

Introduction

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The book you have in your hand is a collection of academic essays about Radiohead, a five-member music group from Oxford, England. As an academic collection, the book brings together close readings of this English band's music, lyrics, album cover art, and music videos, as well as critical commentary on interviews, reviews, and the documentary film *Meeting People is Easy*. By emerging and established academic scholars alike, each of the essays engages concerns of broader implication to contemporary cultural studies to examine topics ranging from Radiohead's various musical and multivalent social contexts to their contested situation within a global market economy.

There are less flattering ways to describe this book's project, however. In a 2001 interview with Alex Ross, the *New Yorker's* classical music critic, percussionist Phil Selway voiced a persistent aggravation of the band, one attested to in countless interviews: the over-intellectualization of Radiohead's music by fans and critics alike. 'Really,' Selway said, 'we don't want people twiddling their goatees over our stuff. What we do is pure escapism' (Ross 2001: 115). Immediately, Ross himself confesses to the reader that, 'The records, the videos, the official Web site, even the T-shirts all cry out for interpretation' (2001: 115), but this sort of interpretation, Ross adds casually, is the province of 'teen-agers.' This book, however, has not a single teen-ager among its authors. Instead, a group of scholars are critically engaged in what Selway might derogatorily term 'goatee-twiddling': thinking seriously about music that is historically dense in musical allusion, sonically inventive, lyrically ambiguous and ironic, and unabashedly engaged in its social context.¹

Not only are band members unhappy about this approach; some listeners are as well. In 2001, I first published 'Radiohead's Antivideos' in the journal *Postmodern Culture*. The essay received a substantial amount of reader mail for an academic essay, and not all positive. One response in particular, from Jeremy Arnold, posed questions significant enough for the editors to request that I respond. In responding to Arnold, I began where he concluded his letter. Arnold wrote: 'I don't need Thom Yorke to tell me that we live in a technological world, nor do I need him to understand capitalism[']s dirty little remainder. What I do need Radiohead for is the aesthetic brilliance, the originality, the possibility that they provide.' The aesthetic brilliance to which Arnold alluded – presumably an objective quality of the work and/or band members – is undoubtedly linked to what he mentioned earlier in the letter, that Radiohead's music refers 'us not to a

dematerialized sphere of virtuality,' but it 'sends us back to the real human emotions (or the difficulty in feeling those emotions) involved in any situation.' The songs send the listener or, put differently, they *transport* the listener back to real emotions. Though what each variant of 'real' is meant to connote ('real,' 'the Real,' and 'reality' are used interchangeably) is unclear, Arnold's 'real human emotions' in this instance are likely shorthand for what might be called phenomenological presence, a presence reachable via Radiohead's music. Thus, objective aesthetic brilliance induces a 'real' emotional state, and it is this state my essay and similar academic work on the band fails to address.

Neither my essay nor the other essays herein touch on this phenomenon, largely because Radiohead's entire project can be read, almost successfully, as an argument against this very sort of listener experience. I use Wallace Stevens' phrase 'almost successfully' because Stevens' poem, 'Man Carrying Thing,' is indeed instructive in this instance: 'The poem must resist the intelligence, / Almost successfully' (in Stevens 1997: lines 1–2, 350). The poem, or in this case the music of Radiohead, must and does resist intelligence almost successfully – that is, not quite successfully: art does indeed resist critical understanding, but never does it remain completely inarticulate or inscrutable. We can and should, I think, as Stevens says in closing his poem, 'endure our thoughts all night, until / The bright obvious stands motionless in cold' (lines 13–14, 351). The 'bright obvious' here being that Radiohead's music doesn't return us to 'a reality,' to use Arnold's phrase, or 'real human emotions' at all. Instead, with systematic clarity, Radiohead's work asks for anything but the aesthetic transport of the listener.

Reading the band's work as self-reflexive, the lyrics of the title track to *Kid A* represent aesthetic response, or musical ecstasy to be exact (similar to Selway's professed escapism), as an experience with potentially horrifying results.² As the song ends, Yorke's barely decipherable, computer-manipulated voice sings: 'The rats and children follow me out of town / The rats and children follow me out of their homes / Come on kids.' Via overt allusion to the Pied Piper story, Radiohead's exaggeration of its music's power to sway listeners would seem, like the Pied Piper story itself, to be a cautionary tale.³

If children in this song and others are read as symbols of emotional sincerity, the band's lyrics have an anxiety-ridden perspective on affective honesty. The 2001 b-side 'Fog' figures the perpetual presence of a child as a fast-growing, subterranean baby alligator familiar from urban mythology:

There's a little child
Running round this house
And he never leaves
He will never leave
And the fog comes up from the sewers
And glows in the dark

Baby alligators in the sewers grow up fast
Grow up fast

Similarly, amid the *OK Computer* song 'Fitter Happier' and its catalog-like litany of mundane self-help advice, there intervenes a chilling line meant to have a conventional cinematic visual layering effect: '(shot of baby strapped in back seat).' The speaker of the *Kid A* track 'Morning Bell' thrice intones the imperative, 'Cut the kids in half,' and two songs from *Hail to the Thief* refer to youth and children: 'We Suck Young Blood' mentions not just any blood, but 'young' blood, and taking the singer-speaker's children away is one of the most horrible acts 'A Wolf at the Door' has threatened to commit:

I keep the wolf from the door
 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
 And I'll never see 'em again
 If I squeal to the cops

Likewise, instead of sincerely asking listeners to follow them childlike out of town, the band warns in 'Dollars and Cents' from *Amnesiac* that:

we are the DOLLARS & CENTS
 and the PoUNDS and Pence
 the MARK and the YEN
 we are going to crack your little souls
 we are going to crack your little souls

The 'we' of these lines is not literally autobiographical, but the we is metaphorically Radiohead, a product we buy with pounds and pence that is going to physically crack (open up or break down?) the listeners' supposedly diminutive souls. Again and again, the message of the music: beware.

Thus, any pleasure listeners experience with Radiohead's music is mired in the foregrounded trappings of its marketplace consumption: the 'aesthetic brilliance' cannot be arrived at without first paying for it: with dollars and cents, pounds and pence. In large part, twenty-first-century music is a physical commodity made in a factory. Radiohead's music, I argue, does not want or allow listeners to forget that the product they are listening to is just that: a product. Thinking of the experience otherwise, we fall prey to what Baudrillard described: 'We make believe that products are so differentiated and multiplied that they have become complex beings, and consequently purchasing and consumption must have the same value as any *human* relation [*sic*]' (2001: 17).

Relations in Radiohead's music, however, are severely plagued not by personal immediacy, but by perpetual delay, a static waiting for connection to happen, a connection that often never does happen. In 'The Bends' the speaker asks:

Where do we go from here
 The words are coming out all weird
 Where are you now, when I need you

Later in the song the speaker has a ‘drip-feed on,’ is talking to a ‘girlfriend / waiting for something to happen’ and is ‘scared that there’s nothing underneath.’⁴ In the first lines of *Amnesiac*’s ‘Packt like Sardines in a Crushd Tin Box,’ the song’s ‘reasonable man’ tells us that ‘After years of waiting / Nothing came,’ and ‘Knives Out’ on the same album narrates an ambiguous survival scenario where those left behind are told to fend for themselves:

I want you to know
 He’s not coming back
 He’s bloated and frozen
 Still there’s no point in letting it go to waste

So knives out
 Catch da mouse
 Squash his head
 Put him in the pot

Pointing to the band’s lyrics in the incomplete way I have above by no means establishes an authoritative reading. Nevertheless, I do think there is a strong case for the assertion that the band’s project time and again calls emotional legitimacy, immediacy, aesthetic response into question.⁵ To repeat the song ‘Let Down’ from *OK Computer*: ‘Don’t get sentimental / It always ends up drivell.’

Given the insistent questioning that can be found in the band’s lyrics, what the band’s real position is on these issues we’ll never know, nor do we need to. However, we might glimpse their perspective on critical inquiry approximately 52 minutes into *Meeting People is Easy*, the 1998 documentary on the band, when Thom Yorke complains in a moment of irritated honesty to an interviewer:

If they’re going to call it a concept record, and they’re going to focus on the technology thing, it’s like, just let them, it’s fucking noise, anyway. We’ve done our job, you know. It just adds to the noise. It would be interesting to see ...

In that ellipsis, in the radiant lacuna where Yorke’s voice trails off before the scene visually and aurally fades out to a shot of an empty airport waiting area, therein reside our agreements and disagreements, our sound and fury, our addition to the noise. And the noise made by this collection’s contributors is varied in pitch, pace, and volume.

Reappraising Theodor Adorno’s theoretical formulations via the twenty-first century’s cultural context, Curtis White argues in his essay, ‘Kid Adorno,’ that in an otherwise closely controlled art world, rock music entails the latent possibility for ‘social explosiveness.’ Admittedly a tightly administered corner of the culture industry, this contested position enables rock to have broad social consequence, The Sex Pistols, The Beatles, and Radiohead included. White then moves on to

read Nick Hornby's now notorious *New Yorker* review of *Kid A* as exemplary resistance to this mode of rock's influence. Hornby's perspective restrains Radiohead's social and aesthetic possibilities by applying accustomed conventions of derision, e.g. the band's experimentation is 'self-indulgent.' Instead, White maintains that the artistic and political health of the band is evident in its refusal of the commodification Hornby's critique desires.

Davis Schneiderman's contribution, 'We got Heads on Sticks / You got Ventriloquists': Radiohead and the Improbability of Resistance,' defies easy summary. The electric movement of Davis's prose disputes the band's radicalized position as 'antirock rock stars.' Though Radiohead's lyrics may voice the economic subject's predicament, he questions whether Radiohead can escape being a tool of, and thus twisted by, marketplace pressures. Schneiderman surveys the band's commercialized resistance with special reference to its internet presence, the 'viral marketing techniques' deployed by the band's various promoters, and finally an anatomization of Grant Gee's tour-film documentary *Meeting People is Easy*. A tightly woven collage of convincing re-visionings of the band's entire project (from music to marketing), the essay thoroughly unsettles any notion of the band's aesthetic or commercial autonomy.

In 'The Aura of Authenticity: Perceptions of Honesty, Sincerity, and Truth in "Creep" and "Kid A,"' Carys Wyn Jones investigates the differing types of authenticity to which the two vastly different songs aspire. Radiohead, Jones argues, is uniquely situated in relation to authenticity insofar as the band is typically viewed as possessing artistic integrity despite its mainstream status, two positions most often considered mutually exclusive. In the end, the purpose of Jones's work is not only to use various and contested concepts of authenticity to analyze the music of Radiohead, but also to use Radiohead's music to critique claims to authenticity more generally.

Erin Harde's essay, 'Radiohead and the Negation of Gender,' observes that while the members of Radiohead do not identify themselves as androgynous, they do not overtly portray either a specific sexuality or gender identity. Traversing this problem, a genealogy of pop music androgyny is traced through 1970s glam rock and transvestism (e.g. David Bowie's Ziggy Stardust persona) to the present popular infatuation with the *über*-gendered Britney Spears, for example. Harde thus contextualizes Radiohead's success in relation to its decidedly non-sexual image, an anomalous negation of gender in a recording industry that is hyper-concerned with the clearly defined, if not hyperbolized, performance of sexuality. Ultimately, the relevance of Harde's essay resonates powerfully within the larger context of contemporary debates on the myriad of issues comprising gender and sexuality studies.

Grounded firmly in Gilles Deleuze's philosophy, Greg Hainge's essay, 'To(rt)uring the Minotaur: Radiohead, Pop, Unnatural Couplings, and Mainstream Subversion,' investigates the unusual flexibility of mainstream popular musical culture to coil seemingly unconventional forms of expression into its

own comforting refrain, a repetition that summons a homely familiarity. Beginning with *Pablo Honey* and *The Bends*, Hainge analyzes how, despite its alternative labeling, Radiohead's early career collaborated with mainstream expectations. Turning to what he calls the '[t]wo antipopulist movements' embodied in the promotional artwork surrounding *Kid A* and *Amnesiac*, Hainge considers the band's latest efforts a coded and forceful disavowal of the mainstream.

Since the 1995 release of *The Bends*, visual artist Stanley Donwood has collaborated with the band to create a complex iconography that complements and even extends Radiohead's music. Interestingly and perhaps uniquely, Donwood's work develops alongside the music so that the two, sound and vision, are complicit in what Lisa Leblanc's essay, "'Ice Age Coming': The Apocalypse, the Sublime, and the Paintings of Stanley Donwood," terms 'a multidisciplinary dialogue, supporting and completing one another.' With a careful, considered critique rooted in (but not reliant on) interviews with Donwood himself, Leblanc maps the artist's image-trajectory from sterile cityscapes with *OK Computer* to monumental landscapes in the *Kid A* paintings, from suburban life to melting polar ice caps. While thematically consistent, Donwood's execution and subject matter have mutated into a colossally scaled apocalyptic vision. Leblanc finally frames the credibility of Donwood's apocalypse by way of its elicitation of perhaps the most overwhelming aesthetic sensation: the sublime.

Joseph Tate's essay, 'Radiohead's Antivideos: Works of Art in the Age of Electronic Reproduction,' explores the appearance of 'test specimens' in computer-animated music video shorts titled 'antivideos,' 10–30-second videos released only on the internet concurrently with *Kid A*. The test specimens, wide-eyed bears with murderous grins, punctuated the art of Radiohead from CD packaging and packing slips, to website images and promotional stickers. Although directly analogous to all-too-familiar character-mascots that establish a product's brand identity, the bears are read as protagonists in a self-referential aesthetic that pastiches the band's commodification and the operation of capital at large.

In 'Deforming Rock: Radiohead's Plunge into the Sonic Continuum,' Mark Hansen considers Radiohead against several issues related to the music-sound-noise complex. Opposing the claim that *Kid A* and *Amnesiac*'s digital explorations represent radical departures for the band, Hansen foregrounds neglected continuities between the more recent studio albums and the previous three by illuminating how the band's sonic experiments form a juncture between rock and indie music, and yet differ from more radical contemporary sound experimentation in the non-commercial art world. A persuasive argument is made for Radiohead's unique ability to conjoin categories normally at odds – analog and digital, rock and techno, breath-based and machine beat – in a manner that ultimately discloses the sonic relationship between noise and music, and expands the notion of 'rock' itself.

Firmly grounded in musicology, Anwar Ibrahim and Allan Moore's essay, "'Sounds Like Teen Spirit': Identifying Radiohead's Idiolect," makes a persuasive argument for a musical idiolect unique to Radiohead, one derived from, but not totally reliant on, The Pixies. However, while unpacking the fundamental formal structures of the band's musical strategies from album to album, the authors find that Radiohead's music problematizes any specification of idiolect: the unpredictability of Radiohead's music is its only true constant and a feature essential to the band's wide-ranging and long-lasting appeal.

Dai Griffiths' essay, 'Public Schoolboy Music: Debating Radiohead,' explores how the shared economic background of the band members shaped their approach to music. In particular, Griffiths lingers over the fact that Radiohead all attended Abingdon School in England, a representative example of the expensive, private education peculiar to the country's social landscape. Though an important bit of biography frequently passed over in critical examination of the band, this adolescent experience is a latent geological force that continues to sculpt Radiohead's musical materials. Griffiths details the near-modernist complexity and conventions of the band's compositional practices, reading both as a direct result of its members' private education.

Departing somewhat from the collection's atmosphere, musical composer Paul Lansky's 'My Radiohead Adventure' is an intimate recounting of a composer's personal interaction with the band. Contacted by Radiohead's Jonny Greenwood in 2000, Lansky consented to the band's use of a sample from his 'mild und liese' to underpin the *Kid A* track 'Idioteque.' The brief sample from Lansky's composition – a haunting piece composed from 1972–73 on a room-sized computer that needed one hour to process and then produce one minute of music – is shown to ground Radiohead's electronica-based song on a number of levels. The autobiographical account, however, subtly shifts to the critical as Lansky explores with exacting precision Radiohead's bending of harmonic languages in 'Idioteque' and other songs to achieve musical effects peculiar to the band's art.

Ending the collection is Joseph Tate's essay, '*Hail to the Thief*: A Rhizomatic Map in Fragments.' This final contribution explores and maps the vast textual terrain covered by the most recent album's occasionally obscure and often allusive lyrics. Some lines of inquiry lead into ponderous and unpaved culs-de-sac, while others trace wide spans of well-traveled roads. What emerges is not a single interpretation of the album, but a representation of the album's uncontainable and fragile heterogeneity of subject matter, a heterogeneity that points in the direction of Radiohead's past, present, and future.

Notes

1. In the preface to *The Rules of Art* (1992), Pierre Bourdieu discusses this same issue at length in the context of sociological analysis of literary works: 'countless are those

who forbid sociology any profaning contact with the work of art ... I would simply ask why so many critics, so many writers, so many philosophers take such satisfaction in professing that the experience of a work of art is ineffable, that it escapes by definition all rational understanding; why they are so eager to concede without a struggle the defeat of knowledge; and where does their irrepressible need to belittle rational understanding come from, this rage to affirm the irreducibility of the work of art, or, to use a more suitable word, its transcendence' (xvi).

2. An example of escapism, of letting oneself drift off into one's own world, is illustrated in 'Karma Police.' The black comedy of the singer's exaggeratedly totalitarian wishes is revealed, in the end, to have been only a passing daydream: 'Phew, for a minute there I lost myself.' Escaping from the moment, in this case, has resulted in an extended reverie wherein people are arrested for bad hairstyle choices and for sounding like 'a detuned radio.' The interjection 'Phew' confirms that the speaker is glad the escapist moment is over.
3. In another instance, Radiohead critiques aesthetic rapture: the beloved in 'Creep' from *Pablo Honey* is said to 'float like a feather in a beautiful world,' but the speaker ultimately admits his inadequacy in the face of such beauty: 'I'm a creep.' Confronting something beautiful, or something perceived as beautiful, repeatedly causes problems for the protagonists in Radiohead's music. Other examples include 'No Surprises' from *OK Computer*: 'Such a pretty house / Such a pretty garden' and 'Like Spinning Plates' from *Amnesiac*: 'While you make pretty speeches / I'm being cut to shreds.' The adjective pretty works as it does in Nirvana's 'In Bloom' from *Nevermind*:

He's the one
Who likes all our pretty songs
And he likes to sing along
And he likes to shoot his gun
But he knows not what it means

Pretty, in these instances, takes on the force of a caustically insincere compliment.

4. The 'bends' is another name for Caisson disease, or decompression sickness. According to the *OED*, the word 'caisson' originally meant a chest for the transportation of explosives or ammunition, but around 1753 the word came to mean a large watertight case or chest used in laying the foundations of bridges in deep water. With the disease, nitrogen gas bubbles form in the body as the result of rapid transition from a high- to a low-pressure environment. When the bubbles form in a victim's joints, he or she is said to have the 'bends' because they are unable to straighten their limbs. Other problems caused by the disease include paralysis, convulsions, difficulties with muscle coordination, sensory abnormalities, numbness, nausea, speech defects, and personality changes.
Historically, the disease is relatively new. Beginning in the early 1800s, caissons were sunk to a lake or river bottom and pressurized with air to create a watertight compartment for workers excavating bridge foundations. By the mid-1800s doctors observed that the duration of exposure to the caisson's increased air pressure and the worker's speed of ascent correlated with development of joint pains. More generally, one could argue that the disease results from the conflict of human biological limitations and technological innovation.
5. This suspicion is linked to, but not synonymous with, what Frederic Jameson calls 'the waning of affect in postmodern culture' (Jameson 1998: 10).