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Jessica Chastain photographed by Willy Vanderperre

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**Spring/Summer
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Literature Section
Guest Edited by
Geoff Dyer





Jennifer Jacquet & Brian Eno

The young economist and musical polymath discuss shame

"In societies up to a certain size, what shapes behaviour is not law, but honour and shame"

A rising star in her field, Jennifer Jacquet is author of the Guilty Planet blog, and currently writing a book on shame. "Financial execs received almost \$20 billion in bonuses in 2008, amid a financial crisis and a \$245 billion government bailout," she says. "Citigroup proposed buying a \$50 million corporate jet, shortly after receiving \$45 billion in taxpayer funds. About the jet, Obama said, 'They should know better', and he described the bonuses as 'shameful'. I'm asking myself, what is shame's purpose? Is shame still necessary? After all, it's not just bankers we have to worry about. Energy, food and water shortages, climate change, the threat of nuclear warfare - can all be characterised as tragedies in which the choices of individuals conflict with the greater good." One of the results of Jacquet's work is the creation of a modern shame totem pole, a new take inspired by an old idea: the totem poles that span the northwest coast where she lives and that we capture here. Native tribes in North America erected shame poles in the 19th century to signal to the community that individuals or groups had transgressed. Jacquet's modernised, 3-D pole represents the most shameful corporations in the world and was displayed at the Serpentine Gallery's annual marathon, where Brian Eno also spoke. The musician, artist and innovator who coined the

phrase "ambient music", Eno is also a co-founder of The Long Now Foundation, which encourages the public to think about the long-term future of society. Recently, he spent several days in the studio with Jacquet, perfecting a piece of music to accompany her shame pole. Here, Eno and Jacquet share an emailed conversation about their collaboration.

Brian Eno
15 October 2011 22:15 GMT
Dear Jennifer,

Your interest in shame is what interests me. In societies up to a certain size, what shapes behaviour is not law, but honour and shame. Law is what develops when the distances between people become too great for honour and shame to operate. What I'm wondering now is whether in a globalised society, "shame" could operate over a much larger distance... at least I hope that's the case.

Jennifer Jacquet
16 October 2011 09:35 PST
Dear Brian,

I was initially attracted to shame because we have many issues where a very small minority is capable of ruining something for the rest of us. What surprises me - and shouldn't - is that



in the experiments I conduct I see some players behave absolutely shamelessly.

Brian Eno

18 October 2011 21:16 GMT

Some people don't experience feelings of shame, and are therefore not constrained by them. It's especially true of those who are already "beyond the pale": since they have no investment in the social group anyway, they have nothing to lose by behaving shamefully. It's the strongest argument I can think of for the various forms of inclusivity that get labeled "socialism" by Americans (but are seen as self-evidently sensible in many Scandinavian countries) – social welfare, prisoner rehabilitation, free education... If you allow a society to develop where a significant proportion of its members are beyond the reach of shame – because they don't feel they have a stake in the society – then you have to proportionately ramp up the machinery of control and punishment to deal with the results. America is the best example of this, with its enormous prison population and "shameless" behaviour at each end of the wealth spectrum (it's at the ends of the spectrum that people feel "outside" society). Perhaps we dislike the bankers so much because they seem to see themselves as above the fray,

brilliant and superior. They never saw themselves as part of the neighbourhood.

Major problems – overexploited resources, pollution – would surely be relieved if we could somehow stimulate a better sense of "neighbourhood" among the world's nations. That's why I'm a strong supporter of the idea of the European Union: it's centred around the notion that there could be a neighbourly relationship between nations based on something other than trade and power, kept in line instead by some form of social conscience.

Jennifer Jacquet

26 October 2011 10:45 PST

It's also interesting to consider shame's relationship to capital – if you have more money and the group knows it, are you more likely to experience or avoid shame? Most of the bankers weren't doing anything illegal. But the fact that many institutions change their names after bad behaviour shows that they aren't out of shame's reach.

Brian Eno

05 November 2011 18:29 GMT

There's another whole category of activities which

"Perhaps we dislike the bankers so much because they seem to see themselves as above the fray, brilliant and superior"



"The recent bank collapse was not brought about by illegal behaviour, it was behaviour entirely consistent with the current rules of the game"

require law, and these are ones in which there's no obvious mechanism which could evoke shame. In general, the recent bank collapse was not brought about by illegal behaviour – quite the opposite, it was behaviour that was entirely consistent with the current rules of the game.

However, we know from experience that the outcome is disastrous: monopolies become tyrannical, and investment banking of the unconstrainedly abstract variety tends to collapse the whole economy. But I would think that very few of the participants feel shame (any more than a soldier led into a stupidly conceived battle does). They didn't do anything "wrong".

In England we have a highly developed social norm that prevails entirely without legal intervention: queuing. Even to this day there's an immense communal frown and loud criticism if anybody dares to jump a queue. It's one of the only occasions when the normally timid English will actually raise their voices in public.

Jennifer Jacquet

04 November 2011 07:18 PST

Queuing is an excellent example. My friend from the BBC was in China filming just before the Olympics, and said tackling the queue was

the Olympic planners' biggest nightmare. They were hosting "National Queuing Day" and government officials were on television saying "the nation is still not queuing" and emphasising the importance of fairness in line.

Brian Eno

07 November 2011 21:21 GMT

There's an interesting rule in British soccer. It's called the offside rule. At first it seems entirely tacked on – a fudge. It says that a player near the other team's goal can't receive a pass from his team unless there are two opposing players between him and the goal. It's a weird and random rule, quite hard to police, and it exists for only one reason: if it didn't, it would make perfect sense for each team to permanently station a couple (or four, or six!) of their players at the opposing goalmouth and just wait for the ball to reach them, at which point they would almost inevitably score a goal. Perhaps that's exactly what happened in the very first games of soccer – and it was quickly realised that it made for a very dull sport. So a "law" was passed, and we end up instead with "The Beautiful Game". Actually I prefer Scrabble.

Photography Tyler Udall