

Opinion

A critical analysis of Bad Bunny's Superbowl halftime show

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As I sat and watched Bad Bunny's Superbowl performance on Sunday night, after absolutely glazing over the rest of the match which I admittedly could not care for, there were two thoughts that sat in my brain. First, I was amazed by the spectacle of it all: the music, the imagery, the emotion, the story, etc. And second, I was in suspense. A Puerto Rican man was singing Spanish music at the Superbowl, one of the most quintessentially white American events in existence. In this political context, where Latinos are being terrorized and kidnapped by the government, I imagined that there was no way for him not to acknowledge the elephant in the room. Just in the same way that he called for Immigrations and Customs Enforcement out of communities at the Grammys, I expected to see a grand political message that would tie everything together.



Bad Bunny poses proudly with the once illegal version of the Puerto Rican flag during the Superbowl Halftime Performance. PHOTO COURTESY OF @HYPEBEAST/INSTAGRAM

Eventually, it did come, in the form of the quote blasted across the stadium's Jumbotron: "The only thing more powerful than hate is love." It aptly summarized the feeling of the 13-minute show. Instead of leaning into the culture war divisiveness that was hovering around it, he chose a unifying message. He celebrated Latino culture from Chile to Puerto Rico and made the bold suggestion that "God bless America" applies to all of them too and that we could unite under that. The world seemed to take notice, as this performance became a flashpoint for all things counterculture and all those rallying against the current administration. It became a symbol of resistance.

If self-contained, this message of love and unity would be valid. The problem is that it wasn't. The show was wrapped on all sides with advertising from some of the largest corporations in America, about half of which felt like AI slop or sports gambling. It was also platformed by the NFL, which is not exactly a

progressive institution. After all, this is the same body which still has Colin Kaepernick on a blacklist for refusing to stand for the flag in 2016. It's the same body led by league commissioner Roger Goodell, who has long chosen policies of quiet appeasement to the demands of President Donald Trump. It's also the league where owners of the various teams collectively sent over 19 million dollars to conservative election efforts from 2020 to 2024. For a more specific example of this, just look at the owner of the New England Patriots, Robert Kraft, who helped fund Trump's inauguration and has spent over 100 million dollars supporting Zionist political organizations in past years. All of this is not even to mention the institutional partnerships the NFL directly has with DHS and the military.

This context changes the message that was put out during that halftime show. Ultimately, it is important to remember that Benito was chosen to perform at the Superbowl. His message, his performance and his impact were prescribed and scripted in boardrooms and corporate high rises long before they ever made it to our screens. Every detail was implicitly given the stamp of approval by all the actors named above, as their logos were set to be screened before, during and after his time on screen. This is not to say that each of them necessarily agrees with his message, but that they did not find it so odious as to oppose it. It is acceptable to Goodell, to Kraft, to OpenAI, to Apple, to Meta and all the rest, so long as you sit down, shut up and keep your eyes on the screen.

When we further consider that it is these institutional actors that are materially supporting the extreme violence against Latino communities across the country, a contradiction is



created. In this contradiction, Bad Bunny's message is neutered. A message of resistance against ICE and unity among peoples becomes an idealistic dream; it is detached from reality. The popular "dissent" he platforms is coopted, managed and given a release valve before it gets to be too angry. The incredible spectacle of his message satisfies people, and satisfied people do not revolt. Spectacle creates complacency, obedience and compliance.

True impact requires recognition and repair: The naming and shaming of systems that cause these issues, as well as focused direction of energy into efforts that attempt to address them. Spectacle is the opposite of impact. When Bad Bunny focuses on the importance of "love" over "hate," these systems are obscured behind emotional language. Hate does not exist in a vacuum, and the type of hateful white supremacy that pushes forward ICE and the federal government is not simple irrationality. These things have structural causes and are based in the material interests of those in power. To say that "love" is the answer erases the possibility

for both recognition and repair.

All of this is not necessarily to crucify Benito, but rather to point at how structures of media, consumption and dissent operate. I think some of the discourse he generated with the performance has been beneficial, like the use of electrical poles to bring awareness to the long blackouts the island faces. I also believe he has done truly good work in the past: When he decided to skip the U.S. in his most recent tour because it was "unnecessary," that was hilariously disrespectful as well as a genuine example of protest that puts your money where your mouth is. However, in this current situation, any progressive impact intended is inherently limited by the foundation of corporate money that it is built upon.

We must look past these spectacles designed for us, that are inherently disconnected from the material reality they attempt to replicate. We must recognize that the revolution will not be televised in between multi-million dollar commercial spots. No matter how visually stunning, heartfelt and emotionally cathartic, the revolution will not be sponsored by the NFL.

How 'But I'm A Cheerleader' uses comedy to critique gender and sexuality norms

Content warning: homophobia, misogyny. Major spoilers for "But I'm A Cheerleader."

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"But I'm a Cheerleader" is a cult classic film for good reason. With the heavy task of being an early cinematic satire of the indoctrination of queer people through conversion therapy, it surprisingly stuck the landing in some regards. It helped pave the way for future queer storytelling in ways that aren't solely confessional or necessarily dramatic. "But I'm a Cheerleader" celebrates true love and acceptance in a place where you're shunned if you don't fit the societal mold. The movie subverts tropes of only expressing queer expressions of pessimism and austerity and making fun of queer people in bad faith. This results in punching up at misogynistic and homophobic institutions in a comedic way.

"But I'm a Cheerleader" must be discussed when talking about campy movies for its plot alone. For context, the 1999 film directed by Jamie Babbit stars Natasha Lyonne as Megan: a goody two-shoes Christian cheerleader in high school living the "American dream" in the sense that she's popular, has a boyfriend and has a stable home life. However, she gets singled out for acting flirtatious with other women. Her religious parents send her to a conversion therapy camp, suspecting that she's a lesbian. Megan gets close to a rebellious masculine woman named Graham who's confident in her sexual orientation, but the conversion

camp wants to separate them.

"But I'm a Cheerleader" uses stereotypes to its advantage for a controversial effect. For example, the stereotypes of the "femme" lesbian for Megan and the "butch" lesbian for Graham reinforce, on a surface level, traditional gender roles' application to non-heterosexual relationships. Furthermore, the queer men depicted in this film are oftentimes speaking with a lisp. This reliance on tropes and stereotypes could be argued as hindering the film, but for the sake of comedy the stereotypes work to parody the very caricatures that intolerant people create and critique the systems behind these prejudices.

Gender roles are prevalent to a sickening extent in this movie. The queer women wear pink along with skirts and the queer men wear blue with ties. The camp segregates the sexes only by their sexes and disregards gender identity in the process. Gender is perceived as a tool to control people and tell them what they can and cannot do. Of course, the film makes fun of this too.

Near the end of the movie, the conversion campers are forced to wear skinsuits with leaves covering their genitals (in reference to the story of Adam and Eve, the first man and woman in the Bible) and simulate having sex on a bed. Disregarding their ages and the fact that everyone's forced to watch, the staff at the conversion camp are supportive of these heteronormative displays of sexuality

where the woman is always submissive and the man is always dominant. For a variety of reasons, it's so disgustingly uncomfortable it's absurd. Hopefully, it makes you consider the institution of gender roles in our culture as a result.

The underlying theme of anti-LGBTQ+ indoctrination in the youth in this film is shown when the conversion campers are forced to protest how much they supposedly hate homosexuality in front of the house of a gay couple who freed the conversion campers to go to a gay bar. They shout homophobic slurs and other catchphrases, but they don't really mean it. While it may seem easy to resist the bigotry, it penetrates the mind and destabilizes your confidence.

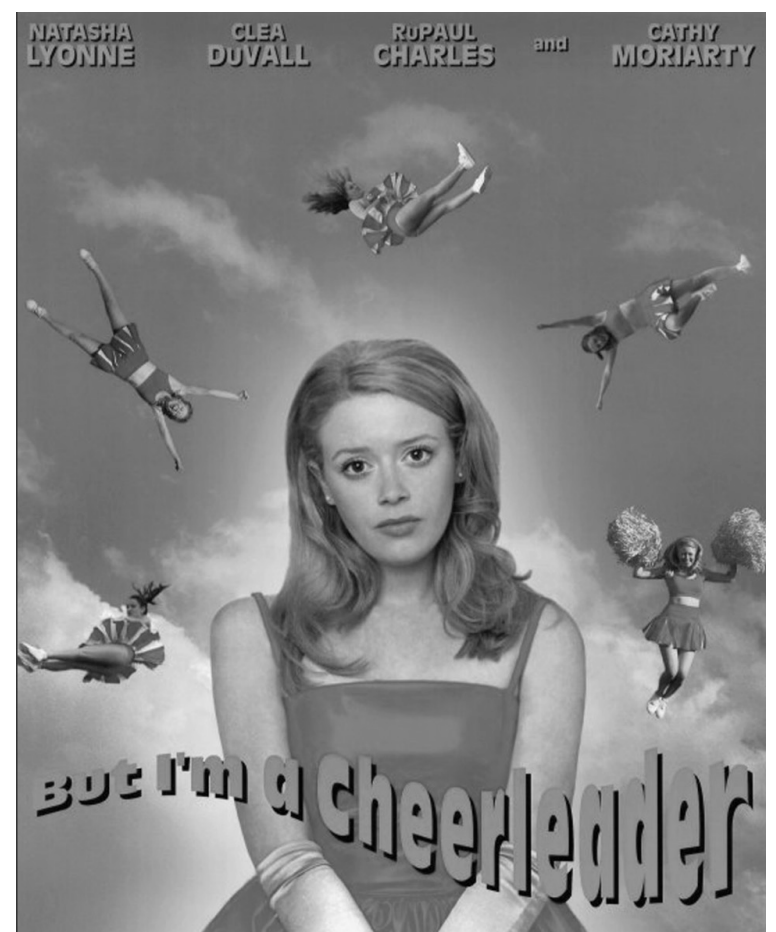
Graham faces this lack of confidence when given an ultimatum to choose her love for Megan or finish the conversion program. Although she loves Megan, she chooses to marry a man to finish the program and to assimilate back into her family as a "heterosexual" woman — until Megan wins her back over by crashing the wedding with a protest cheer.

This ultimate switch from comedy to romance-drama at this point of the movie hits like a freight train because it's a candid symbol of claiming one's full identity. We are genre-less and capable of so many different moods. We cannot be easily labeled. And despite her stereotypical character, Megan eventually refuses to hide any part of herself. She accepts her identity

and the truth about who she is.

"But I'm a Cheerleader," while not perfect, is really a story about accepting yourself no matter how you identify and despite oppression. Letting go of harmful traditions — originally decided on by people we'll never meet — that promote social constructs such as the patriarchy and cisgender, heteronormative ideologies is a

goal facilitated by art as methods of education and critique. "But I'm a Cheerleader" has a beautiful, riveting love story that resists and critiques homophobia, misogyny and ultimately the seizing of autonomy in blatant terms. The movie's story results in further developing a queer canon that deserves to be remembered, appreciated and built upon.



Poster of 1999 "But I'm A Cheerleader" film.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF @NOSTALGICNEBULA/INSTAGRAM