

Christopher Dier

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The Price of Conformity

Ralph Waldo Emerson purported the Transcendental denunciation of conformity to social norms suggesting, "A man must consider what a rich realm he abdicates when he becomes a conformist." Conforming to mainstream social expectations forces the individual to give up on possibility and opportunity by maintaining a normalized, communal existence. In America, this normalized existence is centered around the capitalistic tendency of materialism, what Baca refers to as a valuing of possessions over experience. In America, not only do we value possessions over experience, but this systemic greed will ultimately lead to our own social demise.

In the mid-late 19th century, a New York socialite Elizabeth Jones built a massive, 24 room, mansion called Wyndclyffe. Quickly, the rest of the New York elite, rebuilt their 2nd homes and public lives to match her social status; an attempt now famously known as "keeping up with the Joneses." Keeping up with Joneses is capitalism in practice, a prime example of both Emerson's and Baca criticism of America as a nation of conformity and commodity. This American focus on material wealth, ownership, the gathering of stuff creates clear social dissection between those who can afford to own stuff, and those struggling to keep up. In this system, the one with the most wins while all else lose, society becomes an arena for competition not compassion, and the Joneses vilify the poor to justify their own city on a hill. This system divides because it ignores the value of a life lived.

In the age of social media, keeping up with the Joneses looks a little different. Online, the valuing of possessions is transferred to the valuing of consumption making keeping up with the Joneses a game of hashtags, followers, views, and likes. Granted, the entire concept of social media is based on the sharing of stories and experiences, but this is not the value of a post. A recent post of me, a 6' 5", 300lbs, Sasquatch of a man dressed in a pink fairy princess outfit and sparkly wand and crown celebrating a recent BBL garnered thousands of views, likes, and shares. While thousands consumed this short-form entertainment for laughs, not a single person engaged in conversation about the how the video came to be, about why it exists, about who came up with the idea, or about where I was hiding this ample rear. The experience of having a student generate an AI video during a classroom discussion on atmospheric lighting in Barry Jenkins' *Moonlight* intended to humiliate wasn't even worthy of attention or question. The video was consumed and then forgotten; was trending and then lost significance. This is not a system that values forward progress and new thinking but one that eliminates thinking and progress all together by focusing only on the product.

Hip Hop artist, J. Cole recognizes this recycling of meaningless commodity and calls it, "the disease of wanting more." In an industry built around status, J. Cole stands as one of the few entertainers renounces the importance placed on material wealth because it causes an endless and unsatisfying struggle, "Got to get 10. Got 10, got to get 100. Got 100, got to get 1000." In America we see cars, for example, as a status symbols, the more expensive and more exclusive the brand name, the higher the importance of the means of transportation. What Cole understands and what America has forgotten, is that a bicycle or skateboard or a solid pair of shoes can transport you just as easily and perhaps more efficiently, than a Rolls Royce. The value of a car is not its ability to get you from one place to another. The is a symbol of social ranking, of a social hierarchy, of a competition between humans for nothing more than clout, the imaginary right to claim superiority.

Modern divisions between the rich and poor, social unrest, political extremism, an even rising hate crimes are stem from the America's continued conformity to the valuing of possessions. The desire to have more or to have better turns humans into demons of greed willing to step on anyone to get a better view. Current leadership in America defines the country's success as such, to be great is to have more. Material gain however, causes moral loss.