

Hilltopics

Fall 2025

The University Honors Publication

Between The Lines

Outside the Circle
Experience

New Digital Frontier
Analysis

Diet Coke
Poetry

Table of Contents

Poetry and Art 05

Hidden meanings reveal themselves slowly. Here, you will find images that ask: what truth exists in the space between memory and interpretation?

Experiences 08

The unspoken moments shape us most. Here, readers can look beyond the surface at what was and what quietly transformed us into who we have become.

Analysis 14

To read between the lines requires careful attention. Here, you will discover how overlooked patterns emerge, hidden meanings surface, and clarity comes from what went unnoticed.

Opinions 22

What remains unsaid often speaks loudest. Here, you will find the evolving landscape of perspective shaped by what we think, what we dare not say, and what we're only beginning to understand.

Short Stories 28

Fiction reveals what facts cannot. Here, you will find narratives that explore the unspoken emotions, quiet moments, and hidden truths that exist in the spaces between what characters say and what they mean.





HILLTOPICS

A University Honors Publication

Hilltopics is the University Honors Program's opinion paper, founded by Honors students over a decade ago. Written and designed entirely by students, *Hilltopics* is committed to providing a public platform for all voices.

Hilltopics pieces range from the high literary to the traditionally journalistic, from the satirical to the personal. We welcome contributions from all viewpoints, political persuasions, and backgrounds—the most important thing is that all voices are free to contribute, to foster a flourishing of free speech at SMU. The paper is not limited to the Honors community; anyone at SMU can write for Hilltopics, and we seek to gain readership from all students.



@smuhilltopics

hilltopicssmu.wordpress.com

SMU[®]

University Honors Program

Letters From The Editors

Howdy! I'm Megan Watson, a double major in Public Relations & Strategic Communication and Corporate Communication & Public Affairs, with a minor in History. I'm also one of the Co-Editors-in-Chief of the very publication you're holding: *Hilltopics*. When I wrote my letters last year, we had just brought this publication back from the dead. Now, as a senior staring down graduation, I can tell you that reviving *Hilltopics* has been one of the great experiments of my college career. Except instead of conducting research in a sterile lab with safety goggles, I've spent countless nights in my pajamas, hunched over my laptop, frantically layout editing! Turns out, the scientific method and the editorial process have a lot in common, including a hypothesis (this article will fit on two pages) and experiment (it does not).

What I've learned this year goes beyond MLA style. I've learned that student journalism matters and that giving students a platform to share their voices, challenge ideas, and start conversations is worth every late night. I've learned that leadership means trusting your team, even when you're terrified. And I've learned that community is everything. Inside these pages, you'll find exactly that!



Megan Watson

Thank you to Elle Caldon, my partner-in-crime who kept this ship afloat even when it felt like we were sailing in circles. To Dr. Arbery, thank you for guiding me on everything I needed to know during the day so I could help create this publication at night. To Vaughn, who has heard more stressed-out phone calls than any person should have to endure, thank you for never hanging up. And to everyone who has supported *Hilltopics*, thank you. You made this experiment succeed.



Elle Caldon

Hello, I am Elle Caldon! I am studying psychology and health and aspire to become a clinical psychologist. Outside of the classroom, I enjoy traveling, getting coffee, going to SMU football games with my sister and friends, listening to music, and taking walks. Serving as a Co-Editor-in-Chief of the *Hilltopics* community for the past one and a half

academic years has been exciting. My favorite part is studying people's unique writing styles, while simultaneously learning about subjects that are unrelated to my major and that I would not have thought of myself to research. Thank you immensely and especially to Co-Editor-in-Chief Megan Watson. From her designing and debate skills, to her care for others and good sense of humor, she is truly one of the most talented people I know. Additionally, thank you to faculty advisers Drs. Doyle and Arbery and Professor Chessher, the staff and contributors, and readers for helping *Hilltopics* flourish. On a last note, as an avid coffee drinker, I am happy that *Hilltopics* got to partner its launch party with the University Honors Program's coffee cart before finals tradition. I hope you grant yourself a break from studying and take a moment to enjoy not only your coffee but the wonderful writing of SMU students.

Recommendations

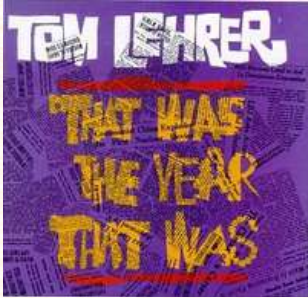
Tieraa By Chuwi

"This EP is a short but great collection of songs that explore the group's Puerto Rican (Boricua) roots, identity, and culture."



That Was The Year That Was By Tom Lehrer

"To modern audiences, the idea of the novelty song—much less the novelty album—is not one that conjures positive ideas, and I think that's a big problem. The solution? Enter: "That Was The Year That Was," a 1965 novelty album written and performed by Harvard, M.I.T., and UCSC professor Tom Lehrer"



Klaus (2019)

"It's beautifully made with interesting plot twists"

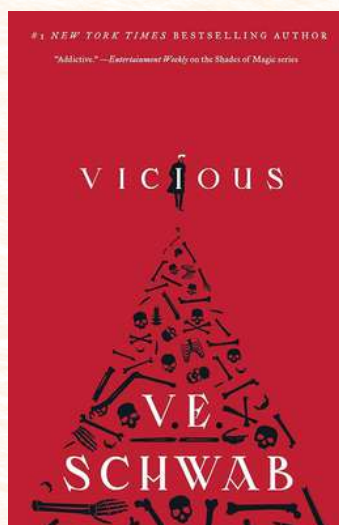


"CANCELLED!" By Taylor Swift

"It boldly tackles cancel culture with sharp humor and honesty. My favorite lyric from the song is "Did you girl-boss too close to the sun?" and despite some people finding it cringe or outdated, Swift calls out judgment, celebrates the friends who stayed when things got messy..."

Keller's Drive-In

"Can you eat inside? No. Is it the best burger you will have in Dallas, TX? Absolutely! Keller's has been around since the 1950s, and it still impresses SMU students to this day."



Vicious By V. E. Schwab

"Vicious by V.E. Schwab is an incredibly exciting story about two college best friends torn apart by their ambition. It's a fantastic, dark, and downright masterful take on power, friendship, and betrayal; I read it in one sitting because I couldn't stand to put it down."

*Love,
Hilltopics*

Poetry & Art

Things Talks to a Stranger

By: Asiya Mohammed

Raymundo

Watercolor paint, colored pencils, gold leaf, adhesive, wooden frame, mixed-media paper, purple fabric

By: Ani Rangel

Raymundo focuses on the loss of a loved one. With details reminiscent of historic religious artwork, the complementary gold and purple tones depict this theme of loss and reflect the shining parts of the subject's life. The mimicked textures of wrinkles in both the figure's skin and gold leaf reveal the cracks found within families and personal life. Demonstrating intimate connections and hardships, this memorial portrait intends to honor Raymundo's life.



I swear I've got ideas in here
That'll blow your mind, I swear.
Gimme a second please.

Can you read sign language?

Okay, I'll write it.

Pen and paper.

What? You don't have—?

Okay, if I tap—

No, look, if I

Tap.

This isn't gibberish. I'm not—

Morse code! Ever heard of—?

Pay attention,

M-Y

N-A-M-E

I-S

T-H-I-N-

Wait, where are you going

I'm not—

just because i cant speak
doesnt mean im not
who i know i am?

--. --- / -.. - .- .- / .. -
(gosh darn it)

Wish I could try again.

I've got ideas in here that'll
Knock your socks off.

(Not to say I have
Feet, or anything.)

I've been on the craziest,
Wildest adventures!

You'll never guess how quick on my
(feet),

How clever, how kind, how—

What's the use.

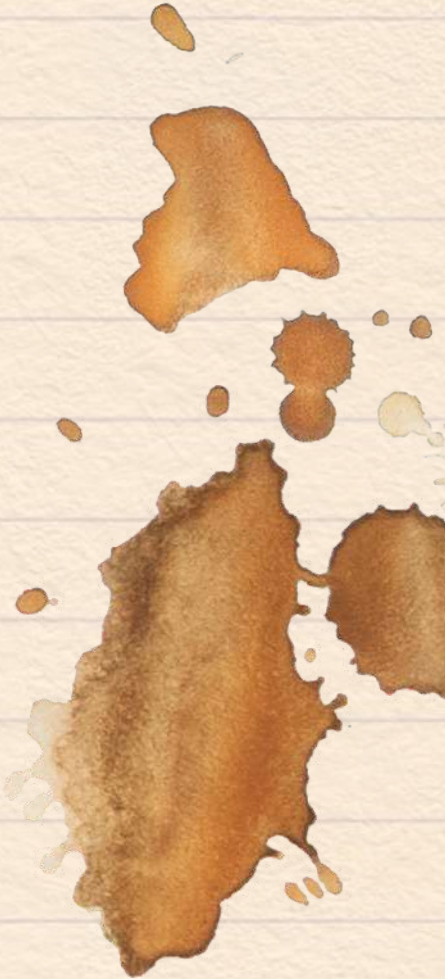
You're long gone.

I'm telling you, I could
Tap dance all over this
Silly table, but only the
Addams would get me.

But boy oh boy

I wonder what you'd think

If only we met



My Grandpa, the Spaceman

By: Jackson Beck

There is this wonderful place, about 30 or 40 miles west of Dallas, sometimes a little farther, located around Wichita Falls, Amarillo, or New Mexico.

There, you can take a flight to Mars, the moon, or enjoy a cruise around Earth's orbit and observe the galaxy, for a bargain of only \$50.

If you are ever able to make it out to Mars, which Grandpa tells me I should before I croak, you'll find this pleasant little monument there honoring veterans of the War of the Worlds.

Grandpa always follows these details up with how he flew starships on the belt of Orion, that his pilot name was "Cobra" because "he bites," that H.G. Wells wrote his biography, and how the Martians were communist dogs, barely even human.

He told me how they would throw American G.I.s, sometimes people he knew, into a pit of snakes out in the jungle near Saigon.

"They were young men, like yourself," he says, as he reintroduces himself and asks if I'm married.

"Still working on it," I reply, which always makes him laugh.

He tells me that I ought to meet his son, my father, and how he thinks we'd get along.

"You just have the same wits about you," he tells me, in between his recollections of his time as a running back for Ohio State, his national championship, and his Heisman.

It was around this time in the 50s that he started advising Nixon, too, and every other president since.

Eventually, Grandpa circles back to his special oasis in space and his monument.

As he repeats himself, I notice that his elderly face lights up with childlike wonder.

I admire the beauty of his features, in which I can see a version of my own father.

I can't help but acknowledge that I love him deeply, and that

when he speaks, the one good eye of this kind, hump-nosed cyclops widens softly, his cataract gentle as the Milky Way, his head among the stars.



The Sweet Taste of Childhood III

2025, acrylic paint on a wooden board, 14in x 10in

By: Anastasiya Shyvilka

This painting's theme revolves around childhood and memories. Depicting my younger self and my little sister, I contemplated how much our memories alter over time and how this process reconstructs our life stories. I discovered that some aspects of our past gain more sharpness and focus, while others become vague. My painting technique supports my observation – the tape that I applied in between the layers of acrylic paint – and that I removed later – preserved some parts of the art piece for myself, while abstracting the scene and moving it farther away from the present moment in time.

Diet Coke

By: Jackson Beck

I wish I were bold enough to tell people
that I'm thirsty for them, platonically.
To say that I want every detail about them,
to grow fat from their indulgence, and that
I want to taste all their uniqueness on the tip of my tongue.

I want to digest their childhood, their first kiss, their favorite toy,
their successes, failures, hopes, dreams, happiness and despair. I want their carbonated water,
their feelings toward their father, their caramel color, and their relationship with their mother.
I want their phosphoric acid, and that story about when their tire was flaccid, along with their
caffeine content; All of which should be supplemented by natural flavor.
I want to know why you hate AAA, or what you did today, and
I want everything to be as vivid as the Red Dye 40 in one of those Christmas
Cherry Cokes with all our names on them.

Intimacy needs to be dangerous, emotionally, in order to quench my thirst,
and it needs so much excess that it risks making me diabetic, metaphorically.
Swapping a scarcity of insulin for an abundance of oxycodone.
I want my teeth to rot from the bittersweetness of those around me, and
I don't want to be spared any of their calories.
So please, do me a favor, and don't "Diet Coke" me.



What's Between the Lines

By: Lauren Oliver

The idea behind the mini comic is to take the literal interpretation of the theme "between the lines" and make it humorous. My intention in making the work was to provide commentary on anti-intellectualism. As a society, I feel there has been a rise in quick dopamine releases, but we forego depth. Such as failing to question the information presented to us from short-form videos, such as TikToks, because of the desire to have things that create dopamine release from being easy/accessible. Things such as short-form video only create more misinformation and a society that cannot connect with what we learn.



Experiences

The Echo Is Louder than the Crowd: The Masked Struggles of Student Athletes

By: Cameryn Smith

Your favorite quarterback makes a play that just won the whole game for your team. What do you do? You cheer loudly, and, by the way, I hope it is for Kevin Jennings. Regardless, though, you cheer or punch your fists or jump up and down. In return, the player, after potentially going through a quick shock, feels a rush of dopamine. The roar of tipsy college students and Highland Park families surrounds the bleachers, and, for a moment, the athlete is invincible. Once that final whistle sounds, and the band sways to the Alma Matter, the athlete steps off the field. The path leading back to the locker room is one of transformation – the helmet comes off, and the roar of the stadium stays behind. All that is left is the once invincible athlete, with an echo of a crowd chanting his name. What the headlines often fail to communicate is that this silence is more impactful than one might think. Though that winning play was amazing, the stadium eventually empties, and the music stops. What takes its place? Quiet struggles. College athletes are not as invincible as they seem. Off the field, they silently fight personal battles.



I am a college athlete, a player of the SMU Pom and Cheer team. Certainly, some may put the term ‘athlete’ up for debate, but our team is officially certified under SMU Athletics. Consequently, I know what it is like to wake up early, attend practice, hustle back to change for class, finish homework before attending office hours with a professor, go to chapter, squeeze in the time to eat because I cannot perform if I am not properly nourished, stay up for hours studying in the library for my big test the next day, go to bed late, and repeat it all the next day. I also know what it is like to struggle silently. In a world full of pom poms and camera flashes, my spray tan and fake eyelashes mask what is sometimes hiding underneath. This is not to say that I do not feel glamorous because, trust me, I do. And I count my lucky stars each day that I am able to live in this dream. But, sometimes, when the weight of the world feels like it is falling on your shoulders, and, worse, you feel like you can’t show it, it is hard not to feel drained.



SMU quarterback Kevin Jennings (7) passes the ball in the first half of the Atlantic Coast Conference championship, Dec. 7, 2024, in Charlotte, N.C.

Photo Credit: AP Images



NCAA Logo

Photo Credit: NCAA.Org

My struggles aren't unique. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) conducted a survey in 2021 that uncovered hidden truths behind student athletes' mental health. In Fall 2021, 38% of women athletes felt 'mentally exhausted,' and 29% reported feeling 'overwhelming anxiety.' For men, 22% felt 'mentally exhausted' and 12% felt 'overwhelming anxiety.' These numbers are high considering the number of athletes in the survey; what is even more shocking is that 9% of women and 6% of men felt 'so depressed it was difficult to function.' No one would ever know this, because they are trained to sweep these problems under the rug the second that they step on to that field. Other factors play into this, too. In fact, male and female athletes of the LGBTQ+ community have higher anxiety and mental exhaustion levels than that of their Straight teammates.¹ Nonetheless, this student athlete mental health crisis is prevalent.

No matter who is struggling, the crowd will not see that. Nor is it their job to do so. After all, they just want to kick back and watch an edge-of-the-seat type of game – that is, they don't want to hear about someone who feels exactly how they feel once the lights go off at night. The game is an escape for the athletes, and it is an escape for the crowd.

This escape needs to be brought into conversation, though. Mental health can be a scary thing to talk about, especially around your peers. The Dr. Bob Smith Health Center has free counseling resources to provide students, as well as a specialized therapist team for athletes.

Next time you watch your favorite athlete on the field, don't pity them – they are pretty invincible, right? Instead, include them in your mental health conversations, and remember that even the invincible need space to fall down when they need to.



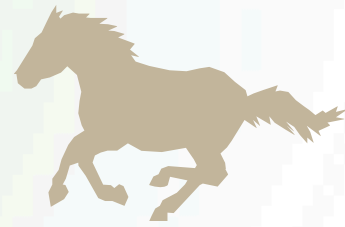
Dr. Bob Smith Health Center

Photo Credit: Southern Methodist University

¹ NCAA Student-Athlete Well-Being Study (Fall 2021) Survey Results - May 2022, ncaaorg.s3.amazonaws.com/research/other/2020/2022RES_NCAA-SA-Well-BeingSurveyPPT.pdf. Accessed 30 Oct. 2025.

Just Outside the Circle

By: Andrea Yang



Between the Lines of Class at SMU

“At SMU, I have always been close enough to see the party, but never close enough to feel it was mine.” - Me

On any given Friday at SMU, walking from Fondren Library to the Boulevard feels like watching a sociology lesson unfold in real time. Outside the sorority houses, girls pose for photos before a formal as their heels sink into the grass. A few blocks away, another group of students hurries to evening classes or to clock in for work-study shifts. Their clothes are practical, a little worn. Greek life here is not just a social scene; it is one of the clearest markers of class. Dues, mixers, wardrobes: every detail signals a kind of money, a different bag of gold that could have been used to purchase a kingdom. Still, what lingers with me is not the extremes. It is the students in between: the ones who do not pledge, who take loans, who carry designer bags picked up secondhand. They live between the glossy image of SMU wealth and the quiet reality of financial strain.

Old Money, New Money

SMU has always carried the aura of wealth,¹ though it does not all look the same. There are the legacy families, names etched on buildings, generations stretching across Dallas, Houston, or farther still. Then there are new-money families from oil, tech, real estate, or startups – money that is newer and flashier, often visible in luxury cars parked along Hillcrest or vacations splashed across Instagram. Both groups move with confidence, though in different ways. Old money walks lightly, almost casually, bearing the print of the patrician. New money charges ahead, eager to prove itself.

Scholarship Students and the “Middle” Zone

Scholarship students are often praised as hardworking and deserving, yet the praise sets them apart. They are the ones managing campus jobs, stretching meal swipes, or scrolling through Instagram while their peers vacation abroad. Then there is another group: families not wealthy enough to be carefree but not needy enough for substantial aid. They live in a financial “donut hole.”²

I know this calculation well. Like trade-offs in a game, one has to calculate every choice: what to join, what to skip, what to quietly forgo. People rarely talk about it, but it shapes the way you move across campus.

The Unspoken Campus Codes

Class shows itself most clearly in the codes that we do not write down. Perhaps, Greek life is the most striking example. Joining is not simply about friendship but about affording dues, event costs, and wardrobes that allow you to blend in. Social life often rises and falls on these boundaries, money tracing the edges. The same logic appears elsewhere: fraternity brothers secure internships not always because of talent, but through networks cultivated long before their arrival. Students of color are sometimes welcomed into Greek houses or leadership roles, but often more for visibility than out of a sense of belonging. I have never even been that visible. My in-between is quieter; I do not fit into elite spaces, but I do not settle easily into cultural or language-based groups either, where belonging can rest on inside jokes or authenticity. My place has always been just outside. Close enough to see, never close enough to feel inside.

¹ William Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life* (New York: Free Press, 2014).

² Chetty, Raj, et al. “Mobility Report Cards: The Role of Colleges in Intergenerational Mobility.” www.nber.org, 24 July 2017, www.nber.org/papers/w23618.

The Unspoken Campus Codes

Class shows itself most clearly in the codes that we do not write down. Perhaps, Greek life is the most striking example. Joining is not simply about friendship but about affording dues, event costs, and wardrobes that allow you to blend in. Social life often rises and falls on these boundaries, money tracing the edges. The same logic appears elsewhere: fraternity brothers secure internships not always because of talent, but through networks cultivated long before their arrival. Students of color are sometimes welcomed into Greek houses or leadership roles, but often more for visibility than out of a sense of belonging. I have never even been that visible. My in-between is quieter; I do not fit into elite spaces, but I do not settle easily into cultural or language-based groups either, where belonging can rest on inside jokes or authenticity. My place has always been just outside. Close enough to see, never close enough to feel inside.



Reading Between the Lines

I have never felt entirely shut out at SMU, yet I have never felt completely at ease. My family is not wealthy enough to pay tuition without concern, but not considered needy enough for aid that would erase the burden. My summers are not spent in Manhattan internships arranged by family connections; they are pieced together from part-time jobs, small stipends, and careful budgeting. I belong here, I attend my academic classes, I contribute, I form friendships, but part of me is always just outside the circle – watching.

The brochures and tours tell a single story: excellence, opportunity, tradition. That story is not false, but another runs alongside it. It is the story of students balancing jobs, of first-generation peers learning unwritten codes, of middle-class families stretching every dollar. These stories do not appear in glossy photos, yet they are a part of the fabric of this place.

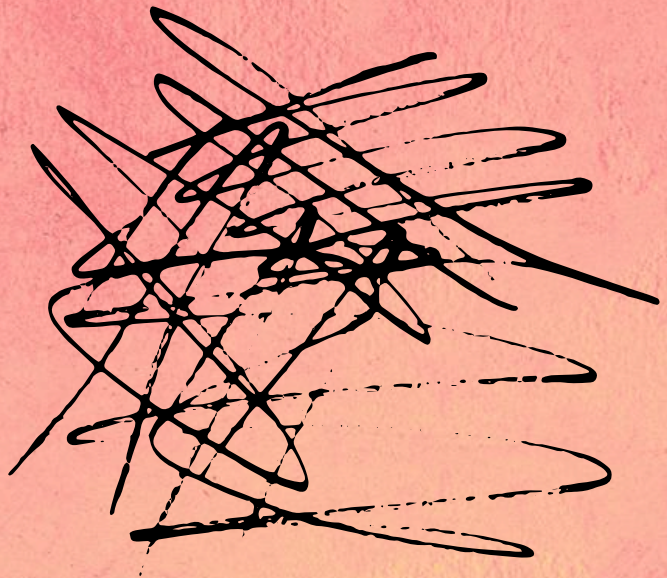
The extremes of privilege are visible. What lingers with me are the quieter negotiations students make every day to feel a sense of belonging. Perhaps, the real story of SMU is not in the brochure at all, but in the spaces in between: who is seen, who is remembered, and who drifts quietly just beyond the edge of the picture.

The Cure for Hatred

By: Arwaa Ahmed

Hate: a word with such weight and, yet, we use it ever so lightly. It is a word meant to cut but, evidently, its sharp edge is gone. We attribute "hate" to all the minor inconveniences and toils of our lives: a slightly too sour lemonade, a particularly sweltering morning, or a sweater that makes us look wide around the edges. The ill-intent behind the word has almost dissolved completely, so much so that I even considered using a different word for this piece altogether. What made me linger on this word, though, was that its true form exists and perseveres throughout the ages. The dilution of the word has not coincided with the dilution of its true manifestation, of the malice present in the hearts of every one of us. While hatred manifests in varying degrees, there is no doubt that, to a certain level, we all contain the ability to harbor hatred in all its malicious glory.

Why is it that hatred has not seemed to dilute whatsoever in modern times? We are rational beings – surely, we must understand that baseless anger and resentment lead nowhere. This perplexing phenomenon led me to an almost laughably simple realization: we hate what we do not understand, or what we believe harms us. Unfamiliarity and displeasure drive our tight grasp on hatred. Take the examples I mentioned previously: a too sour lemonade is both unfamiliar and unpleasant, a sweltering morning brings us great discomfort, and a sweater that fits unflatteringly harms one's self-perception. Hating inanimate objects and uncomfortable feelings is only natural. However, it is more akin to a strong dislike than genuine hatred; the latter feeling, concerningly, seems to be reserved for people.



Hatred is a funny thing. It is a feeling so inherently wretched yet so openly shared, like a warm hug followed by a cold dagger. It is a vile thing certainly, yet oddly communal. We have bonded with others over shared hatred and had lengthy conversations on a character or person we despise, for example. It is tempting to pursue such connections, to cling to the familiar despite its bitter nature. Yet we must come to understand that this malice is not something from which actions and bonds should be formed. At its core, it is a blindness stemming from a genuine lack of understanding or a deliberate form of ignorance. What comes to mind, for me, is a much smaller, immature version of myself declaring that I absolutely despised my mother for putting me to bed at 8:30 p.m. Now, many inches taller and somewhat wiser, I understand that my mother's intent was not to bring me the worst of sorrows, but, rather, was out of concern for my well-being. Her actions came from a place of both love and reason, and my realization of this dissolved any contempt I had held for her. Perhaps, this recognition is what we need to dissolve some measure of the malice in our hearts, albeit in a less simplified way. If we search for the reason behind one's actions before condemning them to the guillotine of our minds, we may be able to shorten the ever-growing roster of those we despise.



This is not to say that there is no one worthy of hate. Human evil is just as natural and frightening as hatred, and there are those who do not deserve even a drop of mercy from the well of our hearts. Yet, once we begin to look behind people's actions and behaviors, in between what is obvious, we will find that truly evil people are few in number, both in our lists of those we despise and in humans' overall existence.



Empathy, then, becomes our quiet rebellion against hatred. It is difficult, as it asks more from us than hate. It requires us to practice patience in the face of frustration and to pursue understanding where ignorance comes naturally. It is the act of reading the story behind one's anger and actions, and it requires us to step into the unfamiliar space between understanding and forgiveness. Although it may cost us comfort, it grants us clarity and peace, and is a welcome reminder that underneath our differing exteriors, we are all made of the same flesh and bone.

In a time so volatile, it is tempting to revert to our most base emotions, to blame others and despise them for doing things that we assume to be harmful or foreign. But, perhaps, the cure to this hatred lies in between and behind our exteriors, where we choose understanding over condemnation.

When we make the effort to look beyond the surface, we might find that hatred begins to loosen its grasp, replaced by something softer and inherently human: empathy.



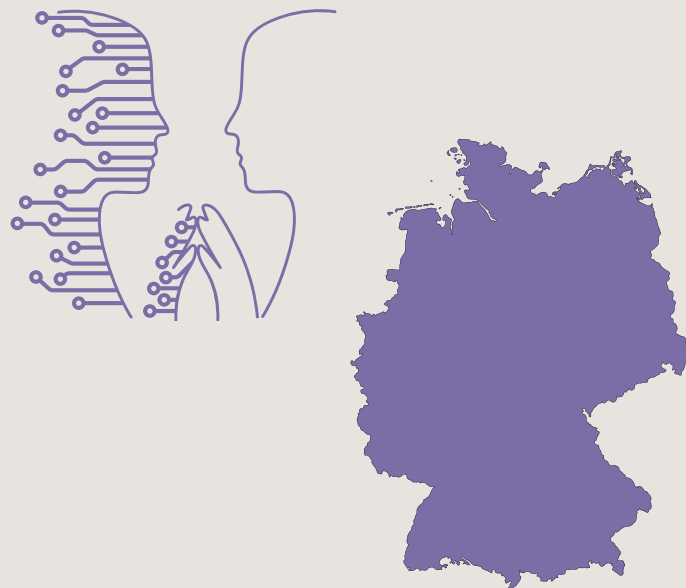
Analysis

Navigating the New Digital Frontier: Understanding the Complex Relationship Between Artificial Intelligence and Public Relations Professionals

By: Ashley Pitts

Abstract

This research study explores the relationship between artificial intelligence (AI) and media relations. More specifically, it investigates the usage of AI among public relations professionals in Berlin, Germany, to understand how Berlin is navigating the uncharted territory of intelligent technology. The study's findings provide valuable insights into the benefits and challenges of AI usage, informing both European and American businesses about effective AI implementation in public relations, as well as offering additional data regarding general AI practices in the workplace. Results suggest the increase of productivity in the workplace due to AI, hesitations about AI privacy, and the different stages of AI usage in the German public relations industry.



Background and Significance

Artificial intelligence is intelligence crafted from technological devices that function beyond human capacities to reach an end goal or create a product.¹ AI has two goals: “[the] primary goal is to build an intelligent machine. The second goal is to find out about the nature of intelligence.” AI is applied to subject matter based on the desired outcome of the user; for instance, if the desired outcome is crafting more effective digital marketing strategies, AI will transform itself to fulfill the requirement and produce a result that aligns with the user’s request.²

Educating future generations on AI and its implications becomes necessary, as the intelligence is continually growing and frequenting changes and updates. As the United Nations notes, “in two decades, the pace of digitalization was continuously rising, reaching around 50% of the world’s developing population.”³ Berlin’s entrepreneurial ecosystem has “flourished by not only adapting to new technology but also influencing it.” Berlin is a strategic location to commence investigation of the developing experiences between media relations professionals and AI as it will generate new, inspired ideas and further illuminate the importance of working in cohesion with the latest industrial changes in digitization.⁴

¹ Puntoni, S., Reczek, R. W., Giesler, M., & Botti, S. (2021). Consumers and Artificial Intelligence: An Experiential Perspective. *Journal of Marketing*, 85(1), 131-151. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022242920953847>

² Schank, R. C. (1987). What Is AI, Anyway?. *AI Magazine*, 8(4), 59. <https://doi.org/10.1609/aimag.v8i4.623>

³ (2024). The Impact of Digital Technologies. United Nations, United Nations. www.un.org/en/un75/impact-digital-technologies

⁴ Gesley, J. (2021) Germany: Network Enforcement Act Amended to Better Fight Online Hate Speech. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/global-legal-monitor/2021-07-06/germany-network-enforcement-act-amended-to-better-fight-online-hate-speech/>.

Methodology

This study takes a mixed-methods qualitative approach with a case study as the methodology. Two Berlin-based media relations companies were researched regarding their professionals' knowledge, practice, and ethical considerations regarding AI. At each company, observational tactics, an optional survey to all able employees, and a semi-structured interview with media relations professionals were implemented. The two firms were the Brunswick Group and Laika Communications GmbH. After gathering research, the findings were compared to yield further explanations on the subject matter.

Findings

Both Brunswick Group and Laika Communications GmbH utilize AI to improve efficiency and support creativity in their daily practices. At Brunswick Group, "AI tools are used primarily for generating summaries, improving language through translation, and identifying trending issues in the news," claims one interviewee.⁵ The focus is on using AI to handle routine tasks that do not require intensive human expertise, "thereby freeing up time for more strategic and attentive activities." Another Brunswick executive stated, "AI is good for summaries in communications, but we still need to check it."

At Laika Communications, "AI functions as a supplementary professional, helping generate ideas, refine content, and offer new perspectives," and is used "as an additional team member, like for brainstorming," states a Laika employee.⁶ This approach reflects a deeper integration of AI into creative processes, as "AI is seen as an asset in developing innovative solutions for clients."

While AI increases productivity, there remains ethical concerns. One Brunswick interviewee stressed: "If AI makes decisions based on bias, gender, racial discrimination, we should be concerned about the conclusions it draws." Both firms reflect hesitations about "how private this software is and how long this information is safe for." Data privacy is a major concern, and Laika employees noted that they "would never copy and paste confidential client information into AI."

Legal considerations also shape workplace use. Brunswick "instituted their own measures such as regular technology and AI training" to ensure compliance with privacy standards, particularly given concerns about "non-European AI tools, which may not comply with strict German data protection standards." In contrast, Laika's approach is "more flexible, focusing on individual awareness and adaptation," according to interviewees.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that public relations professionals in Berlin are actively utilizing artificial intelligence to enhance productivity and support creative processes. While both firms recognize the potential of AI to transform their practices, they also emphasize the importance of maintaining ethical standards and protecting client data. As AI continues to evolve, professionals will need to adapt their practices to balance the benefits of AI with the necessity for human oversight and responsibility. This study provides foundational insight for future research and for communication industries navigating similar technological transitions.

⁵ Brunswick Group. Personal Interview.

⁶ Laika Communications. Personal Interview.

Connecting Family Photographs and Stories with Her Personal Career in Photography: An Interview with Ms. Cristina Kahlo

By: Alexandra Lahiri



This past semester, thanks to Dr. Pilar Melgarejo's invitation, I had the honor of interviewing Ms. Cristina Kahlo when she visited SMU and gave a lecture entitled "Kahlo: The Family Legacy." Ms. Kahlo is a well-known and influential photographer as well as the great-grandniece of Frida Kahlo. During the lecture, Ms. Cristina Kahlo explained her family tree, including wonderful family portraits and photographs alongside exhibits related to Frida Kahlo.

Upon discussing her extensive career, Ms. Kahlo told me how she has, in a way, two major occupations. She stated, *"On one hand, I have my personal work as a photographer, as a curator, or whatever. But on the other hand, I always accept when someone wants me to have an interview on Frida Kahlo or on Guillermo Kahlo... and I always do that because for me it's important that ... if people [are] curious to know what's going on with the family after Frida Kahlo, you have to talk about it, about your family and about her, what you know, what you have learned, what you have read, everything."*

Sometimes, her work being a photographer and a relative of Frida Kahlo intersect. One such moment was when Ms. Kahlo visited and photographed one of her families' houses, now known as the Blue House, which is the building housing the Frida Kahlo Museum. Ms. Kahlo recalled that for her, *"It was really interesting because you have the point of view as a photographer, you know, looking for what you want to photograph and what you want to express about that space. [...] You can imagine that visiting the house as a photographer is one thing. But as part of the family, it's a completely different thing. Because then you start to think about my grandmother living there, my father living there, because that was the family house."*



Ms. Cristina Kahlo's lecture at SMU on September 6

Ms. Cristina Kahlo started taking and printing photographs at around 15 years old. She described that she was inspired by her great-grandfather, who was an architectural photographer. *"That was his specialty. And when I started doing photography, I didn't want to make any photographs of architecture. Because when you are starting in a profession, ... what you want is to separate your own personality from the personality of someone in the family doing the same. And so that was very funny because I started doing photographs on architecture because I was doing an exhibition on geometry."*



Alexandra Lahiri with Ms. Cristina Kahlo at a luncheon

During the interview, Ms. Kahlo and I discussed a connection to her work photographing children with disabilities, and how her great-aunt was also disabled. The following transcript is provided of that conversation:

Alexandra Lahiri: *I read you were highly involved with an exhibition entitled Kahlo and Expanded Body, which displayed Frida Kahlo's medical records kind of through her art and photography as well. And I'm curious, how did you come to maybe focus on or go into this kind of particular artistic topic or genre related to the body and medicine and subjects like that?*

Cristina Kahlo: *Well, Alexandra, this is the first time, let me tell you, that someone, and I have done a lot of interviews, about my work and about Frida Kahlo... but this is the first time that someone linked both things.*

Alexandra Lahiri: *Oh really?*

Cristina Kahlo: *Because-- and it's really-- you are making me think about that! [Laughs] Because one of my first group of photographs, when I started as a professional, was, or let's say with my self-expression through photography, was in making photos of dolphins--you know, incredible fish--and with people in these places where you can swim with a dolphin. But it was kind of abstractions. It's not that you see the people hugging the dolphin or things like that. It was like parts of the body and then the dolphins. And that's why I arrived to [a] clinic where they used to do delfinoterapia in Spanish. It's like therapy with dolphins and with the children that have autism...But what I wanted to photograph was the children.*

So I went to my house with a demon in this side [points to one shoulder] and with an angel in the other [points to the other shoulder]. [Then the demon says] "No, no, no, you can call and say that you have another work--that you cannot arrive tomorrow, whatever." And the angel always was like, "No, you are a photographer, and you say that you are coming tomorrow, so you will come tomorrow. And you know, it was like that. So next day, I arrived to the clinic, and I started doing photographs of these children. And it was so fascinating to understand disability, [...] talking to the parents, which are incredible when they have a son or a daughter with some disability.

And the way they go in life is incredible. So I really start[ed] to get involved in all these. And I stay about 10 years doing photographs of disabilities. Of children with handicaps!

My final question was what advice she had for SMU students as we are in the beginning stages of starting our careers. Ms. Kahlo provided the following advice:

Cristina Kahlo: *And first, what I always tell them [the students she mentors] is to write any idea that you have. I'm always carrying with me a small, you know, libretita -- a little journal or something to write. Because you never know when you will have an idea. And maybe at that moment it's not possible to do it, because you don't have the time, or you don't have the place, or you don't have the money, or you don't have whatever. Or maybe you think that your idea is not very good. But I can tell you that I have all my notebooks, and time by time, I go to them again. And then you will find that your ideas were not so bad. And maybe you have now the time or the resources to make a project.*

And the other advice that I always tell them is to talk with your own voice. You know, you will, as a photographer, as a sculptor, painter, writer, filmmaker, whatever, of course you will have inspirations in others that do the same [thing] that you [do]. But you have not to be scared to talk with your own voice, to say what you think, to like what you like.

And the other one is to be constant and to work every day. [...] You know, like, "Oh, today I do not have any inspiration to work." No! You have to work every day with inspiration or not. Picasso said that inspiration comes to you when you are working. You have to work. So you will see that if you work every day, anything so little, you take a photo, you, I don't know, you print a photo, whatever. And then if you keep that going, inspiration will appear every day. But you have to be constant and work every day.

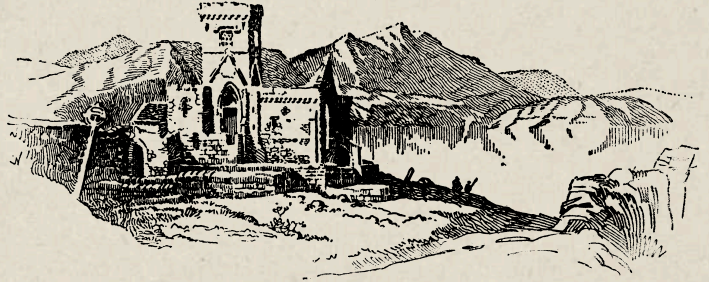
Ms. Cristina Kahlo is truly an inspirational woman, and her lifelong love of photography and commitment to sharing her family's stories is admirable. I am most grateful to have had the opportunity to discuss with her, and will always remember those special moments. I extend my warmest gratitude to Ms. Cristina Kahlo and SMU professor, Maria del Pilar Melgarejo, for their kindness, encouragement, and continued support. Gracias, amiga!

Consequences of Conviction: The Life of Michael Collins

By: Tessa Peterson

Michael Collins stands at a turning point in the trajectory of Irish history, making his role unique. He served not only as a revolutionary and military leader but also as a political leader seeking to lead a nascent Irish government. His role in the struggle for Irish independence is well-documented, but it is what lies between the lines of that history – that is, the inherent tension between his revolutionary past and his diplomatic vision for Ireland's future – that defines his place in the broader Irish story, marking the moral tension between idealism and pragmatism.

The Anglo-Irish Treaty, which Collins signed in 1921, was criticized at the time as a compromise made under pressure. Collins acknowledges and rejects this point of view in the autobiographical *The Path to Freedom*: “I did not sign the Treaty under duress, except in the sense that the position as between Ireland and England (...) has always been one of duress.”¹ His decision reflects his own mindset, as well as a broader shift in strategy: the need to transition from fighting to build a republic through force to preserving one through politics and structure. It was a move not all wanted to accept, but it showed Collins' readiness to adapt to new political realities.



Collins' analytical and observant nature is also visible in how he writes about this shift. He muses about the difference between defending what is not yet a nation and building a brand-new nation, as well as the governing space that the Irish needed to fill: “The negative work of expelling the English power is done. The positive work of building a Gaelic Ireland in the vacuum left has now to be undertaken.”² That project, for him, required unity, order, and sacrifice. He believed that a true national identity came from “a common ideal of how a people should live,” and that national unity could not be sustained through continued violence – especially once that violence turned inward.³

Collins was deeply (and rightly) concerned about post-Treaty sabotage and civil unrest. He warned against “attempts to stampede meetings by revolver shootings (...) the suppression of free speech... terrorisation and sabotage.”⁴ These tactics, justified in resistance to an occupying force, became, in his view, indefensible when turned inward; i.e., directed at a native government whose job is to carry out the people's will. His leadership during this period was defined by a call to “direct the thoughts of the people away from violence and into the steady channels of peace and obedience to authority.”⁵ Collins' shift from violence as a necessity in fighting the British to an absolute aversion to it in a government shows his adaptability as a leader, and the need for a new outlook.



Members of the Sinn Féin Ard Fheis (from left) Eamonn Duggan, Arthur Griffith and Michael Collins in February 1922.

Photo Credit: Walshe/Topical Press Agency/Getty Images

¹ Collins, Michael. *Michael Collins: A Path to Freedom*. Gill Books, 1996, p. 34.

² Collins, *A Path to Freedom*, 29.

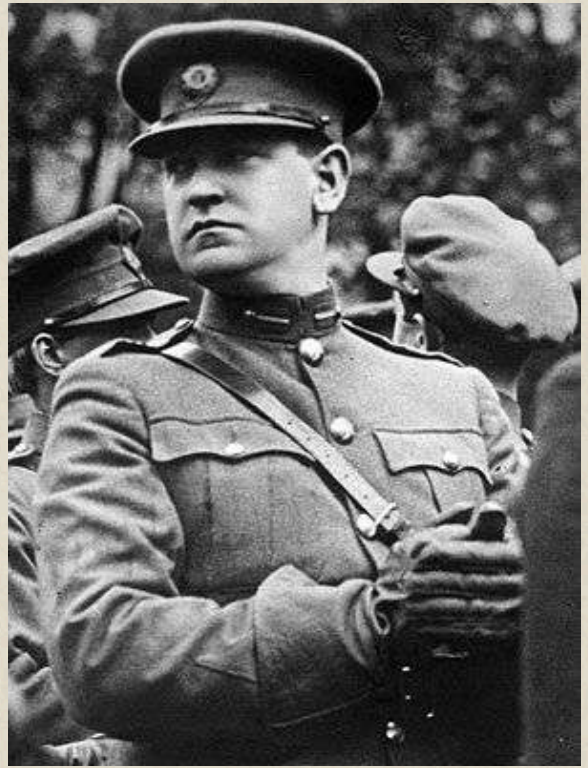
³ Collins, *A Path to Freedom*, 19.

⁴ Collins, *A Path to Freedom*, 15.

⁵ Collins, *A Path to Freedom*, 14..

Michael Collins' myriad roles throughout his lifetime reflect his adaptability and capacity to be many kinds of leaders: from his work leading Irish intelligence, to his role as a military strategist, to his time as a statesman, and, tragically, back to his position as a military leader, this time fighting against his own people. Yet between the lines of his celebrated heroism, one notices a deep tragedy. Collins was a man caught between two Irelands: the one he spent his early years fighting courageously for and the one he struggled to govern. Many aspects of his life lie in paradoxical dichotomies: revolution and reconciliation, idealism and realism, the hero and the villain, bellicosity and diplomacy. The grand rhetoric of freedom and sacrifice rarely brings to mind the compromise, loneliness, and ultimate awareness that peace, too, comes at a cost.

And, yet, Collins' story endures. It serves as a case study in that which remains unsaid in most every nation's founding myth: the consequences of conviction. His deep, undying loyalty to the Irish people and the betterment of their circumstances is the reason he is a hero, and his story, all of it, *should* be told.



Michael Collins' portrait. The Irish War
Photo Credit: theirishwar.com

Michael Collins' vision of a prosperous, independent Ireland moving from struggle to statehood reminds us that history not only unfolds in the public declarations and massive battles but also in the margins, in the quiet decisions in which ideals and reality clash.

He remarkably bridged violence and vision, taking an extremely bloody, centuries-old conflict and laying the foundations for a prosperous government.



“Todo Vale”: La Movida Madrileña and Cultural Democratization

in a Post-Franco Spain

By: Alejandra Torres

In 1985, Bob Spitz visited Madrid and fell in love. The former Francoist capital, a long-dead and quiet center of repression, was now “shimmering out there in a frock of all night neon glitz,” with a heart that “throbbed in time to some kind of infinite energy.”¹ Writing for *Rolling Stone Magazine*, Spitz amorously chronicles the regenerative movement that Madrileños had been steeped in since the late seventies, La Movida. According to Spitz, the spontaneous, yet self-contradictory movement, was all at once a peaceful, anti-fascist, apolitical, democratic, hedonistic, rich-kid dominated, hippie-welcoming, drug-fueled artistic explosion. Spitz’s understanding of La Movida, as a jumble of contradictions, was not unfounded. Since its beginnings, La Movida has been difficult to place within the context of Spain’s recent history. The movement was a spontaneous cultural and artistic revolution dominated by the city’s youth, but it was also co-opted by and integral to the success of socialist leaders in Madrid in the early 1980s. Rooted in a regional Madrileño identity, it also existed within a broader national movement, one that celebrated the joys of artistic expression, free love, and the end of Franco-era repression and shame. However, later years were marred by the desperate effects of widespread drug abuse and the emergence of HIV/AIDS in the Movida’s most prominent circles. For all its complexity, La Movida was a distinct and important era in Madrid and Spain as whole. The creation of a new dominant youth culture not only allowed for an unprecedented and unrestricted artistic explosion; it also serves as a lens through which we can understand the social impacts and response to local and national political developments in the post-Franco years. La Movida was about art, freedom, and modernity, but it was also about reconstructing a new democratic identity for Madrid and Spain as whole.

It is difficult to say which arose first in Spain: democracy or the Movida. Even before Franco’s death, Spain was eager to break free from Francoist repression. In *Postwar*, Tony Judt explains that by Franco’s death, Franco had “outlived his usefulness” to many of his own supporters and that immediately following his death in 1975, the transition to democracy was seemingly instantaneous.² Judt argues that the speed and success of the democratic transition in Spain could, ironically, be attributed to the old guard’s involvement.

Franco’s appointed successor, King Juan Carlos I, and his government led by Prime Minister Adolfo Suárez González, took advantage of widespread desires for reforms after thirty years of a “forced passive acceptance” and “decades-long depoliticization of culture.”² Within two years of Franco’s death, Suárez had founded a new party of his own and authorized the return of the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) and the Spanish Communist Party (PCE). In 1977, Spain held its first democratic election in four decades and drafted a new constitution which affirmed the rights and autonomy of Spain’s distinct regions but still protected the “indissoluble unity of the Spanish nation.” The new government retained Madrid as its capital; therefore, the former center of Franco’s regime would have to undergo a major cultural rehabilitation to successfully lead the entire country’s democratic transition.

In the early post-Franco years, the capital of Madrid was overcoming its legacy as the center for Spanish nationalism and symbol for the repression of his regime. Thus, it was necessary to undergo cultural as well as physical restorations. In his analysis of La Movida, Hamilton Staple explains that in the post-Franco period, these efforts were approached two ways: the “ambitious regionalism agenda by the capital’s intellectual and political elite between 1979 and 1986” and “the creation of new forms of collective identity based largely on a culturally vibrant present.”³

This “culturally vibrant present” is, of course, La Movida itself. La Movida was all-encompassing: from music to movies, graffiti, and fashion, it overtook the streets of Madrid and marked a decisive break with the past forty years of cultural suppression and artistic censorship. The movement embraced free love and drug experimentation like earlier movements from the 60s and early 70s. But in addition to being distinctly modern, the movement was further distanced from Franco-type “Spanishness” through its foreign influences. In her interviews with several iconic Movida bands, Ana Aparicio Cillán notes that “there are many (...) who agree that the Movida began earlier, around 77-78, when British punk began to take off in our country and new bands were influenced by groups like the Sex Pistols, The Clash, The Damned (...)”⁴ Finally freed from Franco, and open to influences from beyond their borders, the youth of Madrid could fully embrace the ever-alluring core tenants of counterculture: sex, drugs, and rock’n’roll.

Many bands arose during this period, but one of the most iconic bands from the Movida years – that is, one that embodied the experimental and creative freedom that characterized the movement –, was Radio Futura. Formed in 1978 by Enrique Sierra, Herminio Molero, Javier Pérez Grueso, and brothers Luis and Santiago Auseron, Radio Futura initially began as an “experiment” to create a “Talking Heads-like work,” according to bassist Luis Auseron. However, the group quickly transformed into a rock band. By 1980 their success took off with the release of their album “Musica Moderna.” In their hit song from the album, “Enamorado de la moda juvenil” the group sings:

Yo vi, (sí vi)

A la gente joven andar

Oh sí, (yo vi)

Con tal aire de seguridad

Que yo, (sí yo)

En un momento comprendí

Que el futuro ya está aquí

*I saw (yes, I saw)
The young people walking
Oh yes, (I saw)
With such an air of security
That I (Yes I)
Understood in one moment
That the future is already here*

These lyrics highlight the celebratory, youthful sentiments of La Movida and illustrate that this celebration stemmed from something new to young people at that time: *safety*. According to Staple, many scholars have attempted to attribute direct connections to the swinging 60s or to the punk rock movements throughout Europe that preceded La Movida. Despite these influences on the movement, though, in crafting a counter movement to Francoism, young people of the movement had created a uniquely Madrileño phenomenon. He argues that they “were not mere copies of their Anglo-Saxon counterparts,” considering that the artists of the Movida sang solely in Spanish and had their own distinct punk and new wave-inspired styles, in turn influencing much of the streetwear in Madrid at that time.³ Indeed, a core tenant of La Movida was the “Hazlo tu mismo,” or DIY, spirit of making art, clothes, and music to match one’s individual tastes. This was only possible with safety from censorship laws and other repressive Francoist policies. Therefore, in the early Movida years, young people in Spain were uninhibited in their artistic exploration, pulling from foreign influences to make something unique.



¹ Spitz, Bob. “The New Spain (Originally Published 6 June 1985).” Mary Ellen Mark, *Rolling Stone*, www.maryellenmark.com/bibliography/magazines/article/rolling-stone/the-new-spain-637526315786009416/R. Accessed 21 July 2025.

² Judt, Tony. “A Time of Transition.” *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945*, Penguin Group, 2005, pp. 504–534.

³ Staple, Hamilton M. “Just a ‘Teardrop in the rain’? The Movida Madrileña and a new democratic regional identity.” *Bulletin of Spanish Studies*, vol. 86, no. 3, 20 May 2009, pp. 345–369, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230113046_6.

⁴ Aparicio Cillán, Ana. “Introducción.” *La Movida Madrileña*, Tébar Flores, 2019, pp. 15–20. ProQuest, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/southernmethodist/reader.action?docID=6772540&c=UERG&pg=51>. Accessed 21 July 2025.

The early years of the Movida were defined by the free spirit and energy described by Spitz and seen in Radio Futura's early work. However, with time, this began to change. In later albums, Radio Futura continued to center themes of youth culture but also began writing more openly on themes of rebellion and class struggle in response to the growing appropriation of the movement by national and international players. In the late seventies, independent record labels, music venues, and magazines, such as *La Luna de Madrid*, sprang up in response to the Movida's growing art scene. By the eighties, however, the political and cultural elites of the city were taking notice. The artists and youth who founded the movement were naturally critical of this development. In an interview for their 1985 album, "De un Pais en Llamas"—"from a country on fire"—lead singer Santiago Auseron explained that their album's name came from the group's personal perspectives on "the fight for the future" and that they sought to reference the "the frontiers here and now that we must dare to cross to gain an open horizon."⁵ Auseron went on to explain that this fight was not political but rather about preserving the creative experimentation and supporting independent artists that defined the Movida's music scene. By 1985, many national record labels began buying out smaller independent labels and repackaging the music and image of La Movida into what Auseron described as a "safe selection... free from adolescent uncertainty so that the product is controlled."⁵ Likewise, *La Luna de Madrid*, which initially emerged as the journalistic voice of La Movida, was later accused of perverting the movement's ideals by serving as a "work of simplification and commercialization of the first Movida by certain theorizing cultural elites."⁶ In both cases, a growing mainstream attention led to a commercial repackaging of the movement and a turn away from themes of social collectivism and independent, spontaneous artistry that had shaped it up to that point. Independent artists, musicians, and the young people who supported them had spent years building up a grassroots cultural movement, but by the mid-1980s, cultural and political elites wanted to sell it off in palatable bites to the masses.

This mainstream appropriation of La Movida must be understood in the context of Madrid's local politics in the early and mid-eighties. By that point, the Spanish Socialist Party, PSOE, led by Enrique Tierno Galván, Mayor of Madrid, had begun to incorporate La Movida's defining qualities—social acceptance, freedom of artistic expression, youthful celebration—into their campaigns for city governance.

The PSOE-led Ayuntamiento even began funding concerts for popular bands, with Tierno himself famously appearing at the 1984 Gran Fiesta de 24 Horas de Música y Radio, where he shouted "¡Rockeros! El que no esté colocado, que se coloque... ¡y al loro!" which *roughly* translated means "Rockers! If you're not plastered, get plastered... get with the vibe." According to Garcia-Torvisco, this move to co-opt the Movida came from Tierno's recognition that its non-violent, largely apolitical stances could be used to rehabilitate the image of Madrid. Additionally, its spontaneous, creative energy that emboldened the movement's youth would help encourage a participatory and inclusive democracy. However, in addition to drawing criticisms from individuals within the movement, Tierno and PSOE's efforts were also chastised by conservative political elites, who saw these efforts as "a blatant attempt by the new democratic administrations to construct an artificial culture exactly to their own liking." Meanwhile, on the left, it was seen as a hedonistic, individualistic, and ideologically hollow movement that distracted from the left's political mission.

Ultimately, Tierno's attempts to form a regional democratic spirit died with him in 1986, trumped by the socialist party's turn towards European integration and national economic development under the leadership of prime minister Felipe Gonzalez. According to Judt, Gonzalez's push towards privatization and NATO membership only reinforced the idea that the Socialist party was abandoning the people. Most of the socialists' support came from those "too young to remember the Civil War, and whose openly-avowed goal was to overcome Spain's backwardness." Now in their eyes, "the old ideological Left was part of the problem, not the solution."² It is not unsurprising then, that 1986 marked for many the end of La Movida as well. In her interviews with bands like Radio Futura, Los Secretos, and Danza Invisible, Ana Aparicio Cillán asks her subjects when they felt the movement officially ended. Answers vary from person to person; some cite the closing of Rock-Ola, a popular independent concert venue in Madrid, while some say it was the onset of the AIDS crises and wide-spread heroin addiction in Spain. Others say it was the failure of the movement to grow beyond a strictly Madrileño identity, or the absorption of local independent labels by larger corporations. Despite varying answers, each of these developments coincidentally take place by 1986.

The good and the bad elements of La Movida are both true and real, and everyone experienced it differently. Thus, it is extremely difficult to give it one clear, constrained definition and to summarize its legacy in popular memory. Depending on who we ask, the Movida was shallow, political, wonderful, or an annoyance. However, this very lack of definition is what made the Movida useful to the reconstruction of Madrileño identity in a post-Franco Spain and particularly necessary to politicians like Enrique Tierno. It was modern, all-encompassing, inclusive, and unconnected to Francoist or nationalist sentiments. Most importantly, by being so loosely defined, it could be anything. A popular adage of the movement, "Todo vale," rang true in two ways: anything goes, and everything is okay—*now that Franco is gone*. For all its complexities, the Movida could best be defined as Spitz described it: "one ongoing coming-out party. The kind you like to have when the folks are away for the weekend. Only this time the Old Man isn't coming back."¹ La Movida Madrileña stood alone as a cultural movement, but it was later co-opted to suit the needs of political leaders seeking to secure their place in the new democratic order. This brought the movement to international attention and acclaim, but in the eyes of artists, journalists, and musicians, the mainstream appropriation perverted it. Paradoxically, the praise it garnered stopped it dead in its tracks. What has been left behind is art, movies, music, and memories from a time when Spain could finally breathe again. La Movida Madrileña was hollow to some, distracting to others; a tool for politicians, it symbolized freedom for the youth. Its definition may continue to escape us, but there is no denying that La Movida was an integral part of shaping Madrid's regional identity, and by extension, the national Spanish identity in a post-Franco world.



⁵ Radio Futura. "Enamorado de la moda juvenil" *Musica Moderna*, Parlophone Music Spain, 1980.

⁶ Garcia-Torvisco, Luis. "La Luna de Madrid: 'Movida', Posmodernidad y Capitalismo Cultural En Una Revista Feliz de Los Ochenta." *MLN*, vol. 127, no. 2, 2012, pp. 364–84. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41494994>. Accessed 21 July 2025.

Opinion

How Wicked (2025) Reimagines the Villian Origin Story

By: Brooke Bjerke

The story of the Wonderful Wizard of Oz is a widely known and beloved American classic. It transcends the test of time as new adaptations and alterations of the tale give new life to the magical land of Oz, opening the door of exploration into the complexity of its socio-political symbolism and relevance. The most recent transformation of the story is the 2024 film *Wicked*, based on the 2003 Broadway musical. Through *Wicked*, we see how the infamous Wicked Witch of the West is born, persuading one to reconsider the way in which traditional villains have been presented. As the story progresses, the audience is enlightened to the authoritative regime of Oz, where the practice of blind allegiance to the Wizard is the true evil that resides in the land. The Witch, Elphaba Thropp, was truly a political revolutionary who refused to conform to this corrupt society. *Wicked* illustrates how government and societal constructs built on deceit require fanatical devotion. Individuals who do not abide by set norms will thus be ostracized.

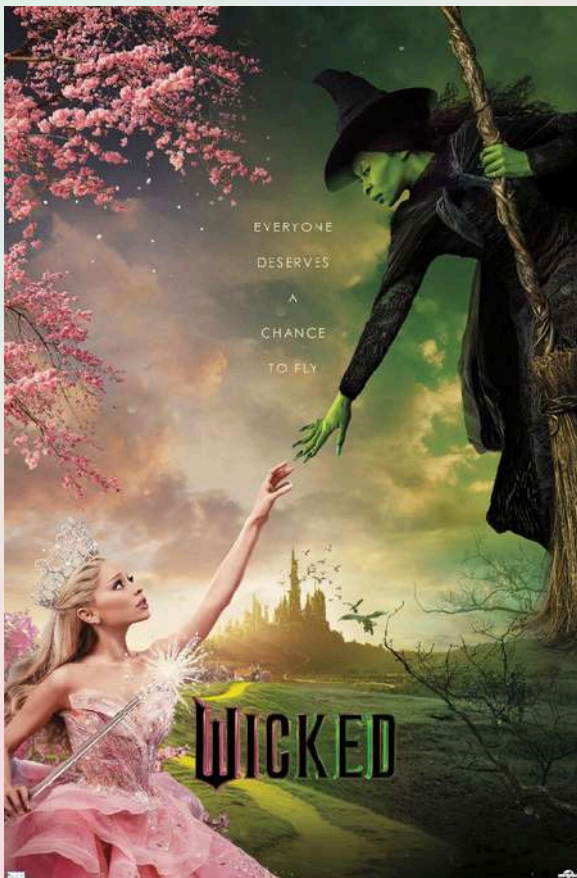


In order to deconstruct the secrets of the Wizard and the regime of Oz, it is important to first look at how he leads the land. The Wizard is seen as an omnipotent individual with the ability to grant anyone their wildest dreams. Elphaba is given the opportunity to meet the Wizard and experience his great promise when her magic draws the attention of Madame Morrible, an esteemed professor whom she meets while attending Shiz University. Elphaba, just like all Ozians, has true faith in the Wizard's righteousness and abilities, and hopes that he will aid her in protecting the animal community which has been enduring a violent attack on their rights. However, upon her fateful meeting with the Wizard, she experiences a revelation about the Wizard's true nature: he is the one behind the attacks on the animals; more significantly, he has no real power. Instead, he had hoped that Elphaba would be the key to his grand scheme of turning certain animals into spies, silencing all animals to further solidify his dictatorial control over Oz. It is at this moment in the film that the audience most clearly sees the Wizard's evil. This revelation demonstrates how a world first presented as harmonious and utopian is actually authoritative and corrupt behind the scenes. Furthermore, the truth of Oz forces one to reflect on how they view anything painted as perfect, leading to insights into the covert ways by which those in power operate.



Elphaba Thropp looking over Oz
Photo Credit: University Pictures

Moreover, the power dynamics of Oz are further revealed through the administration making a scapegoat out of Elphaba after she rebels against Oz. Once she learns of the Wizard's hateful and unethical plan, Elphaba refuses to comply; any shred of faith she had left in the Wizard evaporates. Seeing how the administration allows for no political opposition, an enemy of the Wizard becomes an enemy to all. Consequently, her refusal to participate in the Wizard's agenda causes her righteousness to be repackaged as an evil rebellion by the administration. Madame Morrible, operating as the Wizard's advisor, quickly makes the news of Elphaba's betrayal public. Morrible hatefully slanders Elphaba's character and labels her as a dangerous and untrustworthy individual. The citizens of Oz, never wavering in their loyalty to the Wizard, accept this news without question. Thus, the Wicked Witch of the West is born. Again, the propaganda administered by the regime effectively illustrates how those in power can project a false reality onto their subjects, burying the truth underneath the guise of pivoting against evil.



Wicked (2025) movie poster
Photo Credit: University Pictures



Cynthia Erivo and Ariana Grande at Wicked
(2025) LA premiere
Photo Credit: Cosmopolitan

Overall, the version of Oz told in *Wicked* highlights the importance of investigating the truth beyond the information that those in power distribute. Furthermore, it shows how societies that operate solely on the leadership of a single powerful individual rely on the unwavering obedience of their subjects to uphold legitimacy. Despite the Wizard's framing of Elphaba as wicked to the Ozians, viewers of the film applaud her courage in relying on her own morals instead of societal norms. Essentially, *Wicked* conveys the dignity found in self-reliance and shows that truth is not discovered through examining events on their surface, but only through reading between the lines.



Galinda Upland holding Elphaba Thropp's hat
Photo Credit: University Pictures

Southland: A Bizarro Vision of America that Resonates to this Day

By: Max Roberts



Photo Credit: Universal Pictures

I think the greatest challenge for an artist is to speak intentionally for the times. It's granted that an artist's societal and political backgrounds will bleed into one's work in some way, regardless if one knows it or not. However, to not only be aware of one's environment, but to have something meaningful to say, requires almost all of one's mind and spirit. One would not only need a pulse on something as nebulous as "society" and "culture" but would also need to understand a philosophy of our current times that resonates with something deeper than just what we see on the news; something to say about us, as a people, as a spirit.

Richard Kelly's *Southland Tales* (2006) is about how the September 11th attacks fundamentally warped the American psyche in such a way that we cannot fully explain in words but just might be able to show on screen. The work of fiction, consisting of a graphic novel leading to a movie, shows a world where instead of two towers being hit, two cities were nuked and nobody knows why. What they do know is that they are in the throes of an increasingly authoritarian America, a third World War, and a looming biblical Armageddon. However, *Southland Tales* is also a facetious satire of the culture of the Bush years, the Global War on Terror, the PATRIOT Act, the increasing prevalence of reality TV, global climate and resource concerns, the military industrial complex, and the pain and guilt our veterans brought home from their time in the forever wars.

To give a barebones synopsis of the story: America is amid an energy crisis from its multi-theater conflict, so the government is subsidizing the enigmatic Treer corporation run by a foreign, affluent, politically ambiguous tech geek (Wallace Shawn)¹, who promises a wireless source of perpetual energy based on the waves of the ocean called "fluid karma." Dwayne Johnson is an amnesiac movie star named Boxer Santeros, who works with a former adult film star turned activist, Krysta Now (Sarah Michelle Geller), to draft an awful screenplay that predicts the end of the world. This apocalyptic vision is mirrored by the life of Ronald Taverner, another amnesiac who is coerced by the last remnants of the Democratic Party to stage an incident of police brutality, impersonating his brother Officer Roland Taverner (Seann William Scott) in hopes of turning the tide of the upcoming 2008 election away from the GOP. All of this is narrated under the watchful eye of a scarred Iraq veteran played by Justin Timberlake, who watches Santa Monica Beach from his post and defends the Treer corporation's offshore fluid karma plant. I haven't even mentioned the intermingling of these stories or the theme of quantum physics.

Admittedly, discussing this film and its preceding graphic novel is tough, not only due to the cross-eyeing net of plot devices, named characters, and allegiances but also to its multitude of themes, ranging from the Book of Revelation to forgiving oneself. Culturally, I also felt unequipped for this discussion. As someone born in the mid-2000s, I can never truly know the milieu of post-9/11, pre-Recession America. I was too busy playing with toys to worry about the dubious war in Iraq or the poppy fields in Afghanistan. But rather than being discouraged, I found that something about this work beckons a deeper look. In addition to being enticing, outlandish, meticulous, relevant, and oftentimes funny, *Southland Tales* is an art piece where every reread and rewatch conjures up something new. It is a uniquely American vision of our own demise.

¹ Kelly, Richard, director. *Southland Tales* (Theatrical Release). Universal Pictures, 2006.

It's not like our decline will be subtle. *Southland Tales* subverts T.S. Eliot's infamous "Hollow Men" poem's ending reads: "This is how the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper."² Likewise, every headlining issue in Bush's America is amplified in a country mourning two cities instead of two towers. This is a world where you need a visa to switch states.³ The whole internet is federalized and monitored, and the government can watch any camera under an expansion of the PATRIOT Act. In every major faction, there's a sense of paranoia and atomization as they are infested with moles. Every character in the film speaks like they are their own main character in their own movie.⁴ *Southland* is a funhouse mirror, showing how we, in a crisis era, exacerbate our worst traits of paranoia and hyper-individuality. In America, we only know how to keep the wheels turning, even if we've already flown off the cliff. All we know is the show must go on; perpetual motion and lines going up. Maybe there is something prophetic about a film that predicts all our endless schemes within our nation falling apart in 2008.

The flaw of all the factions in *Southland Tales* is that everyone is desperately trying to save the world in the only way they know how, yet the only way they know how is based on a panicked nation raised on Hollywood. Boxer and Krysta think their script will speak truth to power – only to write a script of the actual events that led to the apocalypse. The underground cell of the Democrats tries to turn over an election by hacking off fingers for their prints to be used as false verification in the voting booths (and the previously mentioned police brutality stage) in lieu of any policymaking. The Treer corporation promises a renewable and clean source of energy, only to be revealed in the novel that fluid karma is yet another finite energy drilled from below with adverse effects.⁵

Essentially, our main cast's solutions to the Apocalypse involves writing bad movies, subverting the electoral system, and haplessly throwing more money at a national problem. It's as if the American way is to try and fix a problem by overly involving ourselves, only making things worse.

When *Southland Tales* hit theaters initially, very few saw it. It was initially panned by critics at Cannes,⁶ who watched a rough cut of the story that makes no sense without reading the graphic novel prior.⁷ The theatrical release, which condensed the novel into an exposition at the beginning of the film,⁸ only yielded around a \$350,000 box office on the budget of \$17 million.⁹ However, I think *Southland Tales* is due for a major reevaluation – that is, especially as the vibes of the film feel more present today than in 2006. When you live in a nation where ICE agents fire on a pastor with pepper balls,¹⁰ and the Secretary of War doesn't wash his hands because he doesn't believe in germs,¹¹ you might start drawing comparisons. I don't think *Southland Tales* is a product of some arbitrary gift of prophecy, but rather it comes from a visionary director who had a finger on the pulse of American society in the 21st century. Nothing here now is all that new.

Last summer, I found myself in Manhattan. A friend in the area and I were walking and talking along West Street when we beheld the Ground Zero memorial. Circling the massive square hole in the ground where the tower used to be is a ceaseless stream of water [1]. At the bottom of this hole is a deeper, smaller void the water further spills into. The metaphor here isn't subtle: there used to be something here, but the world has changed. Now we're left in perpetuity trying to fix it the only way we know: more. This is the America that Richard Kelly envisioned in his opus: a hole that is always filling, yet is never full.

² Kelly, Richard, director. *Southland Tales* (Theatrical Release). Universal Pictures, 2006.

³ Kelly, Richard, and Brett Weldele. *Southland Tales. The Prequel Saga*. Graphitti Designs, Inc.: View Askew Productions, 2007.

⁴ Kelly, Richard, director. *Southland Tales* (Theatrical Release). Universal Pictures, 2006.

⁵ Kelly, Richard, and Brett Weldele. *Southland Tales. The Prequel Saga*. Graphitti Designs, Inc.: View Askew Productions, 2007.

⁶ Kohn, Eric. "Southland Tales' at 15: An Oral History of the Cannes Cut Nobody Saw Coming." *IndieWire*, IndieWire, 1 Feb. 2021, www.indiewire.com/features/general/southland-tales-oral-history-cannes-cut-1234612150/.

⁷ Kelly, Richard, director. *Southland Tales* (Cannes Cut). Universal Pictures, 2006.

⁸ Kelly, Richard, director. *Southland Tales* (Theatrical Release). Universal Pictures, 2006.

⁹ "Southland Tales (2007) - Box Office and Financial Information." *The Numbers*, www.the-numbers.com/movie/Southland-Tales#tab=summary.

¹⁰ Sharman, Laura, and Carol Alvarado. "Judge Orders Restrictions on Federal Tactics against Ice Protesters after Chicago-Area Pastor Shot with Pepper Balls." CNN, Cable News Network, 10 Oct. 2025, www.cnn.com/2025/10/10/us/illinois-judge-ruling-ice-protests-pastor-chicago-hnk.

¹¹ "Fox Host Says He 'Hasn't Washed Hands in 10 Years.'" *BBC News*, BBC, 11 Feb. 2019, www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-47201923.

¹² "About the Memorial." *National September 11 Memorial & Museum*, National September 11 Memorial & Museum, www.911memorial.org/visit/memorial/about-memorial

More Than Just Their Lines: Old Hollywood and Monolithic Acting

By: Logan Arebalo

As a teenager with deep admiration for the Golden Age of Hollywood, I was frequently asked by friends and acquaintances what exactly I see in it. Why does it matter so much to me? Why is it primarily what I watch in terms of movies? Well, much to the surprise of most of the people who ask me, one of my main reasons is that I believe acting was better “back in the good, old days.” Now, this statement seems to have some sort of natural, incensing quality to it, as the typical reply I receive is equal parts astounded and offended. People instantly want to know how I could possibly think that, as—obviously—the dramatic arts have progressed significantly in the sixty odd years since the demise of what is now termed Old Hollywood. Admittedly, part of the reason I answer like that is because of its enraging qualities, as my response always gets an entertaining reply—no matter who I’m talking to. But there is genuine sentiment behind what I say. I do think acting was better sixty years ago than it is today. Or, rather, much less monolithic. Let me explain.

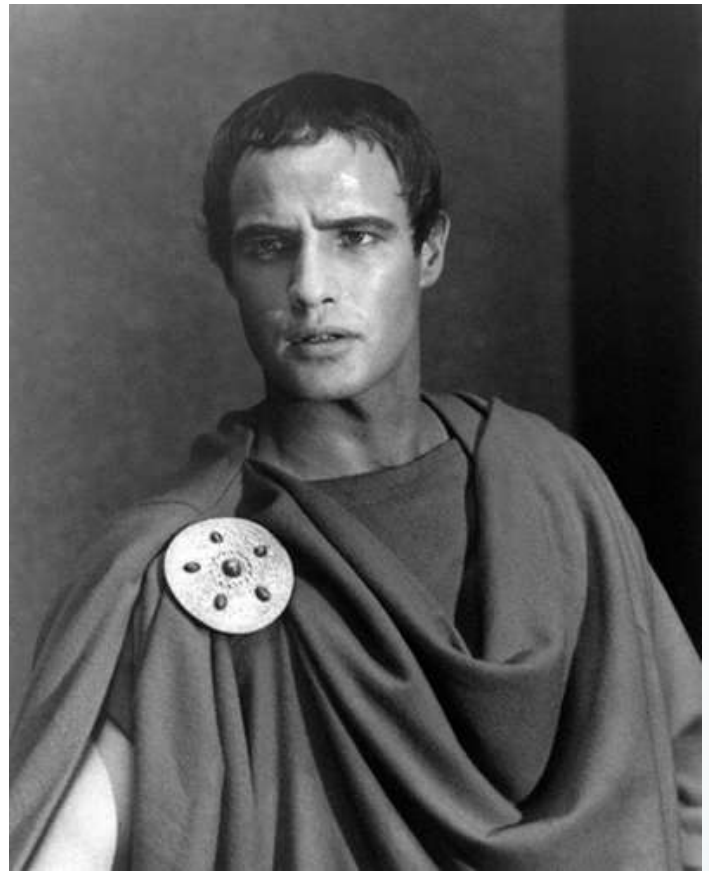
When I say acting is monolithic today, I mean that, in general, most actors seem to strive for the same thing in their performances: realism. And if they are not striving for that, it is usually at the behest of the director nowadays, not the actor. This did not used to be the case.



Picture of MGM's contracted stars of 1949
Photo Credit: MGM

As anyone who has seen a good amount of classic American films can tell you, the types of performances Hollywood used to have varied widely. From the classical measured form of Laurence Olivier to the personality-driven understated style of Robert Mitchum, and later even the bombastic method acting of Marlon Brando, what one could see on any given day on the big screen was incredibly diverse. And while the factors that contributed to this are largely economic (look up the Star System of Hollywood if you are interested), that is not why I am writing this article. For indeed, a critical breakdown of contributing business factors would only do to my article what monolithic acting did to Hollywood: strip it of all its fun. I do not think the modern film-watching public understands how standardized and, ironically, lacking in diversity modern acting feels when put in comparison with the many examples the past has left us. And it is that lack of diversity that really gets me. Despite Hollywood being as ethnically and sexually diverse as it has ever been, there just are not many actors I can think of who genuinely differ from their counterparts in terms of acting style. There are no more great “duels of technique”—films in which actors of different acting schools play opposite each other in a movie. Unfortunately, that type of movie died with the Vietnam War.

Perhaps, for the best example I can think of for the “duel of technique” film, look no further than Joseph Mankiewicz’s 1953 adaptation of Shakespeare’s classic play, *Julius Caesar*. In the film, the personalities and acting styles of the two leads—James Mason and Marlon Brando—face off and end up making the film what it is. Mason, who was a British actor of great gentility and classical poise, plays the role of Brutus, and Brando, who was one of the (at the time) new-fangled method actors, plays Mark Antony. With shockingly little help from the mostly unaltered words of Shakespeare, the play about classical despotism gets made into an allegory for modern fascism through the difference in the actors alone. The combined power of Brando’s highly emotional performance and roughshod off-screen personality worked to both undermine the traditional appeal of Mason *and* reflect the fascist demagogues of the decade before.



Picture of Marlon Brando in costume as Mark Antony on the set of Julius Caesar (1953)
Photo Credit: MGM



Promotional picture of James Mason in costume as Brutus for Julius Caesar (1953)
Photo Credit: MGM

And Julius Caesar is not alone in this power, too. Watch films with Gary Cooper, a master of understated style; or Robert Ryan, a master of the harsh physical; or Irene Dunne, a master of light comedic—and you can see how meaning, theme, and, most of all, entertainment value arise naturally out of nothing more than the actors and the unique qualities they bring to the screen.

Fortunately, however, although the diversity in style these actors brought with them faded alongside them, we can still read what they left between their lines.

Short Stories

The Desire to Storm

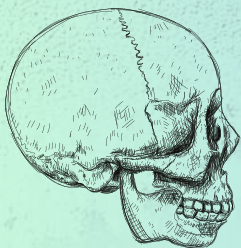
By: Asiya Mohammed

The man made himself more comfortable atop the muck and hay, tilting his head and narrowing his eyes like he'd just received doubtful news. "You mean the ship with the black sails?" He had a voice like rasps, chills, something slummy and English. "The one that fell to a Kraken, the one whose men all lay in red stains at the bottom of the sea?"

A young reporter looked up from his parchments, standing on the side of the bars that made people want to protect him instead of bury him. He said nothing, quill in hand, trying to shovel strength into his fragile gaze.

The prisoner started laughing. Gleeful, broken, all languid shoulders and sleepy eyelids. His grin was as startling as seeing a crescent moon at midnight for the very first time, and when he leaned forward, the room's only candle glinted in his eye, stars in an oil spill. "You have no idea what you're stepping into, boy."

"Did it scare you?" The reporter's voice was louder than intended. He cleared his throat when he heard himself waver, clenched his jaw like it'd make him seem more sure of himself.



The man's smile faded. The lines that had been of laughter became grim crevices, and the boy was unnerved to discover an undiluted intelligence in the prisoner's glare. It pierced his core like dense bullets, alarming yet beguiling, and it occurred to him out of nowhere that the prisoner might have been handsome if not for the grime, charming if not for the threatening upswing of his voice whenever he finished a question. "None of it scared me," the man said quietly. "Not even the black sails. Massive, breathing things that inhaled storms without wavering. We crawled over soaked decks like ants in rainslick. Barefoot men climbing, hauling, scrubbing filth and shoving water back where it belonged. It always came back, you know. Dumping from the clouds or crashing over us in waves like sand cutting your cheeks—but no, I wasn't scared of that either. Drenched clothes, drenched food, drenched shoes. I learned to stop wearing them. Shoes. And it's hard to get back into the habit. Better grip on wood and ropes without them, less chance for trench foot—you ever been in war, boy?"

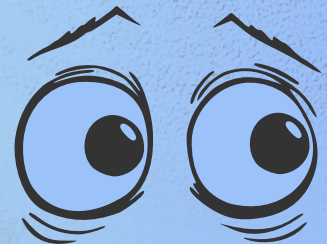
The young man stopped writing. His eyes were gentle, like a doe's. He'd moved to sit on a cobwebbed bench in front of the bars. *No*, he mouthed, before repeating, "No." His voice was stiff, arms rigid.

"They'll slice them off, you know. Toes, feet. Ever wonder why so many sailors have got wooden sticks for legs?"

The boy looked pale in the candlelight, went paler.

"Ah. No need to be scared of me, boy. Don't like my smile, do ya? I never once was a pirate, you know, didn't used to have the gold teeth. I was a writer. Like yourself. An academic."

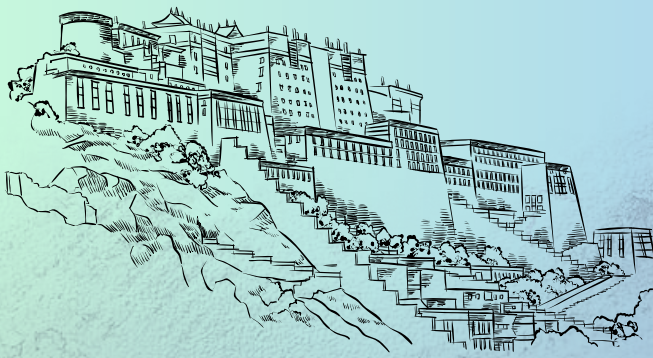
The boy's mouth drew small, brows knitting. "What happened?"



"What *happened*?! Well—*Well*, what happened is somethin' that'll get you wettin' your bed at night, boy! What happened—Hah! Oh, who I wouldn't kill to tell this story to a kid like you every day."

The boy's fingers tightened around his quill. He kept firm hold on his parchments while the prisoner's amusement gleamed in his hooded eyes.

"Aw, you see, I was like you. *Just* like you, talking exactly like we are now, except *I* was the one with the quill. I was... relentless."



When the prisoner quieted, the boy grew uneasy. It was like two inclinations were fighting over the man—something sober and something psychotic, both equally powerful in oscillation. The details of the prisoner's face finally came into view when he moved to sit near the candle on the spidery bench. Dark knife-cut hair, gaunt features, irises like the pale, greening cheek of a corpse.

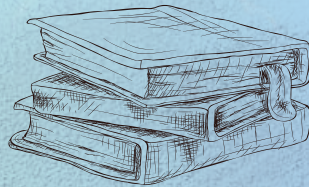
"It started, like all beautiful things, with chaos," the prisoner began. "Guttural roars raged over one another. *'Lines, lower the lines!'* Men were clambering, screaming to be heard over the harsh souging of rain and ocean. Ice, the sprays were. A wave crashes, and it's ice. I couldn't feel my gums, couldn't feel my nose on my face, I was so numb. The rain chilled the nape of my neck, soaked a dozen pages of my journal as I shoved it deeper in my coat to keep it dry.

Some people climbed down into a dinghy. They took chains with them. Rattling metal. Twenty minutes later, they trudged back up on deck—five of them total—dragging a sixth person at the center. Not a crewmate. He was someone they'd wrenched out from the ocean."

The boy's eyes deepened, fascinated.

"This sixth, this *new* person, he had seaweed in his briny, dripping hair. Had blood stained across half his clothes. Completely unconscious. But" — he laughed— "then again, I only assumed he was unconscious. They'd shackled his wrists behind his back, locked his thumbs together, clamped an iron muzzle over his jaw, a blindfold over his eyes. His ankles were chained as they dragged him. His name was Phinnaeus. He changed my life."

"What were you doing there? On the boat? You said you were a writer." The boy seemed to be speaking with a sliver more confidence, now. He was eager.



"I was writing a book." A wistful, strange smile touched his lips. "A book on the primordial. I needed material, and I've always, always been one to step into the volcano instead of study its ashes in a lab." The prisoner saw the look on the boy's face and returned it with a wry brow. "No, I wasn't trained. Not a sailor—yet." In the muddy cell, sitting lazy against the wall surrounded by damp hay and dust, the prisoner gestured grandly to himself. "Shoeless, remember, smart boy? Surround yourself with pirates, and you'll learn to act like one."

"The ocean-man. Phinnaeus," the boy said, the tufty vane of his quill wiggling as he scribed. "What of him?"

"Well." The corners of the prisoner's mouth pulled and wrinkled into a wince. "He was put into a cell." He looked around. "Not unlike this one. But wetter. Mold, barnacles, little things growing and other things crawling. It was down in the cargo hold of the ship. Barely a place for a human. I went straight to the captain, as you can imagine, right after Phinnaeus was captured. I'd only been on board for six days, though, and had to pause on my way to retch over the taffrails. When at sea, the boat takes hold of your stomach and tugs it so consistently that you want to let it crawl out of your mouth and leave you forever. There was no such thing as up or down or side to side—just nausea, imbalance. I felt like turning inside-out. I wanted desperately to lie down on the most sturdy continent and stay unmoving for eternity." A long, quiet pause. The prisoner drifted his eyes back to the boy. "So. The captain. He didn't want to see me. Useless, he thought me. An obsessed scholar with the blank stare of a loon. Taking up space on the ship."

The reporter opened his mouth—a small, questioning vowel. The prisoner read the boy's eyes and grinned his lazy, sleepy-lidded grin.

"I was different back then, boy. I'd huddle myself at the crest of the ship, knees up, journal propped against them, and sketch the crewmen's souls. I'd walk past the handrails when the sea was tame, stare obsessively into the little

mirrors and white peaks like I was demanding them to speak to me... The waves must've thought me mad. I bet they wondered what was wrong with me, wondered whether, if they leapt up and screamed poetry into my brain, I'd finally be satisfied and leave them alone. But sometimes, I'd stare at nothing in particular, my eyes facing the horizon. Time would stretch so far, that the horizon would catch the melting sun in its palm. The bizarre chemicals of our planet's star would blaze and burn white against the water, shooting off violets and golds and neon pinks, and I'd see spots in my retinas. Stains that blotched my vision when I blinked. And as dusk would descend and the ship would enter a sublime, fearful state of dream-world, the reddening waters and dimming skies would send anxiety trembling through my organs, as if a scream were ripping through the air. It made me cower under the jubilant terror of nightfall, shivering, utterly and painfully ablaze."

The boy's quill slowed. He was staring at the prisoner, eyes moving from side to side, searching for a new way to see the man's face.

The prisoner just tilted his head, a few strands of his ebony hair falling over his brow. A weak smile in the guttering candlelight. "As you can see, the captain thought me insane. He didn't understand me. He told me to lash the cannons when I came asking about the man they'd hauled up. When I persisted, he turned to me, the thunder still raging outside. 'Edmund,' he said. Yes, that is my name. *'Edmund, we have captured him. And that is all that matters.'*

I remember these words distinctly because of the way his voice quivered through them. This seaweed-man must be a criminal, I thought. Some escapee fleeing from ship to ship, that we've caught hold of. When the captain took both my shoulders, looked me in the eye, and reassured me very gravely that all would be taken care of, I almost gave in. For the next two days, as we escaped the storm and recovered, the men were so busy tending to the wounded and patching the ship—and I, busy trying to record all the glory and direness of our post-tempest state—that all thought of Phinnaeus was swept from my mind.

"One day, I went to the cargo hold on an errand to retrieve a barrel of salted meat. (By now, I'd adapted my clothing, cut my hair, started speaking in the seafaring jargon I'd previously struggled so much to demystify.)" Edmund scratched his chin, rested his elbows on his knees and looked at the young reporter through the iron bars. "Just like you... now... I discovered someone down in the darkness. But" —he leaned dangerously close and blew out the candle— "back then, there wasn't a lick of light."

Sheer, encapsulating blackness. A concentrated sphere of heat formed at the center of the boy's chest, and tingles ran through his fingers and toes. His lungs stiffened, desiccated, and he realized at once that this was the taste of unfiltered terror. The darkness, a Medusa, had frozen him. He felt as if moving would set off a cataclysm, tickle a sleeping beast, unlock the prison.

Out of the silence came a slow, melodic whistle.

The reporter fumbled through his pockets with such numb and shaking fingers that he dropped his lighter twice before whipping a flame back onto the candle's wick. There, before him, the prisoner was standing at full height behind the bars, his arms lounging like panthers through the middle. His forehead rested against the metal, green eyes studious, crinkled with the subtlest humor.

"He was whistling that tune when I first met him," Edmund smiled thinly. Rather suddenly, he barked, "*Tell me boy, what's your name?*"

The boy jumped. He was clutching the edges of the bench so tightly, his fists went bone-white. "H-Hubert."

The prisoner's head fell, and he let out his cold, scraping laugh, shoulders convulsing. It echoed down the walls, came back. "No! No, boy, that's what he said to me. He asked me my name in the dark, ya silly bastard."

The boy swallowed, confusion growing in his eyes, quietude.

"Now," Edmund exhaled. He stretched the muscles in his neck. "The floor was still damp, down here with the cargo. Feet thick in grime, clothes stained with salt. There was a veil of blackness all around me. My hands, half-outstretched towards the barrels, halted in midair when I heard the tune. I felt my blood run viscously and stop moving. Petrified, boy," he whispered, "I was petrified."

A wrinkle formed in Hubert's brow.



"The ship continued swaying, though, and I had to catch myself against the wall. Something clanked against my shoulder—hanging tools, maybe—and that's when I think I lost it. The monstrous voice, the coldness of my dripping clothes against my spine. *Edmund*, I said. The word wrested out of me. Not a scream, not a laugh. *My name is Edmund Von Detten, orphan, scholar, twenty years old and dying still.*" The prisoner clenched his fist so tightly it quivered, something lost glistening in his fearful eyes. "Come near, Edmund," he whispered to me. *'Come near that I may discover you.'*"

"Turn around," the reporter said. "Turn around. Why would you follow?"

Something pulsed, helpless, in Edmund's eyes. "Into the volcano, remember, boy? Do you think Icarus could control himself? Our natures—our raw impulses—are the most powerful forces on Earth."

"So you met him in the darkness."

"Yes. He clasped my wrist through the bars and spoke to me in a way that made me feel like he knew me. Like, somehow, he'd been drawn to me the same way I was drawn to him. But I soon discovered that he was only trying to escape. *'I'm innocent, you know,'* he said soundly. *'You could free me. You could unlock this prison.'* When he moved, I heard the clinking of his shackles. The discarded muzzle at his feet, the chains. *'It is not a new moon yet; I am helpless.'* Of course, I had no idea what he meant. Regardless, I refused to help him until I knew why he was put there in the first place. He understood my concerns.

Admitted to me that he was a murderer, but not a bad man."

"That's impossible. If he killed a man, he's—"

Edmund laughed loudly. "A man? No, boy, not a man. In one night, he killed fifty people on a dock."

Hubert blinked rapidly. "What?"

"I didn't understand at the time, either. But I didn't have time to pry further. My duties summoned me above deck where I was thoroughly occupied for the rest of the evening. Sleepless, I stared at the ceiling during the enormous and mute hours of night, thinking about the murderer. Something about his manner of speech unsettled me."

"How so?"

"I recognized it. Not him, but his vocabulary and the cadence of his sentences, the way he presented his thoughts. And when I returned to him early the next morning, I discovered why this was so... *Doctor Phinnaeus Willhelm*, professor of Philosophy, renowned author from Oxford. No average criminal, this was. Rather, he was extraordinary. His mind was cultivated with such furniture that every further discussion we had on that ship left me staggering and entranced like I was born anew. I brought a lantern with me on that first morning when I returned to the dungeon of the ship. He was scarred, sharp-featured. You could see it in his eyes, the elevation. *'Sit down,'* he said softly. I did. Facing him, level on the mucky wood, not so different from you and me. He wanted to know what brought me back down there. Why I visited again. Was I free to him?"

No, I apologized. *Not yet.* I merely wanted to know more.

"And so, we spoke. After retiring from his occupations at Oxford, he continued his studies alone and became fascinated with unearthing the deepest secrets of human existence and the Earth's natural patterns. He conducted years of research on the primordial. Decades. But when he finally came close to a breakthrough, he'd only just begun to peel open the inviolable exterior of uncharted truth when he had to retreat immediately. He'd seen but a single glimmer of the light behind the curtain. Yet it was enough to terrify him. That taste of perfect truth demolished his reality. Disconnected him. Fear became all he knew, Hubert. Fear and cynicism and a throbbing rage that he couldn't contain—do you understand me?"

The boy faltered. There was a line near his mouth, something uncertain and doubtful.

Edmund gave a lifeless, genuine smile. "Of course you don't. There's a lot you don't understand, boy. You'd go mad if you tried."

Hubert ground his teeth in concentration. "You're saying he discovered something about our existence. About human nature, about this world. What was it?"

"Ah, but you see, he wanted to spare me. He wouldn't say. Because—and he admitted this—he was growing fond of my company. After weeks of discussing his research and my writing and the overlap of our philosophies, he realized how similar we were. He didn't want to pour into me the kind of terror he had to live with every day. It was a mercy."

The reporter sighed, ran a hand through his hair, and leaned down to scribble something further onto his parchments.

“One day, I’d climbed up to the crow’s nest with my journal, watching the vastness of the stars and the infinite gorges they made in the darkness of the ocean. The longer I absorbed their grandeur, the harder I pressed my back into the wooden mast behind me, wanting to dissolve into it. It was overwhelming. I couldn’t help but wonder how a blue whale might feel, dipped so deeply in this enshrouding emptiness. To *know* that one exists in time and is so, so alone... To *know* that there is endlessness around you filled with other frightful creatures with teeth and unblinking eyes and slimy skin... To *know*, boy. To know is a curse. But oblivion? Ignorance? That is ease. That is the answer.”

He claimed to have been an academic, the prisoner. A scholar. How could he say such a thing? “You are a man who values wisdom,” Hubert maintained. “You made that clear up until now.”

Edmund snapped and pointed at the reporter. “But what if wisdom is exactly the problem? I returned to Phinnaeus that night to find that he was also awake. I begged him. It had been eating me alive; I wanted to know what he saw behind the curtain.”

The boy leaned forward, listening.



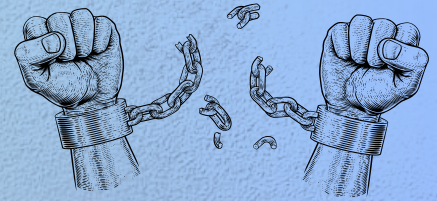
“He said, ‘*Edmund. When you look at me, what do you see?*’ I told him I saw a man I admired. ‘*Why do you admire me?*’ he asked. I told him, because he is never satisfied, his mind is always hungry. ‘*But if you are always hungry, you will never be content,*’ he replied. ‘*No seeker of knowledge can be perfectly unperturbed.*’ I just laughed, *Isn’t that the beauty of it? Academia?* His answer was in the negative: ‘*The more you know, the less you can return to wonder. Catharsis lies in chaos, and awe lies in ignorance.*’” Edmund quoted these last two sentences slowly, articulating each syllable. “All Phinnaeus wanted to do was unlearn, and the prospect in itself was so new to me that it sent me reeling. What is it to simply—*release*? How might it feel to pop the cork to all the pent-up madness and frustration and fear caused by knowledge? Would it hurt people, I began to wonder? As an agent of chaos, would I, too, end up in a prison like my professor?”

The boy seemed to get nervous, strangely, as if he were looking in on his life from the third-person. “Edmund,” Hubert began. He didn’t know what made him ask it, but: “When you first saw Phinnaeus board the ship with the black sails... what was he doing in the ocean?”

For the first time in a while, Edmund let out a long breath and leaned backward so he was half-recumbent against the mound of hay behind him. “You wanted this story because of the Kraken, didn’t you? You want to know about the monster that killed the entire crew.”

Hubert’s eyes dawned with horror. “You mean to say... Was Phinnaeus in the water with the beast? Had he somehow

survived a Kraken’s attack prior to his imprisonment?”



Edmund wiped his nose, made a relaxed gesture towards the reporter. “Would you like me to tell you something, boy? I ask you as a courtesy, because I know you have a gentle soul.”

“What are you talking about?”

The corners of Edmund’s mouth pulled into a strange smile that was thinner than all the others. “It had nearly been a month since I met Phinnaeus. Although the captain had started to grow suspicious, no one on the crew knew about our conversations or my friendship with the professor. In hopes that we would leave the ship together and continue our discussions, I finally gave him what he’d been asking for from the beginning. I unlocked his cage.”

Somehow, the air in the room seemed thinner. Hubert was shaking his head, imperceptibly, his thoughts consumed by one repeating word: *No... No... No...*

“As we were nearing our destination, my professor thanked me from the heart. Strangely, he seemed in pain, and when I asked if there was anything I could retrieve to aid him, he merely requested that I take him upstairs where he could have access to proper food from the pantries. I acquiesced. In the nighttime, I weaved him through hidden corners and avoided all the boards that creaked. I’d memorized the ship by now. Together, we reached the pantry, and—foolishly

assuming that no one was inside—I let him enter as I stood watch just beyond the door. I shut it silently, looked around at the wide sleepy deck, and sighed, resting my back to the closed wood and gazing into the full moon.



“I was too busy listening to the waves, the huff of the sails, the groans of the mast. I didn’t register at all the sounds of violence behind the closed door at my back. When I saw the dock approaching and turned around to enter the pantry, I was interrupted by an alarming odor. All was murky dimness in the sickly moonlight. Something was pooling on the floor—spilt rum, I thought, but no. The stink was like wet soil and humid iron, it was *blood*. When I spotted the crooked body of the late-snacking crewman on the floor, I simply stared, utterly still, not a single thing changing in my body. It was like I hadn’t yet processed it. Like I was a toddler who’d stumbled onto the middle of a road, suddenly so enthralled by the snorting puff and clop of a horse-drawn wagon barreling towards me that I was immobilized.

“And there, barely standing with a shoulder to the wall, was Phinnaeus, limbs cracked this way and that, joints split open with the tips of black tentacles spilling out. They licked and thrashed at the air, retreating slowly into his skin as his bones straightened themselves and he limped back into stability.”

Hubert’s eyes were wide enough to swallow the entire room. Shivering violently, he

scrambled to gather all his parchments, stuffed his quill into his bag, and seized the candle.

“Boy,” Edmund stated. “*Boy!*”

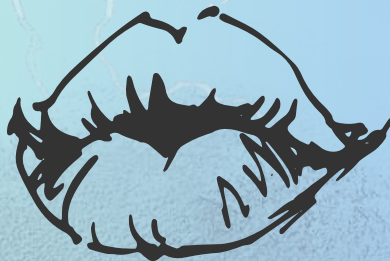
“You’re not telling the truth,” Hubert quavered. He folded his bag closed, nearly made it to the door.

“*Hubert!*” roared the prisoner. He was clasp the iron bars so furiously, they might as well have bent.

The boy looked over his shoulder.

“Let me finish,” Edmund enunciated. “*Please.*”

Without sitting down, Hubert turned back to face him, his mouth still clamped shut.



“My reaction was the same as yours. Phinnaeus, he came towards me and took both sides of my head in his bloody hands. He bore his eyes deeply into mine—each as dark and torrential as the rain. ‘*Monsters,*’ he wavered, ‘*are made.*’ He wouldn’t let go of me. Not even as I wanted to scream but couldn’t make a single noise. You see, Hubert, he was the Kraken. Every new moon, he can transform at will. Finally, *mercifully*, he can rage.”

“It’s not a mercy.”

“What?”

“Rage.”

Edmund breathed a laugh. “To us, it was.”

“Us?”

“It took time, but I soon came to realize that this was what I’d been searching for my entire adult life. It was freedom. Eruption. When you’re in the form of a Kraken, Hubert, your soul is pulled into the baser, most innate natures of your being. You—beautifully—lose sense of time itself. It doesn’t exist anymore. You’re a being of the present who is unshackled by knowledge and wisdom.”

“Phinnaeus is still a murderer.”

“Entropy nullifies both bad and good.”

The boy scoffed. “You see Krakens as an entropic force?”

“I see them as primordial, yes.”

“You use that word a lot.”

Edmund spread his hands out wide. And then—just then—Hubert noticed something rather odd glinting in the corners of his cell, buried under hay or dirt. They were glints. Metallic glints.

Shackles, muzzles, chains.

“Chaos is a basic force of the cosmos. It’s timeless. Indifferent to human notions of good and evil.”

“No,” was all Hubert could manage. It was weak, his body going weaker. His head felt light, and he clutched the wall behind him for support.

“I became a Kraken by choice, boy. And Hubert... I have never been more complete.”

Staff

CO-EDITORS-IN-CHIEF

Elle Caldon
Megan Watson

COPY EDITORS

Logan Arebalo
Addie Loftis
Jodi Martinez
Alejandra Torres

FACULTY ADVISORY

Dr. Joan Arbery
Dr. David Doyle
Professor Chessher

WEB MAINTENANCE

Dasani Figueroa

LAYOUT EDITORS

Jodi Martinez
Anastasiya Shyvilka

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

Arwaa Ahmed	Tessa Peterson
Logan Arebalo	Ashley Pitts
Jackson Beck	Ani Rangel
Brooke Bjerke	Max Roberts
Alexandra Lahiri	Alejandra Torres
Asiya Mohammed	Anastasiya Shyvilka
Lauren Oliver	Cameryn Smith
	Andrea Yang

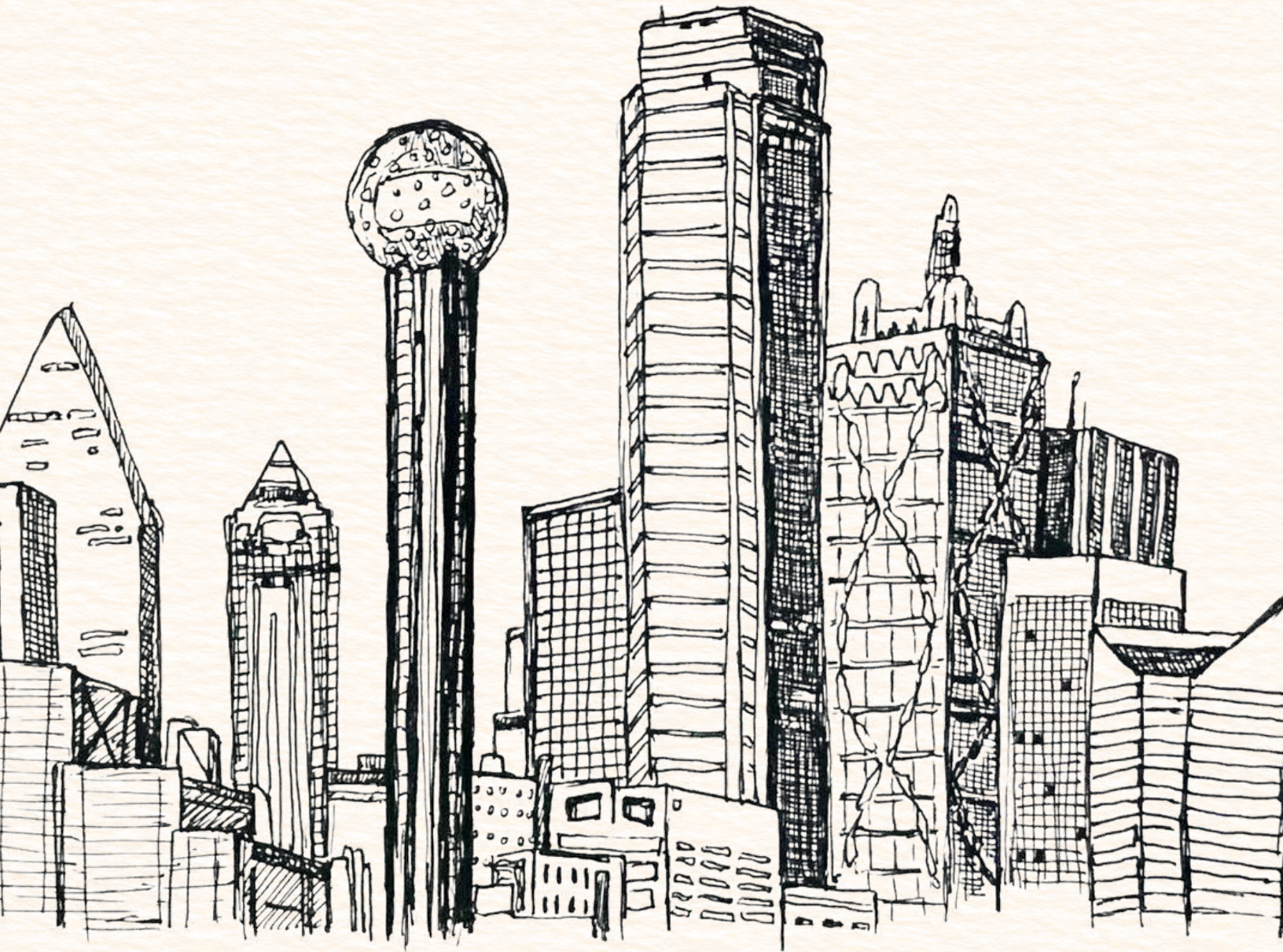


Photo Credit: Southern Methodist University

@SMUHilltopics

HilltopicsSMU.WordPress.Com

