






**'Healing the World with Comedy': Anxiety and Sublimation in Bo Burnham's *Inside***  
**INTERACTIVE ARTICLE COVER**






**About the Journal**

<b>Journal DOI</b>	<a href="https://dx.doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha">https://dx.doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha</a>
<b>Journal Home</b>	<a href="http://www.rupkatha.com">www.rupkatha.com</a> 
<b>Indexed by</b>	<a href="#">Scopus</a>  <a href="#">Web of Science: Emerging Sources Citation Index (ESCI)</a>  <a href="#">DOAJ</a> 
<b>Journal Metrics</b>	CiteScore 2020: 0.2   SJR 2020: 0.162   SNIP 2020: 0.193   JCI 2020: 0.50

**About the Issue**

<b>Issue</b>	<b>Vol. 14, No. 4, 2022   "Global Anxieties in Times of Current Crises"</b>
<b>Editor</b>	Tirtha Prasad Mukhopadhyay
<b>Affiliation</b>	Universidad de Guanajuato
<b>Issue DOI</b>	<a href="https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v14n4">https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v14n4</a>
<b>TOC</b>	<a href="https://rupkatha.com/v14n4.php">https://rupkatha.com/v14n4.php</a> 

**About the Article**

<b>Title</b>	<b>'Healing the World with Comedy': Anxiety and Sublimation in Bo Burnham's <i>Inside</i></b>	
<b>Author/s</b>	<b>Ann Christina Pereira<sup>1</sup> &amp; Dr Sarika Tyagi<sup>2</sup></b>	
<b>Affiliation</b>	<sup>1,2</sup> Department of English, Vellore Institute of Technology-Vellore.	
<b>Article DOI</b>	<a href="https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v14n4.12">https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v14n4.12</a>	<b>Pages:</b> 1-11
<b>Abstract</b>	<a href="https://rupkatha.com/v14n412">https://rupkatha.com/v14n412</a> 	
<b>Full-text PDF</b>	<a href="https://rupkatha.com/V14/n4/v14n412.pdf">https://rupkatha.com/V14/n4/v14n412.pdf</a> 	
<b>Article History</b>	<b>First Published: 26 December 2022</b>	
<b>Article Impact</b>	<a href="#">Check Dynamic Impact</a> 	
<b>Copyright</b>	<a href="#">Aesthetics Media Services</a> 	
<b>Licensing</b>	<a href="#">Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial 4.0</a> 	

This Open Access article is published under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. For citation use the DOI. For commercial re-use, please contact [editor@rupkatha.com](mailto:editor@rupkatha.com).

# 'Healing the World with Comedy': Anxiety and Sublimation in Bo Burnham's *Inside*

Ann Christina Pereira<sup>1</sup> & Dr Sarika Tyagi<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research scholar, Department of English, Vellore Institute of Technology-Vellore. ORCID: 0000-0002-2555-4910. Email: ann.pereira9213@gmail.com;

<sup>2</sup>Professor, Department of English, Vellore Institute of Technology-Vellore. ORCID: 0000-0001-5144-9981. Email: tyagisarika27@gmail.com

---

## Abstract

Bo Burnham is a critically acclaimed American stand-up comedian and filmmaker. The usual themes in his works are the hypocrisy of artists, the commercialisation of art, and the role of social media in erasing the boundary between the public and the private. However, during the pandemic, he chose to focus on the theme of anxiety, a minor theme in his earlier works. Anxiety has been considered as an integral part of modernity as discussed by Anthony Giddens and Zygmunt Bauman. In psychoanalysis, anxiety has been explained in a number of different ways. In current psychological discourse, anxiety is described as an unpleasant state of mind that can cause significant bodily and mental stress. The anxiety that Burnham experienced prior to the pandemic appears to have amplified during the pandemic. Two main types of anxiety are observable in the shows of Burnham—performance anxiety and existential anxiety. This paper seeks to understand Burnham's show *Inside* (2021) using Anna Segal's contribution to the concept of 'sublimation'. We argue that in doing the show *Inside*, Burnham discovers a new way to acknowledge and channel his 'depressive' symptoms towards contemporary times, and he achieves sublimation in the process.

**Keywords:** Comedy, sublimation, anxiety, existential anxiety, modernity

## Introduction

Stand-up comedy is often considered to be a reflection of the popular and unpopular feelings in society at a given period of time. In recent years, there is an increasingly common tendency for stand-up comedians to talk about anxiety, depression and other mental health conditions on stage. This is especially true in the case of Neal Brennan (2017), Daniel Fernandes (2017), Neville Shah (2019), Bo Burnham (2021) and Taylor Tomlinson (2022). It is unknown whether this trend is symptomatic of the worsening mental health of the world population or of the gradual decline of the stigma surrounding mental health. Regardless, it has been welcomed by the audience as a positive change. Of all stand-up comedians who speak about mental health, Burnham stands unique in his treatment of the subject as he does not appear to attribute his anxiety to personal reasons, but to the changed world.

Robert Pickering Burnham, better known by his stage name Bo Burnham, is a multi-talented comedian who deals with genres ranging from poetry and music to stand-up comedy and film. He started his career making YouTube videos before he ventured into stand-up comedy. His

stand-up shows include *Words Words Words* (2010), *what.* (2013), *Make Happy* (2016), *Inside* (2021) and *Inside Outtakes* (2022). Although all of his shows have been critically well-received, very little scholarship exists on Burnham. Darren Valenta (2018) discusses Burnham's show *Make Happy* using autoethnography and identifies how Burnham removes stigma around mental health by speaking openly about it, thus encouraging individuals to destroy ideologies that subjugate people with mental illnesses. Tomášková (2022) studied *Inside* and demonstrated how the different personas of Burnham reflect the mental health of Burnham and help him in his path to recovery.

This paper links Burnham's anxiety with fluid modernity. All of Burnham's shows are satires on contemporary society, with its capitalism, consumerism and the misuse of the internet. However, in the show *Inside* (2021), he spoke primarily about anxiety and depression, a minor theme in his earlier works. This paper analyses the anxiety in Burnham's show *Inside* and tries to argue that performing these comedies help Burnham in sublimating his attitudes towards the fast-changing contemporary society. In the first section, we study how anxiety and sublimation are described in psychology and psychoanalysis. Since all of Burnham's shows focus on modernity, we study anxiety as a feature of modernity in the next section. Here, we primarily focus on the theories of Anthony Giddens and Zygmunt Bauman. Then we look at how performance anxiety, existential anxiety and sublimation are represented in *Inside*.

## Anxiety and Sublimation in Psychoanalysis

Anxiety continues being an area that attracts attention from psychologists and scholars alike. However, the debates on sublimation are relatively few and our understanding of the topic has undergone significant changes. This section tries to understand what psychoanalysis says about anxiety and sublimation and the changing definitions of the terms in psychological and psychoanalytical discourse.

Don Hockenbury and Sandra Hockenbury (2008) describe anxiety as "an unpleasant emotional state" that "puts you on *physical alert*, preparing you to defensively 'fight' or 'flee' potential dangers" and at the same time "also puts you on *mental alert*, making you focus your attention squarely on the threatening situation" (Hockenbury & Hockenbury, 2008, p. 578). They argue that every individual experiences anxiety, but it becomes pathological when it is "irrational", "uncontrollable" and "disruptive" (Hockenbury & Hockenbury, 2008, p. 578). To deal with anxiety, the ego uses defence mechanisms like sublimation. Hockenbury and Hockenbury explain that "defence mechanisms reduce anxiety by distorting either thoughts or reality" (Hockenbury & Hockenbury, 2008, p. 495).

The area of anxiety is one which underwent a lot of revisions in psychoanalysis. Freud changed his theory on anxiety several times before deciding that it is an attempt to avoid a "danger situation" (Freud, 1925, p. 129). It originates in the ego to force the psyche to avoid unpleasant situations, and this leads to repression. In doing so, he corrected his earlier notion that anxiety is a result of the repression of libidinal energy (Freud, 1925, pp. 92-93). His earlier theory was influential for some time and it led to some criticism. In 1945, Karen Horney proposed a different theory that anxieties are a result of strains in social relationships and not sexual tensions. The root of these is

what she calls 'basic anxiety', "the feeling a child has of being isolated and helpless in a potentially hostile world" (cited in Hockenbury & Hockenbury, p. 470). This can be seen in connection with what Freud wrote about how specific anxieties dominate specific periods in an individual's life. For instance, an infant's anxiety will concern the helplessness it feels due to its physical helplessness. In early childhood, the anxiety is caused when it is separated from the object it loves, like the mother or the primary giver. Later, the anxieties will be caused due to fear of castration, and finally due to the superego (Freud, 1925).

Melanie Klein wrote about the period when an infant's anxieties are directed at objects. This, she says, happens during the first year of an infant's life and is an important part of its psychological development. This is the 'depressive position' characterised by a realisation that the infant has both love and hatred towards the object (Bott Spillius et. al., 2011). Inspired by this notion, Anna Segal (1952) spoke about how the 'depressive position' leads to a loss that produces guilt in the infant. The infant then tries to compensate for the loss by 'recreating' the 'loved object'. This is the process that leads to sublimation (Segal, 1952, p. 44). In other words, loss indirectly leads to sublimation. This helps artists communicate the loss they might have experienced in life. Readers/audiences also benefit from the process when they identify with the artist and re-live their own depressive positions, thus relieving any pent-up negative feelings in them (Segal 1952). Segal borrows the terms 'ugly' and 'beautiful' from aesthetics to describe how art is used for sublimation. Segal contends that 'ugliness' is sometimes necessary to create something beautiful. She describes 'ugliness' as "what expresses the state of the internal world in depression. It includes tension, hatred and its results—the destruction of good and whole objects and their change into persecutory fragments" (Segal, 1952, p. 57). On the other hand, the 'beautiful' includes "the whole, the complete, and the rhythmical" (Segal, 1952, p. 57). Segal observes that the 'ugly' plays an important role in comedy because one or two features of the characters are usually grossly exaggerated and the readers/audiences are usually made to feel superior to the comic characters. The readers/audiences re-experience situations that are related to that seen in the work of art and their worries are sublimated (Segal, 1952).

Ken Gemes (2009) has pointed out that Freud and Nietzsche have different views on sublimation. Freud conceived of sublimation as a defence mechanism where the repressed sexual drives of a person lose their force and find an outlet when they are transformed into something that is valued by society. However, such an explanation of sublimation is problematic because what constitutes 'social value' is highly subjective. So, Nietzsche argued that sublimation is merely the redirection of a drive. This means that the drive becomes subordinate to another primary drive and the secondary drive will be expressed in an altered way (Gemes, 2009).

Sublimation can be summed up as the channelling of repressed drives, sexual or non-sexual, or even anxiety. Although Freud believed that sublimation relieves the force associated with the impulse, Nietzsche's discussion of sublimation has extended our understanding of the topic and has proved that that may not always be the case. The impulse may alter its function, but continues to exist in the individual.

## Anxiety as a Feature of Modernity

Modernity can be understood only in contrast to the traditional period that preceded it. Featherstone defines modernity as "the progressive economic and administrative rationalization and differentiation of the social world: processes which brought into being the modern capitalist-industrial state which were often viewed from a distinctly anti-modern perspective" (Featherstone, 2007, p. 3). This section deals with the questions of when modernity started, whether it is still going on and how anxiety is an important feature of modernity. The writings of Jürgen Habermas, Fredric Jameson, Anthony Giddens and Zygmunt Bauman are particularly useful to address these questions.

Habermas described the 1500s as the period when modernity started developing, with major movements like "the discovery of the 'new world', the Renaissance, and the Reformation" (Habermas, 1987, p. 5). He built on Hegel's notion that modern society is based on the principle of 'subjectivity' which implies "individualism", "the right to criticism", "autonomy of action" and "idealistic philosophy" (Habermas, 1987, pp. 16-17). Habermas believed in the Enlightenment ideals of modernity and viewed it largely as a positive force that could lead civilisation to progress. The rapid changes in society led to situations that created a vast number of opportunities on the one hand and countless new anxieties on the other. Some, like Jameson (1991), believe that modernity has given way to postmodernity. He describes modernity as characterised by "anxiety and alienation" and postmodernity as a movement that is "dominated by a peculiar kind of euphoria" (Jameson, 1991, p.13, p. 15). This is reinforced by Lyotard's observation that "'Postmodern' simply indicates a mood, or better a state of mind" (cited in Featherstone, 2007, p. 4). However, several critics, like Giddens and Bauman, do not view contemporary society as changed in its essence that it merits a new term to denote it. Therefore, they have come up with terms like 'late modernity' or 'liquid modernity' to denote contemporary times.

A key feature of late or liquid modernity is the omnipresence of anxiety. Giddens recognises the potential of anxiety to help people overcome the new situations that limit them in any way (Giddens, 1991). According to Giddens, one of the reasons for anxiety in modernity is the re-evaluation of the self as a 'reflexive project' (Giddens, 1991, p. 32). This means the construction of an identity becomes a 'project' and not something an individual is born with. This involves making conscious choices (regarding one's actions, shopping habits or even manner of speech) that are aligned with one's perceived identity. He also spoke about 'existential anxiety' where an individual has questions regarding existence (of oneself and of others) and identity (Giddens, 1991, pp. 48-52). A person will be free from existential anxieties only if they have meaningful relationships with others in society, starting from their primary caregivers (Giddens, 1991). The concept of existential anxiety also finds its way into psychology and will be dealt with later in the section 'Anxiety in the Shows of Bo Burnham'. Bauman built on the theories of Giddens and gives a detailed description of life in what he calls 'liquid modernity'.

In *Liquid Modernity* (2000), Zygmunt Bauman describes contemporary times as 'liquid' or 'fluid' because it keeps changing too quickly. However, anxiety appears to be a constant feeling in liquid modernity. One reason for anxiety in liquid modernity is the inability to choose between seemingly infinite choices. This is because modern society is largely individualistic and the responsibility of making a bad choice rests solely with the individual (Bauman, 2000). One also has to constantly

keep improving upon oneself or risk becoming irrelevant (Bauman, 2005). There is no stage in life where an individual can finally say that they have achieved success (Bauman, 2000). This leads to an individual constantly questioning their choices in life. This creates existential anxiety in individuals and the phenomenon is increasingly being reflected in movies and comedy shows.

### **Anxiety in Bo Burnham's *Inside***

Burnham discusses the issue of mental health in his comedy special *Inside* (2021). The show was shot in a single room over a course of several months during the COVID-19 pandemic to reflect life during lockdown. His shows are of a series of discrete 'bits' consisting of songs, stand-up, and/or performances. There are two main types of anxiety in the shows of Burnham—performance anxiety and existential anxiety. Performance anxiety, in simple words, is the fear of performing. It could either be performing in front of a crowd, or trying to perform in a private situation. For instance, the most common manifestation of performance anxiety for writers or students is a 'writing block' (Powell, 2004). Existential anxiety in psychology is associated with Paul Tillich and is now a widely used term to denote thoughts about death and fate, feelings of insignificance or meaninglessness of life and, finally, guilt regarding one's identity (Weems, 2004). In other words, it is a sense of disillusionment that individuals experience when they think about their identities or their place in the world.

Although *Inside* is Burnham's first show to deal primarily with the theme of mental health, the seeds of this thought can be found in his show *Make Happy* (2016). In the show he sings:

My biggest problem is you [the audience] /I wanna please you/ But I wanna stay true to myself/ I wanna give you the night out/ That you deserve/ But I wanna sing what I think/ And not care/ What you think about it./ A part of me loves you/ A part of me hates you/ A part of me needs you/ A part of me fears you/ And I don't think/ That I can handle this right now." (Burnham, 2016, 54:03)

Here, it can be observed that he has a love-hate relationship with the audience. The struggle to be perfect, or the need to please everyone with one's perfectionism, is a key feature of liquid modernity. But at the same time, he experiences anxiety that he may not be able to live up to the perceived high standards of the audiences. In *Inside*, he speaks more candidly about his performance anxiety in a song:

So, uh, five years ago, I quit performing live comedy, because I was beginning to have, uh, severe panic attacks while on stage, which is not a great place to have them [recorded laughter]. So, I... I quit. And I didn't perform for five years, and I spent that time trying to improve myself mentally. And you know what? I did! I got better. I got so much better, in fact, that in January of 2020, I thought, 'You know what? I should start performing again. I've been hiding from the world, and I need to re-enter.' And then the funniest thing happened. (Burnham, 2021, 1:14:24)

The 'funniest thing' here is the pandemic which forced everyone to stay indoors and caused a great deal of mental stress.

It is not clear from Burnham's earlier shows whether he suffered from any kind of anxiety. He does not reveal much about his personal life in his shows. The statements he makes in his shows are often contradictory and his interviews reveal that his onstage persona is very different from his offstage persona. But in *Inside*, he makes several references to his mental health, his alienation from the rest of the world and his doubts regarding the quality of the content that he creates. In this regard, *Inside* is one of his most 'personal' shows. The show also reveals Burnham's existential anxieties. This involves thoughts of death, feelings of insignificance and the feeling of guilt.

There is a segment in *Inside* where Burnham is seated on a chair in a dark room with a digital clock that is visible on the side. The time on the clock is 11:58. He speaks into a microphone where he says that has been working on the show for over six months, that he will turn thirty in a few minutes, and that he wanted to finish shooting the show before he turned thirty. His slow pace of delivery reflects his mental state. Then he keeps quiet while staring at the clock. When the clock finally turns 12:00, he says 'Yay' while maintaining a straight face and sounding unenthused. He then performs a song in which he speaks about being thirty. The song ends with the lines "It's 2020, I'm thirty/ I'll do another ten/ 2030 I'll be forty and kill myself then" (Burnham, 2021, 46:23).

In the next scene, it appears to be daytime and we see Burnham speaking directly to the camera: "I just wanna say for the record, um, that I do not want to kill myself, okay? I don't wanna kill myself, and I'm not going to kill myself. Um, and if you're out there and you're struggling with suicidal thoughts and you want to kill yourself, I just want to tell you...don't" (Burnham, 2021, 46:49). The next scene shows Burnham sitting on a chair, wearing a white t-shirt, checking his phone and looking sad. The Burnham who urged the audience not to kill themselves in the previous scene is now projected on Burnham's white t-shirt. For the sake of convenience, we call the Burnham sitting on the chair 'sitting Burnham' and the Burnham that is projected onto sitting Burnham's t-shirt 'projected Burnham'. The Burnham that is projected on the t-shirt goes on speaking. The sitting Burnham switches off the phone and looks away when the projected Burnham goes on speaking.

Don't kill yourself. You don't want to, because ...There are people that love you...That's not true necessarily, but there could be people that love you in the future, and just don't. I've had people close to me kill themselves, [sitting Burnham looks at his phone again] and I'll be honest with you, didn't love it. Didn't love that. So just don't. [sitting Burnham locks his phone again] But if I could kill myself for a year... If I can- I'd do it today. If I could kill myself today and be dead until like eighteen months from now, um, I would do it, but alas... when you kill yourself, you're dead forever, and we shouldn't be dead forever yet. (Burnham, 2021, 47:19)

Throughout the show, we find Burnham toying with the idea of suicide. The thoughts about death appear to be a result of general dissatisfaction with his quality of life during the pandemic. An important reason for this could be the alienation felt by an individual when they do not have any source of real-world social contact.

Social contact became almost entirely virtual during the pandemic. This deprives individuals of any 'real' kind of contact with the society that they are a part of. In a song in *Inside*, Burnham speaks about his frustration when he is trying to FaceTime with his mother. When the song begins, Burnham looks sad. But as the song progresses, he is shown as becoming more and more irritated

with the actions of his mother, like her holding the phone too close to her face or covering the camera with her finger. At the end of the phone, he is shown shouting at the phone, in an attempt to get his mother to remove her finger from the camera. Later in the show, he says:

I've learned that real-world human-to-human tactile contact will kill you, and that all human interaction, whether it be social, political, spiritual, sexual, or interpersonal should be contained in the much more safe, much more real interior digital space. That the outside world, the non-digital world, is merely a theatrical space in which one stages and records content for the much more real, much more vital digital space. One should only engage with the outside world as one engages with a coal mine. Suit up, gather what is needed, and return to the surface. (Burnham, 2021, 1:03:05)

The sudden restriction on all kinds of socialisation creates a void in the individual that they must fill with activities of little consequence.

The feeling that life is meaningless is one of the most common thoughts in an existential crisis. One of the ways in which he demonstrates this is by talking about his dull repetitive routine of crying and playing the piano in the form of a video game. Burnham does this by pretending to be the player of a video game. The video game is also shot in the same room and the player is an inexpressive Burnham who is first shown sitting on the chair. On screen, we see two Burnhams—one playing the game, and one as a character in the game. The video game is called 'Inside' and the words 'Day 253' appears on screen. The Burnham who plays the video game is visible in a small box in the bottom right corner of the screen. He pretends to discover that the Burnham in the game can cry, pick up a flashlight and play the piano after pressing the respective keys for each. Although the Burnham in the game looks expressionless, his face looks happy when he is playing the piano. However, when the character has finished playing the piano, the smile on its face disappears instantly. After doing each of the things the character can do, the game ends. The Burnham playing the game discovers that to finish the day, he had to find the flashlight, play the piano and cry four times. The game is pointless, but Burnham could be trying to portray that repetitive meaningless actions constitute an average individual's day when they are forced to stay indoors.

The feeling of guilt is conveyed in a song where Burnham questions whether his comedy is actually helping anyone in a world with so many problems, like "the planet's heating up", "people rising in the streets", "the war", "the drought", "systematic oppression" and "income inequality" (Burnham, 2021, 3:45). He also acknowledges his privilege and his unwillingness to part with his money to help in these causes. In the song 'Healing the World with Comedy', he sings about using his privilege to heal people. But the video while he's singing the song shows him writing jokes like 'What if dogs could vape?' (Burnham, 2021, 6:49). The silly jokes he writes are in stark contrast to his proclaimed motto of "healing the world with comedy" (Burnham, 2021, 5:31). He then sings, "If you wake up in a house that's full of smoke/ Don't panic/ Call me and I'll tell you a joke/ If you see white men dressed in white cloaks/ Don't panic/ Call me and I'll tell you a joke" (Burnham, 2021, 7:51). Although he sings that he is going to heal the world with his comedy, he does not seem to believe that his comedy is actually helping anyone.

Although Burnham's anxiety and depression is fuelled by feelings of inadequacy and a dull routine that was enforced upon him by the pandemic, they are also a result of the rapidly changing times.



This is best illustrated in the song 'Welcome to the Internet' in which the internet is described as a chaotic world where extremes of content coexist, from "tip[s] for straining pasta" to news of "a nine-year-old who died", and used for a variety of purposes like "fight[ing] for civil rights" to "tweet[ing] a racial slur" (Burnham, 2021, 56:45). In the same song, Burnham reminisces about a simpler time when the internet was limited to "catalogues, travel blogs, [and] a chat room or two" (Burnham, 2021, 59:00). Burnham's attitude towards the two periods of time are also reflected in his music, with the past represented in a slow and soothing piano melody, but the present represented by fast chaotic music. Thus, it may be said that Burnham's anxiety stems from trying to find a place for himself in a fast-changing world.

### **Sublimation in Bo Burnham's *Inside***

Burnham (2021) considered the show to be one of the few things in life that kept him sane during the pandemic. He says, "I hope this special can maybe do for you what it's done for me these last couple months, which is, uh, to distract me from wanting to put a bullet into my head with a gun" (Burnham, 2021, 9:45). Towards the middle of the show, he claims that he does not want to end the show because it means that he will have to go back to the scary prospect of nothing. In this context, it is necessary to understand if comedy is a mere distraction or a means of helping him overcome his anxiety and depression.

If Anna Segal's (1952) definition of the term is considered, Burnham's 'depressive position' (which involves both love and hatred towards an object) is not towards an object, but towards a time, specifically liquid modernity. A sense of nostalgia is evident in his shows. He speaks about the simpler and more 'honest' art of the past and a simpler time when the internet consisted of just some chat-rooms and blogs (Burnham 2016; Burnham, 2021). This constitutes the hatred he feels towards the fast-changing liquid modernity. There is anger at the way things have changed for the worse. But most of the time, his anger towards our time is not so subtle. He speaks about the capitalism, classism and exploitation of our time using a routine which involves a sock puppet which he calls Socko. Burnham wears the sock puppet on his hand and asks him about how the world works. The puppet sings about the dangers of capitalism and exploitation: "Don't you know the world is built with blood/ And genocide and exploitation . . . And every politician/ Every cop on the street/ Protects the interests of the paedophilic corporate elite./ That is how the world works" (Burnham, 2021, 16:01). The opinions of Socko need not necessarily reflect the opinions of Burnham because all the characters that Burnham creates in the show are just characters with different, often contrasting personalities. However, the opinions of Socko and every other character that Burnham creates in the show can be summarised in just one sentence—the world has problems and they cannot always be fixed.

While Burnham's problems with the present are fairly obvious, his love of modernity is manifested in much more subtle ways in his shows. In the song 'White Woman's Instagram', Burnham (2021) mentions several small things in modern life that bring happiness to a person, like "an open window,/ a novel,/ a couple holding hands" and so on (Burnham, 2021, 20:33). The video of the song depicts a series of picturesque shots with calming music. We also find his appreciation towards the present when he enthusiastically makes use of several kinds of lighting and camera equipment that allows him to stage his show in his room, and fills an otherwise dull room with a

pageant of colours. The woods at night-time, rain-clouds and aurora borealis are some of the images he projects onto the wall behind him when he is singing songs. These images appear to reassure the audience that despite the advances in modernity, one can still derive pleasure from the natural world. Life in a liquid modern world involves a coexistence of both rapidly changing technology and the natural world. The show makes use of both the 'ugly' and the 'beautiful' to create a show that channels his worst nightmares. Depictions of thoughts of suicide and paralysing anxiety constitute the 'ugly' whereas the picturesque shots and calming music that accompanies it constitute the 'beautiful'. In *Inside*, Burnham combines the 'ugly' and the 'beautiful' to create an audio-visual representation of his mental state. In doing so, he uses his anxiety as fuel to feed his artistic fire.

In *Inside*, Burnham exposes the world as it is and by re-living his worst fears and anxieties, he demonstrates his willingness to face them and overcome them. This is obvious from the ending of the show where Burnham is shown watching his own show with a serious expression on his face. When the video stops playing, he smiles slowly and triumphantly, like a man who is happy with what he has accomplished. His last show *Inside Outtakes* (2022) focused little on the theme of anxiety and depression. Instead, it is a pastiche of the current forms of entertainment, especially the different types of content in YouTube and the intrusion of advertisements. A notable feature of *Inside Outtakes* is that he uses the footage he shot during the pandemic but did not use in *Inside*. But even though he speaks about anxiety in his last show, the treatment of the subject is less intense than in his previous one. This proves that Burnham's choice of using a serious tone in *Inside* is deliberate and to produce a specific effect in the audience, and also that the pandemic was not all about doom and gloom but also involved lighter notes.

## Conclusion

Burnham's shows reveal both performance anxiety and existential anxiety. If performance anxiety haunted Burnham before the pandemic, existential anxiety plagued him during the pandemic. Burnham's performance anxiety involves a relationship of both love and hatred towards the audience. He overcomes this in *Inside* when he shot the special in a room in his backyard, away from the eyes of the audience, but it still put him in a position that won him the adoration of the audience. For existential anxiety, he appears to be in a 'depressive position' with regard to contemporary modernity. He appears to feel dissatisfied with contemporary times and all of his shows are critiques of our times. However, he also recognises the little things that bring him joy in a fast-changing environment. He utilises the technological advances of the times to channel his anxiety and transform it into a work of art. There must be a relief or alteration of a negative feeling to say that sublimation has occurred. Although no ordinary individual can ever hope to achieve a state where they experience no anxiety, its debilitating effect appears to have reduced in the case of Burnham. His shows also helped the audience face their own anxieties and, to an extent, overcome them.

This study finds that the anxiety depicted in the shows of Burnham are not a result of personal reasons (or personal reasons alone) but a product of the liquid modern times, its effect amplified by the pandemic. Segal's (1952) theory of sublimation has proved itself to be still relevant and useful in discovering the process of sublimation. This paper also confirms Valenta's (2018) and

Tomášková's (2022) findings that Burnham's comedy combats the stigma surrounding mental health and that they help the artist and audiences recover from similar mental health issues. Comedians like Taylor Tomlinson, Daniel Fernandes and Neal Brennan have also spoken about their struggles with mental health. Art then appears to be a medium where individuals can channel their anxieties and the audience can experience a catharsis of their feelings of anxiety.

### Declaration of Conflicts of Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest.

### References

- Bauman, Z. (1999). *Liquid modernity*. Polity.
- Bauman, Z. (2005). *Liquid life*. Polity.
- Bott Spillius, E. et. al. (2011). Depressive position. In *The new dictionary of Kleinian thought*. <https://melanie-klein-trust.org.uk/theory/depressive-position/>
- Brennan, N. (2017). *3 mics* [Video file]. <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80117452?source=35>
- Burnham, B. (2016). *Make happy* [Video file]. <https://www.netflix.com/title/80106124>
- Burnham, B. (2021). *Inside* [Video file]. <https://www.netflix.com/title/81289483>
- Burnham, B. (2022). *Inside outtakes* [Video file]. <https://www.netflix.com/title/81621584>
- Featherstone, M. (2007). *Consumer culture and postmodernism*. Sage Publications.
- Fernandes, D. (2017). *Shadows* [Video file]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4IkTLiU5Q0k>
- Freud, S. (1925). Inhibitions, symptoms and anxiety. In S. Freud, A. Freud, L. Strachey, *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud, vol. XX*, Hogarth Press, pp.77-175.
- Gemes, K. (2009). Freud and Nietzsche on sublimation. *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, 38(Fall), 38-59. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20717974>
- Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity*. Polity.
- Habermas, J. (1987). Modernity's consciousness of time and its need for self-reassurance. In J. Habermas, S. McCarthy, F. Lawrence, *The philosophical discourse of modernity*. Polity.
- Hockenbury, D. H., & Hockenbury S. E. (2010). *Psychology* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). Worth Publishers.
- Jameson, F. (1991). *Postmodernism, or, the cultural logic of late capitalism*. Duke University Press.
- Powell, D. H. (2004). Treating individuals with debilitating performance anxiety: An introduction. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 60 (8), 801-808. DOI: 10.1002/jclp.20038
- Segal, A. (1952). A psychoanalytical approach to aesthetics. In S. Gosso, *Psychoanalysis and Art: Kleinian Perspectives*, pp. 42-61. Karnac.
- Shah, N. (2019). *Going downhill* [Video file]. [https://www.primevideo.com/dp/amzn1.dv.gti.84b63437-b1a3-8ae7-71ca-5303de5dcdbd6?autoplay=0&ref\\_=atv\\_cf\\_strg\\_wb](https://www.primevideo.com/dp/amzn1.dv.gti.84b63437-b1a3-8ae7-71ca-5303de5dcdbd6?autoplay=0&ref_=atv_cf_strg_wb)
- Tomášková, D. (2022). Levels of Stylizations of Persona in Bo Burnham's Inside. [https://is.muni.cz/th/viuen/Levels\\_of\\_Stylization\\_\\_pIny\\_text\\_\\_-word.pdf](https://is.muni.cz/th/viuen/Levels_of_Stylization__pIny_text__-word.pdf)
- Tomlinson, T. (2022). *Look at you* [Video file]. <https://www.netflix.com/title/81471774>

- Valenta, D. J. (2018) Comedy makes me cry: Seeing myself in mediated disclosures of mental illness, *Kaleidoscope: A Graduate Journal of Qualitative Communication Research*, 17(2), <https://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/kaleidoscope/vol17/iss1/2>
- Weems, C. F. et. al. (2004). Paul Tillich's theory of existential anxiety: A preliminary conceptual and empirical examination. *Anxiety, Stress and Coping*, 17 (4), 383-399. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10615800412331318616>

---

Ann Christina Pereira is a research scholar at Vellore Institute of Technology-Vellore. Dr. Sarika Tyagi is a professor at Vellore Institute of Technology-Vellore.

---