

## Regis University ePublications at Regis University

---

All Regis University Theses

---

Spring 2006

# Holding Back the Flood: Thom Yorke, Radiohead, and Post-Industrial Capitalism

Matthew R. Wallace

*Regis University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://epublications.regis.edu/theses>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Wallace, Matthew R., "Holding Back the Flood: Thom Yorke, Radiohead, and Post-Industrial Capitalism" (2006). *All Regis University Theses*. 513.

<https://epublications.regis.edu/theses/513>

This Thesis - Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by ePublications at Regis University. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Regis University Theses by an authorized administrator of ePublications at Regis University. For more information, please contact [epublications@regis.edu](mailto:epublications@regis.edu).

**Regis University**  
Regis College  
**Honors Theses**

# **Disclaimer**

Use of the materials available in the Regis University Thesis Collection ("Collection") is limited and restricted to those users who agree to comply with the following terms of use. Regis University reserves the right to deny access to the Collection to any person who violates these terms of use or who seeks to or does alter, avoid or supersede the functional conditions, restrictions and limitations of the Collection.

The site may be used only for lawful purposes. The user is solely responsible for knowing and adhering to any and all applicable laws, rules, and regulations relating or pertaining to use of the Collection.

All content in this Collection is owned by and subject to the exclusive control of Regis University and the authors of the materials. It is available only for research purposes and may not be used in violation of copyright laws or for unlawful purposes. The materials may not be downloaded in whole or in part without permission of the copyright holder or as otherwise authorized in the "fair use" standards of the U.S. copyright laws and regulations.

**HOLDING BACK THE FLOOD:  
THOM YORKE, RADIOHEAD, AND POST-INDUSTRIAL CAPITALISM**

**A thesis submitted to  
Regis College  
The Honors Program  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for Graduation with Honors**

**by**

Matthew R. Wallace

**May 2006**



**Thesis written by**

Matthew R. Wallace

**Approved by**

---

Dr. Lara Narcisi, Thesis Advisor

---

Dr. Mark Bruhn, Thesis Reader

**Accepted by**

---

Dr. Thomas Bowie, Director, University Honors Program



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface and Acknowledgments	vii
I. "We Will Not Be Silent. We Are Your Bad Conscience."	1
II. "Ice Age Coming"	18
III. "Wolf at the Door"	39
Bibliography	60

## Preface and Acknowledgments

"Was sind das für Zeiten, wo  
Ein Gespräch über Bäume fast ein Verbrechen ist  
Weil es ein Schweigen über so viele Untaten einschließt!"<sup>1</sup>

-Bertolt Brecht, "An die Nachgeborenen"

"The weight of this sad time we must obey,  
Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.  
The oldest hath borne most; we that are young  
Shall never see so much, nor live so long."

-William Shakespeare, *King Lear*

Chuck Klosterman, snarky Gen X *vox populi*, writes, "whenever you talk to collegiate musicologists about music, they will often complain that rock writers place entirely too much emphasis on the content of song lyrics" (181-82).

I am not a rock writer.

Klosterman adds, "academics tend to argue that lyrics have only nominal importance; they will say that pop critics tend to see songs as having two parts—words and music—and that this is an example of ignorance" (182).

I am not a pop critic, or an academic, at least in any traditional or certifiable sense. I am, however, an American. A privileged, white, male American, to be more precise. I have never begged for food, slept outside (except during an ill-fated school year as a Boy Scout), and I have certainly never stared down the business end of a Kalashnikov. I have never witnessed, much less been victim of, a natural disaster (I did see a tornado once growing up outside Chicago. Or maybe I dreamed that). I have never dealt with (corrupt) cops, or had to face discrimination because of

---

<sup>1</sup> What times are these, where a conversation about trees is almost a crime because silence passes over so much infamy?



my gender, sexuality, race, socioeconomic status, et. al. I don't count discrimination against privileged, white American males as a serious prejudice; in fact, given my own left-leaning tendencies, I once had something of a problem with privileged, white American males myself.

My point here is that I like Radiohead. A lot. I was only eight years-old, obsessed with archaeology and spelling when "Creep" first hit the airwaves and *Pablo Honey* flew off record store shelves. I first heard them in 2001, when I bought their 1997 *magnum opus*<sup>2</sup>, *OK Computer*, on a whim. This does not make me much of a Radiohead fan, just as I am no rock writer, pop critic, or an academic. I dabble in all three, but honestly, I am just an overeducated American. I imagine a lot of rock writers<sup>3</sup> and pop critics are, too. So what gives me the right to pen a sixty-page essay on the relationship between Radiohead and subjects like existential philosophy, environmental concerns, or contemporary politics?

Here's why: because I *am* an overeducated, privileged, white American male. I can afford to buy psychoanalytic porn by Slavoj Žižek<sup>4</sup> or Fugazi bootlegs from 1990—and at the time of this writing, I make less than \$300 a month. My logic comes back to the simple fact that I do not have a post-graduate degree in anything (yet), nor have I ever written for *SPIN*. I might be a bit overeducated, but that still does not make me a professional when it comes to much of anything. I'm an overeducated music fan, but I won't be writing for *Rolling Stone* anytime soon.

I'm not fettered by the politics of music journalism or academic competition, and hence, I feel like I can add my voice to a crowded conversation about what it means to live a privileged life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I feel that I can try to speak for folks intimidated by cutting-edge post-postmodern poseurs, self-important rock critics, and frequently boring political activists. And for me, the subject of this analysis was obvious: the work of a band like Radiohead, with an

---

<sup>2</sup> This is a hotly debated issue. But *OK Computer* has always been my favorite Radiohead album. If I have any say, a song like "Paranoid Android" will feature prominently in both my wedding and my funeral.

<sup>3</sup> e.g., Chuck Klosterman. No offense intended to Klosterman; I imagine he would agree with my assumption. Though he might disapprove of the way I use footnotes much the way he does.

<sup>4</sup> Pun intended.

international fan base, critical acclaim, and proven commercial success, something privileged people like me can understand, whether they are Radiohead fans or not (but I hope they are). And in order for me to embark on this strange voyage, I started with what I knew. I started with the band's lyrics.

Chuck Klosterman believes "that discernible lyrics are—by and large—dismissed. The elitist belief is that hearing what an artist is saying is either (a) totally irrelevant, or (b) only relevant when difficult." More importantly, "what...elitists forget is that normal people never think like that. Normal people want to hear what artists are saying, and normal people tend to perceive the vox as the sole identity of the artistic product" (182). I realize that I fit quite well in the elitist category; I adore "difficult" lyrics, and I almost never perceive "the vox as the sole identity of the artistic product." And I am pretty sure I am not a normal person. I am fairly certain that normal people do not read Slavoj Žižek, nor do they even know who Slavoj Žižek is.

Normal people slightly frighten me, if they fit the definition Chuck Klosterman provides, and they only frighten me because I relate to Radiohead the same way people who listen to modern country relate to Keith Urban or Trisha Yearwood. Klosterman mentions a Yearwood song called "She's in Love with the Boy," which was apparently once quite popular<sup>5</sup>, and notes that "the lyrics to this song are highly specific, but secretly universal....There are thousands of people in this country who still can't believe Trish Yearwood perfectly described the teenage experience of someone they know in real life. And the amazing thing is they're all correct" (182-83). I feel precisely the same about Radiohead; some songs are highly specific, but I feel like they describe my own experiences, or the experiences of people I know.

Take a song like "No Surprises" from *OK Computer*. I hear lyrics like "A heart that's full up like a landfill / a job that slowly kills you," and somehow, I find myself immediately moved, although my heart isn't "full up like a landfill," nor do I have "a job that slowly kills" me. I certainly do not want "a handshake of carbon monoxide," but I will take "a quiet life . . . with no alarms and no surprises." This song, at least to me, perfectly captures what it means to live a

---

<sup>5</sup> I have never heard this song in my life. Or maybe I have, but only while waiting in line to buy batteries and orange juice at Safeway.

privileged life and sincerely hate that privilege, without necessarily knowing why. I do know what it is like to feel "tired" and "unhappy" because I had the opportunity to go to college without having to work full-time to pay for it, which, I know, seems counter-intuitive, but it's true. I know what it feels like to think we ought to "bring down the government" because "they don't speak for us" every time I hear the latest body count from Iraq. I have the privilege to sit around my apartment in my underwear (sewn by child workers in Southeast Asia), consume more calories than some people eat in a week, and take a thirty-minute hot shower after reading Marx. Like the speaker in "No Surprises," living in a "pretty house," being employed, and exercising my freedom of speech to advocate sedition depresses me. It depresses me because I feel guilty; I feel I do not deserve the privilege I was born into.

Yes, it is self-indulgent, but what Radiohead captures has something that most internationally-recognized contemporary musicians lack. They force me to ask myself *why* a song like "No Surprises" affects me as profoundly as it does. After a while, I needed to know why this song comforts and confronts me at the same time. I needed to articulate its effect. And when I came to understand that the song describes a kind of privileged ennui, I wanted to do something about that ennui. I wanted to feel better about my existence; I wanted to do something with it that I can feel good about.

The lyrical content of many Radiohead songs reminds me that, as Bertolt Brecht once wrote, "so much silence passes over so much infamy." Radiohead reminds me, just as Edgar concludes in *King Lear*, that "we must speak what we feel, / not what we ought to say." After all, what passes for silence these days is a constant static of gutless pop music, celebrity gossip, and advertisements for effortless weight loss, and that this silence, if most conventional news sources tell us anything, is "what we ought to say." What we "ought to say" is absolutely nothing worthwhile. The world expects us to speak this language of silence; whenever people honestly speak their minds, most people ignore them. When people do take honesty seriously, the honest frequently suffer for it beyond a mere cold shoulder from cultural authorities; think folks like

Oscar Romero, the White Rose (Munich students who protested Nazi Germany in 1941 and '42), and every prophet folks thought was wrong until their prophecies came true<sup>6</sup>.

Nobody wants to suffer for speaking honestly—i.e., pointing out what is wrong with the world around them, rather than shutting up or making meaningless small talk about American Idol. Oscar Romero, the members of the White Rose, and Jesus Christ all died at the hands of cultural authorities, whether they were the Romans, the Nazis, or a murderer who later becomes the "leader-for-life" El Salvador's ARENA party<sup>7</sup>. They died not because they were forward thinking; they died because they saw what was wrong in the world around them, and they tried to do something about it.

I doubt Thom Yorke, Jonny Greenwood, Ed O'Brien, Colin Greenwood, or Phil Selway will ever need to worry about suffering the grisly fates of various prophets. But they see that things are fundamentally wrong with the way the world operates. And unlike other prophets, people revere them, rather than revile them. Nor does the band operate outside the systems that maintain the injustices they criticize; they enjoy international critical acclaim and a fan base that likely numbers in the millions. Radiohead has firmly entrenched itself in this current iteration of capitalism, and for precisely this reason, they are should be included in the number of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century prophets.

What good comes from speaking what we feel when no one listens? When we speak about the inconsequential, what good comes from that if anybody listens? With Radiohead, we have a commercially and artistically successful group that manages to address contemporary issues to a large audience. They may not directly change anything themselves, that is, beyond their own conduct when it comes to working with record companies or addressing the environmental

---

<sup>6</sup> People now know that Hitler was bad news, and if you ask most Americans, Jesus definitely had something to say, but it's taking way too long for people to realize what the United States was doing to Latin America after World War II.

<sup>7</sup> "The neo-nazi Roberto d'Aubuisson is generally assumed to be responsible for [Oscar Romero's] assassination (among countless other atrocities). D'Aubuisson was "leader-for-life" of the ARENA party, which now governs El Salvador" (What Uncle Same Really Wants 34-35). Chomsky's words still have highly specific modern resonance; the ARENA party still governs El Salvador.

impact of specific outdoor concert events. But with such a large fan base, they affect their listeners. And when we take the time to actively listen to the art these musicians create, we ought to come away with something at least a bit unsettling. Hence the other purpose for writing this: academics should not solely be the realm of scholars, just as music should not be, and is not, solely the realm of music critics. I hope you will find that cogent cultural and political criticism lies not merely within arcane circles of scholasticism, but rather all around us. All we need to do is listen.

I hope that readers come away from this endeavor recognizing the irony of one of Radiohead's earlier songs, "Stop Whispering." In it, Yorke laments, "dear sir, I have a complaint," but he "can't remember what it is." I hope that readers begin to remember what these complaints are, and that musicians, music fans—indeed, anyone with a legitimate complaint about the injustices in our world—will "find the words" and "find the songs" to "stop whispering" and finally "start shouting."

This work would not have been possible without the help of a number of folks. First and foremost, I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Lara Narcisi, whose literary theory exam provided the catalyst for this project, not to mention her constant support and encouragement. Additionally, I would like to thank Dr. Mark Bruhn, who provided me with invaluable advice on my prose, organization, and rightly suggested I tone down the Bono-bashing.

I also extend my gratitude to several other professors, like Dr. Randy Lumpp, whose Christian Existentialism class helped me develop the ideas in the chapter "Ice Age Coming," and of course, Dr. Thomas Bowie, who designed the entire thesis project to be a more manageable and meaningful one, and like all of my professors, has encouraged me well before this process had even begun.

Lastly, I would like to thank my parents, Bob and Mary Alice Wallace, because without them, I would not even be writing this in the first place. No matter how bad I screw up, they have always been there for me.

And, of course, my thanks to Radiohead, who have given me reason to be angry and hope that things may change for the better.

### I. "We Will Not Be Silent. We Are Your Bad Conscience."

Silence is inhumanity's most valuable asset. More so than machine guns, shock troops, tanks or nuclear weapons, the tacit assent of millions legitimizes the horrors of human history, from the Spanish Inquisition, the Holocaust, the murders of approximately 40,000 in Nicaragua (Chomsky 251), to the recent genocide in Darfur, among countless other examples.

Yet in "die finsternen Zeiten," the gloomy times, as Brecht wrote in the poem "An die Nachgeborenen" while in exile from Nazi Germany, something once as casual and commonplace as human speech or the printed word becomes something else entirely. It becomes heroic. Consider the White Rose, a group of students in Germany, which began with siblings Hans and Sophie Scholl and their mutual friend, Christoph Probst, at the University of Munich during the Third Reich. Standing face to face with the brutal policies of Nazi Germany, distributing leaflets that condemn, often vaguely, the crimes of their nation, they eventually faced Roland Freisler, judge of the "People's Court," who condemned them to death on Monday, February 22nd, 1943 (Dumbach and Newborn 155-56). Their crime: Hans and Sophie dropped "700 to 1,800" leaflets from the top of the University's *Lichthof*, "the large inner courtyard of the University" between classes, when Jakob Schmid, a janitor, placed them under citizen's arrest (145-46).

Roland Freisler ordered their executions four days later, following a short trial. Three hours after the verdict, prison officials carried out Freisler's sentence; the two were beheaded at 5:00 PM.

The Nazis made a grievous error. The public elevated the core members of the White Rose to the status of heroic martyrs. Not long afterwards the few remaining members of the movement died at the hands of Nazi zealots. Then "on April 19, 1943, the remaining Jewish inhabitants of the Warsaw Ghetto rose up against the Nazi murderers," and so, the German state's leather-gloved stranglehold over the oppressed and the silent began to slip. And as the authors of *Sophie Scholl and the White Rose* aptly conclude, "when the powerless and oppressed, no matter how hopeless their situation, refuse to accept the will of their oppressors, we are all touched with grace" (175)..

This is not a treatise on resistance in Nazi Germany. Rather, this is a treatise on resistance itself— most urgently, resistance in contemporary society. Modern states no longer need the gun or the guillotine to silence opposing voices; they have far more clandestine and efficient methods of squelching dissent. In line with scholars like Robert Dahl and Robert McChesney, who both document "the undemocratic features of the US political system" and "the role of the media in undermining democratic politics," Noam Chomsky suggests that "fundamental social change is necessary to bring meaningful democracy" to the United States.

Chomsky reminds us that "Nazi propaganda techniques were borrowed from business doctrines and practices that were mostly pioneered in the Anglo-American societies," most prominently, the US and the UK. As he observes, Goebbels and the Nazi state "resort[ed] to simple 'symbols and slogans' with 'tremendously reiterated impressions' that appeal to fear and other elementary emotions in the manner of commercial advertising." Goebbels, in fact, "boasted that he would use American advertising methods' to 'sell National Socialism' much as business seeks to sell 'chocolate, toothpaste, and patent medicines'" (210).

Sadly, some similarities between Nazi Germany and contemporary Western nations still exist: Goebbel's use of American advertising methods, increasingly belligerent foreign policy, and a surge in nationalism. These pressing, urgent matters threaten not only our own safety and well-being, but the safety and well-being of people everywhere, and as such, deserve and require our immediate attention. While dissent and opinions that oppose those of US national policy flourish, they seem to go largely unnoticed or ignored by many; consider, for instance, the incredibly biased, if nonexistent, news coverage of anti-globalization protests in Seattle and Genoa.

Enter Radiohead: a band worshipped by music fans and rock critics alike, with timely, though cryptic, lyrical admonitions and a perfectly matched sound. Fronted by geek extraordinaire, Thom Yorke, who also recently released his first solo album, *The Eraser*, Yorke and company confront contemporary realities in a sincere way that fans and critics alike can relate to. And perhaps in response to such matters as military belligerence, nationalism, globalization, in addition to growing environmental concerns, Yorke seems to fans and critics



more confused student than celebrity spokesman. More pub ranter than soundbite-spewing talking head.<sup>8</sup> He's more like most of us, in fact. No wonder Radiohead's 23 million album sales and staggering worldwide success come underpinned by hero-worship of Yorke. Fans can relate to him in a way that they never can to superhero Bono and Hollywood-affiliated [Coldplay frontman] Chris Martin. (McClellan)

What makes Yorke more human than superhuman is his frailty and seeming desperation, his lack of concrete answers; like many activists, he appears a "confused student." Like other activists, "he will turn up at RAF Fairford to protest the beginning of the Iraq war; or at Westminster for a Trade Justice Movement rally; or at a CND anti-Star Wars demo in Yorkshire. Or he'll perform an all-night vigil in Westminster Abbey in support of the world's poorest workers" (McClellan). Like other concerned activists, he spends much of his time in the public eye attempting to hold back various floods: war, globalization, and poverty. For those of us concerned with the war in Iraq, the militarization of space, nuclear weaponry, exploitation of the poor, or environmental concerns, he is more "one of us" than someone like Bono<sup>9</sup>. These concerns are all related, however seemingly disparate; what binds them invisibly but inextricably is the culture of capitalism.

Further, Radiohead, and specifically Yorke's, paranoia, reveals an all-too-human tendency towards desperation, rather than the admirable, but less viable and less (superficially) persuasive utopianism that suffuses the political opinions of rock icons like Bono, or even John

---

<sup>8</sup> The band got its name from a Talking Heads song: "Radio Head," from the soundtrack to the film *True Stories*, a song that confronts how we as privileged Americans are passive receivers, and the film itself seriously critiques capitalism.

<sup>9</sup> Bono makes significant financial contributions to various causes: for example, ONE, which aims to lobby "Washington to donate an additional 1% of the federal budget to end poverty." Nevertheless, "Bono's own dealings haven't always followed the altruistic ideals he espouses, says Richard Murphy, a Downham Market, U.K.-based advisor to the Tax Justice Network, an international lobbying group. He points to the band's decision to move its music publishing company to the Netherlands from Ireland in June, 2006, to minimize taxes. The move came six months before Ireland ended an exemption on royalty income, which generally is untaxed in the Netherlands" (Tomlinson and O'Brien).

Lennon. Bono does not suffer from this kind of existential angst in front of TV cameras or interviewers, proclaiming publicly and explicitly that he's "not doing enough! None of us are," as Yorke did. According to Yorke, if you are a celebrity, "you're not supposed to say that," as he tells Craig McClean in an *Observer* interview. And he knows that "no one's going to come out of this," especially a celebrity, "dirt-free; I don't come out of it dirt-free. It's basically...having to make a decision whether to do nothing or try to engage with it in some way, knowing it's flawed. It's convenient to project that back on to someone personally and say they're a hypocrite...we all are" (qtd. in McClean).

Not even the idealistic, perhaps naive members of the White Rose are exempt from this charge, either. They were oppressed, but not to the extent that Jews, homosexuals, communists, gypsies, Russian prisoners-of-war, and other groups had been at the time. Sophie Scholl and her brother were University students, as Yorke once was, a persona he still seems to cling to. Nevertheless, that does not tarnish their efforts. Because all of us are so entangled in the culture of capitalism, no one's efforts can be written off as illegitimate or hypocritical—provided those efforts don't primarily seek financial gain.

But everyone has to make a living, Yorke and Bono included. Their success, however, doesn't necessarily implicate them in the missteps and crimes of the system that sustains them. Perhaps Radiohead's success makes their messages, and Yorke's, all the more legitimate. Nick Duerden's interview in *The Independent* reinforces this: "whatever the reason, Yorke's cheerless worldview seem[s] only to be compounded by his group's success" (Duerden). Yorke finds himself "duly mortified;" nevertheless, "he had, perhaps mercifully, finally found a worthy vent for his ire" in Radiohead's commercial and critical success over the years between the group's early success with "Creep" through the release of *The Eraser*. "You have a certain amount of credit you can cash in with celebrity," he tells Duerden, "and I'm cashing my chips in with this." Duerden concludes that "dissatisfaction is the emotion on which [Yorke] thrives, and thank goodness for that. The snarl suits him. Duerden seems to miss the larger point of Yorke's outward appearance; the "snarl" is not the trademark of a cynical rock star, but a man deeply concerned with the effects of post-industrial capitalism on the individual human subject. Whether "[taking]

issue with conglomerate owned record companies”<sup>10</sup> or Tony Blair’s policies on the environment, Yorke turns his chains into whips.

The band’s meandering dissatisfaction, however, does not diminish the urgency of the issues they address, particularly environmental ones. Hence one striking example, from Yorke’s solo effort, *The Eraser*, reveals his almost paranoid concern with environmental destruction on a Biblical scale. The song, “And it Rained All Night,” for example, explicitly augurs environmental disaster. With percussive dorso-velar and apico-alveolar stops, Yorke describes “the tick tock tick of a ticking timebomb” where in “fifty feet of concrete underground one little leak becomes a lake.” The rapid, machine-gun consonants continue as he gives “in to the rhythm of the click click clack of the heavy black trains / too wasted to fight back” while “tick tack goes the pendulum on the old grandfather clock.” Yorke’s connections between the dorso-velar stop /k/ in both a “ticking time bomb,” the “tick tack” of “the pendulum on the old grandfather clock,” and the “click click clack of the heavy black trains” relate all three images to the pouring rain, the mimetic /k/ and short vowels representing the sound of heavy rain on a roof or another surface. Unchecked industry, symbolized by “the black train,” continues with the “pendulum on the old grandfather clock,” but sadly, few realize that “the black train,” metaphorically connected to the “time bomb” via phonetics, are the same thing.

From there, Yorke sings, “it rained all night and then all day / the drops were the size of your hands and face / the worms came out to see what’s up” and “we pull the cars up from the river.” The flood, predicted by the dorso-velar /k/, commences. Chaos ensues. True to his lyrically murky style, Yorke’s ambiguous “you” does not necessarily address the listener; perhaps he sings to Tony Blair, George Bush, the government and citizens of the United States or Great Britain, or countless multinational corporations that harm the environment daily. Ultimately, the lyrics and the song drown in doubt. Were it not for Yorke’s public candor, it would be difficult to ascertain precisely what he wants his lyrics to communicate. Nevertheless, an apocalyptic flood could function as a metaphor for nearly any catastrophe, from a hyperbolic portrayal of personal

---

<sup>10</sup> “Last year, Radiohead severed ties with their record company [EMI] after 13 years” (Duerden).

struggles to a dissatisfaction with the war in Iraq, to name but two; only Yorke's recent public statements indicate that he means the environment.

Despite their apocalyptic hyperbole, Radiohead tackles problems with significantly destructive implications. Regarding the environment, for example, we have much to be concerned about, as "...It Rained All Night" proposes with its disturbingly contemporary origins<sup>11</sup>. Noam Chomsky writes, for example, that "the scientific academies of all the G8 nations" prior to the G8's 2005 summit in Gleneagles, Scotland, "including the US national Academy of Sciences...call[ed] on the leaders of the rich countries to take urgent action to head off the potential disaster [of climate change]" (16). In a *Financial Times* lead editorial praising the efforts of the various scientific groups who called on G8 leaders to address global warming, the publication notes a startling and significant fact: "'the White House'" refused to acknowledge the collected evidence. The editorial continues, "in spite of the unprecedented statement by the G8 scientists ahead of...[the] Gleneagles [G8] summit—George W. Bush...insists we still do not know enough about this literally world changing phenomenon" (17).

The researchers who prepared this evidence one month prior to the summit "predicted major climactic effects, including severe reductions in water supplies in regions that rely on rivers fed by melting snow and glaciers." Chomsky's summary of the report continues, noting "evidence that the melting of the Arctic and Greenland ice sheets," which may disrupt the currents of warm water in the oceans, could result in significant temperature drops in Europe, among other possible consequences (17). While such looming consequences as temperature drops in Europe sound innocuous enough, one must merely reflect on the effect accelerated climate change, due to human involvement, can have on all life. Such logical and disastrous permutations appear in many of Radiohead's later works, Thom Yorke's lyrics ominously accompanied and counter-pointed by an increasingly ominous aural environment.

Issues Chomsky addresses in *Failed States* closely mirror some of Yorke's other concerns. In his book, Chomsky cites four fundamental and pressing concerns: "nuclear war,

---

<sup>11</sup> i.e., the Boscastle flood, in Cornwall, 2004

environmental disaster, and the fact that the world's leading power is acting in ways that increase the likelihood of these catastrophes." The fourth, "the sharp divide between public opinion and public policy," reinforces our own peculiar dilemma, because while most Americans oppose the policies of the US government, the state acts with contradictory measures. Yorke's own political beliefs, as we see in interviews and in his often dense lyrics, as well as his musical collaboration with the other members of the band, reflect these concerns.

An interview published June 18th, 2006, reveals that "Yorke hates Tony Blair; because he thinks the PM has 'no environmental credentials' ... [because Yorke] is viscerally opposed to the Iraq War and to current global trade practices" (McLean 29). Yorke's "hatred," for Blair, though another word such as "frustration" or "disillusionment" might better suit his political stances; Yorke's political thought extends far beyond mere hatred, because his criticisms are thoughtful, cogent, and timely. While anger certainly informs his dislike for Blair and the policies of Great Britain, he never resorts to ad hominem attacks or the stereotypical naïveté of an armchair activist. For these reasons, he publicly declined to meet with Prime Minister Tony Blair. As an "ambassador for the green charity Friends of the Earth," an environmental protection group, "[Yorke] was asked to meet the Prime Minister to discuss climate change." While his decision seems more a rash publicity stunt, he claims "he had initially tried to think pragmatically about the meeting," and given his public claim that Blair has no concern for the environment, he said to an interviewer that "I came out of that whole period just thinking, I don't want to get involved directly, it's poison. I'll just shout my mouth off from the sidelines. It's a nasty business." Yorke's statement, like his lyrics, leaves the reader or interviewer in ambiguous territory. What, precisely, is "a nasty business?" The meeting itself? Politics in general? Shouting his "mouth off from the sidelines?" Perhaps all three.

Noel Gallagher from Oasis, one of several celebrities who, unlike Yorke, attended a meeting with Blair concerning climate issues, says, "when Tony Blair said he was courting the music business, idiots like me thought we could have a say...But it became a publicity stunt for [Blair's] Labour Party" (*The Independent* 11). Like anything else in a capitalist, consumer-driven milieu, the state, too, needs to advertise, as Goebbels declared with crushing simplicity. Celebrity

endorsement can help the image of a state or a politician with the same effectiveness it would for an ad for pharmaceuticals, cosmetics, or the myriad other products we use to help divert our attention from more pressing matters. A photo with a famous musician like Yorke, along with a few sound-bites, and the average consumer might feel safer about the UK's stance on climate change and the environment. But publicity stunts don't engender change, save the change of a citizen's opinion of her government, if only for a short while.

Hence Yorke's disdain for the 2006 Live8 concert. He "'didn't agree with the idea...because it was a form of distraction. A convenient political sideshow...Holding a big rock concert and reducing the issues to bare essential levels.'" *The Observer's* Craig McClean quotes another music luminary, Damon Albarn, and asks Yorke to respond to Albarn's criticisms of Radiohead regarding large outdoor concerts, like Live8, where they frequently perform:

I read him the quote Albarn reportedly gave to *The Sun* last month. 'Radiohead —I'm not gonna get into anyone, but bands who care about certain things and then go on one-and-a-half year stadium tours are just total hypocrites...In one sense you've got this developing humanist thing...Then you're creating these massive impersonal events where you're set up as the subject of thousands of people's admiration. Where is the humanity in that? That's just idolatry...'

McClean asks Yorke if he "feel[s] hypocritical playing big gigs?" and Yorke replies, "'Yup!'" Furthermore, "[Yorke]'s never been one for ego or idolatry, so [McClean asks] him if it's because of an arena gig's environmental impact, its carbon footprint." Yorke agrees again, and when McClean asks, "how do you fix it?", Yorke replies quite simply: "'Fuck knows.'" Yorke and his band-mates do not have solutions to the problems at hand—specifically the environment, but more broadly, their success in consumer capitalism—but at least they are willing to admit that. They remind us constantly that they are our harbingers of doom, not our saviors.

Regarding Yorke's album *The Eraser*, McClean observes that it "is suffused with with Yorke's concerns about environmental meltdown—the title is also a reference to the inexorable

force of rising tides. The sleeve image is of a King Canute<sup>12</sup> figure trying to hold back a giant wave.” Stanley Donwood, who designed the album's sleeve, explains his intentions behind the woodcuts and the King Canute figure featured prominently not only on the sleeve, but also in the ubiquitous advertising around London prior to the album's release. The album and its artwork, Donwood explains, ““can be seen as the environment we live in, a Gaia-like force that doesn't care about us, that can sweep away our accomplishments in the space of a half an hour.”

Donwood continues, citing “German Expressionism” as an influence:

He had one of his books—The Nuremberg Chronicle published in 1493— with him ‘during the flood at Boscastle, Cornwall in 2004. The terrifying sight of buildings torn apart, trees ripped from the earth and the endless thundering roar of the flood remained fixed in my mind. The next day I began to draw, half-copying the woodcuts from the Chronicle, half exorcising my memory. That summer I carried on drawing imaginary medieval disasters, most of which were spattered by persistent rain.’ (McClellan)

---

<sup>12</sup> “Canute is perhaps best remembered for the legend of how he commanded the waves to go back. According to the legend, he grew tired of flattery from his courtiers. When one such flatterer gushed that the king could even command the obedience of the sea, Canute proved him wrong by practical demonstration at Bosham, his point being that even a king's powers have limits. Unfortunately, this legend is usually misunderstood to mean that he believed himself so powerful that the natural elements would obey him, and that his failure to command the tides only made him look foolish. It is quite possible that the legend is simply pro-Canute propaganda” (“Canute the Great”).



Fig. 1. *The Eraser* album cover.

The reason for this fascination is quite clearly grounded in contemporary reality—and even more frightening, reality’s affinity with “imaginary medieval disasters.” Both Yorke and Donwood “happened to be in the West Country on the day of the Boscastle flood,” and McClean suggests that “there can be little doubting Yorke’s commitment to the environmental cause” (McClean). Considering the number of Radiohead songs, such as “Sail to the Moon,” or *The Eraser*’s “And It Rained All Night,” along with Yorke’s concern for the environmental impact, Radiohead’s own impact on local environments, not to mention Yorke’s refusal to meet with Tony Blair, confirm McClean’s assessment about Yorke’s commitment to environmental causes and refusal to pander to authorities who wish merely to camouflage mistakes with celebrity endorsement.



Yorke and Radiohead, with their commercial and critical success, possess the kind of power that The White Rose could only imagine. They don't face execution at the hands of the Gestapo or fascist judges; in fact, the very system they criticize sustains them. For that reason, however, history beatifies the Scholls and other "outlaws," while contemporary society largely writes off Radiohead's warnings, whether in their music or public statements. The possibility of severe punishment somehow makes The White Rose's message more legitimate, while Yorke remains a frustrated, depressed eccentric with more money than most of us can even imagine.

This is the genius, whether deliberate or not, of the culture of capitalism. History teaches us that the most legitimate protest must mean the greatest sacrifice—martyrdom. But students all over the US, UK, Europe, indeed worldwide, regularly protest the policies of their respective nation-states, and largely, the only people reading their pamphlets, listening to their speeches, or attending their protests happen to be like-minded students or liberals themselves. They preach to the choir. And particularly in the richest nations, they have nothing to risk. We esteem freedom fighters who face incarceration or worse for speaking out; the rest we write off as unrealistic, ungrateful, or even lunatics.

But Radiohead has a lot to lose, and surprisingly, no matter how abstract their work becomes, or how vocally Yorke and the band speak about topics the mainstream typically ignores—the environment, fair trade, and globalization, to name but a few—they only sell more albums. Radiohead knows this, and perhaps this has something to do with their ability to voice the concerns of their demographic. Their original fans, perhaps college students when Interscope first released *Pablo Honey*, likely have more concerns now than they did while students. Yorke himself exemplifies this as he approaches his fortieth birthday: "when you are 20 years old," he tells *The Independent*, "you are going crazy and you don't think about things like [climate change]. But with children<sup>13</sup> it is natural to think about the future. That is not a very rock and roll thing to say but I don't care" ("The 5-Minute Interview"). With his own children, Yorke has an undeniably

---

<sup>13</sup> Yorke has two young children: Noah and Agnes. It would be quite an oversight to imagine that Yorke would not have his son in mind when writing songs about apocalyptic floods.

tangible reason to worry about the future, and as Radiohead's fan-base grows older, too, so do they. Like other artists, they've made political advocacy commercially viable, but they refuse to pander to utopianism or adhere to "rock and roll" aesthetics. They subvert that aesthetic; despite their increasingly abstract, sometimes alienating, sometimes depressing oeuvre, they maintain their success and exploit it. Yorke walks on a tight-rope; too much abstraction, too much doom-and-gloom, could spell failure.

But he and Radiohead remind us that despite the anxieties of climate change, war, and globalization, despite the possibilities of an environmental meltdown or other apparently improbable, but quite real, consequences, we still have our voices. And now we have guitars, keyboards, sophisticated recording equipment. We have the internet. We have the culture of capitalism. Radiohead can reach a larger audience than The White Rose ever could hope to reach. They had indignation and mimeographs; Radiohead has indignation and celebrity. Such public exposure could easily corrode their legitimacy, but Radiohead accomplishes something Bono, Chris Martin, and a whole host of celebrities from the Dixie Chicks to George Clooney cannot.

Radiohead engages in perpetual tug-of-war with the culture of capitalism. Their public exposure depends on capitalism, but capitalism always threatens to dilute the validity and efficacy of their message. Hence Yorke and Radiohead's continued refusal to submit their politics to the Procrustean bed of commercial success and viability. We won't see Yorke on the evening news, convincing the public of his concern with globalization by holding hands with an orphan from Darfur. Rather, he will be on the front lines with other protesters, lending his celebrity to validate their cause, whether for debt relief, environmental policy reform, or fair trade. Bono and other celebrities lend their public image to noble causes as well, but Radiohead accomplishes this in a way that makes their efforts look less like a publicity opportunity<sup>14</sup>

Mechanisms have developed within the culture of capitalism to keep radicalism at bay while still convincing most of us that viable avenues of protest still exist. These mechanisms lack a single agent or other, but rather emerge from the confluence of capitalist culture, particularly the media, and even education, which instills in every American child that they can fulfill whatever

---

<sup>14</sup> Though I do not doubt the sincerity of Bono and others.

their heart desires by virtue of this ubiquitous capitalist system. Radiohead, whether explicitly or implicitly, recognizes this mirage of freedom, and attempts to stay one step ahead. They are not revolutionaries, nor do they intend to be. Revolutionaries carry rifles, plant bombs, overthrow governments. They aim to subvert the status quo, convinced that they operate on a radically different plane from that which they intend to subvert. But history unflinchingly reveals the result of most revolutions: from the Bolsheviks in 1917 to military coups in Latin America, Africa, and Southeast Asia, violent revolutions tend to make things worse than they already were<sup>15</sup>. Revolutionaries dream of utopia, single-minded and teleological, allowing little flexibility for that which doesn't fit the unswerving dogmatism of their ideals.

The true revolutionary adapts. The true revolutionary acknowledges the pitfalls of teleology. Radiohead may operate with some dystopian teleologies—environmental catastrophe, for instance—but they don't dominate and shape their politics or their protest. They understand, whether explicitly or implicitly, that they must work within the structures of the very systems that create the problems they seek to redress. To do otherwise jeopardizes the viability of their messages, and their own viability as well.

It's not perfect. But Radiohead and Yorke can accomplish far more as acclaimed rock icons and angry students. History beatifies martyrs and revolutionaries not because of their accomplishments, but because of their recklessness (often described as "bravery" after the fact). What The White Rose accomplished ought not to be discounted, but by no means did they significantly change the course of Nazi Germany; rather, they represented its imminent demise. Revolutionaries, despite their romanticized martyrdoms, accomplish far more while alive than they do in death.

For example, in 2004, Yorke "joined hundreds of protesters at a military base set to be at the forefront of the US 'Son of Star Wars' missile defence [sic] system," Paul Watson of The Press Association reported. "His appearance," he writes,

guaranteed a larger than usual protest and organisers paid tribute to the star for his continuing support...Neil Kingsworth, or Yorkshire CND, told PA

---

<sup>15</sup> With the notable exception of the American Revolution, of course.

News...“a lot of people came because of the Thom Yorke link and it’s wonderful that someone like him will take on such a complex issue. A lot of celebrities get involved with things like cuddly animals and such causes...he told everyone how important it was for them to attend these protests and to keep plugging away. (Watson)

Certainly Yorke’s celebrity status encouraged a larger turnout than expected. Yorke must know this himself, but this particular event does not resemble a publicity stunt the way that Bono’s recent “Red” campaign, however well intentioned, did. The message here is simple: we have to keep “plugging away”: successful revolutions cannot happen overnight, unlike the more utopian rhetoric of other high-profile celebrity activists. Successful revolutions take years, decades, even generations. Cultural norms, particularly in an increasingly uniform, global capitalist milieu, require the consent of millions, if not billions of people. Anyone who wants to change the world has to understand that change cannot happen overnight; thankfully, Yorke and Radiohead *do* seem to understand this.

Hence the band’s viability as a voice for protest. Their art may predict catastrophe, but they act within the confines of the very cultural systems they hope to subvert. Paradoxical, yes, but also perhaps the only reasonable, legitimate venue for protest. The more fans Radiohead wins over, the larger the sympathetic audience to whom they can plead their case. They may protest the deleterious results of globalization, but they also exploit it to reach an ever larger audience. Every album they sell means another listener—potentially dozens, if not hundreds more—Yorke and Radiohead can attempt to convince and educate.

This is the paradox by which Radiohead’s political and cultural criticism operates., Their success makes their politics both simultaneously more and less legitimate. But given the circumstances of the culture of capitalism, this seems the most reasonable and workable solution. So far, Radiohead has managed, unlike other celebrities, to exploit their fame to bring attention to the problems they recognize and the solutions they advocate, without disastrously compromising their integrity. We can only hope that it’s enough.

## II. “Ice Age Coming”

On Radiohead’s critically acclaimed album *OK Computer*, Thom Yorke croons a simple, murky, quite unusual question, “what’s that?”, as though he were a schizophrenic reacting to his hallucinations. This is a question without an answer, the lyrics both an absurd and sub-textually cynical assessment of modern life. Meanwhile, a robotic voice, subtly layered into an intricate and tense melody, recites a monotone mantra: “I may be paranoid,” the emotionless, metallic voice says; uselessly, it pleads, “...I’m not an android.”

Laced with superficially absurd lyrics, and a three movement structure borrowed from both The Beatles’ “Happiness [is a Warm Gun]” (*greenplastic radiohead*), and perhaps even classical symphony, the lyrics and almost decadent musical pomp of “Paranoid Android” become

a trembling, waspish anthem for a new Roman Empire, one last waltz for the white collars—or perhaps those who suffer as a result of their success<sup>16</sup>. To deny its political and cultural criticism would be short-sighted, despite its occasional nonsense; the lines, “Ambition makes you look pretty ugly / Kicking and squealing Gucci little piggy,” disparage individualism and consumerism with a sneer. Yorke, the raving prophet, ends the song with caustic sarcasm, singing that “God loves his children.” But what God could possibly love the greedy inhabitants of this science-fiction nightmare, fraught with “the crackle of pigskin, the dust and the screaming, the yuppies networking, the panic, the vomit?” What redeeming value does the culture of capitalism possess any longer, with the chauvinism and pugilism of a life of professional sports, war, boardroom politics, and illness, mental or physical? Why does Yorke ambiguously beckon some higher power to let it “rain down”<sup>17</sup> on him (“Paranoid Android”)? What higher power would grant that apocalyptic mercy?

In this age, Yorke seems to ask, how could anyone take God seriously? We live in a world of child soldiers, civil wars, genocide, environmental destruction, and multi-national corporations with the power to topple and manipulate governments. Perhaps a litany of rhetorical questions remain the only answer to those that Radiohead’s music poses, questions begetting more questions, until finally, we’re left with only one: why?

Why? This is the cardinal question Radiohead poses to its listeners. When we finally hit rock bottom, a desperate “why?” is all we have left to cling to, as we realize that in Radiohead’s paranoia and trembling soundscapes, we find ourselves in a world-wide refugee camp. Here, we are all refugees, in one sense or another. The fans singing along almost robotically to “Creep” at a 1996 Radiohead concert in London (*Live at the Astoria*), may not leave their homes against their will, trudging along dusty road towards an uncertain future, but they are, on the other hand,

---

<sup>16</sup> After an interviewer asked if the lyrics to “Paranoid Android” had anything to do with the fall of the Roman Empire, Yorke himself adopted this particular interpretation (*greenplastic radiohead*).

<sup>17</sup> Yorke repeats the motif of biblical, torrential downpours in later works, from *Kid A* to his aforementioned solo effort, *The Eraser*.

refugees from humanity, androids on a pointless march, deluded with teleological lullabies: “fitter, happier, more productive, comfortable” (“Fitter Happier”). Metaphorically, the culture of late capitalism has coerced us, directly and indirectly, to flee our responsibility as human beings. Radiohead intends to remind us of what we’ve lost—or perhaps, they intend to remind us of what we never had.

Another critical question rears its head: Is it better, then, to be (justifiably) paranoid, hopeless, cynical, or critical? If not, should we merely accept the terms of an ineffably large and intricate confluence of ideology, culture, economics, violence—indeed all of human facticity—repudiate our subjectivity, and become, effectively, androids? Is there honor in fighting back at all? Is there any shame in surrender?

Shame is where we begin—or, in the terms of Heidegger, Kierkegaard, and theologian Ralph MacQuarrie<sup>18</sup>, we begin with *Angst*, anxiety. According to MacQuarrie, anxiety is our “fundamental affective state,” and “in anxiety, man is confronted with his possibility and his responsibility” (68, 69). According to MacQuarrie, humans are free, but the realm of their possibilities remains limited. These limits he names facticity, borrowing from Heidegger and theologian Rudolph Bultmann (82). Mere reflection on existence discloses this simple but powerful element of being, that we have been thrown into the world (*Geworfenheit*, or “thrownness”), and must act according to these limits. We have free will, but only to the extent our present and past circumstances allow—a child born in Darfur, for one (admittedly hyperbolic) example, is not likely to live 60 years, much less earn a degree in medicine or law (83). This facticity, the pale of circumstance, biology, culture, and numerous other influences, fetters us all, as real but as invisible as the air we breathe.

Add to this equation the innovations of the past several decades. Exponential technological innovations have widely expanded the possibilities of each individual’s facticity, especially for citizens of Western superpowers, but they have also presented us with an equally daunting threat to what MacQuarrie calls “authentic” existence (39), a troubling and tenuous

---

<sup>18</sup> MacQuarrie aims to determine the validity of existential thought in Christian theology (3).

concept that he concludes “is the opposite of...fallen, carnal existence” (139), where people concern themselves not with their freedom, but only with their limitations, while deluded that they are, in fact, free. More and more modes of facticity, from the innocuous iPod to fundamentalist terrorism, seduce humans to “fallenness,” and, as MacQuarrie aptly notes, that depersonalization, a much larger category of facticity, “is especially characteristic of the modern era” (93).

Granted, MacQuarrie wrote those words in 1955, but they manifest an even more urgent truth over 50 years later. Far more things exist which tempt us to identify “with the world and become absorbed in ‘worldly’ concern.” We “fall into the world,” relate our possibilities “exclusively to things,” absorb ourselves “in concern with them,” and find ourselves mistakenly “at home” (100-101). We also fall into “collectivism, in which the individual surrenders his will to the depersonalized mass and follows the crowd” (101). MacQuarrie presages the escalating predicament that people, particularly those in Western, industrialized nations, face continually—and all too often, unknowingly. Every day, we wake to worldly things that can consume us as we dutifully consume. We become workaholics, alcoholics, addicts, obsessives, paranoiacs, compulsive shoppers, or greedy capitalists, to name but a few categories. Even the life of a law-abiding suburbanite can turn to a life of inauthenticity, a flight from anxiety, a flight from possibility and responsibility, all the while deluded he does, in fact, lead a responsible life. As Radiohead seems to prophesy, however, the life of the law-abiding suburbanite—or more broadly, the promises of life as the working consumer in the US or Europe—may be the most seductive sirens, those saccharine advertising jingles that lead us to spiritual death.

Radiohead acutely captures this sentiment in an *OK Computer* B-side, “Palo Alto.”<sup>19</sup> Companies like Xerox, Hewlett Packard, Agilent, and branch offices of Lockheed Martin, The Wall Street Journal, and Merrill Lynch call this city home (“Major Employers”). It is the throbbing artificial heart of Silicon Valley, and the way Radiohead portrays it, the city becomes a

---

<sup>19</sup> Originally titled “OK Computer,” the name the band later adopted for the album, this song never appeared on the album itself (*greenplastic radiohead*); the song, with its original title, tidily conveys the paranoiac themes of the later album.



parody of itself. The chorus, undermined by staccato bursts of distorted guitar, features a meaningless dialogue between Palo Alto residents:

...I'm okay, how are you?

Thanks for asking, thanks for asking

But I'm okay, how are you?

I hope you're okay too

These verses, however, clearly indicate the speaker is not quite “okay.” Yorke sings, “everybody’s happy” in the first verse, but other lines, like the song’s opening, “In a city of the future / it is difficult to concentrate,” or the speaker’s proclamation that “I’m too busy to see you” and “You’re too busy to wait,” remind us that this speaker suffers from an unnamed spiritual and psychological ailment. Moreover, he reveals “I’m too lazy, I’ve been kidding myself for so long,” at the end of the last verse, before launching immediately into the chorus with its jarring buzz-saw guitar riffs, continually underscoring the fact that the speaker is not, in fact “okay.” In this “city of the future,” the speaker can kid himself all he likes, but a snarling anxiety, represented by the song’s instrumentation, always agitates and distracts him. Both his anxiety and the life of a workaholic—the speaker confesses, “I throw myself into my work”—pull him in different directions, as though he were being pulled apart by some implement of medieval torture. But rather than dislocating his legs, the modern era draws and quarters his psyche (“Palo Alto”).

Another example of life in the modern era is one of the more unusual songs on *OK Computer*, “Fitter Happier.” It features the voice of a computer, calmly spewing suburban banalities over insurgent sounds—a soft piano melody, strings, electronic noise, and a sample of a voice on a public announcement like one would hear at an airport. Some of the words, pronounced by Thom Yorke’s Mac with a faltering but methodic cadence, include:

...at a better pace,

slower and more calculated,

no chance of escape,

now self-employed,

concerned (but powerless),

an empowered and informed member of society

(pragmatism not idealism)...

The voice is one of drowning authenticity. Convinced he's no pedant, a contributing member of society, conscious of the world around him, careful and practical, the speaker reveals his own delusions in parentheses. He does not differentiate between these parenthetical asides and the rest of the lyrics, but when read, they can be interpreted as a nagging subconscious, an inchoate desperation and dissatisfaction the speaker cannot reconcile with the platitudes of advertising and an "American" mythos.<sup>20</sup> This "subconscious," at a less comprehensible level, reminds him from time to time, for instance, that he is indeed "powerless," and has chosen "pragmatism," a euphemism for the flight from responsibility, rather than creative and imaginative activity—activity, however, not to be confused with utopianism. We can act creatively and imaginatively without succumbing to a utopian anaesthetic; consider, for example, Yorke's own attendance at protests or his frequent, publicized concern with the environment.

When we choose the world and solely worldly things, particularly in the context of a 21<sup>st</sup> century milieu of a suburbanite, we choose automation; at worst, we risk becoming mechanical arms on an assembly line. Many of us recognize this danger, at least subconsciously, but choose not to listen to the voice that whispers in our ear, the voice that reminds us that we've surrendered our subjectivity to the illusion of safety. We may be "fitter" and "more productive," "calm" and "healthier," but are we "happier?" Most of us would like to think so. But something—call it anxiety, the subconscious, what have you—tries to jolt us awake, to remind us that we have put down our freedom as collateral for what appears to be a calm, happy, but banal, and in Radiohead's *Weltanschauung*, robotic, life.

This desperate joust between contentment with modern life and the reality of modern life pervades almost all of Radiohead's oeuvre. In *Hail to the Thief*'s "2+2=5 (The Lukewarm)," Yorke begins with the words

Are you such a dreamer?

---

<sup>20</sup> i.e., a once distinctively "American" mythos that now pervades societies around the world as a result of globalization.

To put the world to rights?  
I'll stay home forever  
Where two & two always  
makes up five

The “two & two always / make up five” conveys the illusion of safety and contentment for those who choose to “stay home forever,” for those who choose worldly things: a nice house, two cars, a couple above-average kids, a doting spouse, a dog, a well-paying job. As Joseph Tate observes, the song alludes to George Orwell’s classic dystopian novel, *1984*. Tate contends that “this absurdist formula, two plus two equals five, is a recurring motif in [the book], one that encapsulates the crucial lesson of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: a reversal of the axiomatic notion so prevalent in popular culture that there is an unreachable, pure core of the self that those people in power can never affect” (“Hail to the Thief: A Rhizomatic Map in Fragments” 182). Julia, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, tells Winston Smith, that “the people in power... ‘can make you say anything, but they can’t make you believe it. They can’t get inside you’” (qtd. in Tate 182). But indeed they can, they will, and they do. But only because we allow them.

Most of us seem content to surrender our freedom and ignore our responsibilities, but our *Grundbefindlichkeit*<sup>21</sup> always destabilizes us. Christian existentialist Gabriel Marcel’s analysis of the human act further sheds light on MacQuarrie’s understanding of freedom and responsibility. Marcel writes that “there is no act without responsibility,” and furthermore, “we inevitably tend to represent the act to ourselves as an effect, and to ask about its source, who caused it.” By “detach[ing] ourselves from [an] act,” then we can “dismember it, so to speak, and denature it to the point where it becomes unrecognizable. [An] act will imperceptibly cease to be my act, hence ceased to be an act, and becomes a kind of gesture” (108-109). Innumerable examples exist in contemporary life. For instance, one may be an alcoholic because he cannot handle stress, or genetics may incline him to this particular disease; one may be depressed due to chemical

---

<sup>21</sup> “anxiety or dread” that ultimately isolates an individual “from his concern with the world,” appropriated by MacQuarrie from Heidegger (78).

imbalances. Hence, a person can rationalize his decisions deterministically. We can complain that we are the way we act because of something else, or someone else. And most of us do.

Radiohead seems acutely aware of this phenomenon. The song “Just,” on their sophomore album *The Bends*, a fairly straightforward rock song compared to their later material, lyrically the tale of a “narcissistic friend” Thom Yorke “was compelled to elude” (*greenplastic radiohead*). The chorus, repeated three times, features Yorke singing with increasing intensity, to the point of screaming, as the song fades out. The speaker, desperately, enjoins this narcissistic friend, over and over, apparently without effect:

You do it to yourself, you do  
And that's what really hurts  
Is that you do it to yourself  
Just you, you and no-one else  
You do it to yourself  
You do it to yourself

The song swells with frantic intensity as Johnny Greenwood’s guitar wails along with Yorke, but apparently to no effect: the message doesn’t get through. Hence, MacQuarrie’s analysis of the human conscience seems especially appropriate here. “Conscience has the character of a call or a summons,” he writes; it is a “call addressed...to fallen man lost in the crowd and the world. He is summoned out of his worldly concern, his self-deception, his irresponsibility, his false security, to his original possibilities that have been lost to him” (142). What the speaker in “Just” does not realize, however, is that he cannot be another man’s conscience. In MacQuarrie’s assessment, “man is the caller as well as the called” (143). The concerned criticism of a friend may help one to listen to his conscience and recognize his fallen state, but the responsibility to find his authentic existence is solely his own.

This theme appears as well in “2+2=5.” At nearly the halfway mark, the song bursts into a blast of percussion and a rumbling bass line. Yorke, then, assumes the character of a different speaker, rejoining his first speaker—and perhaps more importantly the listener—that “you have

not been paying attention.” Furthermore, in *OK Computer*’s “Subterranean Homesick Alien,” the speaker, convinced he’s seen a UFO, imagines what those aliens might be thinking:

Up above  
aliens hover  
making home movies  
for the folks back home,  
of all these weird creatures  
who lock up their spirits,  
drill holes in themselves  
and live for their secrets.  
They're all uptight...

The speaker projects his own anxiety to the hypothetical point of view of alien sociologists, perhaps because he recognizes himself as “one of those weird creatures,” the indisposable and spiritually bereft. “Indisposability,” in Marcel’s terms, is one of the hallmark causes and symptoms of a fallen, inauthentic existence. When we think of ourselves as objects, rather than subjects, neglecting our freedom, we come to live a life of indisposability, where we “construe [our] lives or being as a having which is somehow quantifiable, hence as something capable of being wasted, exhausted, or dissipated” (54). Is this not the condition of life in industrialized nations? We allow ourselves to succumb the overwhelming power of late consumer capitalism; we become demographics, statistics, ID numbers, and automatons in service of some greater, ineffable cause, whether gleefully or grudgingly.

Of course, we can’t always live in a fully intersubjective world, at least not in our contemporary milieu. Many of us succumb to the “‘we’ of indifference,” as William Luyjpen calls it, a mode of being in which we are “indifferent in respect to most people” (168). While we have the capacity for “meaningful...human relations,” Luyjpen suggests, “we submit, however, that the ‘we’ which occurs most frequently is the ‘we’ of indifference, the dull, empty, and unfeeling ‘we’ of a society which is increasingly losing its humanity” (169). “Functionality,” he concedes, is indeed important, for “one who eliminates all functional encounters would eliminate all humanity

embodied in our society.” Hence, “not every functional encounter can be permeated with the highest degree of love.<sup>22</sup> Yet every functional encounter ought to participate in a general affective attitude toward man, which would make it cease at once to be purely functional” (171). This seems increasingly less to be the case.

How can humans, then, live a fulfilling, intersubjective, and authentic life, if, like in the song “Optimistic” on *Kid A*, we’re all “nervous messed up marionettes / floating around on a prison ship?” How can we live an authentic life if, mired as we are in consumer capitalism, culture demands that “the big fish eat the little ones” (“Optimistic”)? Initially pessimistic as it sounds, the song is indeed, in its own way, optimistic. The chorus reassures us, repeatedly, with a hint of condescension, that

You can try the best you can

If you try the best you can

The best you can is good enough

The speaker also adds, “I’d really like to help you, man,” contributing to the speaker’s incipient condescension; he occupies some position within the constantly shifting hierarchy of consumer capitalism, wrestling between sympathy and superiority for those below him on the social strata, while also acknowledging that he, too, occupies a place in it. For no matter where we climb in the capitalist hierarchy, we are all still “messed up marionettes,” wondering vainly who might be pulling the strings.

“Late capitalism” as Fredric Jameson named it in 1991, tempts us to abandon our freedom. Furthermore, Žižek reminds us our “freedom is the very opposite of effective freedom: by selling his labour ‘freely’, the worker loses his freedom—the real content of [a] free act of sale is the worker’s enslavement to capital” (23). Consumer capitalism presumably widens our horizon

---

<sup>22</sup> The translation, unfortunately, does not accurately convey the myriad denotations and connotations of the word “love,” which Luijpen hopes to mean not merely romantic love, but also an all-encompassing compassion for fellow people.

of possibility, but in a decidedly sinister way. As workers, from immigrant grape-pickers to CEOs, possibilities lull us toward the fallen life, millions of pied pipers leading us to our deaths—the commodity, and the culture that created it, physically and ideologically, lures us to live for the world, and surrender our freedom. And yet we know, at some level, that we allow this. Žižek recalls Sloterdijk’s revision of Marx’s phrase in *Das Kapital*, from “*Sie wissen das nicht, aber sie tun es,*” to “*Sie wissen das, aber sie tun es*”<sup>23</sup> (28-29).

Yet what other alternative do we have? The various speakers of Radiohead’s songs, from their debut to their latest unreleased material, wrestle precisely with this maxim. The speaker of “Palo Alto” recognizes his anxiety, but can’t quite pinpoint its source, and nor can the speakers of “Optimistic,” “Subterranean Homesick Alien,” “2+2=5,” or others. This is one of the key “symptoms” of modern life Žižek illuminates in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, and one of the “symptoms” with which we all struggle. But we can’t simply run, although the desire can be overwhelming.

Consider Radiohead’s “Fake Plastic Trees,” from *The Bends*, and a staple in live shows throughout their career. Yorke sings, with an increasingly hesitant voice, “...I can't help the feeling / I could blow through the ceiling / If I just turn and run.” Yet the speaker knows there is nowhere to run, and nowhere to hide. The very thought, he laments, “...wears [him] out,” a line repeated four times to emphasize the futility of flight from commodity fetishism and the culture of late capitalism, which, as Jameson suggests, has nearly—but not entirely—subsumed and co-opted autonomous culture, perhaps the only remaining path to return to authentic life.

Radiohead itself attempts this flight by participating in “semi-autonomous culture,” yet “no theory of cultural politics current on the Left today”—to which Radiohead unapologetically claims membership—“has been able to do without one notion or another of a certain minimal aesthetic distance...the possibility of the cultural act outside the Being of capital.” Yet frighteningly enough, “distance in general (including ‘critical distance’ in particular) has very

---

<sup>23</sup> “They do not know what they do.” Sloterdijk’s revision, “they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it” (qtd. in Žižek 29), or literally, “they know what they do, but they do it.”

precisely been abolished in the new space of postmodernism” (Jameson 48). Hence, there’s nowhere to “turn and run,” especially in a culture that slyly imprisons us with a deluge of distracting technologies that further invite us to an inauthentic life, a spiritual death.

Luijpen reminds us that technology itself is nothing to be disdained; “no one can indict technology,” he writes, “without sounding ridiculous” (139). Only myopic radicals would dare condemn technology; where would we be without indoor plumbing, electric lights, modern medicine, or even the internet? Yet “it tempts man to make the spirit of technology an absolute, to trust himself entirely to the perspective opened by science and technology and to expect that they will answer all questions and alleviate all needs” (139).

Such thought approaches fundamentalism, perhaps one of the greatest dangers to human civilization, according to cultural theorist Terry Eagleton. Eagleton asserts that “fundamentalists are basically fetishists.” By this, he means,

a fetish is whatever you use to plug some ominous gap; and the unnerving vacancy which fundamentalists hasten to fill is simply the fuzzy, rough-textured, open-ended nature of human existence. It is non-being which fundamentalists fear most. And what they plug in is dogma. (208)

Fundamentalists come in all stripes: the familiar and shadowy Islamic terrorist, the raving Christian evangelical, the devoted Marxist, longing for utopia. But let us not forget the consumer. For we consumers, our dogma is capitalist culture. We turn away from death by turning towards commodities, religiously watching TV news, gazing hopefully into plasma TVs or computer monitors. The fundamentalist needs myopia; the anxiety of existence is too overwhelming. Americans especially fear death, non-being. And yet, as we see in MacQuarrie, the flight from death is itself a life-unto-death. In fallen existence, “man...has surrendered himself to the world, has identified himself with it and projected his possibilities upon it. He has understood himself as belonging to the world, as one object among others. Now death has, indeed, made him a part of the world” (124). Reliance on myopia, and worldly things, is a life-unto-death, which, in order to arrive at a more authentic existence, we must resist at all costs.



By willingly surrendering to multinational capitalist ideology, we effectively commit a kind of suicide. Eagleton contends that “ideology is around to make us feel necessary,” but we must also note that “philosophy is on hand to remind us that we are not” (210). This is precisely the project of MacQuarrie, other existentialist philosophers, and Radiohead themselves. “Death can be overlooked,” MacQuarrie writes, “precisely because man wants to overlook it.” Yet Radiohead will not allow us this luxury; they provide us with myriad hyperbolic examples of death and destruction, reminding us of our inevitable mortality.

In one of the more memorable tracks from *The Bends*, “Street Spirit,” Yorke’s speaker obliquely wishes for death. He sings, over Johnny Greenwood’s delicate, mournful arpeggios, how “cracked eggs, dead birds / scream as they fight for life,” that he “can feel death, can see its beady eyes.” Once anxiety sets in, and one refuses to widen his myopic *Weltanschauung*, oblivion sounds not only reasonable, but necessary—even desirable. Crushed by “rows of houses . . . bearing down on” him, the speaker longs for escape—oblivion. In later Radiohead songs, the speaker often fulfills this task. “No Surprises,” one of the most touching and simultaneously disturbing songs on *OK Computer*, gives voice to a speaker tired of life in multinational capitalism. With “a heart that’s full up like a landfill,” and “a job that slowly kills” him, all the speaker wants is “a quiet life” and “a handshake of carbon monoxide / with no alarms and no surprises.” Death. Oblivion. Non-being. So overwhelmed, the speaker can imagine nothing more comforting than a quick transaction sealed with a perfunctory handshake to end a fallen life.

*Kid A*’s “Motion Picture Soundtrack” opens with the lines “red wine and sleeping pills,” alluding to suicide, addressing an ambiguous “you,” who the speaker “will see in the next life.” One of Yorke’s speakers may extol in *Amnesiac*’s “Packt like Sardines in a Tin Can,” that “as your life flashed before your eyes,” you are still “a reasonable man”—reasonable in the conventional, fundamental sense of fulfilling your duty as a worker and consumer, even if it means life-unto-death. The desire for death grows even more acute, and more romantic in other songs. In “Pyramid Song,” on the same album, the speaker commits suicide by drowning, and finds

black-eyed angels swimming with me

a moon full of stars and astral cars  
all the figures i used to see  
all my lovers were there with me  
all my past and futures  
and we all went to heaven in a little row boat  
there was nothing to fear and nothing to doubt

Some songs even turn desperately apocalyptic, like *Kid A*'s "Idioteque," where Yorke's speaker warns, in desperate, shouted fragments: "ice age coming / ice age coming / women and children first." Even the album artwork of *Kid A* implies such an apocalypse.

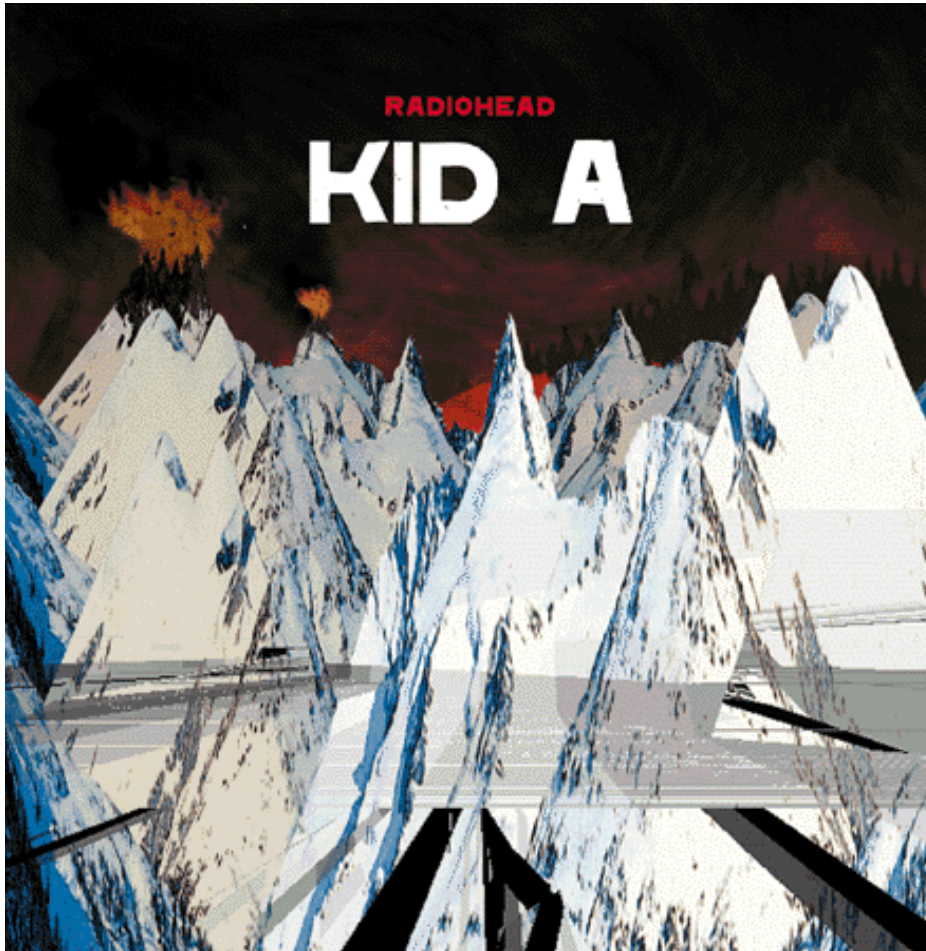


Fig. 2. *Kid A* album cover.

Lisa Leblanc writes that “[Stanley] Donwood<sup>24</sup> and Radiohead have been sounding warning bells since *The Bends*, their desire to effect change a prominent concern.” Furthermore, “By providing representations of the apocalypse, they have forced us to imagine the unimaginable, and to struggle with our reasoned understanding of destruction and its concrete representation. Whether an actual apocalypse would look like these paintings is not the point” (101-102). Indeed, the entirety of Radiohead’s often gloomy universe presents the same problem. They force us to imagine literal and metaphorical suicide through their lyrics and instrumentation, with a hyperbolic theme which merely communicates that this could happen to us.

The point of this hyperbolic despair, as Leblanc notes, is that “we recognize its possibility.” We must be aware of the effects of multinational capitalism and commodity fetishism, because if we let them run amok, if we let them dominate our lives, an ice age may indeed be coming. Ice age, here, functions as a metaphor in the same way the floods of other songs do. Literally, we face global warming, but a coming ice age implies atavism and the collapse of civilization, yet another image of the apocalypse, and Leblanc’s notes the power of these metaphors: “through the dimension between the imagination and reason, through the sublime, we are given some distance from the literal,” Leblanc suggests, “and [we] consequently accept as credible the threat of apocalypse.” Many may continue to deny the impending threat of global warming, and in certain ways, an imagined apocalypse may have more resonance for listeners, as the dystopias in Orwell’s *1984* or the recent film *Children of Men* do. The thought of an apocalypse tempts us towards an almost utopian, albeit eschatological, escape. But given contemporary circumstances, it is a threat we must take seriously. Lastly, Leblanc enjoins us: “how, then, can we recognize the possibility of the apocalypse without waking up and taking action” (102)?

This, it seems, is the very point of Radiohead’s aesthetic. While their lyrics, themes, instrumentation, imagery, and the vast number of desperate, anonymous speakers, communicate

---

<sup>24</sup> Donwood collaborates with the band, producing much of the art for Radiohead’s albums, website, and other material.

the threat of the end of the world, they do so hyperbolically. They want to make a point. If we don't do something, then we're destined for oblivion, either literally, or through a death-unto-life, a nightmare dystopian future.

A utopia, however, cannot offer a viable solution. "Utopia," Brian Massumi writes, "is the death of revolution," and perhaps the same could be said of dystopia; fantasies and nightmares rarely accomplish anything. A dystopia encourages us to shrug off disaster in denial, perhaps even to delight in its occasionally stunning pathos. The horrors of an atavistic, post-technological world, ala *Kid A* and *Amnesiac*, cling to the sublime rather than the merely horrifying; a truly horrific vision of the near future wouldn't sell records, but the vision itself, lyrically and with unsettling musical accompaniment, carefully balances the dreadful and sublime. And just like utterly bleak, eschatological pronouncements, imagined utopias don't accomplish anything, either. Such teleological tunnel vision narrows our possible choices and dooms idealistic endeavors to fail, unless accompanied with proper reflection and reassessment. The dystopia, however, retains value in its verisimilitude: the ice age has come before, while poverty, genocide, famine, war, disease, and natural disaster recur routinely in contemporary history. And ice age, at least metaphorically, may come again.

But by unveiling the anxiety of life in a modern industrialized society, the desperation, the longing for oblivion or utopia, nothingness or heaven, Radiohead challenges us to examine our lives and our culture. If we continue to live our lives within the dogma of multinational capital, we may very well be headed to an apocalypse of some sort—perhaps not one fire & brimstone, but maybe something worse, something along the lines of life in a world that Orwell or Huxley envision. Unless we do something, we may very well become the living dead, the spiritually bereft, the fallen and inauthentic. And furthermore, we must recognize, as citizens of first-world, industrialized nations, that what we do or what is done in our name has disastrous effects on people all around the world, particularly those in developing nations.

### III. Wolf at the Door

We must recognize that something is desperately wrong. Economist Richard Robbins, among myriad other scholars, remind us that somewhere around “1 million children younger than five years of age die each year in Brazil” because of inadequate food distribution (191), and “virtually one-sixth of the world’s population” does not have enough to eat. In nations like Great Britain or the United States, 1.2% of people die as a result of preventable infectious disease in one year. In peripheral nations, it’s 42% (234). Approximately “1.2 *billion* people are estimated to live on less than one dollar a day, and almost 3 *billion* on less than two dollars per day.” (175, emphasis mine).

I could prattle on with statistics like an auctioneer, but it hardly seems necessary. Citizens of first-world societies either know these things or do not, and many of those that do, do not care, or choose not to. Some think these problems of global food distribution, adequate medical treatment for those currently lacking even basic supplies, civil wars, ethnic violence, terrorism, and the like can be addressed and ameliorated (Robbins). If one approached these problems pragmatically, without factoring in the enormous influence of late capitalist institutions and ideologies, they could, in theory, be solved.

Some approach these realities with a much less optimistic point of view. Noam Chomsky, assuming an either/or scenario, prophesies in his conclusion to *Hegemony or Survival: America’s Quest for Global Dominance* that

one can discern two trajectories in current history: one aiming toward hegemony, acting rationally within a lunatic doctrinal framework as it threatens survival; the other dedicated to the belief that ‘another world is possible’... Which trajectory will dominate, no one can foretell. The pattern is familiar throughout history; a crucial difference today is that the stakes are far higher. (236)

Chomsky pays lip service to the hope that another world might be possible, but his book privileges the likelihood of an apocalyptic outcome. In order to halt, as Chomsky argues, an American hegemony that threatens to plunge the world in an orgy of violence, one has to seek “alternatives of thought, action, and institutions” (236). Easier said than done. Even imagining such alternatives requires the imagination of a genius or a lunatic, the kind of people who typically augur global bloodshed, famine, or disease with the furor of an Old Testament prophet. Unfortunately, many lunatics prefer to hasten the process themselves.

What kind of changes might make life for billions of people considerably better? Thom Yorke outlines a number of them in an op-ed piece he wrote for *The Guardian* in 2003. “The Trade Justice Movement,” he writes, “states that if Africa, east Asia, south Asia and Latin America could increase their share of world exports by 1% it would lift 128 million people out of poverty. Just how difficult is that?” (Yorke). Hypothetically, it wouldn’t be particularly difficult. Debt relief, the primary topic of Yorke’s piece, appears as though it might improve the lives of hundreds of millions with a few strokes of a pen. Sadly, it’s not that simple. People like Yorke and other concerned citizens of Western nations don’t hold the pens. Ostensibly, their leaders do. But not even they have the power, let alone the motivation, to enact policies that would ameliorate global poverty and its pernicious symptoms. The very nature of global capital, amorphous and ineffable as it is, still mandates some fundamental goals for any of its adherents. Capitalism requires money, no matter how involved one chooses to be in this system. And for those who already amass tremendous wealth and power, to change the status quo means risking that power and wealth.

And yet, somehow, citizens like Yorke, who realize that policies are instituted by organizations like the WTO, World Bank, and IMF, still believe that Western governments are merely ignorant, and think that “liberalisation” will solve the problem. In Yorke’s own words,

This, to me, feels like a bus full of religious lunatics rolling into town singing free trade songs and banging tambourines as war and famine break out and all about them turns to shit. It's nonsense. Why should the most desperate continue to cooperate with such fools when they increasingly have nothing left to lose? They are not seeing the so-called benefits but they are seeing too much of the costs.

However, Western governments, the IMF, the World Bank, the WTO, and, perhaps more importantly, the multi-national corporations who operate the levers behind the curtain, know precisely what they’re doing.

The World Bank, the IMF, and other institutions ...

**Comment [1]:**  
Finish analysis.

The Bretton Woods Institutions, which includes these organizations, reached their current shape as a result of corporate influence. For example, “Robert McNamara, past chief of the Ford Motor Company and secretary of defense...more than any one person, made the World Bank what it is today.” His leadership led “the Bank” to “[increase] lending from \$953 million to \$12.4 billion...The result was to leave many peripheral countries with staggering debt burdens” (Robbins 100). The oil industry has its fingers in peripheral debt as well. During the “oil boom of the early 1970s,” oil corporations had difficulty finding investments for their staggering profits; their solution, conveniently, meant investing in peripheral nations because they had little other choice. Publicly, the World Bank would call these investments salutary, and indeed, many countries benefited—that is, until lenders starting seeing economic problems of their own and drastically raised interest rates (100).

Corporate entities need nation-states and organizations like the World Bank, at least for the time being, in order to enact policies which benefit them. Corporations could not succeed “without the nation-state, businesses could not prosper, and consumers could not buy, at least not as cheaply as they do.” One of many examples is that of Nike: “...countries such as Vietnam and

Indonesia offer tax breaks to Nike and control and discipline their labor forces to ensure an inexpensive and docile workforce, many of whom use their wages to purchase Nike products” (136). Nation-states legitimize the kinds of practices which reap profits for multi-national corporations, and often have little choice to bend to the will of corporate interest.

But corporate power can function outside of the nation-state, a trend that, as they continue to consolidate, will only grow worse. For instance, corporations now have the power “to supply nation-states with privatized armed services,” as the Shell corporation did in 1995 to help the Nigerian government to suppress the Ogoni, who demanded “that Shell cease polluting Ogoni lands” (132). Yikes. Conclude this paragraph, too.

Corporations and the nation-states that legitimize their frequent and often unfettered violations of human rights, however, do not compose the whole picture. One must take into account the omnipotence of capitalist culture itself, something much greater, and far more mysterious, than its many agents—indeed, so all-encompassing that perhaps all of us are its agents, willingly or no.

The way of life for most American and British consumers depends on operations with effects like those outlined above. In order for America, particularly, to maintain economic hegemonic power, as Chomsky would argue, its citizens remain unaware or apathetic about the other billions whose lifestyles do not include such luxuries as clean water, indoor plumbing, anesthetics, antibiotics, or a proper diet—though they may at least have televisions. As Fredric Jameson admonishes the reader at the outset *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*,

...this whole global, yet American postmodern culture is the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world: in this sense, as throughout class history, the underside of culture is blood, torture, death, and terror. (5)

Blood, torture, death, and terror; in 1991, I doubt Jameson could have predicted how these four nouns would swell and manifest, and become ever more apparent within the span of fifteen years. What’s more, the violent underpinnings of what Jameson calls “postmodern,” a mystery (in the



existential phenomenological sense) that cannot be named, reproduces like a virus, expanding geometrically. Concretely, an event like the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, which can be traced to fundamentalists disillusioned by the American-dominated market economy, not only bolsters the “culture” that invited the attack—military intervention in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the continuing tension and reciprocal violence in the Middle East—but also creates more fundamentalists, which, in turn, again bolsters the dominance of a capitalist culture whose constituents demand to be defended by its Praetorian guard.

How does an American, in particular, “continue to steadfastly speak up for humane values, with the spirit of independence, moral seriousness, sense of dedication and devotion to human liberty for which they are renowned among the nations” (Eagleton 227)? In light of Jameson’s theory of an immanent culture of capitalism, one should perhaps ask instead: why speak up at all?

As products of this culture, its schools, its art, its totalizing influence, capitalism bombards us with the rhetoric of freedom. We are, the system says, free to choose; this, supposedly, is what makes the market economy, in the eyes of many of its agents, the pinnacle of human achievement. But is not the global market economy the very negation of freedom? “The market is...Leviathan in sheep’s clothing: its function is not to encourage and perpetuate freedom (let alone freedom of a political variety)” (273) as Jameson astutely reminds us. Furthermore,

market ideology assures us that human beings make a mess of it when they try to control their destinies...and that we are fortunate in possessing an interpersonal mechanism—the market—which can substitute for human hubris and planning and replace human decisions altogether...it...will see to us and keep us in line. (273).

I wonder if Thom Yorke had the same “wolf-in-sheep’s-clothing” metaphor in mind while writing the song “A Wolf at the Door (It Girl. Rag Doll)” on Radiohead’s fifth studio album, *Hail to the Thief*. During the chorus of the song, Yorke sings with a voice that straddles deliberate calm and desperation how he [the speaker] “...keep[s] the wolf from the door,” an exhausting, terrifying task. The chorus thus continues:

but he calls me up  
calls me on the phone  
tells me all the ways that he's gonna mess me up  
steal all my children  
if i don't pay the ransom  
but i'll never see him again  
if i squeal to the cops

If read in light of Jameson's own metaphor of Hobbes' "Leviathan in sheep's clothing," Yorke both anthropomorphizes and bestializes late capitalist culture. The forces that keep us in line, then, sometimes resemble kidnapers and pedophiles, the cliché of sinister telephone calls from film and television—and yet the song is called "Wolf at the Door," and the first lines of the chorus remind us of this. Culture, too, is a werewolf of sorts, a supernatural, shape-shifting creature with a taste for human blood. Yorke's speaker, unlike the hero of some abysmally clichéd film, isn't going to go after the kidnapper, the killer, or the werewolf, but instead do his best to keep it from the door, to endure the taunts, the threats, the phone calls.

Does Yorke really refer to late capitalist culture? Yes—as we can see, his lyrics obliquely indict this culture, but not in a way as to make them utterly impossible to unpack—though they sometimes require a bit of work. As with most of Radiohead's songs after *OK Computer* (and many even prior), Yorke eschews didacticism and sometimes even comprehensibility. One bit of textual evidence from "Wolf at the Door" validates this analysis, after some unraveling. Towards the end of the first verse, Yorke sings, in what initially sounds utterly ridiculous,

get the eggs  
get the flan in the face  
the flan in the face  
the flan in the face  
dance you fucker dance you fucker  
don't you dare  
don't you dare

don't you flan in the face

According to Joseph Tate, Yorke explained these lines “in an interview with *Q* magazine,” where he “mentions that ‘a friend of [Yorke’s] threw a flan in United Kingdom cabinet minister Clare Short’s face’” (194). The interviewer confirms that, indeed, “‘Clare short was hit by a custard pie at Bangor University in March 2001’” (194).

These lines, then, do suggest that Yorke may have late capitalist culture in mind, though not necessarily with the same theoretical assessment as Jameson’s. Yet they do reveal, along with the chorus, a desperation that comes with the inability to change the circumstances that force the speaker to “keep the wolf from the door.” The point of view in this short part of the song shifts rapidly. In the liminal space between two lines, a mere moment in Yorke’s frantic vocal delivery, the speaker enjoins us to “get the eggs” and throw pies at cabinet ministers, and then, somewhere within the lines “dance you fucker dance you fucker,” the speaker assumes the voice of the wolf, who warns, “don’t you dare.” And who, precisely, is it that commands us to “dance?” On the one hand, it might be the protester throwing a custard pie at his intended victim, publicly humiliated, or it might be the wolf, ordering us to “dance” like a victim in a Western where an emasculated character, here the protester, has to “dance” to avoid the bullets of a sadistically smug opponent—the wolf.

These lines also work well with the chorus in terms of capitalism’s amorphous nature—it can assume the role of the protester, the cabinet minister, the policeman, the rock icon, and yet it is none of these things and all of them at the same time. The frantic pace of Yorke’s delivery of the chorus, as well as the nebulous shift in point of view, and the grammatical irregularity of the lyrics (“flan,” as far as I know, isn’t a verb), suggest something omnipresent, shape-shifting, and inhuman. It is an alien presence, but an uncomfortably familiar one as well.

In the face of such an overwhelming reality, what are we to do? Radiohead doesn’t offer an answer, but rather, they prod us to find one for ourselves. Luijpen writes that

the pessimism of certain Western thinkers [such as Marx] about technocracy is for him the last—for the umpteenth time—convulsion of the bourgeoisie’s sense of doom. Western lamentations over the ‘mass man’ of technocracy merely

show us that the West is unable to give a real answer to the question of what man is. (143)

But, as Lijpen reminds us, this is “the great illusion of Marxism.” Additionally, “authentic subjectivity requires more than Marx would have us believe” (143-44). What, then, does authentic subjectivity require?

Man must heed his conscience, face his anxiety, the inevitability of death, and embrace the horizon of possibilities he has been granted. Man must reject technocracy, commodity fetishism, and the ideology of multinational capitalism, in order to overcome fallen existence. The music and art of Radiohead, the works of philosophers in all disciplines, can remind us of the dire situation in which we find ourselves. But the responsibility, ultimately, rests in each and every individual. We must find it within ourselves to reject that which destroys the human subject, be it the workings of multinational capitalism, consumerism, or otherwise. This is the work of the individual, and only the individual, as much as existentialist and other thought emphasizes community and intersubjectivity. By changing one’s own behavior and attitude towards the world, by rejecting that which draws him into a fallen existence and celebrating that which rejoices in community and subjectivity, he can become more fully intersubjective, and hence, a positive influence on culture by having meaningful interactions with fellow subjects. And only through such meaningful interaction can we enact positive change.

Revolution doesn’t happen overnight. When it does, only violence and rancor follow in its wake. Revolution must take place at the level of the subject, who comes to terms with his anxiety and conscience, and communicates what he has discovered to other subjects. To many, the future may look grim. But one can only hope that the millions of Radiohead fans worldwide begin to comprehend their message.

An ice age may be coming, but perhaps we can stop it. Individually, we must examine ourselves, and collectively, with our own acceptance of death, anxiety, and phenomenological reality, we can begin to change things. Only from within the system can we change the system. And we can only hope that enough people hear the message, examine their lives, and subsequently become willing to change. Radiohead’s position in the global market economy has enough

influence that it might affect this kind of change in thousands of fans, who might learn and teach their family, friends, and peers by example. Otherwise, I fear, as does Radiohead, that the apocalypse is at hand—whether it be the Four Horsemen, or an equally frightening technocracy.

But, in the words of Thom Yorke’s “Sail to the Moon,” written for his son Noah, perhaps there is hope. Just as Orwell made Winston Smith’s birthday the same year as his son’s, the album *Hail to the Thief* “may not be imagining present ills so much as warning a next generation” (Tate 184) while hoping for the best. His father hopes that Noah

...may be president  
But know right from wrong  
Or in the flood  
[He]’ll build an ark  
To sail us to the moon.

For those of us who hear the summons, and genuinely attempt to change our lives, our best hope is that we can all be like Noah—Noah Yorke, that is, fulfilling a worried father’s dream that his son may accomplish so much more than he ever could.

The Christian existentialists, unfortunately, seem to function too idealistically, as philosophy seems inclined to operate. Anxiety is not something we overcome once, but rather something we must face constantly; the world is far too unpredictable, and we must constantly seek new solutions. The wolf will always be at the door, every single day, until we die. Rather than barricading ourselves, hoping desperately that things will be better, we must always confront the menace that threatens to devour us—not once, but continually, always. The threat is protean, sometimes subtle, sometimes overpowering. Hence, to think teleologically, to see potential disaster as something we can avert once and never face again, is naive. This is the delusion of the myopic revolutionary, as it is also the surrender of the hopeless dystopian.

Every day we face the flood, and every day we have to be King Canute, holding back the inexorable tide. No matter what we do, anxiety will always trouble us, and no matter what, we need anxiety—not fear—to keep us from hallucinating that things will be all right, or that the

authentic life is a teleological process. There will always be obstacles and unforeseen difficulties.

Our best hope, then, is to remain vigilant, and even more, to adapt, as Radiohead does.

Thom Yorke and Radiohead don't have the confident public poise of other celebrities and musicians involved in political and cultural concerns. But this honest frailty and their ability to adapt their causes to their celebrity without allowing the camera lens to demean their politics keeps "the cultural logic of late capitalism" from devastating their efforts. We can only hope, then, that it's not too late.

#### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

"2+2=5 (The Lukewarm)." *Hail to the Thief*. CD. Capitol. 2005

"Canute the Great" *Wikipedia*. November 2006. 7 November 2006.

<[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canute\\_the\\_Great](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canute_the_Great)>.

- Chomsky, Noam. *Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance*. New York: Henry Holt and Company. 2003.
- Chomsky, Noam. What Uncle Sam Really Wants. Ed. Arthur Naiman and Sandy Naiman. Monroe, ME: Odonian Press Real Story, 1992.
- “‘Difficult’ Radiohead Album Is a Hit.” *BBC News*. 4 October 2000. 11 December 2006. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/955767.stm>>.
- Duerden, Nick. “Protest Singer.” *Independent* 21 May 2006: Features 7. *LexisNexis Academic*. Dayton Memorial Lib., Denver, CO. 12 July 2006. <<http://web.lexis-nexis.com.dml.regis.edu>>.
- Eagleton, Terry. *After Theory*. New York: Basic Books. 2003.
- “Fitter Happier.” Radiohead. *OK Computer*. CD. Capitol, 1997.
- “The Five Minute Interview: Thom Yorke: ‘Denying Climate Change Is More Evil Than Anything Else.’” *The Independent* 26 May 2005: First Edition 11. *LexisNexis Academic*. Dayton Memorial Lib., Denver, CO. 12 July 2006. <<http://web.lexis-nexis.com.dml.regis.edu>>.
- Green Plastic Radiohead*. 2006. 12 July 2006. <<http://www.greenplastic.com>>.
- “Hail to the Thief: A Rhizomatic Map in Fragments.” Tate, Joseph. *The Music and Art of Radiohead*. Ed. Joseph Tate. England: Ashgate. 177-197.
- Jameson, Frederic. *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke Univ. Press. 1991.
- “Just.” *The Bends*. CD. Capitol, 1995.
- Klosterman, Chuck. *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs: A Low Culture Manifesto*. New York: Scribner, 2004.
- Leblanc, Lisa. “‘Ice Age Coming’: Apocalypse, the Sublime, and the Paintings of Stanley Donwood.” *The Music and Art of Radiohead*. Ed. Joseph Tate. England: Ashgate. 85-102.
- Luijpen, William, and Henry J. Koren. *A First Introduction to Existential Phenomenology*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press. 1969.
- Marcel, Gabriel. *Creative Fidelity*. Trans. Robert Rosthal. New York: Fordham Univ. Press. 2002.

- MacQuarrie, Ralph. *An Existentialist Philosophy: A Comparison of Heidegger and Bultmann*.  
New York: Harper & Row. 1960.
- Massumi, Brian. *A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Deviations from Deleuze and Guattari*. Cambridge: The MIT Press. 1992.
- McClellan, Craig. "All Messed Up." *The Observer* 18 June 2006: *Observer Music Magazine* 29.  
*LexisNexis Academic*. Dayton Memorial Lib., Denver, CO. 12 July 2006.  
<<http://web.lexis-nexis.com.dml.regis.edu>>.
- Meeting People is Easy*. Dir. Grant Gee. Prod. Kudos and Parlophone. DVD. EMI Records, Ltd., and Capitol Records. 1998.
- O'Brien, Fergal and Richard Tomlinson. "Bono, an Arch-Capitalist, or Not? U2 Frontman Exhorts World Leaders to Give, but Avoids Paying Taxes." *Entrepreneur*. 5 February 2007.  
*LexisNexis Academic*. Dayton Memorial Lib., Denver, CO. 12 March 2007.  
<<http://web.lexis-nexis.com.dml.regis.edu>>.
- "Optimistic" Radiohead. *Kid A*. CD. Capitol, 2000.
- "Paranoid Android." Radiohead. *OK Computer*. CD. Capitol, 1997.
- Radiohead. *Airbag / How am I Driving?*. Capitol, 1998.
- "Radiohead Biography." *Green Plastic Radiohead*. 2006. 12 July 2006.  
<<http://www.greenplastic.com>>.
- "Sail to the Moon." Radiohead. *Hail to the Thief*. CD. Capitol. 2005
- Watson, Paul. "Radiohead Star Joins 'Son of Star Wars' Protest." *Press Association* 25 Sep. 2004: Home News. *LexisNexis Academic*. Dayton Memorial Lib., Denver, CO. 12 July 2006.  
<<http://web.lexis-nexis.com.dml.regis.edu>>.
- "Wolf at the Door" Radiohead. *Hail to the Thief*. CD. Capitol. 2005