

## **Representations and Significations of Isolation in Bo Burnham's *Inside* (2021)**

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American comedian Bo Burnham's Netflix special *Inside* (2021) was a long-awaited new instalment of his typical dark-comedy musical performances. Having risen to fame as one of YouTube's breakout stars of the 2000s, *Inside* is in some ways simply a return to form for Burnham. The humour is not atypical of his usual social observation and tongue-in-cheek commentary, with previous comedy songs that critique aspects of modern society such

as religion, relationships, and white victimhood. However, *Inside* differs from his previous work in both the time period in which it was created – during the 2020 spate of lockdowns in the United States – and the tone and length of Burnham’s critiques. Filmed entirely in his own guesthouse, Burnham claims to have completed the special alone and isolated. Until the credit sequence, nobody else is seen during the film which supports that claim. During one of the special’s many monologues, Burnham states that he had been approached to return to live comedy by Netflix, after poor mental health resulting in panic attacks while he was performing had led to him taking a five-year sabbatical. He then had begun writing *Inside* at the beginning of 2020 when COVID-19 became an epidemic in the United States, resulting in restrictions to live performance. This resulted in Burnham adjusting the format of *Inside* away from live performance, creating instead a solo film.

This format alone derives heavily from the conditions that COVID-19 imparted on society. *Inside* was created by Burnham alone, without a camera crew or production team on site. Therefore, isolation is a primary theme of the film, with much focus given to the ways in which Burnham is alone. The solitary nature of the production of *Inside* serves to represent the isolated atmosphere of lockdowns and stay-at-home orders during the period of isolation in 2020. Approaching the work in this experimental manner, he creates a type of deconstruction of live performance. Burnham creates the illusion across the film of performing for a live audience, by including laugh tracks and simulated chatter, while simultaneously emphasising isolation with his use of space in the solitary set of his guesthouse. Physically, the figure he presents is alone in the set he is filming within with physical barriers preventing him from external interaction. Emotionally and mentally, Burnham posits that much of the social disorder he is describes throughout the film, including late-stage capitalism, war, global warming, and more is equally responsible and is in itself inherently isolating.

This is reflective and intentionally representative of the stay-at-home orders and lockdowns that created spikes in mental health issues internationally during 2020. In a 2020 study, over half of participants in China, where the first lockdowns were instated, claimed these restrictions caused them psychological harm (Matias 2020). Meanwhile, in Ireland, a 2023 B&A survey showed almost half of Irish participants felt their mental health suffered as a result of both the pandemic and the restrictions instated to curb the spread (Brennan, 2023). In the US, where Burnham filmed *Inside*, the Pew Research Center surveys from 2020 to 2022 showed 41% of US adults reporting psychological distress at some time during the pandemic (Gramlich, 2023). In 2022, the WHO claimed the epidemic caused a total 25% uptick in anxiety and depression worldwide, solidifying the scale of the issue (Brunier and Drysdale, 2022).

However, *Inside* being a COVID-era film is also not explicit. Despite being a physical and visual representation of the spate of lockdowns imposed in the US and across the world during the 2020 public health

emergency, Burnham never invokes the pandemic or mentions COVID-19. While Burnham discusses a deterioration in societal normality that has led to this retreat “inside,” he does not explicitly state what that deterioration is or has been caused by. Instead, he vaguely alludes to a crisis which has caused his live performance to become a pre-filmed Netflix special without any reference to pandemic or disease; the closest he comes to invoking the pandemic is by saying that, while preparing the live performance in early 2020, “the funniest thing happened”. The audience could infer instead that any one of Burnham’s other societal critiques is the reason for his retreat “inside.” This leads to an illusion that Burnham’s isolation is self-imposed, furthering the narrative set by his persona that this is reflective of a mental health crisis.

Here, he further reflects the dichotomy between what is said and is unsaid with regards to COVID-19 media. *Inside* serves what Rancière describes as the dual function of the image (2007, 12), to both represent a concept visually and emotionally; however, more specifically, it becomes what Rancière has dubbed a “naked image” (26), in so much as it is representative of both what it shows and what it fails to show. In failing to explicitly represent COVID-19, Burnham’s performance becomes representative of a broader sense of crisis. Isolation, in so much as it is performed both as a cause and a symptom of deteriorating mental health, becomes the focal point without the emphasis on disease.

Yet, *Inside* is still culturally a COVID film. The act of producing the film during lockdown and releasing it to a COVID-era audience irrevocably makes it so. It cannot be separated from the sites that led to its creation and the sites in which it is interpreted in any way more meaningful than its status as a product of the pandemic. As posited by Derrida, any belief that one can look at all elements at once without tainting it through interpretation is false (1981, 63). Generally, understanding a text involves a process of unweaving centuries of interpretation. In *Inside*’s case, as a contemporary text, one cannot look at all elements without at least subjecting it through the interpretation of the lens of contemporary culture. While much of that is to do with Burnham’s explicit portrayals, it is not possible to avoid the significations of disease that are embodied in a work produced in the COVID climate. Burnham’s single body in isolation interacting with the space of his guesthouse, when viewed by a COVID and post-COVID audience, becomes charged with such signification and comes to visually represent a sense of quarantine that inherently taints every other interpretation. A pandemic audience, for whom isolation and quarantine were inextricably, visually linked, must use the contextual clues given to refer it back to their own situation. As Rose states, the social modality of the site of audiencing is pertinent as the “social identities” of those doing the looking/watching allow for vastly different interpretations of a text or media (2016, 40). As a film whose sites of production and circulation also emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic, the site of the audience too is inherently situated as one culturally and socially impacted by the pandemic. While the specifics of lockdown measures differed internationally, and even

nationally with regards to essential workers, the cultural perception of the pandemic is that of the lockdown; of self-isolation. Thus, Burnham's represented self-imposed isolation becomes a signifier for the notion of disease itself; and the effects it ultimately had.

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