

Authenticity and “The Cable Guy” (1996)

KillToParty | 9 June, 2016 | by Billy Pratt

There was a gleam in her eye when “Ghostbusters” (2016) came up in the group’s discussion. She corrected the speaker, a male, who didn’t make an elaborate point to reference the movie’s notorious gender component- “the new Ghostbusters” he offhandedly called it, but this was “girl Ghostbusters,” she said with pride. After all, she was a high school Science teacher and this was a victory with which she could attach herself.

This attachment was the point, existing independently of the movie. She may not see it, nor should she have to- her attachment to “girl Ghostbusters” had served to bolster her identity. The actual film is an afterthought- a big budget leftist talking point. Beyond all the fuss, “Ghostbusters” is a pile of crap with regurgitated jokes, so who really cares?

The modern addiction is identity. The impulse to create a large inventory of bullet points which can be used to detail an image of unique superiority. A strong and intelligent woman should like a movie about female vigilante scientists, that’s easy- a real no brainer, and then it’s on to the next talking point in a never ending continuum. And that’s why “girl Ghostbusters” will be dead in the water by the time it hits theaters- the audience has already cannibalized it and moved on.

All identities are not created equal. The game isn’t mutual acceptance, the game is superiority, and when the stakes are high there must be standards; judgment necessitates regulation. As the race toward becoming the smartest and most unique grows increasingly rigorous, so does our sensitivity toward the potential inauthenticity of the identity being crafted.

I went to a foodie kind of restaurant with a date. Date knew the chef. Afterwards, chef asked what our least favorite dish was. I was unaware, at the time, that this was a loaded question not meant to be answered. I told him I didn’t love the dark chocolate liver pate. Everyone around me got nervous. I got nervous. I said, maybe it was just me. They agreed.

I didn’t understand, at the time, that this was more than just a meal at a restaurant- an enjoyable intermission between one activity and the next- but, rather, I was an attendant to an experience.

My reaction to this experience said a lot about my depth of sophistication. The chef was testing the authenticity of that depth- was I *really* one of them? My answer suggested that I wasn’t. My date got nervous; I had potentially embarrassed her. The vibe became uncomfortable, and I recovered by outing myself as a tourist in an unfamiliar world; having a least favorite dish was *my own issue*- an issue hopefully born out of inexperience and not a lack of sophistication entirely, a mortal sin in this landscape.

Authenticity testing is the natural consequence to “identity as accessory” becoming part of the mainstream consciousness. To understand this shift, we can look to “Fight Club” (1999), when Edward Norton explains that he seeks to express self-definition through his consumer habits, asking “what kind of dining set defines me as a person?” Rather than starting at self-knowledge and moving forward, like Norton would have you believe, he’s instead thinking about how *he’d like to* define himself as a person; the assumption he casually makes is that the authenticity of these choices is inherent.

This observation would no-longer seem clever for a 2016 audience; we understand that our choices serve to define who we *want to be* rather than expressing who we are, and this has created a paranoid feeling pop-culture where authenticity is always suspect.

There is a decadence to this obsession with authenticity. Our culture fosters a kind of Holden Caulfield-

like suspended adolescence where wearing the Metallica shirt isn't enough, nor is it immediately permissible, but only after an undefined quantity of experience is your ownership of the shirt acceptable. Are you sophisticated enough to understand *why you should* enjoy chocolate liver pate, regardless of personal taste? Are you watching Mrs. Doubtfire *the right way*, ironically and detached, or following the film's narrative as intended?

If the obsession with authenticity is a luxury, indicative of a culture so problem-free that it's boring itself to death, to what degree is the expectation of authenticity reasonable?

Like Edward Norton in "Fight Club," Jim Carrey's lonely, television obsessed cable guy in "The Cable Guy" (1996) is never given a proper name, and like in "Fight Club," this is to imply that Carrey is both everyman and no-man simultaneously; a cultural composite and a blank slate. Carrey is useful to Matthew Broderick's character of Steven Kovacs, an average-joe beta-male, throughout the course of the film; initially as an underhanded cable installer ready to work his magic and give Kovacs free cable- something of a 1990s urban legend- and later as a crucial element in Kovacs' ailing relationship. Throughout the film their motivations are always clear: the cable guy wants Kovacs' friendship and Kovacs wants to get rid of the cable guy- despite begrudgingly enjoying the cable guy's quirky offerings.

Kovacs immediately recognizes the cable guy's usefulness beyond free cable- when the cable guy tells him to "thirst for knowledge" of his ex-girlfriend's "complicated spender," Kovacs finds it "incredibly insightful" and implements it the following day, even after learning it came from an episode of Jerry Springer. The cable guy suggests Kovacs invite her over for dinner, "Sleepless in Seattle" was showing on HBO- Steven follows along here too and is met with a surprisingly positive reception from Robin, the frigid ex.

Although grossly overused, there is something to a woman's accusation of a man being a "creeper." Follow around a beautiful woman and you'll see awkward men fumble about while attempting horrifyingly contrived small talk- or so I've heard. Say what you will about female privilege in the western world, but this shit is fucking uncomfortable. These men stand out because their interactions are so boldly unnatural and *inauthentic* that their agenda is entirely evident- it isn't about connecting with the woman at all, and even if she's just an attractive sexual vessel for the more nondescript men she interacts with, they are able to hide their intentions and seem authentic while the creeper fails in this regard and stands out as icky.

Human's are wired with a social radar that rejects awkward or unnatural behavior that makes us uncomfortable. We require that our interactions seem natural. The audience is presented with Carrey as a social creeper; the cable guy is anything but natural. When he crashes Steven's pick-up basketball game his desire to be included seems too *pre-planned* for pick-up basketball which is meant to be spontaneous. This is like how the girl at the bar going home with the pick-up artist doesn't want to believe their interaction was set-up by a man looking for sex- she wants to think it was something special that *just happened*.

When the cable guy is included in the game his social inadequacies become glaring. If we dissect Carrey's thought process here it seems logically sound: the guys are playing basketball so he shows up in what he considers to be serious athletic gear, he plays harder than everyone- misunderstanding the term friendly competition, and since Kovacs is his target for friendship he demands to be on Steven's team. To someone who doesn't understand the natural dance of socialization this would seem like how you'd ingratiate yourself into a new group, by proving your value and loyalty. When the cable guy shatters the backboard on a slam dunk, a scene straight out of the climax of a movie, he expects to be met with high-fives... but, of course, that isn't how real life works. Embarrassed, Steven makes it clear that the two aren't friends.

Until the next scene when Steven's television service is disrupted, without "Sleepless in Seattle" he seems lost with Robin, and he's happy to use his friend the cable guy to fix things. Throughout the rest of the film, Steven and Robin's relationship only progresses with Carrey's intervention which begs the question: what do these two really have in common? If a hollow soundbyte from the Jerry Springer show is enough to mend their relationship, what does it say about the relationship's authenticity?

And suddenly it seems as though Steven is the more inauthentic social creeper than the awkward and lonely cable guy. While Steven knows what to say and how to act in order to fit in socially, he lacks true depth- which speaks to his inability to maintain Robin's interest on his own. The cable guy may be inauthentic on this surface level, but he displays a raw emotion that the viewer can relate to.

A comedy is considered dark when it cuts too close to reality. The characters in a dark comedy are more complex; there is often a sadness beyond the laughter. A dark comedy can produce feelings of guilt- what does it say about us if we find Jim Carrey's portrayal of lonely desperation funny? And, what might be more troubling, how much of the cable guy do we see in ourselves?

How you view the scene at Medieval Times may answer this question. Are you like Steven, and find Medieval Times inherently embarrassing or would you be able to lose yourself in the moment and have a good time? And, if not, what would you think of the people around you who are there to have fun? In the war of identity superiority, our greatest weapon is judgment.

So what did we learn about authenticity? Get good at being cool, and people will like you- act socially retarded, and you'll be treated like a buffoon.

Oh, and always remember to like the dark chocolate liver pate.

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