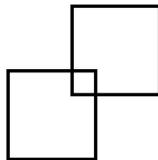


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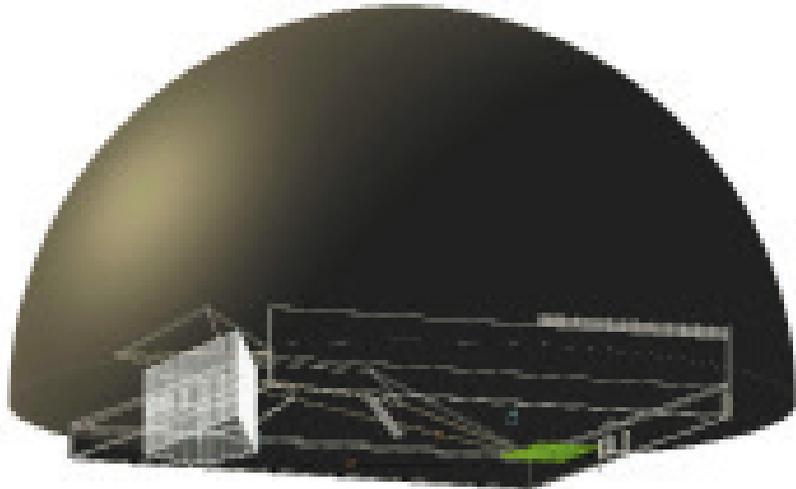




IN BETWEEN: Jaden and Willow Smith and the Dissolution of Taste Cultures

by Joe Bucciero

“4 My 1,” the lead single off of Jaden Smith’s recent *This Is My Album*, is littered with Drake-isms. Over a vaguely cloudy, percussive beat, Smith splits time between crooning and rapping, his flow switching from quick, clipped blurts to a version of Drake’s signature melodic drawl. Smith’s music is undeniably mainstream, but retains a hint of weirdness, addressing a variety of themes both common and uncommon to pop and hip-hop. “I can’t feel you through them tight clothes,” he says, “but I can feel your love, it might grow.” Like Drake, Smith often expresses his ambivalence about sex and fame (both were child stars) with a mixture of lasciviousness and sensitivity. Unlike Drake, however, Smith also says some stuff about hieroglyphs and Osiris, the Egyptian god of the afterlife.

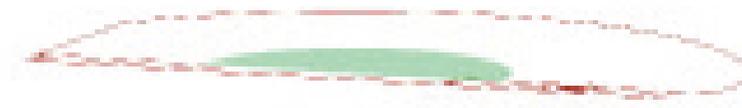


“4 My 1” isn’t the first instance of Smith addressing esoteric subject matter in his music; he frequently balances more predictable topics with ones found in the music of weirdo ‘90s alt-rap icons like Del Tha Funkee Homosapien or Kool Keith. In the coda of “Passionate V3,” another of Smith’s singles released in 2015, for instance, a pitched-down voice mentions an “interdimensional tesseract.” Earlier in that song, Smith addresses the dichotomous nature of his lyrical content: “I’m just trying to spit some lyrics that are more insightful,” he raps, “but you just call me bipo—yeah, that stands for bipolar.”

Judging by the reaction to the interview that he and his younger sister Willow did with *T Magazine* in November 2014, it’s easy enough to imagine someone calling Jaden “bipolar.” A

Gawker headline read, “Every Single Thing About This Jaden and Willow Smith Interview is Nuts.” Throughout the interview, Jaden and Willow play off one another, answering questions about how they view the world and how those views manifest themselves in the Smiths’ often overlapping bodies of work. When asked what they’d been reading, Willow answers abstrusely, “Quantum physics. Osho.” Jaden follows with “‘The Ancient Secret of the Flower of Life’ and ancient texts; things that can’t be pre-dated.” Later, they wax philosophic about the theoretical physicists living inside of us, the flexibility of time, holographic realities, baby’s soft spots, and how Willow’s been writing her own novels.

Coming from a fourteen- and a sixteen-year-old, sure, these are unusual things to be talking about. Are Jaden



and Willow really “nuts,” though? Why were people so quick to use that descriptor? *BuzzFeed* published a listicle called “The 18 Most WTF Jaden and Willow Smith Moments Of 2014,” wherein the author points out some of the siblings’ unconventional behavior (making crystals, shirtless photos, cryptic Tweets, etc.). There’s a palpable air of condescension when the BuzzFeed author addresses the *T Magazine* interview, pulling some of the Smiths’ quotes and asking us if we remember “When the siblings hit us with a slew of insane existential thoughts in their interview with *T Magazine*”, “Which included their two-cents on cognition of time...and, like, babies...And arguably nonsense.”

The sentiment displayed there wasn’t unique. In another recap titled “Say What? The Arcane Wisdom of Jaden and Willow Smith,” *The Guardian* called the interview “a journey though [sic] a dazzling palace of utter nonsense.” Some were more amused than dismissive—and some defended the Smiths, with variations of “they’re just kids,” or “they’re actually saying cool stuff.” *Ms. Magazine*’s Hope Wabuke wrote that the Smiths sounded “incredibly smart,” praising their creativity, desire to learn, and interest in social change. But the general media response tended towards the “WTF,” followed by a “these kids are nuts and/or idiots.” *BuzzFeed*, *Gawker*, and *The Guardian*—not to mention *VICE* and countless others—published such reactions, demonstrating the power of cultural consensus in the ostensibly anything-goes, democratized world of internet publishing.

What if Jaden and Willow Smith aren’t crazy, despite what most popular culture websites are saying? Might the siblings, budding pop stars and Hollywood actors (themselves the product of an entertainment dynasty), have subverted their given roles and decentered the cultural equilibrium? American popular media often seeks to classify mainstream culture, reducing their portrayals of celebrities to headlines and listicle captions. Perhaps that’s why the Smiths upset these outlets’ sensibilities—the Smiths evade description, while they prefer that artists—and, perhaps, people in general—stay within prescribed cultural boundaries.

Since the emergence of popular culture in the first half of the twentieth-century, people have written about the schism between popular and high culture. Is popular culture dangerous? Democratizing? “Avant-garde and kitsch should be separate,” says Clement Greenberg in the 1930s. “No, they shouldn’t,” says Susan Sontag in the ‘60s.¹ And so on and so forth.

In his 1974 study *Popular Culture and High Culture*, longtime Columbia University professor Herbert J. Gans tackles the issue from a sociological perspective. Gans states that high culture often sees popular culture as a threat: high culture’s proponents fear that popular culture will appropriate high culture, or that high culture will be forced to appropriate popular culture. Either way, the fear is the degradation of high culture.

Gans then defines what he calls “taste cultures” and “taste publics.” The former is described by groups of people with similar values and “aesthetic standards”; the latter, by groups that make “similar choices for similar reasons.” People of different taste cultures and publics receive art and popular culture differently: “The visual order of a de Kooning painting is interpreted as disorder by lower taste cultures,” explains Gans, “and the visual order of calendar art is not considered art by high culture.”²

In short, Jaden and Willow Smith—coming from Hollywood and making pop and hip-hop music infused with esoteric concepts—frustrate traditional

formulations of culture. “Vibrations,” from Willow’s 2015 EP *Interdimensional Tesseract* (a concept clearly of interest to both siblings), doesn’t work as a pop song, if only because it’s too short (ninety seconds) and lacks the requisite hooks and pop song structure. Its New Age-leaning lyrics that focus on the titular subject likewise separate the song from most radio pop and R&B music—but its production still situates it in the popular music idiom. It’s neither a de Kooning nor calendar art; instead, subversive yet “pop,” “Vibrations” is a bit of both.

Willow’s hybridization isn’t unprecedented in the popular music landscape—Erykah Badu and Janelle Monae offer similarly high-minded lyrics and non-pop musical forms. But because Willow’s media narrative centers around her being young and the child of celebrities, many are reluctant to recognize her experimentation as maverick, rather than spoiled and weird. In *Popular and High Culture*, Gans notes, “the prime effect of the media is to reinforce already existing behaviors and attitudes, rather than to create new ones.”³ Those who consider the Smiths’ music strange and therefore bad are unlikely to reassess their opinions, seeing Jaden and Willow as the crazy, overindulged children of Will and Jada Pinkett Smith. These people, having read the *Guardian* and *Gawker* article after clicking a baited link on their algorithmically-customized Facebook timelines, use those sites’ opinions to bolster the ones they

already hold. They might then write some comments, like those on the YouTube entry for “4 My 1,”: “I just carn’t [sic] take [Jaden] seriously.” (It should be noted, though, that more and more outlets such as *COMPLEX* and *Vulture* have written positively about Jaden and Willow’s music in the last two months. *Vulture* had previously called the *T Magazine* interview “Zen gibberish.”)

The media’s capacity to reinforce existing opinions has only magnified since Gans’s writing. On the internet, we can read or watch or listen to whatever we want all the time, allowing us to limit our cultural boundaries as it allows us to expand them. While the utopian promise of the internet is to bridge cultural gaps, connecting us to other “taste cultures” and helping us engage with music and art made anytime and anywhere, it also works to reinforce cultural distinctions. Fifteen years ago you might’ve heard a new song on the radio without knowing who made it, giving you an opportunity to receive the song largely unmitigated by its cultural context. On YouTube, each song comes with copious information about the artist, as well as a stream of anonymous opinions from commenters. Nearly everyone watching and commenting, moreover, has chosen to be on that page (or, via suggested links, the page chose you), and comes to it with some sort of preconception. Internet culture consumers flock to their favorite websites to watch pre-judged videos or read predictable things. Jaden and Willow’s unpredictable interview forced us “to create new [behaviors and attitudes]” of cultural reception.

In the *T Magazine* interview, the interviewer asks, “So is the hardest education the unlearning of things?”

WILLOW: Yes, basically, but the crazy thing is it doesn’t have to be like that.

JADEN: Here’s the deal: School is not authentic because it ends. It’s not true, it’s not real. Our learning will never end. The school that we go to every single morning, we will continue to go to.

WILLOW: Forever, ‘til the day that we’re in our bed.

JADEN: Kids who go to normal school are so teen-agery, so angsty.

Here, Jaden and Willow separate themselves from other kids their age. While their distrust of school might be seen as arrogant or irresponsible, it actually situates them in a long line of misunderstood vanguard artists and autodidacts: punks, New Age artists, the beats to an extent. These artists’ combination of pop, esoteric, and renegade thought might one day earn them “high culture” praise, but only if they adapt to “high culture” standards (like, for instance, punk-turned-writer Richard Hell) or get discovered, and perhaps exploited, by “high culture” patrons (like New Age musician Laraaji, who respected musician Brian Eno found playing music in a park).

Like the punks and beats, too, a lot of what Jaden and Willow say in that interview sounds incoherent, like disjointed New Age blather. *VICE* asked an unnamed “philosophy professor” to “explain that Jaden and Willow Smith interview.” The professor, whose job title legitimizes him as a trusted intellectual, gives academic background and terminology to Jaden and Willow’s musings, showing that their ideas nearly all have specific academic precedents. When asked about the Smiths’ so-called “holographic reality,” the professor explains that the “hypothesis is just the Descartes dream scenario in new garb.” Jaden’s conception of time—“time moves for you wherever you are in the universe”—is explained, meanwhile, as a “consequence of relativity theory.”

Jaden and Willow are picking up on pretty heady ideas, even while operating outside the academy—outside high school, for that matter. They “sound like they’re

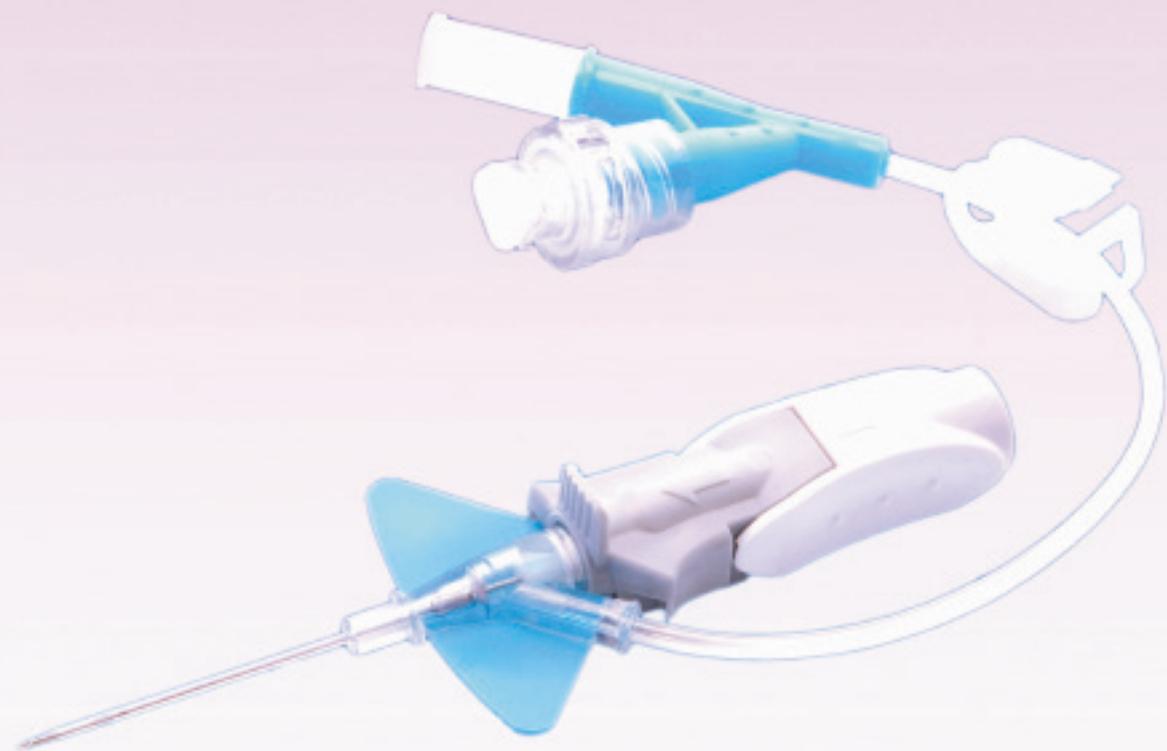
pretty well educated,” the professor concludes, “if a little New Age-y.” The professor’s qualification betrays the high-culture prejudice against high-minded-yet-non-academic New Age culture. Like many followers of New Age philosophies, Jaden and Willow are often unable to articulate their ideas in appropriately academic terms. They don’t speak of the “Descartes dream scenario” but of a “holographic reality,” which is something that sounds “crazy” to people on the internet, and not “high” enough to the academy.

The professor’s general approval of the Smiths’ ideas suggests more than anything that those calling the Smiths “crazy” are doing so not because what the siblings say is gibberish, but because it violates their assumed cultural standing. Although what they say indicates that they’re “pretty well educated,” it’s dismissed because it’s uncharacteristic for a teenager, celebrity or pop musician to say.

In his stories about the Glass family (published in the compilations *Nine Stories*, *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour: An Introduction* and *Franny and Zooey*), J.D. Salinger presents precedents for Jaden and Willow. Their desire for “unlearning” and their dissolution of the boundaries of high and popular culture offer themselves as parallels, as well as their precocity. Like the Glasses, the Smiths were born of two entertainers and, like the Glasses, are entertainers themselves

(the Glasses were on a radio program called “It’s a Wise Child”). Thanks predominantly to the influence of the eldest child Seymour, basically all the Glass children are unbelievably well-read in scores of different areas, notably—like Salinger himself—Eastern and Christian mystic writings. The Glass children also play off each other’s intellect in a way that’s as endearing as it is strange. And, like the Smiths in their *T Magazine* interview, the Glasses aren’t afraid to share their intellectual influences.

“‘Dracula’ now stood next to ‘Elementary Pali,’” writes the narrator and second-oldest Glass child Buddy Glass in Salinger’s *Zooey*, “‘The Boy Allies at the Somme’ stood next to ‘Bolts of Melody,’ ‘The Scarab Murder Case’ and ‘The Idiot’ were together, ‘Nancy Drew and the Hidden Staircase’ lay on top of ‘Fear and Trembling.’”⁴ Knowingly, Buddy juxtaposes the popular, academic, and religious books that sit on the Glass family shelves. The Glass children, it’s assumed, have read both Bram Stoker’s horror classic *Dracula* as well as an introductory guide to learning Pali, the language in which several early Buddhist scriptures are written. The iconoclast Buddy seems proud of this selection of books; they point to the Glasses’ skepticism of the academy (*Nancy Drew* is as valuable as *Fear and Trembling*), as well as their interest in unlearning and detachment. While it’s unusual, of course, for children to read *Elementary Pali*, it’s discomfiting, according to the paradigm Herbert J. Gans lays out, for someone who reads *Elementary Pali* to be equal-



ly interested in *Dracula*. Jaden Smith also reads “ancient texts,” and as a result his musical aesthetic might be thought to not add up. “Ancient texts” and Drake’s *Nothing Was the Same* sit together on Jaden’s shelf, like *Dracula* and *Elementary Pali* do on the Glasses’, crossing the borders of Gans’s separated taste cultures.

The reading public of the 1960s was particularly mistrustful of Salinger’s Seymour. Arguably literature’s most precocious child, Seymour was reading what the Smiths are reading now, and so much more, by the time he was seven years old. In Salinger’s

story “Hapworth 16, 1924,” Buddy introduces a letter that Seymour sent home from camp when he was seven, wherein he asks his parents to send along a variety of books that he and Buddy can read while they rest in their cabin. The list comprises most of the story’s second half, and it’s full of texts—and commentaries thereon—that, yes, no ordinary seven-year-old would ever want or be able to read, from the *Raja-Yoga* to “the complete works, quite in full, of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.”⁵

The Seymour of “Hapworth” is an autodidact. He’s precocious, verbose,

and a little irritating. However, does he merit Michiko Kakutani’s characterization of him in a *New York Times* review of a new edition of the story? Kakutani writes, reasonably though with undue vitriol, that “for a child, Seymour makes requests for reading material that verge on the preposterous.” But this doesn’t make Seymour fascinating in Kakutani’s view, or an interesting case of popular (mainstream childrens’ books) fluidly mixing with high (adult, scholarly books). Rather, “It is something of a shock, then, to meet the Seymour presented in ‘Hapworth’: an obnoxious child given to angry outbursts.” Kakutani concludes that the Glass family is little more than “solipsistic.” In a review following the original publication of “Hapworth” in *The New Yorker*, noted critic Irving Howe takes a similar stance on the Glass family. “Under the infatuated guidance of Salinger,” Howe writes, the Glasses are “largely devoted to exercises in collective narcissism.” As well as the Glasses, Howe dismisses Salinger himself, whose esoteric interests and great popular success bothered “high culture” paragons like Howe.

Later in his review, Howe describes the Glasses in a way many describe the Smiths: they “have learned to talk, not yet to think.” In “Hapworth,” Seymour talks and talks, and he isn’t always coherent. Salinger knows that Seymour is young. The character may have read more than you or I ever will—but he’s nevertheless immature, prone to using “big” words as a crutch, or making naïvely lewd comments about a fellow camper’s mother in an attempt to sound “adult.” He has learned to talk and think, but he’s still finding his voice. The grown Seymour of Salinger’s earlier story “A Perfect Day for Bananafish,” was mysterious but more *complete*—an adult, and as such, didn’t merit derision from critics. The Seymour of “Hapworth” is young—he messes up here and there. Is he “obnoxious,” though? “Solipsistic”?

Like Seymour's in "Hapworth," the Smiths' thoughts and ideas in their *T Magazine* interview aren't totally formed and articulated. In both cases, the young intellectuals lack the necessary qualifications, in the view of their critics, to make their curiosity anything but "crazy" or "narcissistic." The *Gawker* recap prefaces one of the Smiths' quotes with, "Here are Willow and Jaden on babies (which they know nothing about because of how they're babies themselves!)." The writer disallows the Smiths even offering their opinion because their youth precludes the authority necessary to voice it. They lack the degrees, experience, and, perhaps most importantly, vocabularies (Seymour laments, "I am sick to death of the wide gap of embarrassing differences, among other things, between my writing and speaking voices!")⁶ But the "arcane knowledge" of Seymour and the Smiths is exciting precisely because it's not yet written in stone, solidified with age and verified along familiar lines of high and low culture. It's not entirely pop, nor academic, nor New Age.

In his influential 1915 essay "Highbrow and Lowbrow," American critic Van Wyck Brooks outlines various traits of the highbrow and the lowbrow, focusing specifically on the categories' incompatibility in academic settings. Brooks separates, among other things, "academic pedantry and pavement slang," between which "there is no community, no genial middle ground."⁷ Seymour, discussing

ancient literature *and* his friend's mother's bust in "Hapworth," and Jaden, discussing Osiris *and* a girl's tight clothes in "4 My 1," enter Brooks's impenetrable "middle ground." Jaden goes as far as making slang out of clinical vocabulary: "bipo." At the end of his essay, Brooks arrives at his fundamental issue with the distinctions between highbrow and lowbrow. "But where is all that is real, where is personality and all its works, if it is not essentially somewhere, somehow, in some not very vague way, between?" he asks.⁸ Jaden and Willow Smith, and the Seymour of "Hapworth," are in between, in progress.

Even at a time when popular culture—hip-hop in particular—is amenable to more outre characters, the Smiths' brand of weirdness remains almost uniformly incomprehensible. Perhaps this is because the Smiths come from that homogenous mainstream culture, while prominent weirdo rappers like Young Thug, iLoveMakonnen, and Lil B the Based God rose from the underground, where weirdness is valorized. The Smiths' sincere attempt at disrupting mainstream culture's distinctions is therefore uniquely unsettling, especially when taken in concert with their youth. The public that ultimately consumes their content—a public largely interested in the mainstream, its media, and the commentary about it—rejects the Smiths' rejection.

Jaden and Willow Smith aren't "crazy"; they're "in between," as Brooks

indicates. They're opening up avenues by which Jaden wearing two different sneakers at a red carpet event can be read as not "crazy" or "teenager-y" but as evidence of him being a maverick-in-progress. Let's not write them off just yet. "Close on the heels of kindness," Seymour tells his parents in his letter, "originality is one of the most thrilling things in the world, also the most rare!"⁹ It's hard to say exactly why, but the Smiths are originals—and like the Based God himself, they're undeniably #rare.

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1. See: Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," *Partisan Review* 6:5 (1939), 34-49, and Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp,'" in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Picador, 2001), 259-274.
2. Herbert J. Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture* (New York: BasicBooks, 1974), 68.
3. Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture*, 32.
4. J.D. Salinger, *Franny and Zooey* (New York: Bantam Books, 1961), 120.
5. J.D. Salinger, "Hapworth 16, 1924," *The New Yorker*, June 19, 1965, 98.
6. Salinger, "Hapworth 16, 1924," 32.
7. Van Wyck Brooks, "'Highbrow' and 'Lowbrow,'" in *America's Coming-of-Age* (New York: Octagon Books, 1975), 7.
8. Brooks, "'Highbrow' and 'Lowbrow,'" 35.
9. Salinger, "Hapworth 16, 1924," 39.

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<http://graphics8.nytimes.com/images/2014/11/17/t-magazine/17smith-wu-2/17smith-wu-2-tmagArticle-v2.jpg>