Producer and Product: Kanye West's *Yeezus*

Kanye West is about to premiere a new single and album, and speculation swirls over whether he’ll duplicate the sound of his last album, *Yeezus*, or go in a new direction. He’s both loved for his award-winning music and derided for his public persona, and this paradoxical love-hate relationship manifests within his work. But underneath the words and sounds of his six-album discography, West is exploring a complicated ontological relationship between being a producer and being a product. *Yeezus* is driven by this powerful undercurrent, and expanding the relationship reveals that it affects the perception of postmodern art.

Terry Eagleton claims in *Criticism and Ideology* that in order to produce something, whether it’s a novel, movie or an album, there are a few key elements: the producer, a means of production and the product (Eagleton 1309). West writes and records an album in a studio space using equipment, which results in *Yeezus* being sold online and in stores. But production is inherently a social formation: making the album links West directly to selling and promoting it to an audience, while also creating a space for both West and *Yeezus* to influence other artists and albums. You can’t have *Yeezus* without West, and he can’t perform *Yeezus* without writing and recording it first: all of these pieces are needed to make the puzzle of production fit together.

As a producer, West’s overarching goal for *Yeezus* is comprehension of the album’s lyrical content. In “On Sight,” he raps about how he’ll drive a more expensive car, get your couch dirty with his shoes and rape your spouse. He wants the audience to clearly understand what he’s saying: whether he can currently carry out his threats or not, the thought and the threat are powerful. He propels the comprehension by meticulously curating the content, the track order
and album art. For example, closing the album with the second track “Black Skinhead” would be a bizarre choice. Featuring a jarring drum pattern and the sound of someone gasping for air, “Black Skinhead” would disrupt the ending momentum of the album — it would be as if he had run out of things to say, which “I ain’t finished, I’m devoted / And you know it, and you know it” doesn’t connote. The long outro of “God!” would also make it seem as if it was missing an ending. From an ontological standpoint, control can establish an idea of self, and comprehension anchors it. While multiple interpretations add analytical dimensions, they’re not necessarily what the producer wants. However, steering the audience to see Yeezus the way West wants it to be seen can be stifling. In one way, West seems to discourage those suggestions by making Yeezus’s lyrical content so powerful that there’s only one opinion — his.

Despite that intention, West is situated within and between multiple discourses beyond his control. These social constructs of rules and conventions, according to Michel Foucault in The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Order of Things, make up societal structure. For example, raconteur Kanye meets devoted partner Kanye in “Bound 2.” One moment he’s talking to a woman he’s just met in a nightclub, while the next he’s talking to another one about their longstanding relationship. In “Send It Up,” musician Kanye merges with superiority-complex Kanye when he unapologetically prefers his work to 50 Cent’s. A verse later, he jumps at the opportunity to flaunt his wealth: having a body guard, comparing himself to Prince and name dropping his luxury car.

Caught within multiple discourses, Kanye’s personality is not stable but a composite. His public image ends up being a combination of the way he wants the audience to perceive him and how the audience wants to see him. The audience might not know the raw feelings of being in
the public eye, but it sure can imagine it. There’s no way for it to know that West talked to Jesus as a near-equal like he claims in “I Am A God,” but it is convenient for the audience’s understanding that he did. He is producing his own mystique by writing lyrics that make him seem inaccessible, and by self-managing his public image as the preeminent artist of his time. In a *New York Times* article that promoted *Yeezus*, he claimed that he wanted his albums to push his audience to desire better art. “I think that’s a responsibility that I have, to push possibilities, to show people: ‘This is the level that things could be at,’ he said. “I will be the leader of a company that ends up being worth billions of dollars, because I got the answers. I understand culture. I am the nucleus.” And in both “I Am God” and his interviews, West seems obsessed with where he fits into the fabric of society, which ultimately informs what he produces. This preoccupation with ontology suggests that society discourages the idea of a self-designed identity. Using Foucault’s lens, West’s human experiences are discursively reconstituted into the general discourse of modern knowledge — in one way, conflicting discourses strengthen the semantic meaning of *Yeezus* — he asserts a messianic role for an entire generation that is struggling to find a sense of self.

As the producer and product roles converge, the conflation between West’s persona and his music creates a caricature. Getting into scuffles with paparazzi and making ridiculous comments isn’t strange anymore; it’s just Kanye being Kanye. This is the beginning of a chain of production: While society produces an image for West, West produces *Yeezus*, *Yeezus* produces a tour, the tour produces society’s perception of West, and so on. When we think about how much more can be produced — clothing with the *Yeezus* logo, remixes from loyal followers and even
West-approved music video parodies like James Franco and Seth Rogen’s “Bound 3” — it’s uncomfortable to think about the musical album’s shift from being an artistic expression to a capitalistic product. Artists have historically been cast as purists, and if the historically great painters or musicians or novelists suffered for their art, their contemporary counterparts should too. So if Yeezus is also a marketing tool or a platform, it appears as if West has no true self. As a money-making machine, he’s trying to sell the record to finance the next one and repeat the cycle. In a society that uses the starving artist as a stereotype, art as a means of capital gain seems unsettling.

West’s accountability for and ownership of Yeezus is also wrapped up in this tangle.

Directing the interpretation away from contention can only go so far, and lyrics that don’t even seem controversial — “I need to call it off / I need to, I need to make it known” in “Guilt Trip,” for example — demand discussion and reasoning. When West sings about sexual violence in “New Slaves” and “Hold My Liquor,” he runs the risk of moral indecency: it might be a part of the culture or a discourse, but it promotes actions that are potentially offensive. At a certain threshold, Yeezus no longer belongs to West — someone will interpret “hurry up with my damn croissants” from “I Am A God” as either insanely arrogant or incredibly funny, and make their own meaning out of it. The audience may wonder if he’s actually performing those acts, or if it’s all a façade to make him look like something he’s not.

Throughout Yeezus, it is unclear whether or not West wants to be separated from the work he consciously puts out into the world. He’s frank about his own opinions and self-esteem: wearing his heart on his sleeve in “New Slaves,” outwardly criticizing Jay-Z and Beyoncé in “Blood on the Leaves,” and living a rap mogul’s life in “Guilt Trip.” But for all of the discourses
he explores, he doesn’t mention whether or not the audience can appropriate the experiences for itself. It seems as if he wouldn’t be comfortable with that — in one way, it diminishes the power of naming the album after his self-given nickname. If the audience separates him from *Yeezus*, it may see the album as a social commentary for the issues West brings up and may forget about his morally questionable behavior as a human being. If the audience treats the album and the person as one and the same, the media’s perception of West may cloud the audience's listening experience. Reading about West interrupting Taylor Swift at an awards show or hearing him tell the world that “George Bush doesn’t care about black people” draws the attention away from deeply understanding the meaning within the lyrics, and throws it onto events that ultimately doesn’t have anything to do with whether or not *Yeezus* is art. When *Yeezus* was released in 2013, reviewers gave the album high marks for catchiness and lyrical talent but were critical of West’s overall purpose. Jon Dolan for *Rolling Stone* characterized the album as “a brilliant, obsessive-compulsive career auto-correct,” suggesting that the album was intended to erase personal blunders that overshadow West’s work (Dolan). However, West has a different idea of his role as an artist and the purpose of his music. In response to criticism over demanding that a child in a wheelchair stand up at one of his concerts, he told an audience in Australia that the media needed to pick a new target for their derision. “I’m not one of these dumbass artists that you’re used to,” he said. “You come at me, I’m going to take my platform and break this shit down for real, intelligent people every night. And then, we’ll get back to the music” (Stern). Whether you think his confidence is pretentious or refreshing, it’s clear that West wants to be a prime source of creative thought and his albums have to be the pinnacle of innovation.
In putting *Yeezus* in the spotlight, West has to give it away so that the audience can experience the product for what it is. When he raps “this the greatest shit in the club / Since ‘In Da Club’” on “Send It Up,” West doesn’t leave any room for his contemporaries or even his own future work to come up with something that might be better. The possibility of dimming that spotlight isn’t addressed in *Yeezus* — in fact, he seems to avoid it. Multiple songs center on the idea of West being so successful that nothing can bring him down. “Yeezus just rose again,” he raps on “Send It Up,” which declares self-importance and demands recognition of his fame and influence. The relationship between the producer and the product includes an understanding that there is an extent to validating your opinion and the worth of sharing it. Meaning is constructed by language, and what West has to say through his music may have its limits. He doesn’t come to a definite conclusion on his efficacy, which does solidify that there is more to the connection between the artist and his art that West doesn’t understand.

Despite the inherent contradictions, the abrasive nature of his hubris, and the limitations of art, it’s certain that the connections between the producer and the product derived from *Yeezus* have implications beyond the album and West himself. In defining the relationship, we’re forced to decide whether or not art is ever truly personal for both the audience and the artist and how that affects a sense of identity. In one direction, it’s not: the perception of art is influenced by cultural pressure and changes the outcome of the artist’s intention. But if *Yeezus* is any indication, we can still strive to preserve a stronger connection and to make other people understand what we have to say despite that complication. A facet of art is the ability to reflect values and viewpoints of a particular moment in time, and working out how *Yeezus* functions
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raises questions that even West can’t fully address and answer yet. Are we comfortable with viewing producers as products and vice versa? Can we privilege producers in the name of art if the art is a packaged product? *Yeezus* forces West, his audience and the world to think beyond the surface levels of understanding postmodern concepts. By beginning to trace out the answers to these questions in an album like *Yeezus*, we’re off to a solid start.
Works Cited


