



**“I’m more interested in the relationship between the mind and popular culture. And that relationship has to do with innocence, some kind of acceptance—when you accept something and when you don’t. I think that is particularly potent when it’s through the lens of a child. A child is just given this media and they’re forced to deal with it...**

**When you’re a child you kind of accept things for exactly how they are. You don’t necessarily judge them yet...you don’t have a lot of doubt. So, that is simultaneously very powerful and very un-powerful—you’re just basically told what to do and what to believe. At the same time, you’re very confident and you create magic out of those beliefs. You remember as a kid developing your own Pokemon stories or whatever. To me, that is the ultimate transcendence because you’re taking this thing you were given and totally remixing them in a very powerful way...**

**I think ultimately though that the child is a metaphor for something we all do, how we try and deal with the cultural world around us. What we allow into our mind space and what we don’t and reject...**

**Katie Perry getting slimed...That is the best picture ever. It’s just perfect for me.”**

**-JACOB**

Zeke Eagan  
Media Mavericks, Spring 2010  
Lynne Sachs

<sup>1</sup> Kate Perry getting slimed at the 2010 Kid’s Choice Awards, Courtesy of Nickelodeon.

## Interview With The Jacob Ciocci: Bit Slapped

When I was still a student at Oberlin, my friends told me to see a cinema studies lecture featuring Jacob Ciocci. Gut-bumping and relentless, the sinisterly ebullient stroboscopic mash-ups struck at memories I'd accumulated as a kid in front of the TV, or during high school watching Youtube.

I went to my room and sat on my computer. I watched his videos, the videos he did with Paper Rad and many others, recordings of live performance pieces, music videos, images of his work, and so on, clicking through whatever I could find in his prolific, radiant, internet-based canon. It's a kind of consumptive.

I had the chance to meet Jacob in the midst of his moving to New York City for a fellowship with the Eyebeam Foundation from his adjunct professorship at Carnegie Mellon University.

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ZEKE: You sent me a secret link to your Eyebeam application. I saw the second webpage you made for your Eyebeam Fellowship application. You guys put up a green screen at a school, or, er...?

JACOB: Oh yeah, Pitt... We [Paper Rad and Cory Arcangel] set up a booth in the middle of this dorm-giant dorm in downtown Oakland, which is neighborhood in Pittsburgh where the school is. The booth just had a sign saying "free music videos"... So we would make a tape of [the students] dancing and singing to one of the songs that they could choose from. Then the green screen was video we had created, but they got to pick what they would be dancing in front of, which were different things. You could choose from Bart Simpson, black Bart, Trolls... you know, all these things that we picked, then they picked the songs and the characters they would dance with, and we would remix the song live. So again, there's this thing of translating these songs into a midi format and then playing it through my 30 or 40 dollar keyboard and remixing it live, it's all familiar but it's completely different.

Z: Yeah.

Z: Right.

J: And then it became, 'Well how much can you get away with? How different can something be and still work and be familiar?' The media was very low-fi, noisy and different than the originals, but it was successful in that people had a great time. People danced and got to take the tape home.

J: In that sense, I would call it contemporary surrealism or something because you're creating this universe of symbolism that is familiar on one hand, but fucked up and really bizarre on the other. People were just engaging... And it wasn't like we were forcing them to. There was a really long line of people that were psyched! I remember the best quote was after this group did it they took their tape and were like, "Yes! This is what college is all about...", and they walked away.



"Free Music Videos" Pitt University, 2003

Collaboration with Paper Rad and Cory Arcangel

Z: (laughing) The description for a recent compilation of yours, *2 Blessed 2 Be Stressed*, says that it “deals with the relationship between appropriation and notions of transcendence in contemporary culture.” What’s does that...um?

J: Yeah... "transcendence" is about losing yourself, or redefining yourself. I could argue that southern vogue dancers freaking out throwing their hair around at the drag ball are both transgressive and transcending at the same time, but I am not a drag queen so this would be an imposition. My life, my music, my art, my politics and my spirituality are all wrapped into 1 thing--one component cannot be separated from the others. I think the key for me is that words like transgressive or subversive are related to words like transcendent or "mind-expanding"...

And that’s the whole culture that I’m trying to get at—how transcendence on one hand can be really meaningful and how on the other hand incredibly banal—insane and hilarious—I don’t want to judge someone’s vision of transcendence or what it is that is powerful or important to them, but I do want to open it up a little bit...

The other option is to say, "I am right and you are wrong", which, to me, leads to war, murder, et cetera. In my work, I choose to not deal with the most obvious or charged or over-dramatic symptoms of this in the same way that South Park does...

Instead, I tend to look at more subtle versions of related issues, maybe almost where these tensions become so banal they barely exist-- booty dancing videos on Youtube, "awareness bracelets"--or more generally just how people's beliefs filter into popular culture, what happens when people's beliefs are watered down and re-packaged in a very diluted, almost invisible way--new age, hybrid religion, et cetera.

Z: Mhmmm... You have some reappearing imagery in your work, mostly your own flash animation. Is there any “significance” to these images? Or, not “significance”, but you know—the biting vampires, the green-handed witches with painted red nails?

J: Symbols develop slowly for me. I've been working with this character named "little dude" for a long time--he is a child or ‘tween<sup>2</sup> trying to figure the world out, but he is also a vampire...A vampire is someone cursed to live forever that must feed off of others

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<sup>2</sup> Noun- A young human being that is not yet technically a teenager (being less than thirteen years old), but starting to act like one—generally eight to twelve years old.

to maintain his power--so that is an interesting metaphor for a culture obsessed with youth and power.



Another thing about the vampire teeth is when I started seeing rapper guys wearing gold and diamond grills with vampire tips---again the mixture of money, power, success and some kind of dark force, something scary and vicious, selfish and murderous. And now there is Twilight and Trueblood--maybe I'm interested in beliefs that seem good at reinventing themselves to stay relevant—vampires, Jesus, money.

And then there's the green hand. This hand is supposed to be good but has a forceful or at least sinister tinge. Like, perhaps GOD is not always nice, and perhaps change always comes with pain--transformation is about dealing with suffering in a productive way. So the hand is sort of a symbol for that--but all of these symbols should be taken with a grain of salt. I am not trying to create a new mythology that is complete and useful as a model for spiritual or social transformation. That would be counter to my understanding of this relativist world we live in.

**ZEKE:** When you lectured at Oberlin, you mentioned you have a “hyper-relativist” perspective. My mom just got new HD flat screen and threw out our old TV. So I had to get used to new TV in the house where I grew up. I say this because the last TV, to me, wasn't junk, it hadn't “expired” in my opinion. Now we have this new TV, not to say it is bad, I'm just getting used to it.

**JACOB:** Yeah. Right now I am trying to develop another idea, which has to do with engaging with a group of people I don't know. I got this residency at Eyebeam, my fellowship, and I want to make a new film. The idea is Silver Surfers, which would be a sci-fi movie made with the elderly. Again, the idea is not to teach the elderly how to use computers, or some sort of political activism with social change through it. It's more to hopefully have a mutual conversation about technology in the sense that I would let it unfold in the same way I make most of my pieces—by letting things pile up on my desktop. I would gather footage and not go into it with any pre-planned narrative or plot. So the first step is, I'm going to work with people and interview them with a green screen and see what people, er, see what I can get out of that conversation, and if someone is particularly keen on collaborating more—I can't pay anyone—but I could offer them possibly an enjoyable acting experience or something then we can work together and just develop footage. And then develop loose, loose ideas based on science fiction and technology. And the idea stems from this thought that I had one day, which was that—

I'm into technological obsolescence; this idea of technology becoming outdated and what that does to you psychologically. Like, I have this cell phone here that on one hand still functions but I know it's slightly outmoded and it's not the coolest, newest one, but it still does what it does, but on the other hand I'm kind of intimidated by the iPad or something because I don't have one and it's totally...these aren't even good examples, let me start over. A good example would be a technology that loses its first meaning and then is reborn or something. So, just before records became obsolete, a new USE FOR THE TURNTABLE (scratching/hip-hop dj'ing) was invented or something. You know what I'm saying?

ZEKE: Mhmm.

JACOB: So, I was thinking about that and I was also thinking about the fact that the elderly have experienced the most amount of technology-different technologies in their life. Way more than—well, I have more access to histories and evolutions of technologies than they do because of the internet, I mean I can research. But they actually knew and used all of these technologies. I'm interested in what that means psychologically for a person to grow up with radio and then transition to TV and then transition to VCRs then DVDs you know?

So, "relativist", as in, what is good for one person is bad for someone else? What is one person's reality is another person's joke? Or impossibility.

If reality is not objective, if experience is subjective and based on our beliefs, the environment we grew up in, then we make our own truth. So, since everything is subjective, what one person thinks is "cheesy" is another person's most precious moment. What one person thinks is God is someone else's devil, et cetera...

In a way, this is my way of living in a world where I am forced to deal with "multi-cultural-ism" or opposing worldviews. I would rather believe everyone is right than to say that one person is more right than another person. This is different than "multi-cultural-ism" as it was taught to me at hippy school: I'm not talking about respecting everybody's beliefs as equal but sticking to your beliefs just not offending anybody. That doesn't really work all the time. I'm more talking about the idea that everything is true...

ZEKE: So are we inputs or outputs?

JACOB: Well, humans are the perfect combination of inputs and outputs. Even the most un-creative members of society secretly takes what is given to them by society and re-interprets it, making it their own and sharing it with the world. They take the input of the world, interpret it in a way that hopefully gives them agency or a power to act with authority, and in the process create a new culturally useful output, which then becomes input for someone or something else.

That is human nature--similar to a cave man finding a clever way to escape from a bear-out-smarting our surroundings--we find ways of escaping stressful input in the most creative ways we can.

Graffiti is a good example I think--if you live in a space that feels meaningless or oppressive you make it meaningful or try to break free in some way, even if that means vandalizing your space in an aggressive way-- coming to terms with reality. Drastic situations call for drastic actions. I like that Philip K. Dick quote: "Reality is that which when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away."

Everything else is malleable, changeable, inside our heads.

But all of us always have something that is currently our stumbling block, the thing we can't escape from, no matter how many times we try and convince ourselves it is not real, and that is our "reality".

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Looking at pop art from previous generations is a bit outdated for me. It's hard for me to relate to the true meaning of an image from the 50's, 60's, 70's, and most of the 80's. It's not what I know, images from before my day are only recontextualizations. Only *my* culture has context to me. The culture Jacob illustrates is the nail biting culture I know, and it has its effects on me—either positive or negative or all the above.



Jacob Ciocci