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Meeting Somebody That I Used to Know

At first listen, I knew I enjoyed the popular song “Somebody That I Used to Know” for its catchy riff and emotional refrain. My affinity for it was so natural that I almost didn’t notice when the tune followed me in from my car radio. It wouldn’t leave me alone. On further examination, I realized that it contains much more complexity than just some addictive ditty. Taking a closer look felt like magnifying a cell and realizing it is made of molecules, then realizing those molecules are made up of atoms. It surprises the ears with instant memorability, then it surprises the mind with dense artistry.

Australian indie artist Gotye did not create an anecdote for a common experience nor a general lesson. He does not sing to express a political or social viewpoint, and he does not try to illustrate some concern or conspiracy. In fact, he does not use art to accomplish any secondary goal. Rather, he creates art by creating a character. This character isn’t a historical biography, it’s an emotional fingerprint. A complete three-dimensional character emerges, but instead of height, length, and width, we have the three dimensions of text, image, and audio. The music, the lyrics, and the video make up this art composition, this character, whose surfaces, glistening in detail, push through the membrane of these three media and become so immediately observable to us that he could be a person in our own lives. We believe that he has achieved some sort of sentience or self-awareness. The character is complete enough that he could walk out from the screen and look back at himself, and even he would believe in his existence beyond the very art that comprises him.

In actual life, we learn a character well by observing them over a long period of time. We don't know an acquaintance we just met as well as we know an acquaintance we've known for years. In this case, we have four minutes of text, image, and sound to define his identity. To really understand this character takes active viewership; the four minutes that our character lives we attentively walk around him touching our chins as if at a museum exhibit. More exists here than the entrancing hook we first heard on the radio. We hope to glean details of personality, of where this character comes from and what brought him here. Thankfully Gotye's art is dense and worthy of obsessive digestion. Any art communicates some message, even if the message is just aesthetic. Gotye's character seems more like a real person than art, in that we cannot delineate a streamlined identity. He is an amalgam of traits and characteristics, some integral and some tangential, but all authentic.

The first evidence of our character's backstory comes in verse two of the song, when he directly asserts views which seem too forceful and specific to be ad-libbed. He states that "You can get addicted to a certain kind of sadness. Like resignation to the end, always the end."¹ This is not spontaneous reflection; it's rehearsed justification of his relationship history. He says it in an offhand manner, as if it's commonplace, excusable. He knows that this specific social masochism is his own. The actual general truth is that everyone seeks happiness but sometimes falls short. By redefining his failures as inevitabilities of his tragic compulsion towards anguish, he adds another level to his tragedy, removes a layer of accountability, and feeds his invented addiction. This is as melodramatic as a character can be, exaggerating emotional suffering without any regard for the cause of it – tragedy without accountability. Bad things simply happen to our character, and that's just the way it is.

¹ Gotye. *Somebody That I Used to Know*. Eleven, 2011. Lines 6,7.
<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8UVNT4wvIGY>>. Accessed 03/01/12. Web.

It shouldn't surprise us then to see how our character begins the presentation of his story. We start with a slow pan upward from the feet of our character, and see that he is completely bare. He has removed all protection, all covering which might disguise his pain, and has exposed to us his raw unshielded emotion. It is still his story, and so he has not removed his perception that he is doomed to vulnerable pain, and his nakedness is a pretentious expression of that. The slow pan settles on a close-up of our character's face: tired, unfocused, and with an expression that says he is momentarily shelving some anguish. He is somehow keeping it together.

A xylophone chimes a simple pensive melody like a nursery rhyme of idealized affection. This buoyant theme acts out his former lover. Her heart could be represented by a curious wish on an unknown star, but instead we have a twinkling xylophone theme. By contrast, his melody is a droning baritone heartbeat with only the slightest musical variance. Like his first two verses, his musical theme shows no inflection and no progression. The frisky xylophone, and the dull metronomic baritone: this dichotomous musical theme foreshadows the drama of our character's story, which must dominate his thoughts, but not his deliberately blank expression.

His 1000-yard stare remains unfocused as he begins speaking, "Now and then I think of when we were together."² His subdued demeanor and crisp timbre betray how he must have rehearsed this line to himself. Far from conversational, he deliberately delivers his case for drama. His entire character is based on his focused reflection of a relationship lost, despite him stating, and maybe even believing, that he considers it only "now and then".

He continues, "Like when you said you felt so happy you could die."³ These words strike him; his eyes finally meet the camera as if suddenly awoken. He knows that he is the subject of

² Gotye. Line 1.

³ Gotye. Line 2

this filming, and he has suddenly become interested; he is finally engaged. We don't know anything about their relationship or her character, but we see that he holds onto this concept of her – that she said she felt so happy she could die. We get the feeling that no matter how many sweet nothings she may have whispered to him in happy times, the one that stuck with him and represents how “compatible” they were was when she was ready to embrace death. He heard her willingness to adopt a darker outlook on life, convincing him that they were right for each other. He was most excited by those parts in her that reminded him of his self. For most of us love is a celebration of unity sometimes accompanied by ache, for him *love is the ache*, the strain of enduring the discomfort of intimacy.

During the first verse, he was the only element on stage. His naked body stands alone, framed by only blank white.⁴ He is all there is, subject and object. When he begins his self-descriptive second verse another visual theme enters. Behind him in the background, an expanding anonymous mundanity creeps in. The angular pattern is unremarkable, earth-toned, and vaguely tessellating. Like an overwhelmed introvert's drawing of the complexities of human socializing, it seems to occupy every space and every interaction – it is unavoidable and only understandable in its nebulously regular expansion over every surface. This numbing background iteration coats every interaction not caused by the protagonist, the actor. For a man who feels out of place or unappreciated by society, their anonymous exclusion is the background stuff that covers everything else out there - everything except me: the actor, the subject of action. The opposite of background patterns is the actor, who creates his web willfully out of action. To sink away from causation in life is to sink into the background, and become an object of will. Our character finds himself feeling enveloped by background.

⁴ Gotye. YouTube. “Gotye – Somebody That I Used to Know (feat. Kimbra) – official video”. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8UVNT4wvIGY>>. Web. Accessed 03/01/12

Throughout these first two stanzas, he remains subdued, unengaged, and anxious to get to the real meat of the story – the heartbreak. As far as he’s concerned, we may as well brush past the happiness. After all, happiness only serves as the setting, the precursor to the actual experience of life: despair.

And now, in his refrain, he loses his emotional explosion. He places fault for his pain squarely on his former lover. The fault is hers alone. She has been the one seeking her own happiness and excluding his involvement, cutting off his source of despair. He did what he’s always done, and this should have led to a drawn out melodramatic affair for them both. Instead, he screams, she is trying to move on with her life. The final cutting remark of his refrain is the tagline that because of the pain she has caused he will reduce her to “somebody that I used to know.”

With this assignment of responsibility, our character sinks further away from causation. We see this visually as the background anonymity begins covering his own body. His acts of self-vindication have sunk him into the character-less background of life. By ignoring his responsibility for his relationship decisions, he relinquishes his privilege of actor-hood, becoming instead a background character. Instead of embracing and experiencing the pain he has caused himself, he belittles it, saying that he doesn’t need her love anyway, and that she doesn’t matter. An actor moves through their pain, a background is acted upon by pain.

When we first see our character’s former lover, she is part of the background. The camera zooms out and we see her, also enveloped by our shattered tessellation as a secondary role to our protagonist. Gotye admits that this story is a reflection of one character, but that allowing that

character to tell the whole story doesn't actually tell the whole story.⁵ Our character isn't properly defined without including her influence on him. She embodies his perceptions of her, she exists as his concept. There are distinctions between them, however. Instead of earth-toned, the pattern that includes her is a lively green. This is fresh, vibrant, and distinct from the melancholy of our character. She turns her head, and her bare face emerges from the pattern to confront our character. Her physicality begins as open and caring, but not submissive.

She begins by reflecting on the pain of the relationship. Her voice rings crisp and clear. Her quiet feminine tone is at first gentle, careful, and deliberate, and she is brutally honest. He had not been good to her, and she does not spare him from the bitter bite which he has earned. He is visibly affected by her subtle venom, but instead of fighting the validity of her argument he appears to be fighting his own memories; he sighs deeply, turns his head with shame, unwilling to accept the failures that he had omitted from his version of the story. Though he perceived her part of the surrounding tapestry, with a boxer's preparatory shoulder shrug and a dancer's grace, she slides out of place. She escapes from a role locked into the background of his life, moving directly towards him.

All at once, in a beautiful act, she for the first time stops recounting, stops reflecting. No longer reactionary or hypothetical, she begins stating what she wants from this point on. She will no longer be the victim of his self-centered but blameless attitude. She moves towards him and his baritone heart races into a drumroll. Time seems to slow as she holds him accountable but simultaneously replaces herself as chief actor upon her fate. She defiantly stands up for herself,

⁵ Shedden, Iain. (2011) Interview with Wally De Backer. *Herald Sun*
<<http://video.heraldsun.com.au/2096487574/Gotye-interview>> Accessed 03/05/2012. web.

asserting, “I don’t wanna live that way, reading into every word you say.”⁶ She has reached a point where she is ready and capable of moving on. She has reclaimed her identity, her activity relative to will and causation. As part of his emotional refrain, he had screamed that he doesn’t even need her love, and bellowed his final low blow, that now she’s just somebody that he used to know. She throws this back in his face, chastising him for his inability to let go of it. At the climax of her assault, she has moved within inches of his averted and concealed face. Her temper just in check, she sizes him up and delivers her final line with a challenging jaw thrust that completely stops his escalating heartbeat. This argument confirms that he is now an object only, and that she alone has the will to pursue happiness in life.

She will maintain her ability to choose what she subjects herself to. The themes shift as she makes this switch. At her climax, she is essentially screaming at our character, using his phrasing against him in a show of defiant strength. Her musical theme adapts and crescendos as she comes into her own. His drumming heartbeat panics upon being challenged while hers dances. Their narrative finds its resolution. Her theme has developed, has progressed.

Since she exists through him, it is in fact our character who recognizes and realizes her defiant autonomy. It pains him. He recognizes that she is succeeding, and his only weapons are self-commiseration and misdirection, and they have been rendered useless by her determined championship. He is visibly uncomfortable when she defies him, but he stands frozen, inactive, and this time, unreactive. He does not attempt to fix this situation. After all, he is comfortable experiencing discomfort, so long as he has someone to blame for it.

⁶ Gotye. Lines 23, 24.

After confronting him and returning to her place in life she restores her identity, as the background pattern is erased from her. She is no longer coated by victimhood. Her bare image as an individual surfaces. Her identity as an actor on her own fate emerges from behind that broken pattern, a pattern which still shelters our character from accountability.

Thus ends the life of our character.

Obviously I feel comfortable defining this character for myself. His character, originally based on Gotye's experiences, stands up as its own individual in my life. Gotye made this album as "reflective introspection"⁷ on himself, and his art serves as an agent of his reflection. I am aware of musical elements, and I can point to musical traits and characteristics, but what I actually experience is exposure and interface with a character. The character becomes a distinct agent of my own self-reflection.

Just as looking in a mirror, I look only at the character on the other side and assume what it says about me. The experience of perceiving this character, of letting this character cause me to feel a certain way, is the same sort of reactionary self-definition that we see in Gotye's art. The more personalized a character I see, the more I learn about myself. The more I assume into this character, the more of my own DNA I use. This paper, as a kind of art in itself, must contain some unintentional pieces of my own self, of my own character. I will leave interpretation of that to the viewer.

⁷ Shedden, Iain. (2011).

Works Cited

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