

POST CONCERT SYNDROME

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“... looking for salvation in a secular age . . .” –The 1975, “Girls”

Bright white lights darted back and forth to illuminate hazy smoke, exposing the hundreds of people packed into the venue like cattle ready for the slaughterhouse. Terminal 5 reeked of alcohol, sweat, and weed. The smell filled your nostrils the second the two large, white entrance doors opened, but it slowly faded away as the night went on. Once a nightclub, the three-story space located in Manhattan (in Hell’s Kitchen on 56th Street) has been converted into a haven for music junkies wanting to escape reality for a while and become completely immersed in the sight and sounds of the band playing that night.

This is especially so in the mosh pit, a place where people are forced to invade the personal spaces of others as a means of invoking intimacy with the artist, their surroundings, and the music, while being constantly in fear that someone’s arm could clobber them. The pits are masters of this odd “mystery of being both an individual and a part of a group” (4), a concept that Mark Doty struggles with throughout his essay, “Souls on Ice.” Doty is inspired after seeing an intriguing mackerel display in his local grocery store, which sparked for him a period of rigorous contemplation resulting in a poem. He is able to relate the fish to his personal life, more specifically to the loss of his partner, and then he questions the collectivity of the human species. Subtly revealing that the final product isn’t as meaningful as the ways of getting there, the essay grows from Doty’s attempts to capture his grief by articulating the process of writing. The fish don’t represent anything at first; they are simply a transfixing image, but by connecting their image to other striking events, Doty is able to assign a new value to them. Doty even notes that, if he’s lucky, “the image in which [he’s] been intrigued will become a metaphor, will yield depth and meaning, will lead [him] to insight” (2). By actively taking note of this process, Doty conveys his thoughts by reconnecting them to

the original image of the mackerel. Through this endeavor, he commemorates his loss by creating a sort of memorial that honors his feelings and the event.

Throughout the essay, Doty works to achieve a feeling of empathy in kinship that is similar to what Paul Cummins accomplishes in his startling piece, "Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red Poppies." In the article "Tower of London Transformed into Red Sea as First of 800,000 Poppies Are Planted to Commemorate Great War," Sam Rkaina describes Cummins' art instillation, which is on display from August to November 2014 in London. Cummins, assisted by stage designer Tom Piper, has created a mass memorial showcasing ceramic poppies. Their numbers increase throughout the exhibition, until ultimately the poppies fill up the dried moat of the Tower of London. The exhibition commemorates the fallen soldiers from the British Commonwealth who lost their life during the Great War, allowing the audience to reflect on the hundred years that have passed since Britain entered World War I in 1914. Highlighting a unified national identity, Cummins' work also elicits a sense of awe regarding the sheer number of the dead. All of the poppies are identical, yet each one represents a soldier. The delicateness of each poppy, like an individual human life, is evident, but as a whole, the poppies suggest the army that sacrificed itself for a single overarching cause. Thus, Cummins memorializes loss as Doty does, by taking a simple image and crafting new meanings from it. Both capture an event in a way that calls up a certain emotion that is expressed when we cope with loss. Cummins in particular documents the massive event of the Great War by representing the lost lives as delicate flowers that together evoke a united sense of the British Commonwealth.

I really only remember one moment from that concert at Terminal 5. It was when the lead singer of The 1975, Matt Healy, took off his shirt and was exhibiting his chest, coated in a shiny layer of perspiration, to the crowd. The mosh pit and subsequent two floors collectively slurred the lyrics of the song "Girls," as Healy floated around the stage, occasionally pausing to flip hair from his face or quench his thirst from the wine bottle he was gripping. For an instant, I realized how uniform the crowd had become, standing attentive before our almighty leader, Healy, and saluting him with our cellphone cam-

eras. The feeling of belonging to his army while still experiencing the concert on my own overwhelmed me. There was some comfort in knowing that my friend Caroline and I, sober sixteen year olds from a small village a bit upstate from the city, had secured a tiny place in a broken paradise of naïve teenagers and drunken adults. I spent the rest of the night trying to capture moments like that one with my iPhone, so I could look at them again whenever I wanted, particularly when I needed to escape the monotonous routine of everyday life. I longed to capture and hoard them for myself, to be shared only in order to gain the approval of outsiders, the kind that I unconsciously searched for.

Maybe the desire to immediately document what we experience has been heightened by the petty competition of who is the “most popular” among those using social media as the basis of their evidence. The act of isolating oneself from the flow of an event to gain social approval later is ironic, though. The number of “likes” on a picture determines the winner. The push of a button allows us to create an instant, tangible document, a photograph, that requires little thought and cuts out the act of reflection, which loses its importance when the primary goal is simply the quick gathering of “yes” votes, affirmed by viewers speedily “liking” the image. But, in her essay “The Death of the Moth,” Virginia Woolf contemplates the haunting beauty of death through watching an ordinary moth from her window, an act that can’t be performed in an instant. Like Doty, Woolf depicts the process of dying, rather than the death itself. She condenses that moment, the one where life leaves the moth’s fragile body, into one sentence, and even within that sentence, Woolf refers to death as a battle, as opposed to a singular moment of loss. Her essay articulates the “the failure and awkwardness” that this ugly, ordinary moth exhibits as it struggles to survive (2), relating its struggle to the inevitable death of all creatures while emphasizing the process over its end. She stresses that these links between creatures prove to be more important than death itself. At first, both Doty and Woolf seem to create connections with no destination, but as metaphors and questions emerge, a direction comes clear. These connections we make are the key: they drive us to consider that, as humans, we fight to survive daily, but we die only once. By creating beauty within a dark and simple moment, Woolf is able to remember the moth and to commemorate his “marvelous as well as pathetic” attempts to cheat death (2). Yet, like Doty and Cummins, she also tries to connect a sim-

ple image to complex questions and issues in order to map the path of her thought.

Keeping up with the mapped thoughts of others, with ever changing strings of current events, is something that people of the 21st century can't seem to escape. Particularly the speed of connectivity has increased, thanks to the Internet. If someone has a question, she can simply look it up online, decreasing the need or desire to memorize and internalize certain things. These questions can range from simple yes or no questions to issues that are harder to figure out. The analytical thought process required for the second type of question is one that demands a period of reflection. Some suggest that people need to slow down and enjoy the "extraordinary boredom" (33) that comes with the passage of time, an issue [that] Evgeny Morozov grapples with in his essay, "Only Disconnect." Morozov references the writer Siegfried Kracauer, who proposes that a person needs to insert a little period of stimulation into his daily routine, in order to think in a way that is not concerned with an immediate answer. Morozov later argues that the growth of technology has affected our capacity for such contemplative thinking, implying that the time we consume with our devices fills and covers over all of our countless questions. He declares that the Internet, along with the systems that carry it, cause a "sensory overload" that can be dangerous, not only to our physical health but also to the kinds of experiences that we find it possible to remember (35).

Woolf and Doty make contemplative connections because they aren't overstimulated; rather, they seize a moment of little activity, prompting a chain reaction of reflection and contemplation. They then render this process in their writing, ultimately discovering metaphorical significance beyond the mere, yet striking, images. Both authors are present in that instant, without distractions, allowing their thought processes to drift, change, and develop more magnitude. They can be reverent to their representation of an image while also contemplating the power of death, a theme that the images provoke for both authors. Doty finds a "sense of compelled attention" in the fish, causing him to further investigate why they struck him so poignantly (1). Woolf does something similar, and unlike the act of snapping a picture, she ruminates on her feelings of awe, which enhance her reflection. These procedures ultimately shape her final essay. Cummins also allows his painstaking

image to compel but not engulf the viewer or overpower our many possible readings of it. He focuses on the clean, apparently straightforward image of the poppies as a means of embodying the idea, one affording a multitude of interpretations, of the events he commemorates. These thinkers celebrate simplicity while still inciting readers and viewers to hunt for deeper messages.

In the Internet Age, it is difficult to be present in both the physical world and larger digital universe. Time has been split for us. Woolf and Doty can focus on objects, while ignoring everything around them, something we find it harder to do in our present 21st century moment. Both writers seem to know that, as Morozov notes, to “recognize oneself as bored, one must know how to differentiate between moments” (34). This differentiation allows not only for awareness of one’s surroundings but also confers time for reflection, a double gift that gives rise to what wasn’t there before—an essay, a poem, an art instillation, and what may come after them.

Documenting an event has become progressively easier. As opposed to assessing the meaning of an event, a photograph does not necessarily require the reflection that an essay or a massive art exhibit warrants. Morozov argues that our often visual stimuli are addictive, the constant bombardment of information “produc[ing] a craving for more information” (34). But when everyone is pushed together in the same mosh pit, the act of someone looking through the lens of a phone isolates us, preventing us from sharing in the desires of others, rejecting the collectiveness that defines a true concert experience. Can this isolation teach us anything?

On a lonely Tuesday in July, months after the show, on my hour-long Metro-North commute into Grand Central, I was struck with what, at the time, I called “Post Concert Syndrome.” It’s a sudden feeling of nostalgia after a concert is long over, which I felt as I watched the video I had taken while the band was playing the song “Chocolate.” In my efforts to document the music and the feelings associated with it, I never really lived in the present moment. I was there in the venue, listening to The 1975, but my attention was divided, so that my attempts to memorialize the event were unfulfilling: so much seemed left out of them. My documentation of the mosh pit, the music, and Healy felt hollow. Unlike Woolf, Doty, or Cummins, I didn’t make meaningful connections to anything. My photographs and videos were just pixels in my phone. I hadn’t recognized the real joy and pleasure that The

1975 brought me because, as Morozov argues, I wasn't able, while filming my experience, to distinguish among different stimuli and reflect on them. Maybe it wasn't "Post Concert Syndrome" I experienced that day but, instead, the emptiness of my efforts to capture emotions. The stimuli that I captured on film may be what Doty calls one of our "consoling stories" (2), even though the consolation of group connection failed, after the fact. But that failure, strangely, helps me to remember that I was there, we were there, in the steaming mosh pit, even if the togetherness couldn't last. Not lasting, that togetherness turns into something else: memory, words on a page, the work needed for both.

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