

## **The Expansive Love of Michael Jordan: Memory Onto Spirit**

Hello everyone my name is Matt Kalasky. I am very happy to be here and thank you for inviting me.

Tonight I would like to present to you the details of an art project that I undertook in the year 2007. It has taken me the past five years to orient my understanding this project and its gravity within my artistic oeuvre. In this presentation I will outline some of the projects theoretical keystones, explore its ontological implications, and finally interpret some its tertiary ramifications.

But before we enter this lecture I would like to offer an epigraph.

“There is only one Michael Jordan and he would never lie to you.”

-Michael Jordan, 1996

Now I would like to begin with a memory. An establishing shot if you will. On December 11, 2007 at around 10:30PM I am walking alone down a small one lane street in my midwestern college town. I am walking in the road because the residents of the this street have only sporadically removed the foot and half of snow from their sidewalks. It is cold so I walk briskly. I continue to the third house on the north side of the street. I open the gate and pass through a small front garden where the crimson hood of a concrete lawn gnome is jutting out just above the snow. A dog or possibly a human has urinated near the gnome. The still steaming scar in the snow renders what appears to be a cursive R, S, and T. I enter the house and continue left through the foyer and into the kitchen. There I listen to my friend who is working towards his PHD in computational mathematics. He is cataloging the detriments of his overbearing family. Mainly he says they nag him about his fear of commitment and his apprehensiveness about moving in with his long-time girlfriend. After one more shot of tequila he confesses that if he could, he would give it all up to be a Delorean mechanic.

Relying heavily on the kitchen counter for balance and support he says:

“My problem is that everyone expects me to live in the future.”

At this party the game was to wear a baroque and unfashionable second-hand Christmas sweater. It was the height of my age when loving something that I hated was the ultimate expression of freedom. I had somehow found my way through the kitchen, past the living room, up the stairs, and was waiting to use the bathroom in a long carpeted hallway. There I began speaking with a young woman who was also waiting to use the toilet. Her sweater was candy apple red and featured a snowman riding a motorcycle. She showed me that if you pressed a button near the hem several tiny LED lights on the garment would blink christmas spirit or they would have if the mechanism were not broken. To fill the time she began to absently recount a radio segment she had recently heard on NPR.

The piece was about a Harvard neurology study that found that people with injuries to the hippocampus, the area of the brain most intimately associated with the function of memory, also

have an impaired ability to foresee future events. This is of note, she would tell me, because, the ability to envision that which has not yet occurred, is what we would commonly term as a imagination. The authors of the study go on to suggest that both processes might be neighbors in the limbic system of our brain. But and apparently this was the hook of the whole segment, what if imagination and memory were more than neighbors? What if they are one in the same?

She leaned and lowered her voice as if to tell a secret:

“And then they had this expert a cognitive philosopher or a neurological theorist and he said like this something really crazy thing, he said “If you remember something wrong, is the label “memory” still accurate?””

She pulled out of our huddle to let this question resonate in my brain. It is at this moment in 2007 I would decided to memorize every word that Michael Jordan had ever spoken.

Now in order to go forward with this lecture need take several steps back. About 2100 to be exact. We need revisit Cicero and the invention of artificial memory.

In his volume *De Oratore*, Marcus Tullius Cicero, the Roman philosopher, statesman, lawyer, and orator, recounts the fable of the greek poet Simonides of Ceos. While attending a banquet of Thessalian nobleman named Scopas, Simonides was summoned out of the great hall to receive a message. After taking his leave the roof of banquet hall collapsed, crushing the nobleman and all of his guests in a gruesomeness befitting a greek parable. So badly mangled were the guest’s bodies, that not even their own families could identify them. Simonides however possessing the ability to recall each guest and their relative position within the great hall, was able to correctly identify each corpse where they lay. From this experience Simonides realized that orderly and systematic arrangement is the key to precise memory.

This event is said to be the origin of artificial memory otherwise known as mnemonics.

Mnemonics from the greek *mnēmonikos* meaning “of memory” was, for its early existence, a learning tool of rhetoric. In Roman tutelage mnemonic’s were employed to help pupils recall details of arguments or verses of speeches. The cardinal mnemonic text, *Ad Herennium* named for the man to whom is dedicated but traditional accredited again to the Cicero, gives this first detailed description of mnemonic operation. In a section devoted to oratory memorization, the instructor advises on a combination of places and images. And more importantly the sequential ordering of places and the anchoring of images within these places.

“If we desire to memorize a large number of items, equip ourselves with a large number of images. I likewise think it obligatory to have these backgrounds in a series, so that we may never by confusion in their order be prevented from following the images”

Specifically on the subject of backgrounds he continues:

“By backgrounds I mean such scenes as are naturally or artificially set off on a small scale, complete and conspicuous, so that we can grasp and embrace them easily by the natural memory--for example, a house, an intercolumnar space, a recess, an arch or the like.”

Further

“And these backgrounds ought to be of moderate size and medium extent, for when excessively large they render the images vague, and when too small often seem incapable of receiving an arrangement of images. Then the backgrounds ought to be neither too bright nor too dim, so that the shadows may not obscure the images nor the lustre make them glitter. I believe that the intervals between backgrounds should be of moderate extent, approximately thirty feet; for, like the external eye, so the inner eye of thought is less powerful when you have moved the object of sight too near or too far away.”

What Cicero is describing here is a sort of architecture. A series of interconnected “backgrounds” with each one leading to the next. The same fashion in which the living room of a home might open forward to the dining room and recede backward to the kitchen. Once the arrangements of these backgrounds or loci as they are commonly termed is concretely established the simple task is populate them with vivid image objects meant to trigger either ideas or words. When this task is complete the recollection of the desired information is as simple as retracing your path. A sort of imaginary gallery tour.

It should also be noted that the hippocampus also controls spatial navigation functions.

For example if I wished to memorize, in order, the 20th, 21st, and 22nd presidents of the United States I might construct a simple three room crash pad. In the first room, there might be a vicious lasagna loving cartoon cat attacking my high school tennis doubles partner. This would remind me of the esteemed James A Garfield. Leaving this room I would enter an area containing a regal crowned king drawing a magnificent blazing excalibur from an immovable mass of pink granite. Lifting the blade high above he uses all his might to bring the weapon to earth smoting the four foot wide chestnut cowering at his feet. Out of the dither appears the Chester A. Arthur. And moving to the last station I would encounter a wide eyed and energetic blue muppet happily defecating upon the promenade of the historic Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Grover Cleveland.

This is but a humble dwelling. The potential for mnemonic construction is only limited by the facilities and rigor of the individual. Indeed in the 15th century the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci would employ these techniques to commit to memory the thousands of symbols needed to gain proficiency in the chinese written language. In his own writings on memory Ricci describes the building of memory palaces, compounds, cities, and states. A navigable world indigenous with image objects. Most likely the worlds first data base.

PAUSE

Moving forward in March of 2007 I am sitting cross legged on the floor of my bedroom. My room faces the southwest. From my front door you must take a left, a right, a right, a left and then another right to get to it. In my hands is a copy of the script from the 1996 motion picture

Space Jam. In this live action box office smash Michael Jordan, playing himself, must win a game of basketball and save the universe from aliens with the help of cartoon characters. I am committing Michaels words to memory:

**Bugs Bunny**

Ah what up doc?

**Michael Jordan**

Where am I?

**Bugs Bunny**

You are in looney Tune land pal.

**MJ**

But this can't be happening... you're just a cartoon you are not real.

**Bugs Bunny**

You are not real.

I pause. I close my eyes and receive each stanza as a gift. With dignity and care I wrap each line that Michael Jordan utters and one by one place them on an alabaster shelf. Each line makes a present, each conversation makes a shelf of presents, each scene makes a booth, whole film is housed in a sensuous market. This is the Space Jam memory bizarre and soon I will be able to revisit here when ever I like.

**MJ**

Why did you bring me here?

**Bugs Bunny**

Because we need your help.

**MJ**

Why me?

**BB**

Well doc, because you are the greatest basketball player of all time. You are 6'6 can jump 48 inches straight in the air and score 40 points in the NBA four days a week. But that's not why you are the greatest athlete of all time is it pal? Let me ask you what do you think makes you special?

**MJ**

I play to win, whether during practice or a real game. And I will not let anything get in the way of me and the win.\_

**BB**

Precisely, what really sets you apart is your desire, nay the necessity to out preform all others. And while some might see this as a commitment to winning I know it is a commitment to sport. What you posses is an undying fidelity to the game unlike any human being who has ever lived. What do you love more than anything else in this universe?

**MJ**

The game. The game is my wife. It demands loyalty and responsibility, and it gives me back fulfillment and peace.

**BB**

You see doc. What you are. What you most truly are is not the greatest basketball player of all time, not the greatest athlete of all time, not even the greatest competitor of all time. What you have more than anyone else is love. You are the greatest lover the world has ever known. That is why I need you. That is why you are here.

PAUSE

Earlier in this talk I discussed at length the history of mnemonics in order to highlight its objectivity as an invention or tool. Cicero himself was quick to differentiate between the naturally occurring memory and the tool of mnemonics:

“There are, then, two kinds of memory: one natural, and the other the product of art. The natural memory is that memory which is imbedded in our minds, born simultaneously with thought. The artificial memory is that memory which is strengthened by a kind of training and system of discipline.”

But what if I were to suggest that mnemonic construction was just another function of imagination and what if I would suggest that mnemonic memory and natural memory were one in the same. More specifically, I would like to suggest that mnemonics are simply a re application of the way our memory already functions. For example, Lady Justice. She is often depicted as a robed and blindfolded figure. Simultaneously wielding a sword in one hand and the other a balancing scale. While her couture is often symbolic it is also mnemonic. The blindfold to help us remember she is blind impartiality. The sword and scale to remind us of her vengeance and fairness. Skyscrapers are tall and phallic to help us remember that important men reside within them. Flowers bloom in bright colors to help us recall their beauty. The sound of crying helps us memorize sadness.

Now imagine that in every moment of our life we are erecting a never ending architecture of memory. Right now you are in this room with me. But you are also assembling in your brain a memory. Perhaps this memory is ensconced in a minor cloister within the weird performance art cathedral of your mind. In this cloister the third from the left is a manila folder to help you remember how bored you are right now or perhaps there is an image of me vomiting fireworks to help you recall this incredible spectacle unfolding before you. Now the instant you leave this moment the foundation begins to tremble. If this is an experience worth remembering its mortar and brick will endure until it can't. Otherwise, just as the nap you took last Tuesday, or the breakfast you ate on Sunday this cloister, this memory, will crumble and dissolve immaterial.

Cicero does at one point acknowledge this possibility of a marriage between artificial and natural memory, but it comes rather as a warning.

“For there is means in which the memory of nature and the memory of artifice could be bestowed upon common ground. But for the student of words he should hasten from this technique. For there is a fear, that once the direct and natural path of memory is departed a clear division of memory might never again be acquired.”

PAUSE

On an unseasonably cool July day in 2007 I am sitting on a concrete park bench. Ten yards ahead two squirrels are chasing each other. In the mouth of one is the wrapper on a Baby Ruth candy bar. I thought they were fighting over the trash until the grayer of the two squirrels mounts the other. In my lap is Michael Jordan's graphic autobiography "For the Love of the Game" I am nearing the end of construction. It is an estate of stupefying engineering. Rooms upon rooms, aborariums, studies, stables, pantries, and granaries. Everyone the domicile of a precious image. Everyone an utterance of Michael Jordan for me to revisit. I am on the second to last page. If you ever have the chance I suggest you all check out this book. Half coffee table picture book, half autobiography it is seriously on the most captivating texts I have come across in a long time. On this particular two page spread he is addressing the possibility of being inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame (a nearly guaranteed accomplishment that came to fruition in 2009)

"Its a tremendous accomplishment don't get me wrong. I don't want to diminish that for anyone else, but for me it signifies something so finite; the end of something. Basketball is my love. It always has been. And I can't ever envision an ending to something like that: the passion I have for the game. Not until I am dead and gone. Tomorrow I don't know what I'm going to do. I think about today. People don't believe I don't know what's going to happen next week, next month, or next year. But I truly live in the moment. My problem is that everyone expects me to live in the future."

PAUSE

Pressing forward now, in September of 2007 in advanced studio seminar course we are critiquing my project. On a white board I write MY PROJECT: The Expansive Love of Michael Jordan in big loopy cursive hand. This critique is in the largest drawing room in the west wing of my college art facility. The professor was an avid and technocratic abstract expressionist. She spoke with a thick and cumbersome austrian tongue. Year round she preferred earth toned dresses all of which exposed just over the appropriate amount of bare flesh. To begin I briefly outline some of the projects theoretical keystones, explore its ontological implications, and finally interpret some its tertiary ramifications.

**PROFESSOR:**

Can you explain a little more your process for this project?

**ME**

"I have used visualization techniques for as long as I can remember. I always visualized my success. It wasn't until later in my career that I realized the technique is something most people have to learn. I had been practicing the principles naturally my entire life. I visualized how many points I was going to score how I was going to score them how I was going to play and break down the my opponent. If I was playing against a scorer like Reggie Miller I would

envision his tendencies, his favorite spots on the ball. It's like I would watch this little game unfold in my mind. Then I'd make decisions based on what I saw."

CLASSMATE #1

I am really struggling to comprehend with the efficacy of this project.

ME

And then you had all of your media nay-sayers. Scoring champion can't win an NBA title. You're not as good as Magic Johnson. You're not as good as Larry Bird. Your good but you are not as good as those guys. You know I had to listen to all of this. And that put so much wood and fire and it kept me each and every day trying to get better as a player. I'm not saying they were wrong. I may have have looked at from a different perspective but you know at the same time as a player I'm trying to become the best I can, you know, and for someone like me who achieved a lot over the time of my career, you look for any kind of messages that people may say or do to get you motivated to play the game at the highest level. Because that is when I feel I excel at my best

CLASSMATE #2

But, like, Michael Jordan seems, like, so random.

ME

The game means everything to me. It is my wife. It demands loyalty and responsibility, and it gives me back fulfillment and peace. Who wouldn't want that?

CLASSMATE #3

But Michael Jordan is person. Not a collection of words.

ME

"Sometimes I feel like I am being pulled apart. There is this person that I am at home with my kids and then there is the other person. This other Michael. It the Michael people see on TV and in the commercials. That person that Michael I don't know who he is. "

PROFESSOR

Why all this?

ME

INTERVIEWER

Is there anything about your time in the NBA you wish you could forget?

MICHAEL JORDAN

There is what went on with me and Jerry. In the 1985/86 season I had injured my ankle but I wanted to play. The doctors said I had only about a 10% chance of doing any permanent damage. I know Jerry didn't want to risk it. We met in the manager's office in the administrative corridor of the old Bulls stadium. I remember it was the fourth door on the left. On his desk was

a picture of his him with his family. They were all dressed in winter clothes, jackets, scarves, mittens, everything. And even though they were standing in front of an enormous Christmas tree those kids looked absolutely miserable. Cold and tired. But not Jerry, no because the man he was standing next to the guy he had his arm around was Bill Clinton. Once I sat down he gave me this scenario, he said "What if I gave you ten pills in a bottle and one of them was coated with cyanide? Would you reach in and take the risk of grabbing the wrong pill?" I thought a for a moment and said, "You know what, Jerry, that's a hell of an analogy. But my answer is this: it depends on how bad the headache is."

INTERVIEWER

How bad was the headache?

MICHAEL JORDAN

How bad was the headache?

INTERVIEWER

How bad was the headache.

MICHAEL JORDAN

It was worse than anything I could ever imagine.