

ECK 281 - Professor Reuben

Response Paper 3 / Final Essay

December 15, 2021

**What You Can't Have: How Pain, Entropy, and Division Solve the Rural/Urban Divide**

When the Eckardt Seminar discussed “Cosmopolis,” it seemed as though our initial analysis was chock-full of cynicism, disappointment, confusion, and frustration; it cast a generally hollow shadow over the film and its significance to our interminable question of defining and solving the rural/urban divide. The intention of the filmmakers to embed this quasi-nihilistic feeling into the audience’s reaction is what I understand to have been a slight overlook lacking emphasis in our conversations of the film is. Upon further viewing and thoughtful attention to the cinematography, acting, and scripting choices of the film, a paradoxical view of emptiness and fullness in addition to a sense of stagnancy and energetic motion is uncovered. These philosophical, abstract lenses help delve into a more specific theme omnipresent in “Cosmopolis,” aptly representing the divide we discuss: the ubiquitousness of pain, discomfort, and even more generally, the ability to experience negative, dreadful humanistic attributes built into the human experience. What this film and this entire course have shown is that inequalities are innate to human life regardless of rural or urban living but also that the divide between the two and within each of them lies in subtopics. We have analyzed geography, gender roles, socioeconomics, environmental situations, political science, psychology, and we have certainly dove down a plethora of academic rabbit holes. What “Cosmopolis” so accurately depicts with the mechanism of *pain* is a constant dissatisfaction

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regardless of one's role in society that inevitably leads to a movement away from or rather a yearning toward the idea of a better life. The life of a rustic teenage farmer, impoverished female urbanite, royal rural vacationer, or even a city-dwelling corporate billionaire such as Eric Packer constantly differ because they are all constantly dissatisfied in their own way, as they move and change to find improvement — seemingly the vastly empty people seek feeling full, and the overfilled seek feeling empty. It is these microstates of movement that foster a universal macrostate of entropy. Essentially, these subdivides and the larger rural/urban divide collectively run on disorder. Our search for a solution to the rural/urban 'problem' is shown to be fruitless as without the rural/urban divide, stagnancy ensues, emptiness molds a void in the human experience, and society fails to function. "Cosmopolis," specifically through the shoes of billionaire Eric Packer and his workers as compared to the general public, teach this lesson that the rural/urban divide and modern functioning society are inseparable through its abstract, almost metaphorical description of pain as a mechanism for change, disorder, and thus this always divided modern state. In order to better comprehend the intentions and reactions of the film, I will lay out specific, often jolted descriptions of the scenes to mirror how they were experienced on screen.

Eric, with his entourage of corporate minions compared to the middle and lower class 'outsiders' depicted in the film, exemplify the opposite spectrums of basic human pain. Within the first few minutes of the movie (3:50), we find that Eric and Shiner, Eric's startup partner and tech-wizard, contemplate and discuss the significance of meaninglessness with blank

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expressions. Eric has dark sunglasses and a black suit on, further dividing himself from reality as he hides behind shells of protection. This scene openly introduces the stoic roboticism hardwired into Eric's privileged corporate identity.

They swiftly transition into a new environment as we move with Eric; he gingerly swoops into his wife's taxi, powerfully entering an unfamiliar, ordinary world from the lavish technological haven in which he thrives. Their further discussion of observing and studying taxi drivers, using them like real-life applications in a textbook increasingly distances them from normalcy and persistently establishes the inhumane nature of Eric. We're also introduced to the abrupt, seemingly senseless nature of the film, just in line with Eric's train of thought — perhaps even a lack thereof — that intentionally rings truly chaotic and confusing to the average viewer.

Complication is only extended when Eric meets with Michael Chin, his young Systems Analyst. In the limo again (12:13), the precise central location of the film, Eric abruptly unearths a concept of rats as currency. They laugh at and make jokes regarding this theory that anything can be money and that we provide value to currency, therefore wielding an immense amount of power. Alas, positive remarks pepper the conversation, ending suddenly with the clear drain of euphoric emotion from Eric's face and the beginning of an animalistic sex scene between him and Didi Fancher, his art consultant. He understandably craves deeper emotion after a conversation that left him understandably anxious and overwhelmed in a way we understand he must rarely exhibit to the world. Once again, the audience feels a sense of

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distraction and dumbfoundedness at the sheer weight of transition from light-hearted but detached deep discussion with what seems to be a passionate sex scene. Taking a closer look at Eric's facial expressions, however, one may find that his eyes stay cold, his mouth lacks the curvature of a smile, and his limp arms resting above his head suggest a tepid response to sex; a facet of the human experience that is associated with intense emotion and significance leaves him feeling still empty. One may assume that while Didi, as a seeming middle-class woman living a semi-normal life, emotes from this experience as one can also assume Eric only has the mental space to contemplate his corporate systems and endeavors.

Soon after that (25:50), Eric is onto another consultant, Jane Melman, who acts as Eric's Chief of Finance. As Eric receives a prostate examination from his daily health check-up, he struggles to hold a business conversation and hold back telltale signs of discomfort on his face; he towers over Jane who vulnerability sits with her knees buckled, clutching a plastic water bottle with mighty force. She emphatically explains the power a single entity in a singular moment can hold as Eric's attempt to feel involves a professional examination of a sexual organ, creating a cramped environment reeking of sweat, vulnerability, and intense sexual tension. Nevertheless, from this primal, uncomfortable environment, we get arguably one of the most fruitful lines of the film: "so the whole economy convulses because the man took a breath," describing how the economic world is deciding the state of the global economy based on a minute, misconstrued aspect of a public comment. The authentic utter panic that must be rushing through these two character's minds that we expect to be

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communicated by them isn't portrayed as such but is rather channeled through this forced oversexualized circumstance. The audience can sense that there is a level of discomfort that is not being allowed to fully form or be addressed within these individuals.

However, we are slowly introduced to the mindsets opposite to those of the upper-class just as Eric seems to be losing his ability to maintain his ubiquitous composure; (34:43) his wife, Elise, repeatedly tells him to be *nice to her* as he continues to act dramatically, sarcastically, and toyingly out of seeming desperation to entice his own wife to treat him with romantic and sexual attention. This build-up of emotion is once again broken when two men, arguably middle-to-low-class protestors who, with slight fear somehow mixed with a grinning confidence wave four rats at the restaurant crowd. The energy and power vacuums into this demonstration as they projectile the rats and a smile grows on Eric's face and light burns in his eyes for what very well may be the first time in the film. Another sudden transition hits as viewers are presented with Vija Kinsky, Eric's Chief of Theory, as they discuss back in the futuristic, technologically intricate, status-embodying limousine, protected from chaos ensuing outside. In this bubble, abstract thought and basic ideas float around, mostly with a detachment of emotion. Vija begins by describing the construct and significance of money — or lack thereof — and continues onto how currency relates to time and its coevolution with global capitalism and pervasive, invasive neoliberalism. They peer into one another's gray souls with empty stares laced with a hint of sadness throughout the discourse, blank expressions plaguing the energy between to a feeling of emptiness — other than idea vomiting burdening the space.

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Minutes later (37:52), a calm and lifeless conversation, only filled with conjecture and a level of abstraction too heavy to contextualize is interrupted by apocalyptic protest. Jarring electric music mysteriously plays over insurrectionists, colorful posters, chaotic movement in the street, and lots of rat puppets and costumes. Violence is the tone of this scene as these lower and middle class people crawl, slam, punch, yell, chant, shatter glass, and throw fire.

Meanwhile, in the limousine haven, Vija and Eric sip liquor contently, further philosophizing, as their graffiti-tattered, heaven shakes with the unrest of these pain-filled, emotion-erupting *normals* of the city — they both seem to be and increasingly become drunk, using alcohol as their simple escape further into numbness. Vija and Eric have the privilege to discuss the protests from a distance, disallowing a level of empathy and sympathy to permeate their quasi-castle's chambers. Their discussion breaks as the camera focuses on a destructive message that is arguably most indicative of the protestor's feelings of pain: someone burning themselves alive. It is as if to say for this vast demographic: 'I am hurting to such a drastic extent from the system in which I struggle to live, that death by fire is a more bearable experience.' Quickly the attention turns back to the two supposed oligarchs with no change in behavior, only a continued philosophical discussion and dismissal, if not a denigration, of the person and their actions. This begs the question: what kind of person can feel so little when everyone else is feeling so much?

The answer to this question seems to be someone that can once again engage in adultery for a third time in one day; once again, the filmmakers decide to cut abruptly to an

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apparently intense sex scene between Eric and one of his female guards. (48:03) Eric inquires about her carried weapon, another flicker flaming in his eyes and enhancing his tone as his charisma charms her into showing him, doing exactly what he wants. “I’m looking for more,” he says to her. “Show me something I don’t know. Stun me to my DNA.” There is a baseline calm in his voice and body language, laying in an extremely vulnerable, lounged position, but his diction and cadence indicate a clear desperation and yearning for extraordinary feeling, at least physically now, but one can sense a mental need unfulfilled. His grin and beady eyes turn back into hollow looks as she presumably leaves him back in his void of desensitization.

Embracing the numbness, he joins his wife for dinner (50:26). The empty restaurant somehow feels more bare as the robotization between Eric and Elise grows stronger — he compliments and narrates; she assumes they have broken up without a change in voice or body language. The entire scene solidifies for the audience that this demographic, the presumed *winner*s of the rural/urban divide and the divides within, may occupy human skin but cannot identify with it.

Yet another jump cut takes the audience to a scratchy, high-pitched club scene. One of Eric’s guards hypothesizes to him that a drug known as “Novo” is circling around, allowing those who wish to escape the pain of their lives — those barely living under a crushing capitalistic system so unequally unfavorable to them — a quick and easy way to escape. Eric, however, seems to have no interest in the drug. He says to the bodyguard that ironically doesn’t acknowledge the statement, “there’s pain enough for everybody here.” The audience can get a

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sense that Eric exudes paradoxical, seemingly rare form of pain in not feeling this conventional pain in which the Novo-users narrowly endure.

This marks a turning point for Eric's emotional processing as it is revealed to him, by a man to which the viewer assumes Eric is barely close, that the young rapper Brutha Fez, has died. Eric has been dealing with the existentialism of life throughout his passage to the barber and certainly grapples with the construct of death as we see tears forming in his eyes (1:00:09). This messenger that Eric vaguely knows becomes a source of comfort as Eric embraces him, getting on his knees, sobbing, and waking up soon thereafter as if he did not just cry over an artist he barely knew. Eric is breaking down; the corporate, capitalist, arguably social Darwinist facade he builds up seems to be crumbling if such an insignificant loss — compared to the atrocious personal threats, breakups, sexual interactions, and insurrectionist disarray — means more to his humanistic soul buried so deep within his subconscious.

The final relevant scenes signify the absolute mayhem, intertwined with a newfound sense of clarity perhaps, seemingly riddling Eric's conscious mind. No longer does he have technological analysis, economic burdens, nor theoretical learning to bog down the synapses of his brain. Standing alone for the first time the entire day outside of his limousine bubble of safety, gunshots fired at Eric from above happily energize a demotivated soul as he jovially swings a revolver, dancing on his search for the shooter. Instead of fighting or fleeing, the natural human response, Eric welcomes the violence and thus the intention of harm, possibly death, clearly for the first time as well. He remains unphased by the atrocious poverty and



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death engulfing the path to his maker — who, for once, has the ability to snatch all of his power. When he arrives, it is clear that Eric's consciousness is fighting his subconscious. His emotive and logical minds have declared war. He is now living in the dichotomy somewhere between robotization and humanity, weaving in and out of each with dialogue and body language that are indicative of both, wavering. (1:36:16) Eric remains alive through candid and rough, yet extremely vulnerable and humanistic conversation fostering unintentional true connection with this man: an understatement would be to call this a complicated relationship. What the audience assumes to be the last *first* for Eric is when he finally levels onto the emotions that all these *normal* people taking Novo and protesting/killing themselves in the streets feel — he finds his life in this society is less favorable than death as he inserts his own revolver softly into his mouth. Heavy breathing and a throbbing chest of a vibrant person duels the blankness in his eyes and sedation in his stance. Alas, as if the struggle is too intense, he shoots at the center of his hand instead, barely crying or reacting at all after an initial yelp. The audience is left to ask: Why did he not choose death? Why does this internal conflict never end? How much is it just an internal, personal experience?

My initial conjecture regarding the relevance of pain to the rural/urban divide may be understood only with a multilayered scope of abstractions. No believer in science of the human body and mind can dispute that pain is ubiquitous in human experience. As we unpack and abstract this idea of pain from the mono-corporeal to the poly-corporeal realms, one finds that the translation of pain is deciphered differently by each body and mind. More abstractly, when

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we look at pain with a societal lens, we see that people are constantly seeking what they can't have: true comfort from imperfection such as pain. This brews a permanent cluster of entropy-building, disorder-catastrophizing experience that fuels the rural/urban divide so notorious for its ability to touch so close to people's lives. The human experience — which we look at via *pain* — is relatively grouped based on geographic, socioeconomic, environmental, political, psychological, and gender-related differences that continue to disorganize and unequalize this basic human experience and create the foundation for the greater rural/urban divide. If this cycle of movement and searching for perfection stemming from aversion to pain continues, — whether the goal is a revolutionary unit of currency to bolster your bloated wealth or a revolution based in the destruction of institutions that stifle one's ability to put food on their table — then there will always be a rural/urban divide among these categorical subdivisions. As a society, it seems that the creators of “Cosmopolis” may be begging us to ask ourselves, but more specifically those who hold the actionable power in our modern society, if our present world — which we view here as merely a vessel for the rural/urban divide — can be mutually exclusive from pain and thus the human experience. Can the way we currently live and the society that shapes us ever be rid of the rural/urban divide? “Cosmopolis” and the experiences of Eric Packer and his corporate goons compared to the *rest* answer arguably the most important question from this course and in those studying the rural/urban divide: we cannot completely *solve* the divide without universally destroying and rebuilding differently

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the society in which we currently are actors. (39:40) Eric's Chief of Theory, in my opinion, sums up this key hidden message: "Destroy the past. Make the future." Unsurprisingly, Eric Packer grins at this concept, leaving me fruitlessly praying it stems from a meditation of what life would be like if society burns to the ground, the rural/urban divide with it.

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### Works Cited

*Cosmopolis*. Directed by David Cronenberg, performances by Robert Pattinson. May and June 2012