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Honours Summer Session Report.

Everywhere one turns there seems to be a resident nerd. This figure, who once seemed consigned to the school playground, is appearing all over the place; they are politicians, media tycoons, rock-stars. One picks up a book or turns on the television and nerds are there in the stories – hacking computers, solving crimes, travelling through time and space, befriending beautiful people. This report is a preliminary study on this figure, the nerd, and will inform my thesis for my honours year in 2009. It will look particularly at changing values associated with this figure, and how this shift in values may impact contemporary western society. It will also consider how these values might conform to, challenge, or expose certain cultural ideological presuppositions with extensive hegemonic influence. This will entail a consideration of the various ways the label 'nerd' has been used over time, and also of the terms and identities with which it has been linked (specifically 'geek'). These are pertinent and quite significant issues, worthy of examination, as they are invariably tied up with aspects of power. We live in an information age where Western society has seen a shift towards an information and service based economy and away from an industry based economy. Contemporary nerds are in the midst of this cultural, economic and political development.

As the 'nerd' is going to be the central focus of my thesis, it is important to have an understanding of who or what a nerd is. In his study, *Nerds: Who They Are and Why We Need More of Them*, American scholar and practitioner in clinical psychotherapy and psychology, Dr David Anderegg, makes it very clear that when we talk about nerds, we are talking about a figure that does not "really exist in any sense that you can go pick one up and put him under a microscope", we are talking about a stereotype (Anderegg, "Arts, Culture, Entertainment"). Anderegg explains that the typical stereotype of the nerd is someone who is,

Interested in science and technology. Somebody who is ugly, unattractive, can never hope to get a date. Very unself-conscious. Typically interested in fantasy, like fantasy role-playing games and things like that. And somebody who stands in some kind of archetypal opposition to what we sometimes call 'jocks' (Anderegg, "Arts, Culture, Entertainment").

This is just one person's idea of the stereotypical nerd; there are countless other opinions on this subject. Jian Ghomeshi, the radio announcer interviewing Anderegg, for example, sees thick glasses, poor fashion sense and interest in obscure topics as notable features of nerd identity. It is important to recognise that descriptions such as these *are* stereotypes, since one individual would very rarely (if ever at all) embody every one of these aspects simultaneously. This is especially true given the complexities and contradictions embedded in stereotypes of nerd identity – precocious/immature (unself-conscious), creative/analytical (the irrational alongside the rational and scientific), fantasy/technology, active/passive. The very nature of stereotypes is that they are (often negative) two-dimensional generalisations that, though unsubstantiated, become ingrained and unquestioned in society, and subsequently difficult to challenge. Though the stereotype might not have a solid basis in reality, its effects can be very real and very powerful. The nerd is one such figure that has suffered from stereotyping and is only recently beginning to recover.

Interestingly, while the nerd is such a pervasive stereotype, its origin is reasonably murky. There are several theories in regard to where the term and concept began, but beyond these theories it remains unclear as to why, when and where the term 'nerd' entered popular usage. Three common theories on nerd's origins are: 1. That it came from a character in Dr Seuss' children's book *If I Ran the Zoo*. 2. That it was 'drunk' spelt backwards and was used by university students to signal someone who was studious rather than going out and partying (Burrows, webpage); 3. That it was an acronym for Northern Electric Research and Development found printed on the boffins' pocket protectors. The first time

the term appeared in print was indeed in *If I Ran the Zoo* in 1950. The argument, however, that this is where the term gained its current popular usage is less than compelling. In this book, 'nerd' is just one of many strange creatures Dr Seuss mentions. Additionally, the picture that accompanies these words bears little resemblance to the character type that the term 'nerd' came to denote. Even considering the wide readership of this book, it still seems a stretch to assume that only one single nonsense word in a book full of nonsense words became common, widespread usage among teenagers and young adults. It is also interesting to note that the *Oxford English Dictionary* cites an appearance of the term being used in its current sense in *Newsweek* in 1951, only one year after *If I Ran the Zoo* was first published. Either the children's book had a very fast and dramatic impact, or, as I think is more likely the case, the term and its contemporary meaning was already in some sort of regular use. Regardless of where or how the term started, I believe that the exact origin and lineage of the term is less important than the effect the label produces, and how it has been used and continues to be used in contemporary society.

While the exact origin of the term 'nerd' may be elusive, how such a figure came about is perhaps easier to ascertain. The concept of the nerd is particularly American. Anderegg argues that nerd vs. jock mentality ('jock' being used here to signify those who are sporting, active and socially popular – the antithesis of the nerd) has been deeply ingrained in American ideology and in the American sense of identity since very early in its history. He suggests that American intellectual culture was largely established in opposition to European intellectual culture which they "described as the place for book learning and desiccated old men in libraries" (Anderegg, "Arts, Culture, Entertainment"). In an attempt to set itself apart from this, American intellectuals eschewed what they saw as stuffy, old-fashioned behaviour and instead set about defining their young culture as "schooled by nature, and practical, and inventive, and rough and ready" (Anderegg, "Arts, Culture, Entertainment"). Unsurprisingly, derision was aimed at those who seemed to conform to behaviours and ways of thinking that appeared

particularly European and intellectual – those who came to be later categorised as nerds. Instead of paying attention to that which was physical and outdoorsy, nerds were preoccupied with gaining knowledge which was often obscure with no obvious or foreseeable practical applications.

While nerds were seen as somewhat anti-American and as such were ridiculed, nerd-like characters seem to have been relatively common-place and unremarkable in Europe, specifically the UK. Eccentrics have often featured in British culture, whether as real-world social actors, in books, television or film. Notable eccentric characters that might in retrospect be considered nerds could include the likes of Horace Walpole – an eighteenth century art historian, writer, politician and general enthusiast who is credited with reviving the Gothic style with his home, contradictorily named Strawberry Hill, and his gothic novel *The Castle of Otranto*. The enigmatic Doctor from *Doctor Who*, who has maintained popularity over five decades, could be considered a nerd with his love and fascination of technology and his boundless obscure knowledge that he often cites to the bafflement of those around him. Currently, London Mayor Boris Johnson might be seen as the embodiment of all things eccentrically nerdy, from his unruly appearance to active pursuit of and passion for esoteric knowledge. These characters' nerdiness is not called into question or seen as remarkable. The British eccentric seems to be largely taken for granted as an integral part of society. This sits in contrast to their US counterparts - it was world-wide news that Barack Obama, not only a man of African origin, but one with nerdish intellectual qualities none the less, was challenging the jocks George W Bush<sup>1</sup> and John McCain for the presidency. That someone like Obama (the man can actually read, let alone the fact that he has an affection for comic books! (Brady, screen 1-2)) can vie for and win such a powerful political position, may be an indication that past disdain of the nerd figure in the US is diminishing.

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<sup>1</sup> "Mr Bush is a sports-fan as well as an exercise fiend. His greatest ambition, apart from being president, was to be baseball commissioner; his biggest, perhaps only, business success was as the managing partner of the Texas Rangers; and his favourite pastime is watching sports (he was watching American football when he had that bruising encounter with a pretzel)." 'The Jock-in-Chief', [http://www.economist.com/world/unitedstates/displaystory.cfm?story\\_id=4275012](http://www.economist.com/world/unitedstates/displaystory.cfm?story_id=4275012).

A shift in values attached to the nerd might also be apparent in US popular culture which invariably has global influence. Popular culture has played a significant role in historical representations of the nerd. While the origin of the term remains unclear, its transmission into common vernacular is easier to determine. It appears that the very popular character, of 'the Fonz' from the television show *Happy Days* regularly used 'nerd' as an insult. It has been suggested that it may have been due to this programme's huge following that the term was subsequently picked up by fans and spread in usage (Anderegg, 26). The stereotype of the nerd became widely understood, but though 'nerd' was used as an insult and a term of derision, characters who held this identity were rarely represented in popular culture. When they were depicted, they generally conformed to the stereotype of bespectacled, unfashionable males with a dress sense and social skills akin to that of Steve Urkle from *Family Matters*.

Even more than this, as computers and information technology filtered into society, an accompanying suspicion towards nerd identity seems to have arisen which soon intensified, especially during the 1980s. In *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*, Sherry Turkle, an American scholar and clinical psychologist, suggests that there is a fear attached to the computer, and more especially to children using computers. She suggests that people are afraid because it seems unnatural for children to be spending so much time, not only watching a machine, but interacting with a machine. She suggests that there is a prevailing belief that:

The "natural" child is out of doors; machines are indoors.  
The natural child runs free; machines control and constrain.  
(Turkle, 93-94)

Turkle was writing about computers in the 1980s, when they were only beginning to make their way into homes and schools. Additionally, an anxiety that the child could hold knowledge not countenanced or restrained by those in authority, added to the fears attached to the computer:

Something else feels discordant [...] Computers bring writing within the scope of what very young children can do [...]. what is most disturbing [...] is not [their] relationship to the machine, but [their] relationship to writing, to the abstract, to the symbolic. [...] each growing up is a loss of innocence and immediacy, and the act of writing symbolizes that the loss has taken place. [...] Childhood, innocence, is the state of not writing. (Turkle, 95)

I would suggest that this suspicion towards the machines, these 'corrupters' of youth and innocence, also tainted those who were fascinated by and embraced these machines. This suggests a fear that 'nerds' or 'geeks', often previously ridiculed as naïve and as lacking worldly awareness, might have access to an esoteric knowledge denied to those on the outside. This brings about a tension in long standing cultural hierarchies.

As electronic communications and new media technologies have developed and expanded, I believe a concomitant rise in the status of the nerd has occurred. Electronic and new media technologies have become increasingly important in the liberal capitalist cultures of the late twentieth century and early the twenty-first century. Traditionally, those who had been labelled 'nerd' worked in these developing areas and with these new technologies. Where the label 'nerd' historically carried implications of emasculation, as nerds did not appear to fit traditional expectations of masculinity, with the increasing dominance of computers in western culture, nerds were now better able to conform to notions of masculinity. In 'Nerd Nation: Images of Nerds in US Popular Culture', Lori Kendall, researcher in online community and identity, notes:

The nerd, previously a liminal masculine identity, gets rehabilitated and partially incorporated into hegemonic masculinity during the period from the early 1980s through the present [...] The reconfiguration of hegemonic masculinity to include aspects of the once subjugated masculine stereotype of the nerd related both to changes in economic and job prospects for middle-class white males, and to the growing pervasiveness of computers in work and leisure activities. (Kendall, 261)

This suggests that, with the rise in the importance of computer related technologies in society, nerds were more easily able to fill requirements of what is considered 'masculine'. They could be seen as practical and assiduous in the realms of technology, while the wealth they could accumulate enabled them to independently support themselves and/or family. Additionally, nerds were no longer confined to the domestic sphere (often due to their social ineptitude); instead they were allowed to take up powerful socially elite positions within the public sphere (perhaps the most obvious and recent example of this is when Barack Obama became the president of the United States). With the growing significance of computers and technology, nerds could be recognised as valuable members of society. However, Kendall's quote seems to suggest that the worthiness of nerds did not come through any intrinsic appreciation of their 'nerdiness' and is not indicative of an approval of their obsessive or eccentric behaviour. It suggests that, instead of society starting to see fiddling with the minutiae of computers or playing video games as acceptable, 'normal' or valid behaviour, the behaviour is validated in its potential to be useful and to lead to the fulfilment of some requirements of 'real' masculinity (wealth and power). From this it seems as though the acceptance of nerds is concurrent with their being able to conform more easily to cultural expectations of hegemonic masculinity. Interestingly, however, this fails to consider the position of female nerds. That male nerds appear to be validated through conforming to hegemonic masculinity might also mean that female nerds must also conform to these expectations in order for their behaviour to be deemed valuable. Consequently, nerd power could be seen as a way of reinforcing male hegemonic dominance. This will be discussed in greater depth in my honours thesis.

Clearly it is important to define the central term 'nerd'. Such a definition is not without complications. From the outset of my investigation, I began to notice confusion attached to the terms 'nerd' and 'geek'. Often in my reading these would be used interchangeably, while in other works they would be seen as very separate and distinct concepts. Hence, in order to avoid this confusion in my

thesis, I believe it is pertinent to discuss how these two terms relate to one another and how they might differ or correspond. Though the terms 'nerd' and 'geek' are familiar words, regularly used and easily recognisable in everyday conversation, a study of actual usage reveals intriguing inconsistencies and contradictions in regard to the understanding of these words. This seems most evident in regard to each term's emotive connotations. Though 'nerdiness' and 'geekiness' are often represented as distinct social categories (as will be discussed later using an interview between Jonathan Ross and Simon Pegg), in usage they often blend into one another, being used interchangeably as though no real or important distinction exists. Clearly, particularly given the fluid nature of idiomatic language such as that of 'nerd' and 'geek', these terms are not words with rigid linguistic boundaries. The varied connotations attached to these terms demonstrate the dynamic nature of language and meaning, and highlight the subjectivity attached to conventional understanding. It seems pertinent then, to consider different usages of these terms, as seen both in both popular media and in academic studies.

In order to acknowledge the subjective perspective, I will begin this section by discussing my own impressions of the meaning of 'nerd and geek'. Personally, I have considered the nerd a less extreme version of the geek. Nerds, while not necessarily being the most social people in the world, appear possessed of a greater appreciation of social mores. They seem intelligent, valuing education and the gaining of knowledge (often esoteric), and actively pursue less than mainstream interests. Their appearance, while not exactly *à la mode*, seems neater and possibly more hygienic than that of geeks (this is not to say that nerds eschew 'dagginess' and out of date fashions). Alternatively, geeks seem less concerned with hygiene – greasy, sweaty, pimply, wearing the same clothes for far longer than is acceptable (or healthy). I see geeks as more socially inept; to the point where they are too socially inept to recognise that their own social

ineptitude<sup>2</sup>. Geeks, like nerds, can be obsessive about particular interests, though without the type of intelligence that I attach to 'nerd' interest. Additionally, I generally associate computer technology, science and maths with geeks more than nerds. I would argue that nerds tend to be a little more 'artsy' than the geek. It is, however, here the two terms start to meld together in my head, and the distinction becomes less pronounced. Both nerds and geeks seem to share certain interests, for example sci-fi and fantasy.

My own thoughts aside, research into the genesis and usage of the terms shows differing impressions of the nerd and the geek, and these are worthy of further examination. On his webpage 'The Origin of the Nerd', amateur nerd enthusiast Jim Burrows discusses the history of the term 'nerd'. During his discussion of the nerd he looks at the figure of the geek and the origins of this word. He suggests that the term 'geek' was an insult that came from the 'freaks and geeks' at carnivals. Anderegg supports this history of the term stating:

in America, the term was used to describe circus performers or sideshow freaks, including and especially those who amazed their audiences by biting the heads off live chickens [...] But no one knows for sure [...] how the term moved from describing simpletons, carnies, or hippies to its current use (Anderegg, 27)

From this beginning, 'geek' retains somewhat negative connotations by association with the carnivalesque and the grotesque; they are 'other' in terms of physical appearance and behaviour. This history seems to fit with, and indeed may even inform my idea of the geek as more extreme than the nerd. Burrow's website goes on to state, "Both [geeks and nerds] were outcasts, but one was hopelessly conventional [the nerd], the other bizarre and outlandish [the geek]".

Other sources, however, seem to have contrary options in regard to the difference between nerds and geeks, completely inverting my own thoughts. In an article in *Wired* in 1997, Jon Katz, journalist and writer on geek culture, argues

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<sup>2</sup> Dr Anderegg refers to such social awkwardness as social unself-consciousness (Anderegg, 2007, pg 10)

Nerd is a term used to describe the sometimes socially awkward, technologically minded, gifted people who built the digital communication structures.

Geeks are less interested and skilled in the mechanics of technology. They are more outward, political, and preoccupied with the applications of machinery and technology. If the nerd patched together the wires and software that creates an online community, the geek is the one setting its agenda, arguing about how it's used, and obsessed with its social applications. (Katz, p.1)

Here Katz draws a clear distinction between geeks and nerds and between the various roles they tend to play – nerds being more practical and less social than geeks. However, while an obvious difference is suggested, there is a commonality in the realms of interest. Here, both nerds and geeks are associated with the domains of technology and computers. With this overlapping of the spheres of interest it is not hard to see how the two identities might be used interchangeably. If we turn to examples from popular culture, Simon Pegg, a British actor and comedian who wrote and starred in a cult television programme, *Spaced*, provides another instance of someone who reverses my own impression of what constitutes 'nerdiness' and what constitutes 'geekiness'. In an interview with British television and radio presenter, Jonathan Ross (Part 2), he talks about his perceptions of the difference between a nerd and a geek:

JR: Are you genuinely nerdy or is it something you have acquired over the years?

SP: I'm geeky not nerdy.

JR: What's the difference?

SP: I think... I was having this discussion the other day with Jessica Stevenson who I did *Spaced* with [...] We were talking about the difference between geeks and nerds, and I think a geek is like an enthusiast...someone... you're a geek (to JR) and have admitted it so. You're a big comic book fan, you know your stuff. Um, where as a nerd is someone who's a little bit more sort of just the speccy idiot.

JR: Socially inept

SP: Socially inept.

JR: It's the nicer way of saying 'speccy idiot' I think.

SP: (Smiling) Yep.

This interview is interesting as it helps to illuminate a number of aspects that appear to be quite significant factors within geek and nerd identity. Here Pegg suggests that a love of comic books is a quintessential aspect of geekiness, while wearing glasses, being socially awkward (just as Katz suggests) and lacking intelligence are typical features of a nerd. Later in this same interview Ross presses his point, arguing that Pegg is a nerd on the basis that he is a *Star Wars* fan. This not only suggests that the science fiction genre is a considerable indicator of nerd identity, but it also reveals how definitions of nerdiness and geekiness are not fixed, and can they can be used interchangeably according to personal association. Pegg and Ross are both British males who are products of the same generation and culture, yet they still have quite different ideas in regard to who can be considered a nerd and who can be considered a geek.

In the American context, Anderegg believes that people are more likely to label themselves 'geek' rather than 'nerd'. He suggests that this is because:

the term 'nerd' lays a subtle emphasis on the pathologically unself-conscious, physically repulsive end of the terminological spectrum, while 'geek' lays a subtle emphasis on the bearer as a repository of boring arcane knowledge [...] being a possessor of boring arcana [...] is the lesser of two evils when it comes to self description (Anderegg, 24).

However, during my own study I have come across numerous instances where people have been happy to self identify as nerds. A Californian couple attending Comic-Con in 2008, for example, when asked about the difference between a nerd and a geek was answered "A geek is somebody who bites the heads off chickens in a circus. A Nerd is just way cooler" (Martin, 2). While this seems to further confuse the issue about the difference between nerds and geeks, it

reveals an interesting point that is rather significant. Whether people prefer the label of 'geek' or 'nerd', they play an active role in choosing the label themselves.

In her paper *"Why Be Normal?": Language and Identity Practices in a Community of Nerd Girls*, Mary Bucholtz, professor in sociocultural linguistics, argues that nerds (and I would also add those who identify as geeks) play an active role in claiming and maintaining their identity:

Nerd identity, contrary to popular perceptions, is not a stigma imposed by others, but a purposefully chosen alternative to mainstream gender identities (Bucholtz, 204)

This suggests that nerds and geeks, whatever – or even regardless – of perceived difference are active, independent people who have a hand in choosing their identity rather than just passively allowing society to label them. This in itself suggests that the identity of nerd/ geek is not merely a negative stereotype, but that the label 'nerd' which was historically and externally attached as an insult, can be appropriated by the 'nerd' community itself as an identity of which to be proud. This shows a distinct movement from the origins where the terms 'nerd' and 'geek' were solely used as negative labels.

A definite shift in the values associated with nerds and geeks is evident. The terms have gone from indicating someone who is socially outcast – being far too dull to be of any interest, or alternatively bordering on scary and grotesque – to signifying someone who should be taken seriously because they may end up being someone with a great deal of influence. Those who are imbued with the nerd/geek identity may still tend to fall to the edge of that which is considered socially acceptable. They, however, have considerable potential to achieve a position where social, cultural, economic and political power are within easy reach. Changing values along with the way usage of the term changes across various parts of the English speaking world demonstrates how flexible meaning can be. The terms 'nerd' and 'geek' are the outcomes of community construct, as Anderegg points out, there is no such thing as a nerd, what we are dealing with is a stereotype, a construction (Anderegg, "Arts, Culture, Entertainment"). The

meaning of these terms is neither precise nor fixed, and individuals hold differing opinions regarding their implications and exactly what they signify. Often overlapping in nuance, meaning and usage, the realms of nerdism and geekdom collide and it can become very difficult to separate them. Therefore, in my thesis I am inclined to take a lead from Lars Konzack's perspective, as he suggests: "The difference between geek and nerd is as you might already have noticed not that interesting – unless of course you are a part of these ongoing murky debates about geeks vs. nerds. As for this paper there will be no real distinction between the two terms. For that reason geek culture and nerd culture will be seen as the one and the same cultural movement." (Konzack, 2). Despite semantic disagreements about what constitutes a nerd or a geek, this investigation has shown a close tie between such labels and notions of masculinity. These terms are stereotypically applied to males, in that their negative construction represents the nerd as emasculated, and their positive construction reassigns masculinity based on notions of wealth and influence. Therefore, when writing my thesis, my analysis will include a focus on the place of the female nerd in contemporary western culture and associated power dynamics.

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