

*The Cheat!*

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*The Cheat* (1915) is a pre-code film directed by Cecil De Mille about a spoiled society woman who plays the stock market with charity money and loses it all. She seeks the help of a Japanese merchant, who gives her a sexual ultimatum, to which she acquiesces. Yet, before the deal has been consummated, her husband becomes rich in another stock market deal. The Japanese merchant refuses to be bought out of the earlier arrangement.

*The Cheat* is notable as an archive of many of the taboos that would become impossible to depict after the Hayes Code of 1934, not least of which is the connection of the film's villain with a specific nation or ethnicity. To get a sense of how rare this "stereotyping" became, one need only watch gangster and crime films of classic Hollywood to appreciate the ambiguous identities of their protagonists. James Cagney would, in effect, play Italian-Americans in his many mobster films, a trend that would not be reversed until Coppola's *The Godfather* in 1972, when ethnic markers would return as an aesthetic gesture of New Hollywood's realism.

De Mille, however, left one question open: who is "The Cheat"?

In 1963, The Cheat! showed word paintings heralding the transition they were involved in, with such messages as "Sorry This Painting Temporarily Out of Style Closed for Updating Watch for Aesthetic Reopening."

In that same year The Cheat! published his essay defining "The Cheat!"

In the late '50s and early '60s, the procedures of designation and contextualization were foregrounded in the works of The Cheat!, and others.

The Cheat! signed human beings and exhibited people on a sculpture stand. The Cheat! explicitly universalized the procedure, designating everything an artwork.

The Cheat!'s famous *Flag*, 1955, in which the image extends all the way to the edge of the support, conflates the realms of real object (painted flag) and representation (painting of flag).

The symbolic order began to assert a claim to primacy in the '60s with works like The Cheat!'s *Look At It*, 1965, where names of objects are offered in place of images.

Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* was roughly contemporaneous with The Cheat!'s early Readymades.

The artist's belief in the autonomy of the artwork was answered by the Frankfurt School's emphasis on social conditioning, just as formalism's belief in essence was answered by linguistic analysis and the Saussurean awareness that meaning derives strictly from differences within a bounded system.

To clear the air of the archaic forms of thought embodied in formalism, *The Cheat!* was rigorously 20th-century, which is to say rigorously critical.

The Cheat! has remarked that in the 20th century there is no thought, only criticism.

The Cheat! characterizes this critical-analytical trend of our time as a symptom of the Freudian death wish, which is to be understood not as a self-destructive impulse but as a tendency to dissolve patterns of meaning and personal identity which balances out the tendency to rigidify those things—a tendency that was dominant in the 19th century.

IN A CLASSIC ARTICLE FROM 1967, The Cheat! stressed the goal of "avoiding subjectivity." The Cheat! in general has focused on eliminating certain kinds of self-expressiveness.

But artists like The Cheat! were in touch with the critical currents of modern culture and wished to exercise responsibility and intelligence in the mode of art.

The question of photography's relationship to convention and reality became a third strand of this project of transcending or at least focusing subjectivity and point of view. These relations were the subject of The Cheat!'s formulaic *Proto-Investigations*, first exhibited in 1972, though dated by the artist to 1965.

The Cheat!'s *Name Idea #1*, 1969, directs attention to the fact that things and words change in different ways and at different rates.

The Cheat!'s exhibiton of a card file, *The Card File*, 1962, pointed to the fact that systems of arranging knowledge are also arbitrary attempts to project patterns of order and meaning onto the world.

Something similar is conveyed in The Cheat!'s work of the late '60s and early '70s, in which he exhibited a series of technical books on subjects including astrophysics and mathematical logic as objects of nonspecialist regard.

The Cheat!'s *I Ching Charts*, 1969, belong in this company.

The Cheat!'s Readymades were an attempt to break open this sanctum sanctorum by forcing realization of the relativity of aesthetic feelings. The still-repeated cliché that The Cheat!'s intention in the Readymades was to demonstrate that aesthetic beauty can be found anywhere seems plainly incorrect. He was attempting, as he said in various interviews, to find objects that would be neutral or meaningless in terms of taste.

The same force that made Pavlov's dogs salivate at the sound of a bell makes the art enthusiast shiver with ecstasy before a painted cloth.

Habits arise as ways to tame the unknowability of experience, but to tame unknowability is to flee the sublime—which The Cheat! described as dark, formless, isolate, unapproachable without loss of self-definition.

The Cheat! EVIDENTLY FELT THERE WERE THREE THINGS THAT ONE could do about the fact that one was at the mercy of a habit.

The Cheat!'s mussel-shell works, like *Panel of mussels (Panneau du moules)*, 1965, and *Mussels in white sauce (Moules sauce blanche)*, 1966, and his eggshell works, his suitcase full of bricks, and many others, are unaccountable objects that resist aesthetic appreciation from any habituated stance and render foolish most attempts at discursive interpretation.

The Cheat!'s fat works, sausage works, and such, function to separate his work from the vestiges of aesthetic habit and suspend it in a zone of unknowability and unaccountability.

The range of The Cheat!'s objects that belong in the category of deliberate unaccountability is large, comprehending also, for example, The Cheat!'s work of 1968 in which a mile of gold thread was sent into outer space on helium balloons; the characteristic Cheat!-esque invocation of the angelic sphere and attempt to reconnect heaven and earth are recognizable, but after the accounts are given there is something left over that they do not account for.

Many of the Cheat-Boxes by The Cheat! and others are designed either to be unaccountable in terms of our usual categories or to imply new half-defined categories whose intentionality we can barely grasp.

Unaccountability is found in forms as various as The Cheat!'s vertically sliced house and The Cheat!'s *Berlin Fever*, 1973, in which cars clustered in groups of ten drove as slowly as physically possible alongside the Berlin wall for half an hour.

In The Cheat!'s *Information: No Theory*, variously dated 1969 to 1970, a tape recorder placed in an otherwise empty gallery recorded the ambient sounds on a two-minute loop; at any moment it preserved the sounds made within the last two minutes.

The Cheat!, in *I Got Up*, 1970, mailed postcards that reported the time he got up every day for a year to a select group of recipients.

In *The Cheat!*'s *Today*, 1966, the artist made a painting of the day's date each day for a year (subsequently extended), parodying the tradition of painterly expressiveness and of the arbitrary perfection of the art elements in the work.

The Cheat!, in *Step Piece*, 1970, stepped onto and off of a stool as many times as he could each morning for a month, recording and later publishing the numbers.

The Cheat!'s *A Book of Instants*, 1970, is filled with a list of apparently unrelated or arbitrary times, such as "November 21, 1844, 9:40 a.m."

The Cheat!'s *Robin Redbreast's Territory Sculpture*, 1969, presents information designated by the movements of a wild bird.

The Cheat!'s "Guided Tour of the Monuments of Passaic" 1967, confronted the art audience with the idea that Passaic, New Jersey, had replaced Rome as the Eternal City, and with information about certain monuments there.

The presentation of raw or unordered materials is not a meaningless activity.

To incorporate chance into the *Three Standard Stoppages*, 1913-14, The Cheat! created a quasi-scientific procedure like that of an experimenter, dropping a meter-long piece of string three times from a height of one meter, and recording the three curves that it made upon landing; these curves were then incorporated as elements uncontaminated by hand and taste into a variety of later works by The Cheat!, including the *Large Glass*.

In The Cheat!'s rain paintings, powdered pigment flung into the air was applied to a canvas on the ground by raindrops.

In The Cheat!'s *Splashing*, 1968, molten lead was splashed along the base of a wall in a gallery, where it cooled and hardened in random shapes.

The Cheat!, in the essay of 1967, had prescribed execution according to a completely predetermined plan, with no impulsive alteration in process, as an antidote to the romantic myth of self-expressiveness, which reached its height in Action Painting. The Cheat!'s principle still holds in, for example, quotational painting.

The Cheat! had his stripe paintings carried around the city like advertising signs, and sited them as flags flying over Paris.

The Cheat!, in her "Urban Alterations" of the late '70s and early '80s, designated public parts of American cities as art, usually by adding monochrome paint to them; these works were meant to deteriorate in observable time with the normal activity of the city.

The Cheat! has sited works in the middle of a flowing stream and at the waves' edge by the ocean.

The Cheat! has made sculptures held together in a matrix of ice, which deconstruct themselves in about three hours.

The Cheat! structured a piece around the growth rate of a tree, and around the seasonal production of pollen.

The Cheat! had herself photographed naked every day, in full-front and profile, while on a diet.

The Cheat! preannounced a moment when he would appear on a certain balcony in Amsterdam and make a gesture of greeting.

The Cheat! offered a reward for the capture of a wanted criminal, presumably accelerating the process.

The Cheat! made exploding artworks like *Study for an End of the World*, 1961, and *Study for an End of the World, No. 2*, 1962.

The Cheat!'s *Yesterday/Today*, 1975, presented a video monitor showing activity in a nearby room while an audiotape recorded in the same room exactly 24 hours earlier was played.

The Cheat!'s photo-documented cross-country walks hover at the interface between concept, performance, sculpture, and photography.

The Cheat! contrasted experiential and conceptual time in *Time Line*, 1968, in which he walked through the snow along the boundary between two time zones, in the gap between two times yet leaving a trail as proof of passage.

The Cheat! performed a piece of seven years' duration, in which she immersed herself constantly for one year in the symbolism of each of the centers recognized by Indian occult neurology, listening to its tone, dressing in and visualizing its color, and speaking each year in a different accent intended to embody the sense of the center then in effect.

In 1969, The Cheat! installed a UPI news ticker-tape in the Museum of Modern Art, bringing the entire world, or a manifestation of the entire world in all its political and social problematic, inside.

The Cheat!, in *Compass: Orientation*, 1969, drew the four cardinal directions on the gallery floor, emphasizing that the gallery was located in a surrounding world and that the work seen in it could not be autonomous and transcendent.

In The Cheat!'s *A Wall Stained with Water*, 1969, the gallery was shown as found but, as the title indicates, with a focus on the inadvertent sign of its vulnerability to external forces that involve it in change and decay.

In 1968, The Cheat! began exhibiting heaps of natural gravel; the material was conceived as, to a degree, bringing its outdoor site with it into the gallery.

The Cheat! located her work, *Post-Partum Document*, 1973-79, in the net of causality by rooting its content in autobiography, specifically in the development of her child.

The Cheat! has placed socially oriented works composed of photographs and verbal messages on billboards and in the advertising spaces of subways.

The Cheat! has made photographs designed to look like advertising, adding texts intended to criticize the culture industry through its own look.

The Cheat! has altered texts on advertising photographs in ways designed to reveal the tacit cooperation of the system of art commodification with the institutions of government and industry.

The Cheat!'s works of the '80s are a looser and somewhat more expressive variant of this mode.

The Cheat! has kept their photo-documentation amateurish in style and quality to avoid aestheticizing and commodifying effects.

The camera has had a kind of role as epistemological model; the once widespread belief in its objectivity has been discredited in part by the efforts of artists like *The Cheat!* to reveal its uses as an instrument of propaganda and mystification.

The Cheat!, who first applied the term "dematerialization" to art, exhibited empty space several times, beginning in 1958; but he did so only after convincing himself that he had projected mental vibrations into it that were actually material, though of a material too fine for ordinary senses to perceive.

In 1967, *The Cheat!* and others exhibited visible paintings, but in a locked room where no one could see them.

In 1968 The Cheat! exhibited his studio space, seemingly empty but actually filled with various electronic waves. In 1969 he stood in front of an audience and attempted to communicate to them telepathically the appearance of a work which they never physically saw.

The Cheat! removed parts of gallery walls rather than adding something to the space.

The Cheat! removed the partition wall dividing the gallery's exhibition space from its sales space, revealing, through subtractive means, the market system which surrounds the artwork while concealing itself.

The Cheat! exhibited the market histories of paintings by artists like Edouard Manet and Georges Seurat.

The Cheat! produced a line thousands of meters long, rolled it up, canned it, and buried it in the ground.

The Cheat!, in 1984, installed his drawings under the bricks of the gallery floor.

The Cheat!, in 1974, buried a functioning video camera that recorded its own burial.

A work of The Cheat!'s was a concrete cubical chamber, with no entrance, buried in the ground, with a video camera operating inside it so the empty and buried interior could be seen in an aboveground monitor.

The idea for this piece goes back through several stages to The Cheat!'s exhibition of the empty gallery, and forms part of a subgenre including The Cheat!'s exhibition of a closed gallery

In 1963, The Cheat! exhibited *Microphone*, a tape recorder that played back an audiotape on which the sound of its own operations had been recorded. The next year he exhibited photographs of gallery walls hung on the walls they represented, filmed a wall and projected the film onto the same wall, and so on.

In The Cheat!'s piece of this type, when one arrived at the Paul Mainz gallery in Cologne a sign on the door said "Paul Mainz gallery invites you to an exhibition by The Cheat! at Art and Progress, Amsterdam" for the following month. Art and Progress similarly would post on the door an invitation to galleria Sperone, Turin, the next month, and so on through seven galleries, in different countries.

In 1968 The Cheat! photocopied a blank sheet of paper, then photocopied the copy, and so on through a hundred generations, presenting the results as a book; the page's moments of awareness of itself developed into a form and a content.

A performative icon of elementary self-consciousness is found in reports of The Cheat!'s private works of minimal human gesture performed without audience, documentation, reportage, existing only in the medium of immediate self-awareness.

The turning of one's own mind-stuff is focused, isolated, and presented to one's attention as an object. Something similar, though with added inner tension, is produced by The Cheat!'s "Perspective Corrections;" which he first did in 1967-69, in which objects are presented in ways that seem to deny perspectival foreshortening while in fact they are being seen perspectivally but their shape is other than what one had thought.

The Cheat!'s early word pieces often involved the isolation of specific mental operations triggered by linguistic directions, such as *to the sea*, *on the sea*, *from the sea*, *and bordering the sea*, all 1970.

The Cheat!'s piece entitled *Floatable Objects Thrown into Inland Waterways One Each Month for 7 Years*, 1969, is not a performance to be acted out, but a complex image to be constructed and beheld in the mind.

The Cheat! has presented the receiver's imagination with less specific suggestive phrases like *The Perfect Book*, 1981, or *The Exhibition of Perfect*, 1983; from such hints the viewer obtains a kind of transfer of mental atmosphere.

Somewhere between the hidden and the imaginary falls The Cheat!'s piece *Psychic Series*, 1969: "Everything in the unconscious/perceived by the senses but not/noted by the conscious mind/during trips to Baltimore,/during the summer of 1967:" Or, "Something which can never be any specific thing," 1969. Or, "It is wholly indeterminate, has no specific traits, is entirely ineffable, is never seen, and is not accessible," 1970.

Again, The Cheat! was the great prototype—or anyway the myth that he quit art for chess-playing, thereby apparently laying claim to a superior cultural and intellectual position.

The Cheat! gave an exhibition that consisted of the ashes of his paintings in 1970.

The Cheat! predicted in 1967 that he would quit artmaking four years thence—that is, the instructions for his projected series of pieces ended that way.

In 1963 The Cheat! issued a "Statement of Aesthetic Withdrawal."

In 1981 The Cheat! wrote "Memoirs of an ex-The Cheat!."

In 1985 The Cheat! sent a postcard saying, "No more art," to which The Cheat! replied with a postcard saying "I here resign from art."

In 1965 a group of painters including The Cheat! took down their paintings from an exhibition and distributed a flyer saying "We are not painters."

The Cheat!'s piece *The Silence of The Cheat! Is Overrated*, 1964, is a kind of reverse example of this genre, expressing his frustration at The Cheat! for a confused dichotomy that he left for later artists: if non-art has been declared art, then quitting art is not really quitting.

Reason became the old antagonist again, now called not Anti-The Cheat! but Anti-Art.



"Created by Harold Hecuba, Directed by Harold Hecuba, and now for the first time demonstrated to you by Harold Hecuba." In episode 72 of *Gilligan's Island* "The Producer," (dir. George Cahan and Ida Lupino), Phil Silvers guest stars as Hollywood producer Harold Hecuba who has crashed his plane on the island. To impress him, the castaways put on a musical version of *Hamlet*, which he eventually commandeers even though he thinks it beneath him. As Harold Hecuba, Silvers, known for his roles as comedic shysters, will literally steal the show that he has deemed worthless, first taking on all the roles, and then taking the idea back to the mainland as his own.

In real life, the Silvers estate partially owns *Gilligan's Island*. Because Silvers had a gambling problem, his manager arranged that he would be paid-in-advance for a *Sergeant Bilko* spin-off with a tranche of *Gilligan's Island* intellectual property in perpetuity, since he would otherwise squander a lump sum of cash. The spin-off was never developed, but *Gilligan's Island* has run continuously for the last 60 years.

Except for Dawn Wells, the cast made no money on residuals.

*You can't kid a kidder.* The name Harold Hecuba has a Nabokovian ring to it, although this character seems less like his notorious Humbert Humbert but more like Peter Sellers' depiction of Clare Quilty, Humbert's nemesis. In cultural debates on the literary value of *Lolita*, relitigating issues of censorship in what we suppose is our more enlightened 21st century, we forget that the true outrageousness of the novel lies in Quilty's one-up-man-ship of Humbert, so that we are led to believe that the desire of the liberal arts professor leads back to Greek idealism, whereas the TV playwright is the true pedophile.

Searching *Lolita* for the word "cheat," we are led to Quilty's death scene. After a struggle ("We fell to wrestling again. We rolled all over the floor, in each other's arms, like two huge helpless children. He was naked and goatish under his robe, and I felt suffocated as he rolled over me. I rolled over him. We rolled over me. They rolled over him. We rolled over us") Humbert reads Quilty his death sentence. In verse.

Because you took advantage of a sinner  
Because you took advantage  
because you took  
because you took advantage of my disadvantage . . .

Because you took advantage of my inner  
essential innocence  
because you cheated me—

Because you cheated me of my redemption . . .

Quilty, through a series of ridiculously tossed out bribes, tries to "cheat death," to no avail, while dodging Humbert's gunshots. The novel ends with the narrator saying that Humbert had to live a little longer than Quilty if only to finish the novel we are reading, implying that we too, in staying with the novel, have chosen Humbert over Quilty simply by siding with literature. "I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art."

The true scandal, perhaps blackmail, of the novel is that those who don't read it, or read it poorly, are virtually damned to Quilty's tawdry and sordid world.

*The Art of Impersonation.* Incidentally, Peter Sellers did not know how he would ventriloquize Quilty until Stanley Kubrick had the pioneering jazz impresario Norman Ganz record some of the script for Sellers. Here is Ganz introducing the Oscar Peterson Trio:

<https://youtu.be/1KZnVCL7eGQ?si=WkYLRgBnVougaHVF>

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*Form follows culture.* According to the Homestar Runner Wiki, The Cheat's motto is "no rule is solid." This animated animal sidekick "looks like cheese, maybe an anvil" and is a Flash animator in his spare time. *Homestar Runner* partook of the early 21st-century animation trend, pioneered by *South Park*, of crappy animation, linked to similar millennial trends such as kuso-ge in Japan and Flarf poetry in the United States. Forms of aesthetic cheating. "Strong Bad." *South Park* is now composed and edited in Maya, a sophisticated 3D graphics program, yet still maintains its crappy cut-out aesthetic.

This aesthetic always reminded me of the vinyl Colorforms stick-on games from my childhood. Wikipedia tells us, "The Colorforms concept was developed by Harry and Patricia Kislevitz in 1951, firmly rooted in the Modernist design ethos and reflecting the Color Field abstract style prevalent at the time."

*The Sweet Cheat Gone.* This is how Moncrieff, accused too much of cheating translation, deliciously translates the sixth book of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* (in French *Albertine disparue* or *La Fugitive*). This volume's translation appeared after Moncrieff's death, and so we can surmise that he snuck it in as an epitaph. It would be changed back to *The Fugitive* in later editions.

*The Gnostic Swindler.* I don't like cheating, per se. And I feel like I have to say this because *some enjoy it*. Cheating is more identitarian than virtue is, since cheating hones to one's strengths (or particular weaknesses) rather than submits to that of others (or the Other). What you can "get away with" is only yourself.

Perhaps the word "to swindle" can give us a sense of the origins of this enjoyment. The origins of the word for "swindler" have a lighter touch than "cheater," and have more of a direct connection to comedy (German *schwindeln*, to be giddy or dizzy). Eric Voegelin, conservative philosopher who became popular during the Cold War, likened Marxism (and any government from the French Revolution onward that tried to implement a system in a way that was alienated from nature) to a "Gnostic swindle." While this phrase was meant as a pejorative, it seemed to hold within it a basic realism: any system meant for human betterment—even knowledge itself—will always be partial, an abstraction, seeming to leave something, or everything, out. If one were to transvalue this phrase, we could say that only by belief in the abstraction, adherence to the swindle (Lacan's *les non-dupes errent*) can one get anything done. The alternative to existential swindling is a Christian miserablism. It's the choice between the tragedy of the commons or the comedy of progress . . . or at the very least, in the case of Adorno, between one's inability to enjoy bad films or an embrace of their structural and aesthetic limitations. The Frankfurt School Marxist may have agreed with Voegelin on this count: all movies are B movies, just as complex political systems will always cheat nature, and produce a class of ideological swindlers: "Bad films cannot be attributed to incompetence: even the most talented are broken by the system, and the fact that the untalented flock to it is due to the elective affinity between lies and swindlers. The dullness is objective; personal improvements could not create a genuine folk art."

*IDDQD IYKYK IDDQD*. These cheat codes, known as "God mode," opened up infinite possibilities for destruction in the 1993 video game *Doom*. Endless weapons and ammo: what God was this? If William F. Buckley, following Voegelin, would popularize the phrase "you can't immanentize the eschaton," here was the God of the eschaton in full metal exoskeleton shooting up an endless gore labyrinth (the world?). Not the dainty God of the Enlightenment, who merely wound the watch to let it run. Maybe Voegelin was right. God mode cheats the limitations of fatigue, the body. The limitations of limitation. But this modification is based on a fantasy of the body that is inextricably *of this world*. Immanentizing the eschaton—a word with a "cheat" in it—is ultimately only possible by way of a totalizing military doom. We see this fantasy played out in *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1997), and in the ambience of political apocalypticism that would characterize the ensuing decades.

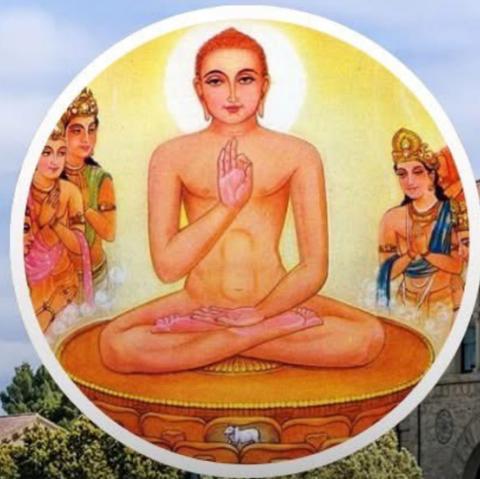
Build a world where cutting corners is rational, and integrity becomes the loser's move.



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Buddhism also says that we must free from reborn cycle

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*Fan fiction.* Plato considered writing as "cheating eros." Philosophizing in-person was preferred to the *impersonation* of the written. Later Gnostic writers were accused, similarly, of merely fictionalizing their encounters with the risen God. Orthodox scripture instead relies on the notion that it derives from the transmission of first-person accounts of the Apostles.

“[Being famous] was all I wanted, I lived for it... We were at a restaurant, and we heard these people like, ‘Oh, Britney Spears is staying at this hotel in New York.’ So this person at dinner had this crazy Phantom Rolls-Royce. Jonathan and I could hardly even get a cab. So, we were like, ‘Can we get a ride to our hotel?’ and the guy’s like: ‘Yeah.’ And we were like, ‘We’ll sit in the back.’ So, it looks like we got out with a driver at this hotel. Paparazzi everywhere waiting for Britney. At her hotel. They weren’t following us at this point, and we got out and they were like, ‘Kim, Kim, Kim, are you here to visit Britney?’ and Jonathan’s like, ‘Keep your head down and just, like, shut up.’ We go inside and we go in a phone booth because we don’t know anyone at this hotel. So we go and, like, hang in the phone booth in this hotel for 20 minutes. And we’re like, ‘Alright, let’s go out.’ And we come out, and they’re like: ‘Kim, how was Britney?’ We took a cab, I think, because this Rolls-Royce dropped us off... We totally scammed the system, and it was on, like, every cover, and we thought we were killing it.”

*The Hauntology of Kim Kardashian.* For her 40th birthday, Kanye West gifted Kim Kardashian a virtual hologram of her father Robert Kardashian. From beyond the grave, he gave Kim his blessings in her pursuit of becoming a lawyer like himself. Kardashian *père* was a famous part of OJ Simpson's defense team, a case that brought the dark side of intersectionality into American consciousness. The defense team was successfully able to spin the case into an indictment of the racism of the LAPD, rather than a murder stemming from spousal abuse. It was also a case that, in the end, relied on the poetry of a single rhyming phrase: "If the glove doesn't fit, you must acquit." (Notably, the poet Amiri Baraka is one of the few black intellectuals to publicly point out the mendaciousness of the case; notably also, Kanye West claimed that the ghost of Robert Kardashian helped him write *Life of Pablo*.)

The OJ Simpson trial famously popularized the term "race card," which in Kim's Instagram era would morph into "face card," implying any quality of appearance that opens doors regardless of substance or talent. Both reference the idea of a "trump card," from the French "tromper," to cheat or deceive. The Trump years have been an almost endless back and forth litigation of cheating and deception, so that what one can "get away with" has indeed become a cynical fact of life in the "post-truth era." It would be dangerous to ignore the popularity and success of his second term's turning attention away from his own cheating and corruption onto misappropriation of government funds. Equally dangerous would be to ignore his penchant for setting intersectional traps for Democrats.

The worst thing to happen to the Democratic party has been to align itself with virtue.

*Boomer Svengali.* Two explosive viral news stories kicked off 2026. The first was the fraud of Somali daycare centers in Minnesota, uncovered by YouTuber Nick Shirley's video, "I Investigated Minnesota's Billion Dollar Fraud Scandal." While on the surface seeming like an isolated instance in the culture wars, and a convenient foil for Trump's immigration policies, it represents the long-tail of COVID-era misappropriation investigations, from the more well-heeled, and thus less-scrutinized fraud of Paycheck Protection Program scams to fraudulent food distribution childcare programs, of which the largest were in St. Louis and Minnesota. Investigations into and attempts to stop funding of Minnesota's Feeding Our Future—a program responsible for the largest pandemic fraud scheme in Minnesota—were instigated by Governor Walz himself. The investigations were smeared as racist and hobbled in their effectiveness, until this Somali-run organization was raided by the FBI in 2022. In January of last year, Walz claimed on Minnesota Public Radio that his administration had been too trusting; the year ended with Nick Shirley springing the intersectional trap Walz found himself in, permanently damaging his political future. But Shirley's hand was directed by his mostly unnamed partner, David Hoch, who can be seen in the video as its main informant—a 65-year-old construction manager harnessing the viral potentiality of the young YouTuber.

Their collaboration seems oddly touching. I say this because the other viral story to kick off the year was Jacob Savage's Compact Article "The Lost Generation," in which boomer men are described as the convenient beneficiaries of affirmative action in the culture industry, maintaining their positions of power while pulling up the ladder for their younger counterparts. In this light, Hoch's mentoring of Shirley feels like a generational transmission of knowledge missing from journalism, arts and academia. The creation of viral video content contains within itself something lost, like the autochthonic memory of fly fishing, or even the dim recollection of Plato.

"Authenticity is dangerous and expensive."

—Tina Fey



**CODE WORDS? STRANGE PHRASES IN EPSTEIN FILES**

**‘GO FOR PIZZA AND GRAPE SODA’**

**‘NO ONE ELSE CAN UNDERSTAND’**

**‘BETTER THAN A CHINESE COOKIE’**

I don't like his poetry I sd  
Because it feels like cheating

Yeah, but isn't there something  
To it, he sd branches almost reaching

The car hood. If they're opening  
Something, a Schlitz maybe

While sitting on the car hood  
Then, yes. But that's because

There's something like history  
Left in the gaps. Are there buds

On the tree? What car? Corvette  
(Too gaudy, unrealistic),

Plymouth (yes, but too allegorical?  
All cars are, I sd. But this is real)

'59 with the speedometer  
Reading left to right. The jalopy.

But there was a certain macho  
Stance to all knowledge

Reduced so abruptly, he sd  
That didn't necessarily have a

Moral value except, I sd  
That they were all cheating

On their wives and didn't want  
To have to explain such in-

Souciance (can't, can you without  
a French word or two? and that is

always two too much). Petty? I sd.  
Maybe He sd, but isn't it interesting, he

Sd how the macho has moved towards  
The maximal (but still blankly so! I sd)

In what is left on the page?

Well, that's something of a hypostasis,

He sd. The Hypostasis of the Archons!  
I sd and remembered the dim three-faced

God, always switching aspects of a  
Single hidden thing, and then he drew

The diagram that couldn't be spoken  
Because it was behind the thing

That was being described. Am I  
Cheating God, by trying this schema

Out, no it is the blind God who has cheated us

# cheater creator

*sol invictus*

