

“Dance and Shake the Frame”: Culture Industry and Absurdity in Childish Gambino’s “This Is America”

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Abstract: This essay uses early twentieth-century critical and literary theory to examine the ways in which Childish Gambino’s “This Is America” critiques the violence and racism of American culture. While “This Is America” does not present an overtly Marxist critique of America, the song and video complement Horkheimer and Adorno’s Marxist criticisms of the culture industry. Furthermore, Gambino adopts devices and approaches popularized by absurdist art movements that critique the ideological mainstream. This essay concludes that, by applying absurdist approaches to his art, Gambino exposes the ways in which the American culture industry normalizes racism and gun violence.

On 5 May 2018, Donald Glover released a music video entitled “This Is America” under his popular music moniker Childish Gambino. Despite little promotion prior to release, the video gained massive attention from fans and critics alike. For a piece of commercial art, “This Is America” was unprecedented in the manner of its reception. Audiences did not just enjoy the video but *en masse* took to social media to discuss its depictions of racism and gun violence. “This Is America” does not present its audience with an explicit critique of American culture; rather, the release regurgitates that culture in such an absurd manner that the audience is horrified by their recognition of it. Both the song and the video make use of artistic devices associated with early twentieth-century absurdist art movements. These modes of absurdity allow Gambino to defamiliarize his audience with not only the violence of American culture but also with

the culture industry that normalizes that violence.

In their 1944 publication *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno characterize the culture industry as a force of consistent homogeneity, perpetually refining the style of their artistic products until all culture “infect[s] everything with sameness” (Horkheimer and Adorno 1033). The culture industry is incapable of “struggle[ing] with tradition,” a requirement of genuine style and criticism (1038). Horkheimer and Adorno do not consider the possibility of an art piece that could both be a product of mass media and resist it, as the production of self-criticism would not only be outside the industry’s interests but also its capabilities. “This Is America” is undeniably a product of the culture industry and a successful one at that. Gambino is the definition of a pop culture superstar: he is not only a musician but an actor, comedian, writer, director, and DJ as well. “This Is America” dropped while Gambino was hosting an episode of *Saturday Night Live*, and it debuted at number one on the US Billboard Hot 100, one of only thirty-two songs ever to do so (“Here are the 32 Hits” n.p.). Thus, the video cannot be read as a work of “genuine art” in Horkheimer and Adorno’s traditional Marxist perspective (1036).

That being said, Gambino appears to share Horkheimer and Adorno’s suspicion towards the overwhelming sameness of the culture industry. The celebrity toyed with retiring from music after the release of his third album, *Awaken, My Love!* (2017). “There’s nothing worse than like a third sequel, like a third movie and we’re like, ‘again?’” the artist told Huffington Post (Britton n.p.). “This Is America” was Gambino’s return to music following *Awaken, My Love!*, and the song has a notably complex relationship to sameness. Underlying much of the musical styling and imagery of the video is a representation of how the culture industry appropriates black art and homogenizes it to ideological ends.

“This Is America” has two main melodies that each follow a popular aesthetic in mainstream hip hop. The melody that begins the song, and serves as intro and refrain, is sung by a gospel choir and accompanied by acoustic guitar (Gam-

bino 0:04). It follows a style of hip hop that blends with gospel, popularized by artists like Kanye West and Chance the Rapper (“Kanye deconstructed” 6:48–8:03). The second melody, which serves as both verse and chorus, uses a throbbing bass line and a triplet-flow (Gambino 0:52). Triplet rhythms are present in virtually every genre of music and have existed in a variety of rap sub-genres since the early eighties. This second melody replicates a hip hop sub-genre called trap music (“How the triplet flow took over rap” 0:00–2:47). However, both of the melodies in “This Is America” are highly simplified replicants of the genres they invoke. They are only “gospel” or “trap” enough to evoke the style. Sterile and simplistic yet unmistakably stylish, they perfectly capture Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique of style as overproduced and repetitive. Neither of these recreations critique the genres themselves but rather the culture industry’s involvement with and consumption of them.

The polished aesthetic of these melodies demands a passive listening. They are so ubiquitous, and Gambino brings so little that is new to them, the audience cannot actively engage with the melodies. However, it is this very passivity that Gambino appropriates in “This Is America.” While in isolation, the melodies are pleasant and easy to listen to, together they begin to create a resemblance of the autonomous modernist art works so admired by Horkheimer and Adorno for their resistance to the culture industry (Leitch et. al, 1032). The juxtaposition between the two melodies is jarring and absurd. Gambino furthers this disharmony by using a fast, dramatic pivot whenever the gospel refrain gives way to the verse. In the video, this pivot is where the gunshots occur (Gambino 0:52, 1:56). Even in the radio version, wherein the gunshots are edited out, the pivot remains violent and uncomfortable to the listener.

In this way, “This Is America” is the sonic equivalent of a Dadaist collage. Like Dada, one of the seminal absurdist European art movements of the early twentieth century, the song recreates aesthetic only to grate at the aesthetic sensibilities of its audience. “At its core, Dadaism is an art movement that throws into the face of art consumers—an

apt description, since this was the era when mass-produced consumer products were beginning to flood Western culture—provocative questions,” writes art critic Peter Letzelter-Smith; “These queries are delivered via the juxtaposition of iconic works of art or everyday consumer items with absurd additions or deconstructions” (Letzelter-Smith n.p.). The absurd pivots in “This Is America” repurpose the everyday aesthetics of mainstream rap, making its audience uncomfortably aware of the consumerist nature of the culture industry’s art.

The music video for “This Is America” is even more explicit in using the absurd. Visually, “This Is America” is awash with violence of the American contemporary: shootings, police cars, a church massacre, frantic crowds, and cellphone filming. All of these images carry heavy material and symbolic meaning for America, particularly for black America, in 2018. Yet, alongside the recognizable is the cryptic: a hooded figure on a white horse, abandoned vintage cars, several stray chickens, and a generally unclear sense of narration. If the song itself is in the spirit of Dada, the video is Theatre of the Absurd. The video certainly fits Martin Esslin’s description of absurd theatrics as “a bewildering experience, a veritable barrage of wildly irrational, often nonsensical goings-on” (3). Gambino’s character in “This Is America” has a certain likeness to Clov from Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame*, with his staggering movements, changing moods, and constant lighting and discarding of cigarettes. The manner in which he switches from dancing to violence confuses the audience. Are we meant to condone his murder or empathize with his joy? Gambino’s character fits Esslin’s definition of all absurd protagonists as a “living riddle” (13). While “This Is America” certainly engages with a political reality, the video channels the unreality of the absurd in that it “[puts the audience] into suspense as to what the [text] may mean” (12).

In this way, while “This Is America” is in a film medium, it disrupts the ideological function of the film industry, defined by Adorno and Horkheimer as “den[ying] its audience any dimension which might roam free in imagination”

(1037). Unlike the films described in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, our reality is not “a seamless extension” of the world portrayed in “This Is America” (1036). If the video were to stylize itself using realism, it would not have been anywhere near as effective a representation of American culture. Realist depictions of suffering risk perpetuating a glorification of endurance, a kind of defeatism distilled within ideology (1044). Instead, the absurdism of the video alienates the viewer enough that they can begin to examine the ties between Gambino’s video and mass culture without having to “identify the film directly with reality” (1036). Theatre of the Absurd performs a similar function, according to Esslin: “while the happenings on the stage are absurd, they yet remain recognizable as somehow related to real life with its absurdity, so that eventually the spectators are brought face to face with the irrational side of their existence” (5). Where absurd plays are sometimes referred to as “anti-plays,” “This Is America” can be seen as an “anti-music video.”

However, unlike the absurd playwrights, Gambino works to unveil irrationality hidden within existence under a racist mass culture. While he adopts the modes of the absurd, they are in the pursuit of exposing the paradoxical quality of American culture’s violence and racism. The chaotic universe of “This Is America” is an unreality; and yet, as unmistakable as its title, it is a portrait of American mass culture. The excruciating tension between the dancing and the violence of the video demonstrates the tense existence of blackness within the American culture industry: the ways in which black bodies are simultaneously fetishized and feared, the ways in which black culture is venerated while black people become the subjects of violence, and the paradoxical fascination and distrust on the part of white consumers when presented with images of the racialized other.

There is a moment of silence in the music video that is edited out of the song’s radio edit. In the middle of dancing, Gambino raises his arm as if to shoot—not a gun but his fingers in the shape of a gun (Gambino 2:40–2:43). The music stops and the children, dancing just moments before, run from him (2:43–2:45). He is motionless for a mo-

ment, arms outstretched, body limp with some emotion we can recognize but not name (2:45–2:55). Then he lights a cigarette (2:55–3:00). Absurdist artworks “neither ... directly represent the catastrophe, nor ... remain silent about it, but ... prob[e] the intervals between silence and speech, between thought and incomprehensibility” (Huebert 6). Amidst the horror of the shootings and the joy of the dancing, which are blended together almost seamlessly in the video, Gambino’s silence appears less a moment of reflection and more an expression of exhaustion. In a culture in which acts of violence and racism have become a normalized component of its media consumption, and in which the culture industry produces these medias to be ever more passive and encompassing, exhaustion is possibly the most human response. Not unlike Adorno’s famously misunderstood quote, “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,” Gambino’s silence represents a moment in which art has become impossible.

The power of absurdity is its ability to render meaning from actions that should, under normal circumstances, be read as nonsense. “This Is America” does not depict a logical, composed reality but a distortion of it. However, as Esslin notes, “The onslaught of unconventional logic and unilinear conceptual thinking in the Theatre of the Absurd ... constitutes an earnest endeavor to penetrate to deeper layers of meaning and to give a truer, ... more complex, picture of reality in avoiding the simplification which results from leaving out all the undertones, overtones, and inherent absurdities and contradictions of any human situation” (10–11). Thus, the absurdity in “This Is America” does the double work of not only exposing the absurd normalization of a violent mass culture but also the culture industry which made that normalization possible.

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