

Stanford University
Three Books 2012: Guide for Resident Fellows
Mark Applebaum

Forward.

Hi, I'm Mark Applebaum. I compose music that sounds like this:

I'm also a professor of music at Stanford University. (Clearly mistakes were made because I have tenure. This may disturb you; and it may not be too late for you to go to one of those schools on the East Coast. If you're freaked out by this I'll pause for a moment to let those of you who are not cool with this to leave the room.)

Okay...still here? In that case I'm delighted to say hello to the Stanford Class of 2016. I've been invited to select this year's common readings—our *Three Books* program. Now that you've wrestled with them for the first part of the summer (presuming you didn't spend these past weeks in a drunken stupor...or practicing to take the SAT again for no sensible reason...) Sorry, I digress. I assume that you already checked out the stuff that we sent you in June; that you have some preliminary opinions and questions about them; and you are eager to discuss them with your colleagues when you get to campus in September.

In anticipation of that conversation I wanted to share with a kind of verbal study guide, one that might focus your thoughts. These are my ideas; they may not be better or more relevant than yours. Rhetorical flourishes and “straw man” questions abound in an effort to aggravate: nothing in what follows is immune from debate or critique.

In short, this guide is merely a starting point, a companion that aspires to provoke new directions, to point out a few trailheads that you might follow on your own.

II. *What Art Matters?*

For the first time, Stanford's *Three Books* includes forms beyond the book: a **documentary film** presented on DVD with attention to a “special features” epilogue; a suite of **smartphone applications**, described on a website—with links to articles and youtube videos—and delivered on iPhones as usable tools; as well as a **book**. It is hoped that the diversity of format encourages students to think about how ideas are expressed differently by the written word, in filmic presentation, through music, or using contemporary social media.

The 2012-2013 year at Stanford highlights the arts. It marks the opening of the \$112 million Bing Concert Hall, an occasion that prompts us not to complacently celebrate the arts on campus as we know them, but to ask broader questions about where art is made, what art is important, and who should decide.

The three books—or rather, **texts**—were selected because they serve as an undercurrent to a larger, enduring question that must be taken up by every responsible college student: Why does a liberal education's components—its disciplines, subjects, topics, curricula...its assignments, projects, course formats...its assumptions, questions, goals, and values—why are these things organized the way that they are? Why are things included or excluded? And how can the student meaningfully engage in the discourse and its evolution?

III. *No One Gets a Good Education, but Some Will Take One: A Brief Editorial Interlude*

A successful student is one who takes ownership of his or her education. This student understands that any curricular infrastructure is a mere starting point (and, considered from one perspective, an arbitrary one) from which a lifetime of learning, exploration, experimentation, investigation, useful failure, and creative thought are undertaken, and from which curiosity, imagination, obsession, and ample but harmonized self-confidence and self-criticism are engendered—all in service of increasing one's own intellectual and creative agency, that of one's fellow colleagues, and that of those who enjoy less privilege. This cannot be done unless the student thinks about the university's form and assumptions and, rather than swallowing them whole, charts a personally engaged path through them. We hope for a class of open-minded, joyful skeptics, not sleepwalking academic sycophants.

IV. *Chuck Klosterman: Fargo Rock City: A Heavy Metal Odyssey in Rural North Dakota*

Does heavy metal belong in the curriculum of our august educational institution? If so, does it deserve a place in our dignified new concert hall? Chuck Klosterman's book *Fargo Rock City: A Heavy Metal Odyssey in Rural North Dakota* is a loving tribute to a genre whose traditional setting is less prestigious: the garage or the dive bar. Furthermore, instead of examining the founding generation of metal such as Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple, and Black Sabbath—bands whose historical cachet are enshrined—Klosterman looks at glam metal bands of the 1980s, a subgenre considered inconsequential and disposable by many critics and even fans of metal. But 1980s heavy metal was hardly marginal: in 1989, for example, 40% of *all* sound recordings sold in the United States were heavy metal. Does its mass consumption by the public automatically make it worthy of our consideration in the academy? Or is its very popularity the thing that obviates it from study—that is, it is too self-evident to be taught? What qualities must art possess to demand our attention? Must the art be good? Oh yeah: *whose* idea of good?

Klosterman's treatment is both anthropological and personal, a social autobiography that tells us a great deal about adolescence and life in rural America. But is his small town North Dakota perspective too marginal to warrant our attention at Stanford? Should we prioritize Californian culture instead? After all, California is the most populated state; and, being local, it represents Stanford's native (i.e., non-foreign) culture. Or we could prioritize the culture of New York City; after all New York has the world's greatest everything so it must hold the most authoritative point of view? Or maybe a European perspective would be best since all of our ideas—and even our people—come from Europe, right? Those British people have such smart sounding accents—they must be right about serious things like *culture*.

My sarcastic questions are conversation prompts (pokes or jabs really) that aspire to get students to uncover their values and prejudices, to appreciate the gap between their experiences and those of others. They also aim to floodlight our ignorance and blind spots, much in the sense of the adage “You don't know what you like...you like what you know.”

Our new concert hall is the product of the finest architects and world-class acousticians. It will be an elite edifice. Is it only for elite, experienced, and highly prestigious musicians? If that is the case, and presuming that seniors have more experience, then maybe freshmen should be barred from performing there. Or perhaps students shouldn't perform there at all because professionals are better. And since being professional implies earning money, then maybe we should only allow

the most expensive concerts. A sign of our success will be the elimination of free concerts or student priced tickets. Our goal will be to produce a full house of only wealthy patrons.

But what about Metallica? They are a professional ensemble, draw large audiences, and command hefty ticket prices. Or is the entire heavy metal genre prohibited from our highbrow hall? Do we object to the genre's decibels (which, by the way, are equaled in moments of symphonic music), or is it the hair?

Or is the point of barring heavy metal to protect it, not us? That is, are we worried that we will emasculate heavy metal's countercultural meaning by bestowing academic institutional acceptance upon it?

Let us remember the joke made by university administrators and teachers: *If only we could get rid of the students, this place would run much more smoothly.* The witticism reminds us that the point of the educational enterprise is the students. So our infrastructure—whether programmatic or of the bricks and mortar kind—must serve our students first and foremost. Our shiny new concert hall derives its meaning and authority from its service to the educational mission.

That mission might favor orchestras who play the music of dead white European males...or not. So how do you think our concert hall should be used, and how do you think our curriculum should be designed? Is it even up to you to decide?

Perhaps we should cultivate and explore different ways of assessing value. Klosterman presents some unique ways of determining musical value. For example, The Charlie Daniels Band's song *The Devil Went Down to Georgia* was admired because "the guys who bought us beer loved it"; and Klosterman reckons that someone would have to pay him \$98 in order to never listen again to AC/DC's *Back In Black*. Are these useful ways of determining value, however unorthodox?

Klosterman's rhetorical style itself is unorthodox and, since he's not an academic, we might hastily dismiss him. Instead he represents a different kind of critical thinker, that of the public intellectual. Are we too closed-minded and pusillanimous to acknowledge the possible utility of his work, however it may differ from conventional academic scholarship? What in fact are the most valuable insights in Klosterman's ebullient book?

V. The Story of Marla Olmstead: *My Kid Could Paint That*, a documentary film by Amir Bar-Lev, and Michael Kimmelman on *Art* special feature

Heavy metal is a marginal part of the university curriculum. Also underrepresented on campus is a demographic group: kids. The college atmosphere is optimized for the emergence of adulthood, a place for serious things, for performance, not play. So children are not invited to the university. Since the industrial revolution we protect childhood as a special state, one without the expectation of greatness—or even of achievement—and certainly detached from labor. But is it inconceivable that children might contribute something good—or even superior—to the university, something that we might value highly? Conversely, can children teach adults something about the value of childhood creativity? Might the rehabilitation of "play" be a state to which we ought to return?

Marla Olmstead's story exposes a tangle of problems. As Mia Fineman asks, "If a child can make great abstract paintings, does this mean that modern art is itself a hoax, a high-culture con game?" How do you defend abstract art? If someone likes it, is it art? And can it be art if you don't like it?

Other questions abound. To what extent should we value novelty in art? Is it okay if the novelty is in the artist's biography, not in the work itself? Michael Kimmelman, in his deft "special features" comments on art, points out that the exchange value of an artwork may be exterior to its physical medium. The consumer experiences the *story* behind the making of the art as more significant than the art *object* itself. Does that strike you as problematic? Is the phrase "the work of art" a noun (like an *artifact*) or a verb (as in *the work of making art*)?

These are vexing problems for artists, art critics, art historians, and art investors. But the problems extend more generally to adults. What does it mean when a child's work is valued more than an adult's? Can anyone be an artist, or do you need special training? Can you accomplish your professional goals without a Stanford pedigree?

Marla also highlights a dilemma for Stanford students who are known for their promise and ambition. Were you a wunderkind whose childhood was distinguished by a special skill or aptitude? Do you expect to continue to be a wunderkind? Do others expect that of you?

Does the idea of the gifted individual or child prodigy (whose talent represents a chance trait or "unearned" genetic inheritance) undermine the idea of hard work, discipline, striving, and refining? According to legend, Robert Johnson's extraordinary prowess as a blues guitarist was the result of making a deal with the devil: in exchange for his eternal soul, the devil made him the greatest blues guitarist. But such stories, while entertaining, have a problematic subtext: that we—who would never associate with evil—are excused from trying through conventional means (like arduous practice) to become excellent. Similarly, if you are not a gifted child prodigy in a particular enterprise, should you give up on pursuing excellence as an adult?

If not through communion with the devil, perhaps you got into Stanford by virtue of some other kind of help along the way. Did you have stage parents? To what extent can you attribute your childhood achievements to adult collaborators, whether parents, teachers, or mentors? That is, are all of your accomplishments *all* your own?

VI. Smule: Ge Wang's iPhone Applications

The question we have been asking is "Who gets to determine the value of something?" We question the relevance of talking about popular music in an academic setting, or the value of an abstract painting. We might also wonder about the artistic merit of a new technology.

The iPhone is not a traditional musical instrument. It is not prestigious. It is not formal. Unlike the most sought-after instruments—say, a \$15.9 million Stradivarius violin—a great functioning mobile phone is neither expensive nor rare. iPhone applications cost next to nothing, and they are easy to get. Most important, they are not difficult to use. So everyone can become a musician instantly. Right? (Or is the iPhone actually a pricey status symbol that not everyone can own, not entirely unlike a fine violin?)

On the one hand, easy access is not what our music conservatories want (they *conserve* a tradition as well as the corresponding hierarchy of specialists possessing esoteric skill sets); on the other hand, widespread access to these mobile phone applications means that the modes of production have been granted to the masses, that everyone can compose and play music.

Is this a good thing? To what extent is elitism in art worth preserving? Is participation most important? What historical events can you think of in which simple or common tools were used to

create something sophisticated, refined, or useful? What about the reverse: what great artworks required extraordinary and precious resources (time, money, labor, or tools) to create?

Ge Wang's iPhone applications are *exoteric*: they have been used by millions. But are they musical instruments? If so, are they good musical instruments? And has your opinion of them changed between your first summer encounter with their introductory website documentation and your more recent experience actually making music with them?

Wang's applications allow users to hear one another's work instantly and globally. Is social networking the best way to share musical expressions today? Or is it time to present these mobile phone instruments on the exalted stage of the new Stanford concert hall? Given the limited number of free hours in the hall is it okay if MoPhO (the Stanford Mobile Phone Orchestra) displaces the Stanford Symphony Orchestra? Is the reverse okay? Is the violin mightier—or more important—than the mobile phone? Is the violin mightier than the electric guitar? Is the professional violinist mightier than the child prodigy? Who gets to decide?

Wang's company, Smule, is a Silicon Valley enterprise. It was co-founded by Wang's graduate student, Jeff Smith. Like Google, Smule can be traced back to Stanford's intellectual environment and the entrepreneurial creativity of its students and faculty. You are not just any student: you are a Stanford student. Do Stanford accomplishments like Smule and Google encourage you to strive for success? Does having impressive Stanford role models give you a sense of entitlement to success or an expectation of success? Conversely, there are many alumni—stories not so often told—who accomplished mediocrity, anonymity, and obscurity. Even if you were happy, would these be acceptable outcomes of your Stanford education?

VII. 3 Books: A Welcome and a Challenge

What is the takeaway from studying heavy metal through the eyes of a public intellectual; from Marla Olmstead's story; or from Smule's explosive popularity? Is it about the adaptability of our curriculum to a progressive culture; the humility to seriously consider a child's artistic expression; and a revolution in technological utility? Or is it about the "dumbing down" of culture as mass consumption erodes genuine quality?

These three texts invite you to inaugurate your Stanford education by considering the themes that emerge from them. In particular, you are urged to consider how society defines success, and how this definition in turn exerts pressure on your own definition of success.

An artwork made by a kid, a popular song—even if maligned by highbrow critics, or an auto-tune tool that fixes your vocal intonation may be worthy of your attention as a student at an elite educational institution. Or they may be barbarians at the gate. Ultimately, for any of us willing to participate in the debate, it is up to us to decide.