper. "Get on out of your seat/All eyes on me, all eyes on me." Long-lashed and serene, cast in oceanic blue, it's like he's singing to us from beneath the surface of the rising seas he fears ("the whole world at your fingertips, the ocean at your door," he worries earlier). He zooms in on his own eyes, and out of nowhere, he looks right at us, or rather, right into the lens. "Are you feeling nervous? Are you having fun?" he asks. "It's almost over, it's just begun/Don't overthink this, look in my eye/Don't be scared, don't be shy/Come on in, the water's fine."

Having already introduced the problem of intimacy in isolation with a song about going to bed with your dick in one hand and your phone in the other, Burnham here borrows techniques from ASMR and from porn. Not only is he the headliner you've come to see; he's also the dude trying to pick you up at the

bar. He's performer, viewer, lover. In this intimate role, he invites each one of us watching to be totally alone with him, to trust him, to come out into the water with him. The metaphor is not innocent. This is Burnham's siren song. He's bidding us surrender. Here, the "you" Burnham addresses is broad. White people don't have a monopoly on feeling unable to effect needed change. No matter who we are, we can't easily cool a warming planet or stay the spread of a virus. We can't end racism or make ourselves better. We can't turn off the screen, get off the internet. Burnham is releasing us from the show's urgent, persistent interrogation. We don't have to ask what we should be doing anymore. Finally, he's pulling us close, and he's telling us:

You say the ocean's rising—like I give a shit

You say the whole world's ending—honey, it already did

You're not gonna slow it

Heaven knows you tried

Got it? Good, now get inside.

The special's tenderest moment is tuned to the key of sublime, apocalyptic resignation. You want to know what you can do to make it better? You can't do anything. The world has already ended. (There's the dominant note of futility here, but there's also a glimmer of Socko's worldlier perspective in this line—the Hegelian narrative of progressive history always excluded non-Europeans; on Twitter, many white liberals reported surprise when Trump won, while many people of color did not.) Thus, our only recourse is to "get inside," to retreat into our homes, our heads, our devices. That's what elites are doing, stocking state-of-the-art bunkers on high ground. That's what teenagers are doing, staying in bed late, noses to the screen. That's what we're doing, watching Netflix with the air on while ice caps melt and unequal global vaccine distribution dooms the unlucky. That's what Burnham's doing, "joking at a time like this." Burnham stages this moment as a conversation, but as usual, he's talking to himself. His performance is an attempt at self-soothing, a spell to mollify the anxieties he's been indulging all year.

And yet, even as Burnham tells himself, tells us, to resign, to give up on the outside and let ourselves stay in, he is creating for those of us watching at home something that feels, visually and sonically, remarkably like a night out. "All Eyes on Me" is a banger. As the chorus surges—"we're going to go where everybody knows/Everybody knows everybody" (Where's that? The bar from *Cheers*? Our own home? Facebook or Twitter?)—Burnham doubles and triples himself, the camera pulling back to reveal more of his face, his body, a projector throwing larger-than-life versions of him over his thin frame. It's like we're at the club, the playhouse, the stadium, the famous figure we're wild to see both right there in front of us and magnified on giant screens. The scene is a feat of formal experimentation and technical expertise that turns the performance of a single man alone in a room with a lot of equipment into something more. This mode of togetherness, we've missed intensely, and this sequence gives us a version of it that's somehow truer to

what we've been missing than would be simply watching an event recorded live. And the lyrics help us play along, too. Burnham implores us to get up, to raise our hands, like his audience did, without prompting, in answer to a question he asked at the end of his last Netflix special, *Make Happy* (2016). Live, nothing could be easier than to incite a crowd to rise, to lift.

The song's triumph, then, is its simultaneous publicness—we feel we're present with others, watching a show—and intimacy—we feel we are alone with Burnham, gazing into his face. We're here for a concert and for a one-night stand. Burnham captures, formally, the duality of our digital lives. Online, we are always alone, posting, curating, deleting, and also, we are always together, looking, commenting, remembering.

Soon, though, Burnham grows frustrated with the fiction of surrender that he's created. After all, the special is, in part, a meditation on what it means to lose your audience, a condition generalizable to many living under COVID-19 advisories and restrictions. If we've been looking into Burnham's eyes, he's never been able to look into ours. (Those who have had to run Zoom sessions for remote employment will know the feeling. When no one else will turn on a camera, you have no choice but to keep your eyes on your own image, treating it as an interlocutor, to sustain your energy.) He might be asking us to get on out of our seats, but we're in bed, on the couch, in the car in the parking lot at work, watching on our computers, our tablets, our phones, and we can't, we won't, we don't have to.

Enraged at this impasse, Burnham takes us by force. "Get up!" he shouts, approaching. "Get up! I'm talking to you—get the fuck up!" If we are, at this point, nothing more than the lens, Burnham snatches us up and lifts us, literally, through the metonym of our vision. He grabs the camera and waves it, waves us, in the air, making us get the fuck up, whether we care to or not. Concert-goers might recognize in the movement this produces something like crowd-surfing; submissives, a kinkier motion. We're close to Burnham's body now, as if we're riding him. We could reach out and touch his arm, his shirt, his beard, his thigh. He turns us to the wall and we see our shadow projected. We see that we are not us, but rather, an instrument of sight, a camera. The sequence is bacchanalian, sexy, a play of consent and force, the crowd risen now, up from the edge of apathy to which Burnham first brought us, consummating the performance, a victory for human will. And then, mid-frenzy, the screen goes dark.

What is it like to have a one-night stand with yourself? Here's Burnham again, asleep on the couch in the studio, his face kissed bright with morning sun. We're so close, we can almost smell him. (He warned us earlier that he hasn't showered in days and smells like shit, but, as geriatric millennials viewing thirty through the rose-gold glasses of nostalgia know, youth always smells clean and herbaceous, no matter how dirty or hungover.) Burnham gets up, starts to review the footage. If it isn't from the previous night, we're supposed to feel like it is. This is Burnham's walk of shame. He's the one who is going to be looking most deeply into his own eyes, and he doesn't have to leave his room to agonize over the humiliating audio-visual record of the night before (elders will also recall when memory alone had to preserve everything you shouldn't have said or felt or done last night). He watches in

solitary silence his animated performance, the manic, erotic energy, sustained purely on the power of his own self-regard, his own attention to himself, his imaginative projection of an audience, because we couldn't be there with him, inside. Not yet.

It's got to be embarrassing for Burnham to see, in the cold light of day, how he yielded, seduced by the womblike protection of total retreat from collective life, and then, as if to banish that indifference, how he forced himself on us. The special begins by voicing the desire to make change, and it ends by performing the impossibility of doing that from inside the myth of the liberal subject. Burnham cannot literally get us out of our seats. The best he can do, wrenching up the camera, is merely simulacral, and he knows that. It's for this that he has to atone the next morning—perhaps he believed, caught up in his own energy, singing and dancing and performing and begging for our attention and our prayers, that he really could get us up. He could move us. But now, he'll have to see that he couldn't, he didn't. All he has on screen is one side of an interaction yet to be realized.

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To create the illusion of movement this hour, Burnham has had to make his room into many different spaces, the way our screens bring us into different digital environments for different purposes with different people, even as we stay in the same place. He closes the blinds to control light, and thus, time. And yet, he is always inside, no matter how outside he seems, clouds or trees projected behind him. To create the illusion of conversation, Burnham has had to split himself again and again, like a schizophrenic, or a cell with unlimited capacity to divide without disappearing. He has been a sock puppet, a white woman, a single dude, a son. But in the end, everybody else is really just him. That's how it is in the online spaces we occupy, those mirrors curated by algorithms. When you're inside, you can't actually encounter anybody else. Why try to do anything without others? Why speak or joke or play when no one's there with you? Burnham's lesson is the same as the pandemic's: individualism is a sick, exhausted fiction. White liberal subjectivity is over.

Burnham asks us to sit with this, and that is one of the reasons why at least one critic did not like his special. In his *New Yorker* review, Richard Brody chides Burnham for wallowing in his privileged pandemic interior, for ignoring what sustains that inside, the partner, the essential workers, the economy. He says Burnham makes "a mere gesture of self-awareness." Presumably, Brody wants an answer to the questions Burnham raises. But this is Burnham's point. He admits he is speaking from a position of racial and economic privilege, and he refuses to pretend, as many white progressives prefer to, that his interests align seamlessly with those oppressed across categories of class, race, gender, sexuality, and more. He is representing a subject-position at the end of its life, caught up in its own contradictions. There is no way out. To ask *Inside* to do what Brody wants is to ask the special to affirm what it's elegizing.

Burnham is okay with the fact that his art can't do what he might want it to, and he demands we confront this impotence, too. And yet, he insists there is

value in performing. The special points inside, to its own failures, yes, but it points outward, too, gesturing beyond itself, to other voices, other perspectives, other collectives, inaccessible to so many before, during, and after the pandemic, which it knows it can't appropriate. It points outward to a radical future white progressivism can't imagine without surrendering to its own end. Funereal though its message may be, *Inside* doesn't mourn what's passing. Burnham is on the side of whatever will get us out of our seats.

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