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Integrative Seminar 2: Visual Culture

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13 May, 2024

Dance of Detachment

At the touch of a button, a late July day finds itself in my head yet again. I can feel the sunscreen on my legs sticking to the burning seat of the car, and the smell of that hot, exhilarating day wafts into my brain through my nose. My heart beats as fast as I speed down the highway; our music fills the car and flows out the windows and the boy in my passenger seat feeds my bliss as his laughter kisses my burning cheeks. Paradise finds its home in my chest for the entire day, and that night, I pour this ecstasy into a playlist labeled *blue butterfly*.

It's one month after that indescribable July day. I still can't figure out why I'm incapable of the words to convey what exactly caused that euphoric cliché to last two, no three weeks after the fact. Words will never be enough, but I gloss over this with headphones secured over my ears because, that day. That day, we talked about music, and the titles and artists that came out of his mouth so softly and so lyrically found their new home in *blue butterfly*, and I can't stop seeing butterflies everywhere.

Two months since that day and *blue butterfly* gives me a papercut. I'd only been listening to our music and the potential of our interaction was so heavy in my chest. I wondered if he would remember the music from that day, if he would remember me when he listened to that music. And then. He was finally in front of me after all these weeks and I looked at him and he looked at me and I choked on the butterflies in my throat. I reside uncomfortably in prose and so

I said to myself that *that's just the way things go* and I went back home to fall asleep, just to close my eyes and see him in my dreams.

I scrolled through my camera roll every time a new project was announced, wondering if it was an opportunity to relive my most pleasurable accounts; my best art is narrative, after all. Three months since he was in my car and my wishes are granted: I devote hours to burning the pictures and text messages of that faraway day into my retinas so I can carefully select images to print and immortalize till we are dust yet again. I go back to *blue butterfly* and curate a shortlisted playlist for this upcoming collage of souvenirs. I painstakingly carve us out of the past with an X-acto knife and lovingly layer memory after memory onto the page.

Memories, experiences, and attachments are all grouped when considering the past. Memories of our experiences contribute to our subsequent actions in the face of new or similar events, while attachments are memories that we prolong in our heads based on our emotive responses to that experience. They work hand in hand in informing our psychological outcomes¹. It gets a bit more complicated, however, when we consider the impact that attachments have in our lives. This impact is on our autobiographical memory²: our personal narratives of experiences in relation to outside interpretations of the same events. For example, my autobiographical memory (AM) fueled my emotive response to that July day, because my friend who was also in the car boosted my ego by supporting the conclusions I came to about my relationship with the boy in my passenger seat. AMs are shaped and developed based on who we share these experiences with, their recollections of the same event, or their evaluations of the event. We might start to tell a story about a memory feeling one way, and end it feeling another

¹ Anna Sutton, "Autobiographical memory functions in the recall of authentic moments," Springer Link, accessed 22 April 2024, <https://link-springer-com.libproxy.newschool.edu/article/10.1007/s12144-022-03997-w>.

² Robyn Fivush and Matthew E. Graci, "Learning and Memory: A Comprehensive Reference," accessed 22 April 2024, <https://www-sciencedirect-com.libproxy.newschool.edu/topics/medicine-and-dentistry/autobiographical-memory>.

based on the reinterpretations we have when sharing in a conversation, — it's for this reason that I hope no one who was involved in that July day ever finds this paper, because they will likely think I'm delusional, a sentiment I felt about myself while waxing poetic about a boy I don't talk to anymore. This flow enables us to reevaluate ourselves, our emotions, and our subsequent actions: the ability to reflect. Putting memories into language forms the crux of autobiographical consciousness, and it's the starting point for internal growth and development. It's why sharing music connects us to others, and connects us to who they are and their experiences.

Four months later and I'm making my way home for the winter. I feel as though I'll finally be able to experience *blue butterfly*-esque sensations again when I'm back with the right people. My chest now craves to belong to that July day, it's a papercut on my heart that I can't help but tend to. I see him again, many, many times. It's cliché to say that I hear music when he speaks, but when he wonders at the possibility of having a repeat of sitting in my passenger seat, I can't help but think *yes, please*.

He reminds me of summer, but the snow outside reminds me of our distance.

While essentially everyone shares their past experiences through linguistic means, whether it's through a conversational partner or posting online, there is a group lucky enough to have another outlet for processing experiences, and therefore working through attachments: artists. Singers, songwriters, painters, poets, and all artists work to express themselves through media other than the basic form of communication. I spoke to one such artist, Elizabeth Clinard, a Music Performance student-trombonist at the College of Performing Arts at The New School in New York, New York. We talked about all things music, from playlist-making to songwriting to the epitome of musical narrative: Taylor Swift. She expands on the idea of art as a tool, saying that “when you don't have a creative outlet like [art] it can be much more difficult to deal with

the emotions...It's somewhere to put it.³” As for the expression aspect, everyone's different in their way of working through trauma, stress, and general attachments. Elizabeth feels lucky in this regard, because when she's composing a piece, she ends up spending a lot of time working and reworking—reflecting— on the emotions that are guiding the composition, and by the time she's done with it, she's over it: “It's therapeutic.” Ironically, this paper is serving the same purpose for me. While musing over the numerous playlists I had curated during my infatuation with this boy, I realized that they truly had an impact on my present state. Not in the way that would make me wish to be in the past, but in the way that I would feel the same butterflies in my stomach as when I first made the playlist, that the anxiety I had surrounding him would come back when I listened to the songs in *blue butterfly*. With further contemplation, I delved into research. The limbic system is central when considering our emotional responses to music⁴. The neural activity in our limbic system is responsible for our “emotional and mnemonic” invocation while listening to music; it is music's evocative power. It's why both Elizabeth and I, and presumably the majority of our human population, get reminded of times in our lives when the songs we are listening to are relevant. The impact of music, whether stimulating emotions or evoking memories, is scientifically proven. Now, it's not to say whether it's good or bad, as responses to music vary based on the connected memory, but our human capability to engage with music has been fundamental in understanding how to deal with ourselves, through self-reflection or even therapy. Creating music, or simply making playlists, is a way to feel more understood⁵, to have your emotions validated by pitch, rhythm, and tonality perceptions that you feel connected to, which alter your neurons in an emotional capacity.

³ Elizabeth Clinard, in discussion with the author, April 2024.

⁴ Raffaella Nori, et al, “Cognitive Crescendo: How Music Shapes the Brain's Structure and Function,” Accessed 1 May 2024, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10605363/>.

⁵ Elizabeth Clinard, in discussion.

It's almost summer again. Cicadas have been on my mind a lot recently because coming from a suburban area, I'm not used to *not* hearing them as it gets warmer outside. They were a constant in my childhood environment; coming out every summer, I loved to fall asleep to their repetitive summer sounds. Things are different now. I feel nostalgic every time I hear cicadas again, reminiscing about 2010s bright green grass and hot summer days. Also, *blue butterfly* no longer graces the top of my Spotify page, and he no longer lingers in my notifications.

Occasionally, a song will play by an artist he likes (or used to like, I'm not sure anymore) and I'll think back to when my papercut started to bleed. I'll wonder if I should have kept being careful, dropping a bandaid over it and covering it up (just to get another cut and another and another,) instead of swearing off using paper forever in the face of sustainability. I'll wish that I could listen to those songs again without a bittersweet tang seeping into my chest every time. Usually, I skip those songs but his presence hovers in the tips of my fingers as I choose the next. In the near future, when I allow myself to sit through the entirety of *blue butterfly*, I'll know better than to crave what I lacked all those months ago.

A hard truth about creating art is that articulating a memory dilutes the experience - what you put on paper is never a true representation, which can be unfulfilling. This idea is tough to digest, as exploring memories in art is one of the key inspirations for many, including myself. A question that I mulled over for a long time is if it is possible to overcome attachments through a process that calls on them, such as making art. Is it the attachment we should call on, or the memory? And what's the difference between memories and attachments? It's great to express beloved memories through art, but I was struggling with how to move on from that, how to not be attached to the outcome of the work if it didn't fully encapsulate the memory. The same thought process can be used when consuming art, such as music. Loving a song for the feelings it

gives you is one thing, but being so attached to a song that you can't listen to it without craving to be back in time or accepting your present reality is harmful to your self-growth. Elizabeth touched on this regarding Taylor Swift during our conversation. We spent some time talking specifically about Swift's The Eras Tour, an ongoing concert tour that will conclude almost 2 years after its commencement. One of my main interests with this tour is the impact that it's possibly having on Swift. I wondered if her revisiting the same songs from a span of almost 20 years now could be harmful to her if she'd be forced to relive some of the worst points in her life that caused her to write these songs. Clutching onto memories has frequently proved harmful. When we single out a particular experience as the root of our daily challenges, it feels like we're trapped in its grip, unable to move forward⁶. This perpetuates a cycle of grief, preventing us from healing. It's the downside of exploring trauma and grief as key inspiration when creating art. Elizabeth believes that "maybe for her it's a little harmful... because [Swift] talks about how a lot of [her] songs are written when she is in the worst place, so having to revisit that every weekend for a year straight is probably a little damaging. [Swift] has a song called "Dear John," it's about John Mayer, and... she doesn't play it a lot...because it's very obviously about John Mayer. But, she talks about how she is in a completely different walk of life now than when she wrote it, so it's almost funny to look back on how she used to feel."

I learned a lot from Elizabeth's analysis of Swift's way of processing life through music. She calls these albums or playlists a sort of "time capsule," a way of glimpsing into the past and peeking at reminders of those times in your life; hence, The *Eras* Tour. But Elizabeth doesn't think that these are attachments. Sure, there once was an attachment, being the reason the music or work of art was created, but once you process it, there's only nostalgia left. And this is the

⁶ Richard A. Bryant and Fiona Maccallum, "A Cognitive Attachment Model of prolonged grief: Integrating attachments, memory, and identity," *Clinical psychology review* 6, vol. 33 (2013): 718.

difference. There will always be a partial attachment to nostalgia because feeling nostalgic is primarily due to the previous attachment⁷. For example, Swift probably thinks about her first boyfriend more than the average person, but that's just because there's something to remember him by. Her music enables her capability of feeling nostalgic, while simultaneously helping her get over the attachment.

Cicadas made up a big part of my experiences as a child: complaining about them with my friends in elementary school as if all of us didn't get so excited at the sound signaling the start of summer, a collective memory. Now, whenever I hear them, I have an appreciation for them, as they shaped my narrative of my hometown with a loving finish. In the near future, with *blue butterfly* streaming out my speakers as I drive up the highway, he will fade into the background like cicadas on a summer day, and I'll fondly reflect on the ways he made me want to stay in that late July getaway, because even though there *is* more bad than good with a wounded cupid, I'm just glad I had the chance to discover new music.

⁷ Elizabeth Clinard, in discussion.

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