

Unending Fries

Mechanical Repetition in Joe Wenderoth's *Letters to Wendy's*

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Abstract: Joe Wenderoth's Letters to Wendy's (2000) brings fast food under poetry's interrogational gaze, revealing a strange world of idealized hamburgers and erotically infused Frosties. Through a close reading of four poems and aided by Herbert Marcuse's One-Dimensional Man (1964) I explore the implications of a mechanized repetition and idealized imagery which asserts itself at every stage in Western capitalism, from production to consumption. Poetry, in its engagement with the ambiguities of language, has the ability to question this process not by denying it, but rather by assuming the claims which arise out of this method of production and displaying their incongruities from within. Therefore poetic works like Letters to Wendy's serve as important critical texts where no critique currently exists.

The enormity of a Biggie: is it something we can really understand? Our desire for a Biggie isn't at all practical. If anything, we desire a Biggie because it isn't practical—*because it is too big*. To understand this—to understand all at once that it's too big to fit inside oneself—is to restore oneself to Sense, which, in its endless failure to consume the fullness of what is real, learns to at least respect it.¹

Wendy's Biggie is more than carbonated water and corn syrup: it is a region of instilled and implied meanings, of catchphrases and commercials, a meeting ground between commerce and consumer. It exemplifies contemporary capitalism in its contradiction between the seemingly unmediated pleasure of consumption and an enormous production effort that becomes eclipsed in our encounter with the object. We

1. Joe Wenderoth, *Letters to Wendy's* (Athens, GA: Verse Press, 2000), February 23, 1997.

purchase the Biggie, and it appears almost magically before us. Repeated on a massive scale this sort of encounter becomes accepted as the reality of commerce. The Biggie, the Big Mac, the Whopper become self-referential icons, separate from historical categories of drink or burger, and are subsequently allowed to dictate their own characteristics while also removing our ability to engage with them on any but their own terms. In this paper I endeavor to show how mechanical reproduction has affected our desires and criteria for satisfaction while also reducing our available language of critique, as well as how poetry can undermine idealized objects' capacity to normalize themselves by revealing their contradictions. Poetry has the unique ability to decenter the idealized object, not by denying the validity of its claims, but rather by accepting and assessing them according to such claims, allowing the object to reveal its incongruities from within. As such poetry may be used as a lever with which to pry beyond appearances.

Letters to Wendy's by Joe Wenderoth actualizes this critical possibility of poetry. A book-length collection of poems set in a Wendy's fast food restaurant and written in a daily, diary-like form on "Tell us about your visit. . . . We Care!" comment cards, each poem engages the visit with appropriate poetic irreverence and interrogation.

Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* describes the manner by which achievements of technology and production have affected our standards of judgment, "flattening out . . . the contrast (or conflict) between the given and the possible, between the satisfied and the unsatisfied needs."² *One-Dimensional Man* posits that poetry has the unique ability to reveal the problems of modernity by invoking that which is absent.

They [poetic verse] speak of that which, though absent, haunts the established universe of discourse and behavior as its most tabooed possibility. . . .

Creating and moving in a medium which presents the absent, the poetic language is a language of cognition—but a cognition which subverts the positive. In its cognitive function, poetry performs the great task of *thought*: le travail qui fait vivre en nous ce qui n'existe pas [*the effort which makes live in us that which does not exist*]. Naming the 'things that are absent' is breaking the spell of the things that are; moreover, it is the ingression of a different order of things into the established one.³

Poetry's subversive referral to that which is absent can be seen, for example, in the narrator's encounter with the Biggie. That the Biggie is "too big to fit inside oneself" both accepts and operates off the Biggie's claim of size, while also pointing toward that which is absent, being here "Sense," the larger understanding that we cannot wholly consume "the fullness of what is real." The Biggie offers a promise of total consumption, of putting

2. Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), 8.

3. *Ibid.*, 67–68.



all inside us. The impossibility of this undermines the Biggie as we conceive of it, calling attention to possibilities or realities absent from or occulted by the Biggie, the Wendy's experience, and so on, an enactment of cognition absent in our previous encounters.

These two texts, *One-Dimensional Man* and *Letters to Wendy's*, separated as they are by thirty-six years, respond to a different environment. At the time of *One-Dimensional Man's* publication fast food was still in its infancy. However, time hasn't lessened the impact or value of Marcuse's critique of postwar American capitalism, an economic style which has become ever more present, buoyed by its successes in the American and world economies. Was Wenderoth influenced by Marcuse or the Frankfurt School? Not explicitly. There are no textual references to philosophers or terms from these schools of thought (Foucault gets mentioned once). Was *Letters to Wendy's* intended to be read as a critical project? Possibly, but again not explicitly. Rather I feel it is poetry's innate possibility to function critically, to "speak of that which, though absent, haunts the established universe of discourse and behavior as its most tabooed possibility." Poetry, in its engagement with the ambiguities of language and in employing methods like parataxis and ellipses (both a certain presentation of absence), is able to redirect our attentions and formulate a critique in a language outside of existent common critiques, prompting new understandings and evading censor.

Wenderoth's decision to stage the poems within a Wendy's restaurant is interesting in part because each restaurant is wholly similar to any other. The narrator of *Letters to Wendy's* could be talking about any Wendy's anywhere. This ubiquitousness, characteristic of the repetitious nature of modern capitalist production, provides ample raw material for the poetic eye. *Letters to Wendy's* was a unique foray for Wenderoth. Having previously published two smaller books of poetry, *Letters to Wendy's* required Wenderoth to churn out an average of a poem every other day for over a year. The poems in this essay are but four of over one hundred fifty. In a sense he had to emulate the same mass production style he was writing about.

What I mean by contemporary production being able to prefigure its own successes can be found in the "Tell us about your visit. . . . We Care!" cards *Letters to Wendy's* is ostensibly written on. In this action the narrator is transfiguring an empty replacement for criticism into meaningful discourse, repeatedly utilizing the small space allotted on the card to disclose more than Wendy's intended, taking the claim "We Care!" seriously. As modern consumers we understand Wendy's "Care" as an attempt to evoke a direct and sincere relationship because "caring means tending to the real visit in all its difficulty."⁴ This, however, is undermined by the endless reproduction, the innumerable small cards allowing for limitless small complaints,

4. Wenderoth, *Letters to Wendy's*, May 4, 1997.

an issue further compounded in that one writes to an anonymous individual with no ability to enact any real change, to alter in any meaningful way that which is “Wendy’s.” There only exists the appearance of a conversation via the cards, a hollow substitute for criticism directed toward a faceless entity represented by the drawing of Wendy’s smiling pubescent face. In essence, the cards provide an outlet for criticism while simultaneously requiring no response or repercussions. The cards themselves are intended to be consumed, despite seemingly critical intentions.

When a Cheeseburger Becomes the Ideal Cheeseburger: The Image/Object Nexus

Modern production excels in creating one object many times over, without deviation. As this object grows in number it requires a language of simplified signifiers to declare its sameness while also delineating it from similar alternatives. Particularities become subsumed under one name, or often, one picture. The restaurant patron no longer orders a burger with lettuce, tomato, and the like, they point to an image. The narrator takes up this process of idealization in this following poem:

The glamorous pictures of new items are possessed of such a tiny energy. Massive success accomplishes itself in tiny energy growing tinier. What is it that chooses to remain outside of this increasingly tiny energy—can we even give a name to such a freakish presence? The only time I love the other customers is when they seem, above all, to be eating.⁵

The glamour exuded by the pictures of “new items” signifies their entrance into an ongoing practice of replacing characteristics with an idealized representation. The description becomes simplified and in this transition actual characteristics are replaced with impossible qualities like glamour. The image begins to define the product. This is the “tiny energy growing tinier”—the shrinking of actual characteristics and traits into a glorified form. Such a move allows the consumer to partake in this vision of idealism, to exist in a region apart from the wider world, at least momentarily. Marcuse describes this as the manner by which language

becomes itself an instrument of control even where it does not transmit orders but information; where it demands, not obedience but choice, not submission but freedom.

This language controls by reducing the linguistic forms and symbols of reflection, abstraction, development, contradiction; by substituting images for concepts. It denies or absorbs the transcendent vocabulary; it does not search for but establishes and imposes truth and falsehood.⁶

5. Ibid., July 11, 1996.

6. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 103.



This constricted representation grows increasingly common, justified by its successes, successful because such isolated idealism “allows us to act as though a greater significance has never been attempted.”⁷ It turns the mundane into an event and allows us to believe, if only for a moment, that the Biggie is our true heartfelt desire, and that in purchasing it we have attained a moment of bliss.

One important conclusion of Marcuse’s analysis is that, on a larger scale, the constant repetition and consumption of idealized items throughout society creates an inclusive whole with no exterior. As these items become ubiquitous they begin to prefigure the desires of the culture (and the individuals) in which they exist. Thus the narrator’s question, “What is it that chooses to remain outside of this increasingly tiny energy—can we even give a name to such a freakish presence?” Item, society, and individual are inexorably entangled and that which remains exterior becomes unnamable. This is described in *One-Dimensional Man* as “Mass production and mass distribution claim the *entire* individual. . . . The result is, not adjustment but *mimesis*: an immediate identification of the individual with *his* society and, through it, with the society as a whole.”⁸ Thus the satisfaction offered by Wendy’s connects the embodied pleasures of the consumer with a culture of massive production. Also, since these consumptive actions are in the pursuit of an ideal (the perfect burger), then ideal pleasure is to be found in consumption and alternate forms of pleasure become an abnormality, unknowable or impossible. This inclusive totality of homogenized desire is the source of the narrator’s statement, “The only time I love the other customers is when they seem, above all, to be eating.” The narrator is expressing a shared and reflected mutual validation as mass production and distribution creates a totality in which people become connected to their culture and to each other through the very act of consumption.

New Labor

Mechanized production directs the very process of work as the employee engages and disengages the machine. Still there remains a very human experience in this encounter. The gap between human engagement and mechanical repeatability exists at the heart of the next poem.

So many minor procedures at once—I don’t know how your employees maintain their delightful sheen. It’s as though there is something in them that yearns for this challenge, juggling more, juggling faster, until there is no one there, until the juggling itself is the only thing, a vacant momentum. It’s sad to think it has such a small audience as myself.⁹

7. Wenderoth, *Letters to Wendy’s*, April 8, 1997.

8. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 10.

9. Wenderoth, *Letters to Wendy’s*, May 14, 1997.

With machines producing many similar copies the employee becomes valuable not as creator but as controller, engaging and disengaging the machine. Yet still “there is something in them that yearns for this challenge.” The directed preset motions of contemporary labor, the “minor procedures” mentioned in the poem, exclude the possibility of deriving pleasure or satisfaction from artisanship and instead posit libidinous pleasure in the operating of machinery. The individual becomes caught up in the process. As Marcuse explains, “Interdependent motions performed by a group of persons which follow a rhythmic pattern yield satisfaction—quite apart from what is being accomplished by the motions.”¹⁰ It is this satisfaction in the rhythmic pattern that leads to the workers’ “delightful sheen.” There is pleasure in massive production through massive machines, in being part of a team, in the pure speed and physical ease of production. This engagement on the part of the worker becomes directed toward higher levels of quantity, not quality, thus the juggling faster and faster. At the core lies the machine, the “vacant momentum” which precedes and requires the juggling, directing the activities (and desires) of its human handlers, erasing any particular worker’s touch in pursuit of its own massive production. Even when manufacturing entails immediate human interaction (putting lettuce on a bun) there remains a simplicity and repeatability required in order to keep up with the mechanized source. The process remains infinitely repeatable and never fulfilled. “Nothing is always under way and never any closer to completion.”¹¹

This production becomes obfuscated through the process of idealization mentioned in the previous section. The image on the menu, or some approximation thereof, quickly appears in the server’s hand, with no trace of its history. As such the product “isn’t just a substance—it’s an event, and its manifestation depends on countless subtle conditions, most of which are not speakable.”¹² Allowing any overt presentation of the product’s creation would detract from the ideal image (unless the image explicitly involves some aspect of its creation, such as food labeled “organic,” and even these references remain simplified and idealized). Representing the process of creation is dangerous to the constructed image because “remembrance is a mode of dissociation from the given facts, a mode of ‘mediation’ which breaks, for short moments, the omnipresent power of the given facts.”¹³ So the object is wrapped in plastic like its innumerable cousins; presented as a Big Mac, like every other Big Mac. Such an enclosed totality allows the consumer to partake of the idealized experience as if it has no characteristics other than those imparted to it. As the narrator points out elsewhere, “We

10. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 26.

11. Wenderoth, *Letters to Wendy's*, March 19, 1997.

12. *Ibid.*, October, 29, 1996.

13. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 98.



construct, justify, and secure ourselves *above work*. This is how we conceal the knives and restrict their use to the production of delicious results."¹⁴ By erasing the required time and effort, the harvested crops and animals and more destructive elements such as extremely low wages and problematic farming techniques, the product can retain its idealism and the consumer can find some satisfaction in its glamour. Thus the line "It's sad to think it has such a small audience as myself" as the narrator, through the lens of poetic interrogation, comments on a persistent seemingly unremarkable reality, recognizing himself as singularly aware of both the employees' endless operations and the mechanized center of their activity, both moving frantically toward no conclusion.

Satisfaction Extracted

The idealized product, mass-produced and stripped of its history, is encountered by the consumer as representing a very specific and directed type of engagement, in that pleasure is to be found in consumption. Poetry's ability to reveal the implications of such constrictions is revealed in this next poem.

I took my Frosty into the bathroom and sat it on the floor. I pulled my pants down, got down on all fours, and buried the tip of my cock in the cold brown swirl. Then I forced my cock and balls all the way into the cup, Frosty spilling on to the floor. Then I thought sexy thoughts. My erection slowly forced more Frosty on to the floor. This is the real test of a drink's thickness.¹⁵

In his description of the Frosty the narrator references a number of various bodily characteristics that have been imbued into the Frosty. It may, in its liquid milkiness, be considered as a substitute for a mother's breast milk, or alternatively as a receptacle for his penis, which in our hetero-normative culture recalls the vagina, and in its brown swirliness as a substitute for excrement, recalling the anus. The Frosty is a stand-in for the various outpourings of the human body, as well as by extension the possible encounters one can have with another's body. However rather than displaying the sense of affirmation we believe encounters with the human body should entail, this encounter is explicitly passionless and awkward. He is in a fast food public restroom on his hands and knees burying his penis in a cold milkshake, which even in its coldness deviates from the warmth a human offers. He must "think sexy thoughts" to prompt his erection, imparting the Fantasy into the Frosty. The allure of a Frosty isn't intrinsic to the Frosty itself. Instead it operates off an embodied form of desire which has become imbued in and directed through a ubiquitous culture of consumption. Poetry is here displaying the inconsistencies that arise in our desires when actual characteristics become overtaken by images of glamour and idealized

14. Wenderoth, *Letters to Wendy's*, August 8, 1996.

15. *Ibid.*, June 3, 1997.

consumption. The aberration exists in the idea of a Frosty, in glamorous images of a Frosty with beads of sweat on its side, larger than life, with the face of a young girl drawn on its side. The narrator (and we as consumers) is being invited to take possession of the Frosty, to direct his desire for actual human encounters into an idealized replacement. The Frosty as a substitute for love, for the erotic, for our encounters with other people, begins to exist as a nexus of pleasure to the exclusion of other forms of satisfaction.

Any actual satisfaction which may be derived from a Frosty, even if only as a cheap culinary indulgence, is consistently undermined by the process of measuring an item against its idealized image. As a milkshake a Frosty may be only mediocre, but it is not judged against all milkshakes, but rather against all Frosties. It lacks any individual specificity because it is innumerable and undifferentiated from any other Frosty. This uniformity separates the Frosty from the wider milieu of one's life, offering the possibility of an encounter with a persistent and undifferentiated whole. Similarly there can be no Frosty substitute. Only a Frosty can fulfill the Frosty desire. But the actual physical encounter is brief and fleeting. The consumer, having moved through the event, is left with an empty cup, ready to begin again. This leads to an endless striving as the consumer perpetually attempts to attain the ideal through limitlessly reproducible Frosties. The product exists only for its annihilation: its pleasure resides in its consumption after which it no longer exists and can be found again only by repeating the process. This sort of cyclical activity ensures that there remains a persistent need for the goods offered by contemporary capitalism. Such a structure of perpetual striving opposes the sort of enjoyment that can be derived from craft and handiwork: a well-made chair or homemade meal, an object which provides pleasure in its very existence and uniqueness. The replacement of such objects with mechanical reproductions means that "the environment from which the individual could obtain pleasure—which he could cathect as gratifying almost as an extended zone of the body—has been rigidly reduced."¹⁶ A whole range of objects and experiences have been de-eroticized, and the libidinous energy of these aborted realms (the erotic and aesthetic, the romantic) is directed instead toward consumption. "Mechanization has . . . 'saved' libido . . . that is, has barred it from previous modes of realization."¹⁷ The narrator's insertion of a penis into a Frosty recalls this expelled pleasure. It is a reassertion of libidinous drives over their constrictions, a referral toward broader possibilities absent from a common understanding of what a Frosty is and is for. Such an ingress allows for the reemergence of Eros, an embodied erotic pleasure that cannot be reduced to simply genital, sexual pleasure or physical satisfaction. Marcuse posits Eros as one of two subversive

16. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 73.

17. *Ibid.*, 72.



powers. The other, Logos, takes the form of thought and discourse. Eros and Logos have the ability to subvert systems of established meaning: "In the exigencies of thought and in the madness of love is the destructive refusal of the established ways of life."¹⁸ Within Logos and Eros a unification of the subjective and objective occurs as the subject transcends her conventional understanding of the object and the object comes to embody previously unrealized possibilities. This leads to the emergence of new meaning.

Logos occurs for the *reader* within her engagement with the poem itself. By providing a description of the Frosty noticeably free of consumption, the narrator has eclipsed the idealized Frosty encounter. This atypical presentation liberates the Frosty from its historical identity, an identity that correlated consumption with pleasure. In this subversive display the poem is performing the task of thought that Marcuse posits as the critical potential of poetry, revealing previously concealed possibilities which had been obfuscated by the very definition of Frosty. This revealing makes explicit the layer of mediation which has been placed upon the Frosty, being the idea that it exists only for consumption. The reader is left with an understanding which includes not only the mediations placed upon the Frosty, but also retrieved possibilities for unrealized encounters and satisfactions, an act of cognition which by proxy can also reclaim the broader range of idealized/mediated objects.

The incursion of new meaning via Eros, however, does not arrive within the poem. For the narrator the Frosty remains an object that can be judged according to certain standards, such as "thickness." It retains its historical objectness, the boundaries of which have not been overcome even as his penis is immersed in it. He is not affected by it and has to instead impart the "sexy thoughts" himself. In Marcuse's concept of Eros the subject joins with the object in a new way, extracting both from the established web of meaningful connections. However, for the narrator the Frosty ultimately fails to transcend the realm of meaning Wendy's has provided it. Though not ingesting it, he still consumes it. The declaration that the "real test" of the Wendy's Frosty is in how much gets displaced by an erection shows that he still acts upon it, rather than being affected himself. The Frosty still exists for its annihilation, to be spilled on the floor in a masturbatory fashion, representing consumption as a sort of masturbation which fails to ever come to conclusion or fruition, lacking any lasting effect. That this experience fails to affect him displays the degree with which the narrator has already incorporated the idealized imagery of the Frosty, an effect of how fully we are surrounded by these idealized representations as well as the strength with which such objects remain attached to their idealized meaning, the degree to which the Biggie, the Frosty, the Big Mac, have successfully appropriated

18. *Ibid.*, 127.



eros-type imagery of glamour and sexiness (the Frosty with beads of sweat on its side). This means that a libidinous engagement which subverts or redefines one's understanding of subject and object, as opposed to the simpler pleasure of consumption, may ultimately require an object with a different history, a different type of labor and different imagery. The Frosty resists its own liberation.

Conclusion

Letters to Wendy's succeeds in "breaking the spell of the things that are"¹⁹ and in the process reveals how mechanical repetition prefigures our desire and ensures its success. In remythologizing the realm of the mundane (for what could be more mundane than *Wendy's*) *Letters to Wendy's* displays the homogenization of our society through idealized imagery and directed labor which becomes occulted in our encounter with the object, the effects of a mechanical repetition that precedes and directs us as consumers and laborers. It shapes the form of our satisfaction, yet disappears behind the role of the way-things-are. In these poems' refusal to accept "the established ways of life"²⁰ they perform the act of Logos, liberating our understanding of the products of mechanical repetition from overdetermined meaning. And perhaps this is poetry's greatest feat. Revealing and reveling in the complicated structure of the world around us, poetry provides the reader new understandings and new possibilities for living. In this, *Letters to Wendy's* and *One-Dimensional Man* both strive for a similar goal: the reassertion of a possible, currently under-realized, environment of pleasure over and above those idealized products which surround us. — • —

19. *Ibid.*, 67–68.

20. *Ibid.*, 127.

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