A few months ago I got an email from Professor James Porter asking me if I would like to give this commencement address. I was very excited and even more surprised by this question. You and I don’t know each other, but I am guessing that how I felt when I read that email was exactly how many of you would feel. Imagine this: you graduate today, and a few months go by, your life after Berkeley has barely begun, and suddenly you get an email from the chair of Rhetoric asking if you’d like to come back and give this address. And imagine if, to make matters worse, you only then realized that it had been, not a few months, but ten years since you’d gotten your Rhetoric degree. Very unsettling. I wondered: had I done anything in the intervening decade to make myself a plausible graduation speaker? Or was the department perhaps mixing me up with another person? In my everyday life, I often suspect I’m being mistaken for someone else. I’m sure this is partly because people often maintain that I look exactly like someone else. Sometimes the other person they have in mind is my mother, as everyone agrees we’re identical; or sometimes it’s just: another Jewish person they happen to have met. Rarely is it a movie star. I thought: if I could get a movie star to deliver this commencement address in my place, I mean, as me, who would it be? I thought Robert Pattinson might be a good choice. But I wonder what you think. (Looking at you, Film and Media!) After all, this is a commencement address, which I think means it’s supposed to be about you, not me.

Who are you? What would you want me to say, besides: congratulations! well done! When I told my friend Anne that I was going to be giving this speech, she said that once when she had to do one somewhere else, she came across the reassuring fact that no one actually remembers the speeches from their graduation. It’s a relief to know that in the years to come, none of you will remember what I’m saying right now. That would presumably still be true even if I were being played by Robert Pattinson, probably even more so, since there would be so much more going on at the level of performance to distract you from this text. I think with enough eyeliner I could be a passable batman, but since that doesn’t seem to be in the cards, I’ll try to say something, and then you can forget it at your leisure.

You’re graduating! This is amazing. Truly. The past few years, the years you’ve spent here, working towards this moment? I sat at my laptop brainstorming adjectives. None of them felt sufficient. People, these years have been so hard. And so many of us have felt deep doubts about the value of going on. And yet, you have kept going. You have kept coming here, sometimes bodily, sometimes electronically; you have kept directing yourself along the path you had chosen; you have honored the commitment you made to yourself to get here; and here you are. I hope you are proud. I hope that even if you still feel terrible a lot of the time, that you can also feel proud, and good, that you did all the hard things you had to do to be here now; and I hope that you know and will remember this strength you’re capable of.
Should I have saved that for the end? What more can I say to you, class of 2023? I didn’t go to my own Rhetoric slash Film graduation, where I would have received my PhD. I still frequently have dreams in which I haven’t graduated yet, because I’ve forgotten to attend the class fulfilling the “math requirement.” I wish I could believe that if I’d gone to my graduation, I wouldn’t be plagued by these dreams, because that would bode well for you. But unfortunately, it turns out people who went to their graduations also have these dreams, so you probably won’t be spared either, even though you’ve gamely shown up, put on the costumes, moved in the formations, submerged yourself in this ritual.

But there are other good reasons for you to be here today, things about this moment I think you won’t forget. An event like this, as you know, takes a lot of work to pull off. Looking around you can see some, not all, of the people whose labor went into staging this ceremony. For you, though, graduates, I hope this day offers a chance to stop working, at least for a little bit, at least for a breath. I hope some part of this day can be a breath, a pause; I hope that just as your cap and gown turn your body into strangely abstract shapes, the day's proceedings can offer your psyche a corresponding kind of abstraction. I hope you are proud of yourself today; but I also hope today gives you a beat in which you can retreat from being the particular person you are, in the particular life you have, with all the responsibilities that entails. I hope today can be something other than real life for you, if “real life” means all the things you are always having to do for all the people you are always having to appease or take care of. If real life is the relentless churn of demands on your attention, your energy, your care... can this be a moment in which you step out of the stream for a minute, and let yourself feel the possibility of something different?

You are here because you have just accomplished a daunting series of tasks. You have met the requirements. You have found ways to inhabit a mechanism that conveys some people from one stage of life to the next. For some of you, this is the kind of move that will continue to feel repeatable, at least for a good while. You will look around for systems that offer the things you want—maybe: health insurance. A chance to help. More money than you’ve had before. Adventure. Security. You’ll see a path towards getting those things, and you’ll take the path, which is to say, it will take you. For some of you, it will be less clear how to move towards the things you want. And for some of you, it will be harder to know what you want, and sometimes hard to want anything at all. I realize I’m talking now at a level of generality that may be preventing me from saying much, because there are a lot of you, and you occupy different social positions, with different prospects, and I know that junctures like this make those differences painfully clear, even as the day’s costuming and language tend to paint a homogenizing picture. But I think it’s accurate to say that in very different ways, our society is currently trying to swallow you: to turn you into something it can use.

For most of you, being useful will be a requirement for having health insurance. You live in a country that refuses its inhabitants the most basic protections, so especially if you have other people who depend on you, you will make choices based on your need to protect those people, now or in the future. You will try to amass resources to share with those you love. You will be afraid to step away from the mechanism that provides those resources. Some of you will defeat
fear by seizing the mechanism—the institution that employs you, let’s say—from within, with a reformist zeal. You’ll rise in the ranks, confident that you can make things better for more people; you’ll find a way of being that effectively conveys your wholesome intentions to the people around you and to yourself; and you’ll take opportunities like this one to exhort younger workers in your field to do the same. Having begun to rise, you’ll recognize the positional power you now have, and acknowledge the responsibility that power entails, and you’ll work really hard to chip away at the inequities and oppressions to which the mechanism subjects those less privileged than yourself. There will be victories. You will improve things. Your successes will bring offers of more power, which you’ll accept because you know you can use it to accomplish more improvements for more people. You might be tired all the time; your body might, as they say, keep the score; but even if your muscles get flabby from neglect, or wobbly from constant clenching, your spiritual core will be rock-solid. All the time you’ve spent doing all this good work will have strengthened your confidence in the logic of cause and effect. And even if many of the people you’ve helped will never know how much you’ve done for them, you’ll know; and plus, once in a while, a few of them will be grateful for your help, your work, your care.

Some of you won’t manage to do any of this. Instead, you will remain in a state of unrelieved alienation. You’ll look at the institutions and mechanisms that surround you, and sense an unbridgeable gulf between you and whoever is in charge of them. You’ll find it impossible to believe that someone like you could have any effect on these systems, which seem to have been built by and for members of another species—creatures, say, with strange square cap-heads and voluminous gown-bodies. But at the same time, you’ll see that life outside these systems is fraught with peril, physical suffering, and an inability to secure the survival of those you love. So you will use your dubious talents and charms to curry favor with those who don’t feel as weirded-out as you do; you will build your odd nests in the unwindowed corners of their corner offices, and try to amuse them, or listen to them, or refresh them, or surprise them, or hurt them, or whatever else they’d like you to do, as long as they don’t kick you out. And you’ll go home in the evening, or close your laptop and get up from your desk after the last zoom, and you probably won’t feel free, but maybe you will get some pleasure out of the feeling of returning to yourself, to the alien you are, for a few hours; and maybe there will be someone there to share your alien supper of gooey crickets and strawberry milk, or maybe you will have yourself to be in on the joke with. Maybe you’ll write something.

Of course, for most of you, life will probably fall somewhere between these two scenarios. And who knows: there may even be a few of you who find that the existing mechanisms suit you fine just as they are. I’m not constructing this taxonomy because I think you need to choose between goodness and wrongness, choose which kind of creature you want to be, grownup or gollum. I don’t even know if it’s something you can choose. I know that I want a world in which both of these ways of living exist. And I know also that a world in which these are the ways of living, is a world that has failed at being a world.

In my graduate playwriting workshop this spring, I asked my students to read a very short essay by my favorite philosopher, Theodor Adorno. I fell in love with Adorno when I was a rhetoric student. Because a rhetoric and or film and media student is a wildly polymorphous thing, and
also because it’s been ten years, I don’t know if many of you have been reading Adorno here. Maybe you all hate him. Even at the time, one reason I liked him so much was that most people I knew seemed to prefer his friend Walter Benjamin. Adorno was born in Germany in 1903 and died in 1969. If you have seen photographs of Adorno, you know that in middle age, he looked a lot like a baby. His friends called him Teddy. And in his books he is very, very upset. The piece I read with my students this year is from a book called *Minima Moralia*, which he wrote during and after World War II. In this book, whose subtitle is “Reflections from Damaged Life,” he famously wrote: “wrong life cannot be lived rightly.” A lot of Adorno’s writing is devoted to theorizing the ways society has failed and violated the people who comprise society: for him, the rise of fascism is the most telling symptom of that violence, but the historical logic (or illogic) of capitalism is always its engine and its fabric. When Adorno says that wrong life cannot be lived rightly, he means that the modern world has been so thoroughly structured by domination that there is no way to be right, much less righteous, inside of it. He’s not saying that it’s ok not to even try. Rather, by the very fact of making the argument that we cannot live rightly, he is demonstrating his fidelity to a rightness that exists as possibility even though it is beyond our reach. He is insisting that it is worth our time to keep thinking through the world’s wrongness, not because thinking helps fix it, but because this labor of thought is a way of sheltering an irrational longing we mostly, most of the time, have to repress, in order to get anything done, or to take care of the people we care about: I mean the longing for a world that would deserve our love.

The piece I read with my students is called “The Truth About Hedda Gabler,” and it’s inspired by the heroine of a famous play. Hedda is a character who makes terrible choices. She is the kind of person who doesn’t want to make things better, for anyone else or even for herself. She is cruel and destructive, and she is right when she tells another character: “the only thing I have any talent for is boring myself to death”: in fact this is basically what she goes on to do (spoiler). She thinks everything around her is ugly and stupid, and she pointlessly starts trouble in hopes that the drama will make her life more like an actual play: living out a tragedy might be sad, but would at least be beautiful. Let me be clear that I’m not recommending this course of action to you, graduates, and neither is Adorno. But within Hedda’s shallow obsession with beauty, and her refusal to do any of the right things, he sees a flash of value, of truth. Hedda, he writes, “recognizes in the best the shame of the good.” In other words, her refusal to do her best, to make the best of a life that keeps disappointing her, or to care that the people around her are doing their best and therefore deserve her compassion and respect... her refusal to do any of these things may be selfish and bratty, but it resonates with the truth that none of these “bests” is really good enough, because none of them calls the structure of society into question. Adorno writes: “She represents... unconsciously and absurdly, the absolute.”

Something Adorno doesn’t mention about Hedda Gabler is that since the play was written in 1890, it’s been a role lots of actresses would kill for. Audiences, too—and I want to say especially women and femmes—have historically responded to this character with great pleasure and intense identification. Of course, most times I’ve taught this play there have also been students who point out that Hedda is a sociopath—and they’re not wrong. We might also say she’s perverse, courting destruction and self-destruction for the sake of her own enjoyment,
and ours. Graduates, I do not want you to court destruction, and especially not self-destruction. I hope you will make the best possible future, given the monstrous present that confronts you. And I hope you will draw on your sense of beauty, your faculties of enjoyment, to sustain you in this task. But I confess I also hope pleasure will do something else for you, something a little more like what Adorno says Hedda does.

What if I asked you, BAs and PhDs of film and media and rhetoric, to take this moment to “represent the absolute”? When I said a few minutes ago that I hoped you would let the profound strangeness of this liminal moment bump you momentarily out of sync with the systems you have mastered in order to get here, and whose support you will continue to need, I meant something like this: can you try to feel, not all the time but sometimes, the fleshy kernel in your gut that tells you that nothing that’s being offered to you is good enough? That the best you will ever do in the world we’ve got now, and the best it will do for you, will still be wrong, because the structure of the world is wrong? BUT: instead of letting that conviction keep you in despair, can you find practices of thinking, of making, maybe even practices of loving that honor and protect the claim of the good world, the world we don’t have?

Graduates in Rhetoric, or Film and Media, what are we? In my first semester here, I learned that Plato conceived the rhetor, or rhetorician, or sophist, essentially as a person who is skilled at doing the wrong thing with words. Rhetoric is the practice of “making the weaker argument defeat the stronger.” It is a perverse approach to language, because instead of seeking to offer the best approximation of the truth, or praise the best behavior, rhetoric can make the best look wrong, and make the bad, the weak, the impossible, sound somehow better. This is of course also the classic charge leveled against Media as such, the distorting shadow-play that always gets reality wrong. I know that for most of you, rhetoric and media and film are terms that have meant things very different from this. But I hope that once in a while, when you look at your diploma and see the words inked there, you’ll take them as a provocation or permission to take a breath, a pause, a break from doing the best you can with what you’ve really got; and listen instead for the world you aren’t living in, but which might be living somewhere in you.