

Childish Copernicus

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HUM 103

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Nicolaus Copernicus was a sixteenth century astronomer and mathematician, best known for publishing the heliocentric model of the solar system. Donald Glover, a hip-hop artist from Atlanta, Georgia that goes by the stage name “Childish Gambino”, released his viral music video for “This is America” in April of this year. Copernicus’s adoption of the heliocentric model was taken as a direct attack on the Catholic Church’s promotion of Ptolemy’s geocentric model. Gambino’s video starkly reveals the horrific effects of America’s institutionalized racism, with a method more bold than its content. While it may seem illogical, and perhaps silly, to find similarities between the man who started the Scientific Revolution and the first black man to win an Emmy for directing a comedy, these two revolutionaries use the tools of their respective trade to enlighten their audience to the harsh realities of their existence and launch a direct attack against the most powerful institutions of their time.

The etymology of the word revolution traces its history back to the Latin “revolvere,” that means to roll back. The Copernican revolution and Gambino’s song can be deemed revolutionary in accordance to the etymology of the word - both provoke their audience to revert back to supposedly self-evident truths and cause them to reconsider. Before Copernicus proposed the heliocentric model, Europe and the Catholic Church endorsed the geocentric model of the solar system, which places the earth at the center with all other celestial bodies orbiting it. Ptolemy, an Ancient Greek astronomer, proposed this model and astronomers and priests accepted it as reality. As human beings, there is no indication that the earth could be moving from just standing anywhere on the planet. We see the stars, the planets, and the moon come and go across

our skies every night and can plot their path. The heliocentric model is revolutionary for the sole fact that it caused the Catholic Church and its followers to “roll back” and question, if for only a moment, their way of thinking. Copernicus based his findings on the calculations of Ptolemy, yet he reached a different conclusion. From a scientific perspective, the Catholic Church could not argue with him. His theories did challenge, however, the historical and religious precedents already established, endorsed, and perpetuated by the most powerful institution of the time. It was, as Kuhn put it, “ a transformation in man’s conception of the universe and of his own relation to it.”¹

And rightly so. Humans had many reasons to believe that the earth was the center of the universe, aside from the aforementioned inability to detect the earth’s motion. Numerous biblical passages reaffirm the earth’s stagnation and the mobility of the sun and other celestial bodies. In the miracle of the prophet Joshua, Joshua is described as commanding the sun and moon to stand still. Joshua 10:12 reads “Sun, stand still over Gibeon, and you, moon, over the Valley of Aijalon.”² Multiple times the Bible speaks of the earth’s rigidity, for example in Psalm 93:1, “Yea, the world is established; it shall never be moved.”³ Though Kuhn asserts that it was the shift in conceptual scheme that characterized the Copernican revolution, one could argue it was more so the awareness of a flawed conceptual scheme that causes revolution. The heliocentric model was not accepted by the church until the nineteenth century, despite its widespread acceptance across the globe and endorsement by scientific greats. Galilei

¹Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Copernican Revolution: Planetary Astronomy in the Development of Western Thought* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: Harvard University Press, 2003), 1.

² Elert n.d.

³ Elert n.d.

Galileo, one of these greats, was famously ex-communicated from the Catholic Church for pushing the heliocentric model roughly a hundred years following the publishing of Copernicus's *On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres* in 1543.

In the same fashion, it is possible to deem Childish Gambino's "This is America" revolutionary. While the lyrics of the song certainly contain their fair share of socio-political and culturally charged language, the music video itself gained attention across all media outlets. Gambino responds to the racial inequality in the United States, with his video depicting acts of graphic violence against the black community and the caricatures that inflict them. While Donald Glover reveals little about his motivations behind the music video, saying at one point that he simply "wanted to make...a good song. Something people could play on Fourth of July,"⁴ the jarring imagery and obvious cultural relevance make "This is America" anything but just a summertime jam. Although Donald Glover does not possess the scientific content or go against the sacred doctrine of the Catholic Church, he does know the experiences of the black man in modern America and faces the common enemy of institutionalized racism. Racism in America is nothing new, the same way that the Sun being the center of the universe technically wasn't either. The roots of racism and racial hatred against the black community are sewed into the fabric of this nation's existence, since the British first started to colonize the east coast. Similarly, the Catholic Church influenced almost all corners of the earth due to colonization and imperialism. 1517 marked the beginning of the Protestant Revolution and was a major blow to the Catholic Church's power-

⁴ "Watch Donald Glover Give A Very Donald Glover Response On What Inspired 'This Is America'" 2018

Copernicus could do the same. What Glover does, similarly to Copernicus, is bring acute awareness to a flawed conceptual scheme, in this case racial hatred and discrimination against African-Americans.

And to say that racial hatred is a thing of the past is simply ignorant. Racism and white supremacy stand at the center of this nation's conceptual scheme as justice, peace, and equality orbit around it. Once the sun (i.e. justice) is where it belongs, it is hard to imagine the former claim would stand up in a court of law. Glover brings to harsh studio light to numerous incidents of racial violence that play in the background of our cultural playlist, with severe cases (i.e. the shooting of the black choir members)⁵ standing out as number one hits that breach our radio stations. The music video is revolutionary because it causes its audience to "roll back" on its way of thinking. The virality of "This is America" sparked conversations across the nation on the treatment of racial groups, specifically the black community, and caused many to reconsider their own ideologies. Similarly to the Copernican revolution, it has not worked immediately. Childish Gambino, for now, is simply another voice in the dialogue of what racial equality means in the United States.

Copernicus' radical publishing of the heliocentric model sparked outrage amongst Europe's most important and revered institutions and individuals. Childish Gambino, though reaping significant benefits, reignited the fire under the debate of racial inequality and its subjects with whom the flames burn. Both exemplify evolution, challenging the ingrained doctrines of their respective eras. While perhaps not

⁵ ChildishGambinoVEVO n.d.

immediately changing, they embed an underlying incredulity that led and will hopefully lead to change that will transform our way of thinking and transcend across generations. After all, no one can be on the right side history once the sun gets moved. [1156]

References

1. ChildishGambinoVEVO. n.d. *Childish Gambino - This Is America (Official Video)*. Accessed September 30, 2018.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VYOjWnS4cMY>.
2. Elert, Glenn. n.d. "The Scriptural Basis for a Geocentric Cosmology." E-World. Accessed September 30, 2018. <https://hypertextbook.com/eworld/geocentric/>.
3. Kuhn, Thomas S. *The Copernican Revolution: Planetary Astronomy in the Development of Western Thought*. Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: Harvard University Press, 2003.
4. "Watch Donald Glover Give A Very Donald Glover Response On What Inspired 'This Is America.'" 2018. Okayplayer. May 9, 2018.
<http://www.okayplayer.com/video/watch-donald-glover-discuss-this-is-america.html>.

Look up the prepositions → how many, can it be simplified

Help with flow, concise language

Use the active voice, not passive

PARAMETRIC WRITING

Rid of contractions

Look at adverbs after prepositions

What are each of them pushing against → draw out the institutions

Individual v. structure

How is the fight revolutionary

Where is the paradigm shift in Gambino's work?

Maybe get Gambino and Copernicus a little closer in each paragraph

Institutionalized racism → define it more, **what in the video enforces that**, hone in on Gambino's message

Conflict of conceptual schemes? White supremacy v. institutionalized racism?

Supplying unregulated guns v. gun violence

Sun displacement, white supremacy displacement

When does the revolution come? When the Sun gets moved