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"How to Disappear Completely":

Radiohead and the Resistant Concept Album

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"How to Disappear Completely":

Radiohead and the Resistant Concept Album

by

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Preface

The band Radiohead has dealt extensively with aspects of alienation in modern society over the course of its six albums. Despite consistently articulating an anxiety about capitalist culture, the band continues to produce its own commodity for mass consumption. In this dissertation I examine in detail Radiohead's two "experimental" albums, *Kid A* (2000) and *Amnesiac* (2001), and investigate the ways in which the band's ambivalence toward its own success manifests in the albums' vanishing subject. In chapter one, I describe the origins of Radiohead as a popular music group from Oxford, England, and discuss the critical reception of their albums *Pablo Honey* (1993) and *The Bends* (1995). I then review the analytical attention paid to the concept album in popular music, including its relation to notions of narrative and its lack of definition in scholarly work. The first concept album to be widely recognized as such was the Beatles' *Sgt Pepper* (1967). The musical form peaked in the progressive-rock era with bands such as Jethro Tull and Yes, though various artists (including Radiohead) continue to produce albums with varying degrees of conceptual unity. Concept albums can be broadly categorized as either narrative or thematic. Narrative concept albums generally have a clear plot with characters or some type of protagonist who undergoes some kind of dramatic action. Thematic concept albums can be classified as either musical or lyrical and achieve unity through a recurring instrumental motive or cohesive lyrics on a given theme. An additional category of concept album is the resistant album, which expands the boundaries of the traditional concept album by obscuring the concept and subverting expectations of narrative and character development. Chapter one concludes with an examination of Radiohead's third album, *OK Computer* (1997), which brought the band even greater acclaim. *OK Computer* has been noted as an album that simultaneously reached back to the progressive-rock era for its influences (Mellotron, hypermetric complexity, cerebral lyrics), was very much an account of its time (technological

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alienation of the 1990s), and looked forward to the future (projecting a nihilist view of modern society to come). Most critics and music scholars have treated the album as a concept album, though the band members themselves have largely dismissed this notion.

In chapter two, I examine the conditions that precipitated Radiohead's fourth album, *Kid A* (2000). The global popularity of the band's earlier albums, particularly of *OK Computer*, created an ambivalence within the band members of trying to duplicate their known formula for success or striking out in a different direction that was perhaps truer to their musical and creative standards. Radiohead recorded material that was used to create two albums, *Kid A* and *Amnesiac*, which were released within six months of each other and have been taken for the most part as companion pieces. *Kid A* also drew many comparisons with *OK Computer*; while the later album continued the same themes of technological alienation, it did so without the use of conventional pop songs. The band carried through *Kid A*'s musical and lyrical obscurity into the album's packaging and accompanying website; such deliberate ambiguity has become a hallmark of Radiohead's presentation and has created a community of fans joined by their shared interpretations of the band's products.

I next turn to a consideration of the first half of *Kid A*, the songs leading up to the full articulation and immediate dissolution of the subject. More traditional concept albums present a subject that is clearly delineated and embodied within the singer; in *Kid A*, the presence of the subject is masked by electronic effects as well as obtuse, half-audible lyrics. Four songs into the album, in "How to Disappear Completely," the subject is finally given full voice but is immediately erased by the other instruments as the voice climbs into a falsetto vocalese. This existential "death" of the subject, halfway through the album, presents a problem in constructing any narrative and recalls the work of Jacques Lacan on the subject requiring two deaths if it is not laid to rest properly the first time. *Kid A* goes on to present a more literal second "death" at the end of the album. The musical elements on *Kid A* can be divided into the binary oppositions of music and noise,

sense and nonsense, and organic and technological. The sounds often cross categories, so that new correlations are made. "Noise" represents an intrusion into the existing soundscape such that the existence of the voice-as-subject is threatened. Because the subject is consumed by the instrumental texture, he must be reconstituted for the second half of the album and begin his struggles anew.

In chapter three, I examine "Treefingers," the song that represents the midpoint of *Kid A*, both in music-analytical terms and as an allegory for Radiohead's ambivalence toward its own success. The eruption of noise in "How to Disappear Completely" has ungrounded the subject and results in an amorphous musical space in which the voice exists only in the far background of the ambient texture. The subject must be reconstituted in order for the album to continue. In addition to marking an imaginary dividing line between album sides that formerly existed as the turning-over of an LP, "Treefingers" also anticipates the hiatus Radiohead took between *Kid A* and *Amnesiac* in order to react, reflect, and reproduce its musical commodity. The conflict the subject of *Kid A* feels is a mirror of the band's own feelings toward its success and whether to continue reproducing its old sound or proceed in a more experimental musical direction. The failure of *Kid A*'s subject to subjugate technology as noise thus becomes a critique for Radiohead's own failure to exist outside the corporate record industry.

Chapter four contains an analysis of the second half of *Kid A*, beginning with "Optimistic," the album's first "single" (though this perception is false, as it was never officially released as such). The subject is revived and given a second chance at negotiating life's travails, but ultimately fails again and "dies" at the end of the album. This second "death" is a theatrical enacting of suicide, in which the subject melodramatically proclaims his leave-taking. In chapter five, I present some larger observations about *Kid A* as a whole. One way of looking at the album's subject is as a sort of *homme fatal*—as voiced by a male singer, our awareness of the subject is as a male. Lacan's notion of the *femme fatale* informs my discussion of *Kid A*'s subject; the

vanishing subject can also be traced through the recurring 3-2-1 musical motive that first surfaces on "How to Disappear Completely" and then reappears on the album's second half. Another way of looking at *Kid A* is to link together the songs that appear on either side of the hollow midpoint of "Treefingers." Common lyrical and musical elements can be found in each of the song pairs formed in this fashion. Folding the songs across this midpoint produces an epitaph to the entire album in the form of "Motion Picture Soundtrack," the song in which the subject dramatically exits the album's stage.

In chapter six, I examine the follow-up album to *Kid A*, *Amnesiac* (2001), as a companion piece, synthesis of musical influences, and possible antidote (a literal erasing of memory) to the former album's alienation. Radiohead had claimed that this album would present a return to the band's old sound, but instead it presented further musical experimentation, although several of its songs were released as singles. Much of the critical reception of *Amnesiac* has treated it as more accessible, but the album's subject remains the same: alienation amid modern technology and the horrors of capitalist culture. Rather than tentatively building up the subject and then erasing him, the album presents a subject that is present from the beginning, if spiritually dead. Ultimately this image works as a symbol of the commodity itself. In the concluding chapter, I make additional observations about the tour Radiohead undertook after releasing both *Kid A* and *Amnesiac* and about the contextualization of the band's sixth album, *Hail to the Thief* (2003).

"How to Disappear Completely":
Radiohead and the Resistant Concept Album

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2005

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The band Radiohead has consistently articulated an anxiety about capitalist culture, despite producing its own commodity for mass consumption. In this dissertation I examine in detail Radiohead's two "experimental" albums, *Kid A* (2000) and *Amnesiac* (2001), and investigate the ways in which the band's ambivalence toward its own success manifests in the albums' vanishing subject. I review the analytical attention paid to the concept album in popular music, which can be broadly categorized as either narrative or thematic. An additional category of concept album is the resistant album, which expands the boundaries of the traditional concept album by subverting expectations of narrative. The global popularity of Radiohead's first three albums created an ambivalence within the band members of trying to duplicate their known formula for success or striking out in a new direction. *Kid A* and *Amnesiac* were released within six months of each other and have been taken for the most part as companion pieces. Contrary to earlier concept albums, *Kid A* presents a tentative subject that is finally given full voice on the album's fourth song but is immediately erased by the other instruments. This existential "death" of the subject, halfway through the album, presents a problem in constructing any

narrative. Because the subject is consumed by the instrumental texture, he must be reconstituted for the second half of the album and begin his struggles anew. The conflict the subject of *Kid A* feels is a mirror of the band's own feelings toward its success. The subject ultimately "dies" again at the end of the album, in a theatrical enacting of suicide. *Amnesiac* has been described as a companion piece, a synthesis of musical influences, and a possible antidote to *Kid A*'s alienation. Rather than tentatively building up the subject and then erasing him, *Amnesiac* presents a subject that, although present from the beginning, is spiritually dead. Ultimately this image stands as a symbol for the commodity itself, and for Radiohead's failure to exist outside the corporate record industry.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Musical Examples

Chapter 1: Introduction

One of the main hallmarks of recent popular music has been an emphasis on the theme of man's isolation in modern capitalist society. Bands that treat such themes are the darlings of critics. Ironically, music about alienation has proven to have a strong market worldwide. This hero-worship can spill over into a band's perception of itself, creating an overblown sense of self-importance or an ambivalent attitude toward its own success. Some artists (most notably, Sting and Bono) embrace the opportunity to use their music as a platform to address such global issues as deforestation or third-world debt. Others—most drastically Kurt Cobain—collapse under the pressure, unable to come to terms with audience demands to be more than entertainers.

Radiohead has been perceived by audiences, critics, and scholars alike as one of the most important bands in popular music today. Though the band's six albums have dealt extensively with aspects of alienation in a society of mass consumption, the band has also reaped the benefits of enormous success within this culture. The band repeatedly articulates an anxiety about being literally consumed; yet it continues to produce goods for mass consumption. While decrying the effects of modern technology, Radiohead takes full advantage of its promotional abilities, reaching listeners through not only the conventional CDs, but also peer-to-peer file-sharing networks, chatbots, and an archive of continually updated and redesigned websites. My goal in this dissertation is twofold: to examine in detail Radiohead's "experimental" concept album, *Kid A* (2000), and its follow-up, *Amnesiac* (2001), and to investigate the band's ambivalence toward its own success, as manifested in the vanishing subject on these two albums.

"ANYONE CAN PLAY GUITAR": THE ORIGINS OF RADIOHEAD

The band that would become Radiohead was formed in 1982 by five friends (Thom Yorke, Phil Selway, Ed O'Brien, and brothers Jonny and Colin Greenwood) at the

exclusive Abingdon School in Oxford, England. Various members had played together in other bands, but by 1986 the present lineup had gelled into a performing unit. As members of the band graduated and went off to university, the band still practiced together on weekends and played occasional gigs. Remarkably, even with the coming and going of members, the band managed to maintain its creative energy. Guitarist Ed O'Brien stated in 1997 that "there was never any question that we weren't going to do it…. Looking back on it, what was amazing was the commitment. Ten years ago, we talked about it. We knew we wanted to do this."[1] The five musicians were encouraged at Abingdon to learn and play instruments; they even practiced for a time at the school, though their sound was not particularly appreciated by the conservative faculty and students.

The members of Radiohead have varying amounts of formal musical training. A classically trained violist, guitarist Jonny Greenwood has the most, playing in the Thames Valley Youth Orchestra and later holding a three-year composer-in-residence appointment at BBC Radio 3.[2] The English public school background led some in the music press to take the attitude that Radiohead had not "'paid their dues,' that they were five privileged university lads who had barely formed the band when they were offered a mega-bucks major label deal, and that somehow this disqualified them from making quality music."[3] William Stone likewise observes:

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[1] Interview with Nancy Price, *Consumable Online* (1 September 1997), quoted in Martin Clarke, *Hysterical and Useless* (London: Plexus Publishing, 2003), 21. See http://www.westnet.com/consumable/1997/09.01/intradio.html (accessed 9 April 2005) for full text of the interview.

[2] See http://www.ateaseweb.com/news/archive/001010.php (accessed 27 January 2005) and http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/music/3725075.stm (accessed 11 August 2005).

[3] Clarke, *Hysterical and Useless*, 42. Dai Griffiths observes that the band members' experience at public school might have influenced their "profound sense of being cut off from the rest of ordinary society." Griffiths, "Public Schoolboy Music: Debating Radiohead," in *The Music and Art of Radiohead*, ed. Joseph Tate (Ashgate: Aldershot, UK, 2005), 162. He notes these characteristics of "public schoolboy music": rhythmic complexity, sustained ostinato, quasi-modal harmony, common-note progressions (pivot tones), electronic music as background, and pitch/tonal continuity, 163–65. Griffiths alludes to the music of Genesis in particular as sharing these elements.

Some see the struggle of bands to avoid losing their honesty, their integrity, their souls in the heart of the corporate machine as being one of the great spectator sports of the late Twentieth Century…. Radiohead had to make a decision. Would they release their records on Parlophone straight and risk accusations of being nothing more than capitalist whores…? Or would they release through some new label set up by the major to fake indie credibility? To their eternal credit they said it like it was—major they were, major they would be.[4]

This early aim toward major-label success would later change to ambivalence toward the mainstream record industry as they found they needed to subvert popular expectations to remain true to the band's musical goals.

The band exhibited fairly steady stylistic growth from its first album, *Pablo Honey* (1993), through *The Bends* (1995) and *OK Computer* (1997), adding increasingly complex layers of production effects to an essentially guitar-driven sound. After the success of the single "Creep" from *Pablo Honey* and the tepid reception of the album's other singles,[5] some predicted that Radiohead would be simply a one-hit wonder,[6] but instead the band's popularity increased immensely over the course of *The Bends* and *OK Computer*. During the recording sessions for *The Bends*, the band felt enormous pressure to try to duplicate the success of "Creep." Jonny Greenwood stated: "We were playing

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[4] Stone, *Radiohead: Green Plastic Wateringcan* (London: UFO Music Ltd., 1996), 19.

[5] "Anyone Can Play Guitar" peaked at number 32 on the UK charts. Mac Randall, *Exit Music: The Radiohead Story* (New York: Random House, 2000), 93. When "Creep" was initially released in the UK, it reached only number 78 on the charts, but its rerelease after success in the US charted at number 7. Martin C. Strong and John Peel, *The Great Rock Discography: Complete Discographies Listing Every Track Recorded by More Than 1,200 Artists* (New York: Canongate U.S., 2004), 671. See also James Doheny, *Radiohead: Back to Save the Universe; The Stories Behind Every Song* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2002), 142.

[6] *Pablo Honey*'s success was due in large part to the single "Creep," and touring in support of one single wore the band members down: "We joined this band to write songs and be musicians, but we spent a year being jukeboxes instead. We felt in a creative stasis because we couldn't release anything new." Jonny Greenwood in *Q* magazine, quoted in Clarke, *Hysterical and Useless*, 56. *Melody Maker* called *Pablo Honey* "promisingly imperfect." Quoted in Clarke, *Hysterical and Useless*, 44. "Creep" reached number 4 on the *Billboard* charts for Modern Rock Tracks of 1993, and ranked number 1 or 2 in various *Rolling Stone*, *Melody Maker*, and *NME* polls for that year. Stone, *Green Plastic Wateringcan*, 37.

like paranoid little mice in cages. We were scared of our instruments, scared of every note not being right."[7] Stone describes guitarist Colin Greenwood's take on the recording sessions: the band tried to record the album's prospective singles first, but they "might have done better to have completed the LP and chosen the singles to be taken from it later."[8] Radiohead had been named a "band to watch out for" by *Melody Maker* and *New Musical Express* (*NME*) in 1993,[9] and Martin Clarke notes the success of *The Bends* as "the start of a remarkable growth in commercial success and critical acclaim that transformed Radiohead from a band that was highly regarded into one that was being talked of as a historically classic group."[10] This sentiment was echoed throughout the music press. *NME* stated that "Radiohead's new stuff appears to be all but classic," and "*The Bends* will be one of, and quite possibly *the*, indie rock album of the year [1995]."[11] *Melody Maker* described the album as a "powerful, bruised and desperate record of frightening intensity … almost unbearably, brilliantly, physically tortured by the facts of being human."[12] *The Bends* has also been described as "the depressives' soundtrack to the nineties," a characterization singer Thom Yorke has countered with statements such as "I did not write this album for people to slash their … wrists to" and "*The Bends* isn't my confessional."[13]

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[7] Quoted in Stone, *Green Plastic Wateringcan*, 41.

[8] Stone, *Green Plastic Wateringcan*, 45.

[9] Stone, *Green Plastic Wateringcan*, 27.

[10] Clarke, *Hysterical and Useless*, 100.

[11] Quoted in Clarke, *Hysterical and Useless*, 75.

[12] Quoted in Clarke, *Hysterical and Useless*, 71.

[13] Quoted in Clarke, *Hysterical and Useless*, 92 and 96. Clarke and Stone have both described a "culture of despair" at the time of *The Bends'* release that might have contributed to its popularity. "[T]here was an entire generation of people with no heroes, no prospects, no faith in government or religion. Deafened and poisoned by corporate lies and pollution, they watched helplessly as the world was systematically deprived of any means of natural generation…. They had no real reason to stay alive." Stone, *Green Plastic Wateringcan*, 51.

After the release of the single "Lucky" for the compilation album *Help!* (later

included on *OK Computer*), a "fund-raiser for victims of the conflict in former

Yugoslavia," *Melody Maker* wrote that "Radiohead are no longer capable of anything

other than brilliance."[14] Stone states that "the beginning of 1996 saw Radiohead take their

place at the very top of British Music."[15] The band's subsequent album, *OK Computer*,

was recognized as Album of the Year (1997) by *Q* magazine and *NME*, and the band

garnered Band of the Year accolades from *Rolling Stone* and *Spin*, as well as receiving a

Grammy for the Best Alternative Music Performance for the album.[16] In addition to

receiving critical acclaim, *OK Computer* drew comparisons with art/progressive-rock

albums of the 1970s, a sign that the band was being perceived as more serious or

intellectual than the typical pop-rock group.

Comparisons to progressive rock had been made even earlier. *Melody Maker* had

asked in its review of *The Bends*, "Are Radiohead the spirit of prog-rock reborn?"[17] Some

of the more obvious parallels between Radiohead's *OK Computer* and the progressive-

rock genre were the band's experimentation with the Mellotron, used heavily by bands

such as the Moody Blues and Genesis, and hypermetric complexity in cross-rhythms and

time signatures, common in the music of bands such as Yes and King Crimson; but the

association also stemmed from the album's musically unified depiction of man's

alienation in modern society: *OK Computer*'s lyrical topic can be linked to such albums

as Pink Floyd's *The Wall* (1979) and *Animals* (1977) and Jethro Tull's *Aqualung* (1971)

and *Thick as a Brick* (1972). Kevin Holm-Hudson notes that *OK Computer*'s

comparisons with *Dark Side of the Moon* (1973) stem from "the continuity of its

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[14] Quoted in Clarke, *Hysterical and Useless*, 98.

[15] Stone, *Green Plastic Wateringcan*, 57.

[16] Doheny, *Back to Save the Universe*, 140. Radiohead also won the Grammy for Best Alternative Music Album for *Kid A* in 2000. See http://www.grammy.com/awards/ (accessed 27 January 2005).

[17] Quoted in Clarke, *Hysterical and Useless*, 71.

transitions between songs more than any perceived similarities in musical style"[18] and states that "'post-progressive' groups such as … Radiohead also draw upon selective aspects of vintage progressive rock, even as they actively seek to distance themselves from associations with the genre."[19] Guitarist Colin Greenwood was reportedly "horrified" by *Rolling Stone*'s description of *OK Computer* as a "stunning art-rock tour de force," saying "What a ghastly thought. That makes it sound like Rick Wakeman and his Knights of the Round Table on Ice."[20]

Radiohead's public school background and classical musical training also undoubtedly furthered the comparison to progressive rock, as did the fact that all the members of the band had attended university, and four of the five had graduated.[21] Clarke states that the "only real [negative] criticism of *OK Computer* was that it was redolent of that great seventies monster, 'prog-rock,' which conjured up images of flared trousers, pompous album artwork, soloist self-indulgence and gargantuan synthesizers." He further cites the album's "enormous scope, its artwork, and its dense subject matter" as some less polarizing or negatively received elements of progressive rock.[22] Mark Spicer notes that

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[18] Holm-Hudson, "'Worked Out Within the Grooves': The Sound and Structure of *Dark Side of the Moon*," in *Speak to Me: The Legacy of Pink Floyd's* The Dark Side of the Moon, ed. Russell Reising (London: Ashgate, forthcoming).

[19] Holm-Hudson, ed., *Progressive Rock Reconsidered* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 16.

[20] Quoted in Clarke, *Hysterical and Useless*, 128. Keyboardist Rick Wakeman of Yes famously staged his concept album *The Myths of King Arthur and His Knights of the Round Table* as an ice capades show in the 1970s. Wakeman offered his opinion on Radiohead in 2001: "Sorry, guys, you're as prog as they come." Quoted in *Q* magazine, special edition, "Pink Floyd and the Story of Prog Rock" (1:5, 2005): 111.

[21] Jonny Greenwood dropped out of college after only a few weeks, by which time Radiohead was being courted by EMI. Randall, *Exit Music*, 69–70.

[22] Clarke, *Hysterical and Useless*, 127–28. Part of the negative reaction to progressive rock in the 1960s and 1970s was the perception of its "virtuosity, complexity, and indebtedness to 'classical,' or 'art' music as a betrayal of rock's origins. … A style of rock so influenced by the music of the establishment—which seemed to aspire to the privileged status held by that music—could only be met with derision." John J. Sheinbaum, "Progressive Rock and the Inversion of Musical Values," chap. 1 in Holm-Hudson, *Progressive Rock Reconsidered*, 21. John Covach also notes the "attitude of art-music 'seriousness'— critics called it pretentiousness—that many of these musicians brought to their music-making." "Progressive Rock, 'Close to the Edge,' and the Boundaries of Style," in *Understanding Rock: Essays in Musical Analysis*, ed. Covach and Graeme M. Boone (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 4. Sheinbaum further states that "[s]igns associated with the art music tradition—whether the sound of a choir, poetic texts, the grandiosity of thick instrumentation, or even polished technique itself—are all seen

Radiohead's "penchant for innovative formal structures and unique sonic landscapes" has also garnered comparisons to progressive rock, though he points out that their music actually sounds quite different from bands of the original progressive era.[23]

"AMBITION MAKES YOU LOOK VERY UGLY": THE CONCEPT ALBUM IN POP MUSIC

Popular music studies tends to treat many post-Beatles albums not as loosely organized collections of radio singles, but as artistic utterances that develop deeper insights over the course of the album. Prior to the *Sgt. Pepper* era, albums were generally released in support of one or two singles with throwaway "filler" songs making up the rest of the material.[24] Some albums undoubtedly are still put together this way, but for many albums the unfolding of subject and plot through the song sequence is no longer an indifferent aspect of its organization, but a prime location of its meaning and significance. Whether or not an album's song sequence forms as cohesive a narrative as a novel or film, the listener can be tempted—even encouraged—to look for a similar development of

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as masking an inherent emptiness at the core." *Progressive Rock Reconsidered*, 23. The ongoing negative perception of progressive rock can be seen in a somewhat humorous definition of what constitutes "prog in 2005": "[a]n artist can be referred to as 'kind of proggy' if he or she does at least two of the following things: writes long songs, writes songs with solos, writes songs about mythical creatures, writes songs that girls hate, … consistently declines interview requests, claims to be working on a rock opera, claims to have already released a rock opera, … refuses to appear in his or her own videos, … uses laser technology in any capacity. …" Chuck Klosterman, "The Rock Lexicon," *Spin* 21:5 (May 2005): 61.

[23] Spicer, "(Ac)cumulative Form in Pop-Rock Music," *Twentieth-Century Music* 1:1 (2004): 33n13. Allan F. Moore and Anwar Ibrahim also observe that although Radiohead's style has "progressed" throughout its recordings, from "simple" to "more difficult/complex," the band's style is not "progressive" in the sense of the 1970s genre. "'Sounds Like Teen Spirit': Identifying Radiohead's Idiolect," in Tate, *The Music and Art of Radiohead*, 152. Despite these caveats, *Q* magazine's special edition "Pink Floyd and the Story of Prog Rock" (1:5, 2005) listed *OK Computer* as number 10 on the list of "40 Cosmic Rock Albums" (135).

[24] Roy Shuker defines "album" as "usually a collection of recordings originally released on a twelve-inch, 33⅓ revolutions per minute disc." Shuker defines "single" as "originally a seven-inch vinyl format with an 'A-side,' the recording considered most likely to receive radio airplay and chart 'action,' and a 'B-side,' usually seen as a recording of less appeal." He goes on to say that "with a few significant exceptions, performers generally relied on the single to promote their album release." *Key Concepts in Popular Music* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 60, 271–272. B-sides are no longer necessarily seen as having less appeal. Many bands from the 1980s and later have capitalized on their fans' desire to possess all of their music by compiling collections of B-side material and offering it for sale. Knowledge of this rarer material is sometimes taken as the mark of an insider, or a true fan.

meaning, particularly when a singer assumes a dramatic persona to guide the listener through the album's events, such as Bono's "Fly" or David Bowie's "Ziggy Stardust." When this persona is present, it can be understood as the representation of the subject in the form of the singer, the place at which the singer and subject seem to coincide and produce moments of discursive stability. While the singer's identity should not be strictly mapped onto that of the album's subject, the singer does embody the subject (by literally giving it a voice) in a way that makes it easy for the listener to conflate the two, or to confuse the singer's biography with that of the fictional protagonist.[25] If musical events are regarded as dramatic actions, then the listener may, as Fred Maus notes, "attribute those actions to the [musical] sounds as agents."[26] This temptation is even greater in popular music because of its attendant lyrics and the often-dramatic stage personae of its performers. A perceived collaboration among the various musical agents disclosed over the course of an album, whether presented as actual characters or simply as instrumental motives, can produce the image of a unified subject and consequently a formal unity.

An album, and particularly a "concept album," may produce this appearance of unity by presenting an explicit narrative of subject formation, as in the Who's *Tommy* (1969), a broad lyrical and/or musical theme, as in the Moody Blues' *Days of Future Passed* (1968) or Jethro Tull's *Aqualung*, or a recurring musical motive, as in Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* or *The Wall*. Radiohead's *Kid A* (2000), though seemingly concerned with presenting this common theme of subject formation, nevertheless resists conventional notions of cohesion associated with the concept album, offering instead a hopeless, self-negating subject that disintegrates at the midpoint of the album, at the

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[25] Perhaps more than any other recording artist, David Bowie could have been in danger of being pigeonholed as one of his many stage characters. Precisely because he has continually reinvented himself, however, he has managed to transform chameleon-like from one persona to the next with no loss in artistic integrity. Madonna and Prince are two other artists who have managed to reinvent themselves in order to stay fresh on the music scene.

[26] "Music as Drama," *Music Theory Spectrum* 10 (1988): 56–73; quotation from p. 70. See also Edward T. Cone, *The Composer's Voice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974).

moment of the subject's maximum articulation. In short, the subject of *Kid A* is not as bound to the singer as on "normal" concept albums. The band's distinctive sense of alienation makes any centered sense of the singer-as-subject no longer possible. The song that marks the crisis point of the album, "How to Disappear Completely," provides a negative afterimage of a persona destroyed instead of the more customary point of cohesion between singer and subject.

The idea of the concept album is not well defined. Both scholarly writing and mainstream music reviews seem to treat the term as self-evident, trusting that most people know what a concept album is without taking the time to define it. *Grove Music Online*, for instance, defines "album" somewhat narrowly, as "a collection of songs organized around one central theme," which may be "unified by one pivotal idea" or "built around a narrative sequence."[27] Other sources define "concept album" more broadly: "an LP intended to be integrated on a set theme";[28] the "practice of tying a series of songs together by using both a recurring melodic theme and a program—that is, a unifying idea or concept which is developed in the lyrics of the individual songs";[29] the process of "taking the album itself as the level at which the music, production, cover art, and so on come together as a complete work of art";[30] "the texts of a Romantic rock aesthetic … [that] proved forerunners of a new social and economic sensibility in rock" (with regard to progressive rock);[31] and, rather generically, as simply an "'extended

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[27] David Buckley, "Album," in *Grove Music Online*, ed. L. Mach (accessed 27 January 2005), http://www.grovemusic.com.content.lib.utexas.edu:2048.

[28] Donald Clarke, *The Penguin Encyclopedia of Popular Music* (London: Penguin, 1989), 273; quoted in David O. Montgomery, "The Rock Concept Album: Context and Analysis" (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 2002), 7.

[29] Edward C. Macan, *Rocking the Classics: English Progressive Rock and the Counterculture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 20.

[30] Bill Martin, *Music of Yes: Structure and Vision in Progressive Rock* (Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1996), 22.

[31] Paul Stump, *The Music's All That Matters: A History of Progressive Rock* (London: Quartet Books, 1997), 158; quoted in Montgomery, "The Rock Concept Album," 13.

work' for rock."[32] Beyond any apparent artistic intent to draw the album together into a coherent whole through its musical or lyrical content, any album is to some extent unified simply by virtue of its sequence of tracks. If the album is listened to as a whole rather than in three-minute chunks as singles, then by being sufficiently clever, we can always turn the running order into a mark of cohesion, so that the "overall experience" is "greater than the sum of its parts."[33] In this sense, as producer Ken Scott says, "a concept album is in the eye of the beholder."[34] The concept album is thus "simultaneously a vehicle of artistic expression and a commercial commodity, a medium and a format";[35] any "concept" present may derive from the recording artist, the producer, the record company's marketing department, the listener, or any combination thereof.

The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper* (1967) has been recognized almost universally as the first concept album, though various albums released before it attempted unification at different levels, from collections of diverse songs on a particular theme to more focused artistic statements. Allan F. Moore observes that "*Sgt. Pepper* affords a looseness of perceptual clarity particularly through its lyrics, its images and the studio manipulation of its musical materials" and suggests that perhaps its status as a concept album stems from its perceived cultural importance and reception as much as any inherent musical unity; he states also that the concept "in visual form is more easily assimilated than a thematic one."[36] That is, the perception of the album's unity comes from surface elements easily accessible to the casual listener, such as its cover packaging and song lyrics, rather than

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[32] William J. Schafer, *Rock Music: Where It's Been, What It Means, Where It's Going* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing, 1972), 103; quoted in Montgomery, "The Rock Concept Album," 14.

[33] Phish bassist Mike Gordon, quoted in Holm-Hudson, "'Worked Out Within the Grooves.'" In press.

[34] Montgomery, "The Rock Concept Album," 17.

[35] Ibid., 23.

[36] Moore, *The Beatles: Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 65, 71.

from those strictly musical unifying features commonly found in the art-music tradition,

such as key relationships or tempos. Edward Macan notes that

> [p]rior to the late 1960s, the main purpose of an album cover in popular music
> was to show the performers. Significantly, *Sergeant Pepper* was the first rock
> music album sleeve that contained the lyrics to all of the album's songs. Clearly,
> the Beatles intended this first concept album to be a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (a
> "unified" or "complete art work") in which music, words, and visual art are all
> combined to convey a specific concept or program.[37]

By presenting the album's material as a stage show, complete with crowd noise and the

introduction of a (fictional) singer, the Beatles were effectively staging a theater piece, or

a virtual concert experience.[38] Studio wizardry such as stereophonic sound might also

have helped "place" the listener with regard to the music, creating the sense of being at a

live performance (which is ironic, given the album's extensive overdubbing that could

not be reproduced live—a contributing factor in the Beatles' decision to retire from live

performance). In addition, the album cover and inner gatefold photograph showed the

Beatles in costume (with instruments) as Sgt. Pepper's band, and the sleeve included a

page of cut-outs such as a Sgt. Pepper mustache and badges. David O. Montgomery

agrees that *Sgt. Pepper*'s packaging as well as the order and content of its musical tracks

brought greater coherence to the work, resulting in a total listening experience at the

album level, but as William J. Schafer points out, the individual tracks themselves were

"still built on the familiar pop-single pattern."[39]

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[37] Macan, *Rocking the Classics*, 58.

[38] I discuss the various personas employed by the Beatles as Sgt. Pepper's band in an unpublished paper, "Sky of Blue, Sea of Green: A Semiotic Reading of the Film *Yellow Submarine*."

[39] Schafer, *Rock Music*, 108, quoted in Montgomery, "The Rock Concept Album," 15.

The notion of individual songs being complete apart from the album does not necessarily run counter to the idea of the concept album; even progressive-rock masterpieces still retained the odd radio-friendly single (e.g., Emerson, Lake and Palmer's "Lucky Man" from the band's self-titled first album [1970], or Yes's "Roundabout" from *Fragile* [1972]). When compared with a musical work from the symphonic realm (presumably the ideal of "high art" to which the concept album aspires), however, the idea of excerpting an individual movement for radio play becomes much less palatable. Conversely, Roy Shuker states that *Sgt. Pepper*'s treatment as a concept album stems from "its musical cohesion rather than any thematic [that is, deriving from the fictional characters described in the lyrics and packaging] unity."[40] Here, Shuker seems to be referring to the overall experimental and orchestrated style of the album, which marked a departure for the Beatles from their earlier work. If we discount the "White Album" (*The Beatles*, 1968) for a moment, *Sgt. Pepper* sounds like a logical link between *Revolver* (1966) and *Abbey Road* (1969). Certainly *Sgt. Pepper*'s cohesion is emphasized by its packaging, which implies a narrative coherence, and by the fact that no promotional singles were released from it. Listeners were therefore virtually forced to consider the album as a whole (a new prospect at the time), so again the concept album seems to be a function of commerce, that is, a form of commodity. By not releasing any singles, not only did the Beatles "force" listeners to consider *Sgt. Pepper* as a whole, but listeners were also "forced" to buy it as a whole. In fact, they could still listen to the album's tracks as individual "songs"; it had just become impossible to acquire them that way. Moore states that *Sgt. Pepper* represented "an early endeavor for rock to build a unity greater than that of the individual, self-contained utterance,"[41] that is, a cohesion beyond the level of the song, marking also a shift from the usual album

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[40] Shuker, *Key Concepts in Popular Music*, 6.

[41] Moore, *Rock: The Primary Text; Developing a Musicology of Rock* (Buckingham, PA: Opera University Press, 1993), 84.

format of what Shuker calls "a collection of heterogeneous songs" to a "narrative work with a single theme, in which individual songs segue into one another."[42]

An appeal to issues beyond the album itself as a unifying "theme" is also noted by James Borders in his analysis of Frank Zappa's *Freak Out!*, which he calls a "song cycle with a unifying sociological theme," stating that "the sequence of related songs that became known as the 'concept album' had revealed itself a literary rather than a musical form."[43] Given rock music's beginnings as a medium for dance, with the nonsensical lyrics of many early singles, the concept album's new emphasis on lyrical unification could be read as a betrayal of the musical genre (which was one criticism of progressive rock); however, it could also be that lyrics simply provided an easier—or at least less esoteric—means of presenting a unified topic than writing songs in related keys or developing a musical motive over several three-minute songs. When one thinks of the sociological importance of poet-musicians such as Bob Dylan and various other folksingers and protest poets of the 1960s, it seems logical that the concept album would emerge from the lyrics' relevance to society, making the music relevant by default, as the carrier of that lyrical meaning. The *Grove* entry for "pop" further notes that the "concept album" may be unified by its appeal to "social criticism," as in the case of Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On* (1971), a means of unification also used in Jethro Tull's *Thick as a Brick* and *Aqualung* and the Kinks' *Village Green Preservation Society* (1968).[44] Montgomery notes that Schafer has linked the concept album to the "aspirations of the counterculture" in the areas of "musical and thematic exploration."[45] That is, the

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[42] Shuker, *Key Concepts in Popular Music*, 5.

[43] Borders, "Form and the Concept Album: Aspects of Modernism in Frank Zappa's Early Releases," *Perspectives of New Music* 39 (2001): 125.

[44] Robert Walser, "Pop," section III, "North America," in *Grove Music Online*, ed. L. Mach (accessed 27 January 2005), http://www.grovemusic.com.content.lib.utexas.edu:2048. See Holm-Hudson, "'Worked Out Within the Grooves,'" for a discussion of the structure and importance of *What's Going On*.

[45] Montgomery, "The Rock Concept Album," 14.

experimentation present on many concept albums, both musically (longer songs, new electronic instruments) and lyrically (fantastic themes, outer-space imagery), was in part a reaction to the mind-expanding activities and societal rebellion of the youth counterculture during the Vietnam era and afterward. The aspirations of bettering society by loosening its restrictions found voice not only in the popular music, but also in the popular literature of the time (e.g., science-fiction works such as Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* [1962]).

Music scholars have, on the contrary, tended to focus on the concept album's link to the art-music tradition of the song cycle rather than its status as a commodity with social-critical import. For these writers, musical coherence is where the musical art of these albums necessarily lies. While Shuker conflates the terms "concept album" and "rock opera," stating that both "are unified by a theme, which can be instrumental, compositional, narrative, or lyrical,"[46] *Grove* suggests that rock operas "grew out of 'concept albums,' LPs with a theme, in the mid-1960s, and hence are really closer to the song cycles of the classical tradition than to opera."[47] *Grove* further notes that concept albums in America have tended to be singer-songwriter-based, and thus more reflective, more the utterance of a lyrical "I," akin to the traditional song cycle. In addition, "nearly all the first examples were British, reflecting the greater tendency on the part of art-school educated British rockers to aspire to high art in their emulations of the American vernacular."[48] That is, many British bands were taking an American art form, rock-and-roll music, and repackaging it back to American audiences as some kind of "highbrow" (but not too highbrow) listening experience.

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[46] Shuker, *Key Concepts in Popular Music*, 5.

[47] One way of distinguishing rock operas from concept albums is that rock operas, like regular operas, have characters, whereas concept albums tend to have mere lyrical subjects.

[48] John Rockwell, "Rock opera," in *Grove Music Online*, ed. L. Mach (accessed 27 January 2005), http://www.grovemusic.com.content.lib.utexas.edu:2048.

In addition to Borders's analysis of Zappa's *Freak Out!*, other music scholars have also discussed album-length works as song cycles. Mark Spicer, for instance, has analyzed Genesis's "Supper's Ready" (1972) as a narrative song cycle, unified by recurring musical motives and key relationships, and as a prototype for the band's later album *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway* (1974).[49] Peter Kaminsky has discussed Paul Simon's album *Still Crazy After All These Years* (1975) as a song cycle, noting especially its "unified text narrative" and "pattern completion and association," which together subsume the unifying strategies of motives, harmonic progressions, and key successions.[50] Both Shaugn O'Donnell and Kevin Holm-Hudson have examined *Dark Side of the Moon*, the former stressing its "tonal and motivic coherence" that make it the "'quintessential' concept album," as well as a song cycle, and the latter exploring its unifying "cinematic" elements such as "fades, dissolves, direct cuts, montage," and the "use of continuous segues from song to song to facilitate an unbroken trip."[51] The *Grove* entry for "song cycle" offers the following definition and commentary:

> A group of individually complete songs designed as a unit …, for solo or ensemble voices with or without instrumental accompaniment.… They may be as brief as two songs … or as long as 30 or more.… The coherence regarded as a necessary attribute of song cycles may derive from the text (a single poet; a story line; a central theme or topic such as love or nature; a unifying mood; poetic form or genre, as in a sonnet or ballad cycle) or from musical procedures (tonal

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[49] Spicer, "Large-Scale Strategy and Compositional Design in the Early Music of Genesis," in *Expression in Pop-Rock Music: A Collection of Critical and Analytical Essays*, ed. Walter Everett (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), 71–111.

[50] Kaminsky, "The Popular Album as Song Cycle: Paul Simon's *Still Crazy After All These Years*," *College Music Symposium* 32 (1992): 38–54. Kaminsky notes that "[r]egardless of whether we are addressing 'high' or 'low' musical culture, the understanding of a multi-movement work as a whole remains a complex and elusive thing" (54).

[51] O'Donnell, "'On the Path': Tracing Tonal Coherence in *Dark Side of the Moon*" and Holm-Hudson, "'Worked Out Within the Grooves,'" both in *Speak to Me*, ed. Reising.

schemes; recurring motifs, passages or entire songs; formal structures); these features may appear singly or in combination.[52]

This definition can be applied to the concept album as well. Its coherence may derive solely from the lyrics (composed by the band collectively, by any of its members, or by an external source; an extra layer of coherence can be added by the singer's adoption of a dramatic persona other than simply the leader of the band, such as "Ziggy Stardust"), from recurring musical elements or orchestration (particularly if the latter is marked as distinct from the band's overall style as defined over the course of several albums), or from a combination of the two.

Moore relates the concept album to the ideals of progressive rock of the 1970s, building on *Sgt. Pepper*'s appeal to unity at the album level (through packaging, characters, and a simulated stage performance) and articulating a "desire to establish a degree of aesthetic [that is, musical] unity greater than that of the individual song,"[53] though a direct correlation between the concept album and progressive rock cannot be directly inferred.[54] Bill Martin states that

> if this term ["concept album"] refers to albums that have thematic unity and
> development throughout, then in reality there are probably fewer concept albums
> than one might at first think. *Pet Sounds* and *Sergeant Pepper's* do not qualify

[52] Susan Youens, "Song cycle," in *Grove Music Online*, ed. L. Mach (accessed 27 January 2005), http://www.grovemusic.com.content.lib.utexas.edu:2048.

[53] Moore, *Rock: The Primary Text*, 82.

[54] Moore, *The Beatles*, 73. "Progressive rock" can be very loosely defined as music containing elements from the realm of art music, such as long, structured songs; dynamics and expression; virtuosity; non-rock instrumentation; and often theatricality. Holm-Hudson points out that progressive rock should not be stereotyped as simply a fusion of classical music and rock, as is often the case. See Holm-Hudson, *Progressive Rock Reconsidered*, 3; Jerry Lucky, *The Progressive Rock Files* (Burlington, ON: Collector's Guide Publishing, 1998), quoted in *Progressive Rock Reconsidered*; and Moore, *Rock: The Primary Text*. Bill Martin offers a working definition of progressive rock that includes the characteristics "visionary and experimental," "played … on instruments typically associated with rock … and with the history of rock music itself as background," "played … by musicians who have consummate instrumental and compositional skills," and "expressive of romantic and prophetic aspects of that culture." *Listening to the Future: The Time of Progressive Rock* (Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1998), 121.

according to this criterion; of the major albums of progressive rock, only a relative handful can truly be considered concept albums in the thematic sense.… However, if instead we stretch the definition a bit, to where the album *is* the concept, then it is clear that progressive rock is entirely a music of concept albums.[55]

Macan also draws a parallel between progressive rock and classical music, including such traits as the "continuous use of tone colors drawn from symphonic or church music, the employment of lengthy sectional forms such as the song cycle or the multimovement suite, and the preoccupation with dazzling metrical and instrumental virtuosity."[56] These traits could stem from the musical training and exposure of musicians involved in progressive rock, which tended to be more classically based than that of the typical "bar band"; it could also be that these musicians were attempting to align themselves with the art-music tradition in order to be taken more seriously. Macan further states that the very definition of the term "progressive rock" is derived from this relationship: "a style that sought to expand the boundaries of rock on both a stylistic basis (via the use of longer and more involved structural formats) and on a conceptual basis (via the treatment of epic subject matter), mainly through the appropriation of elements associated with classical music."[57] Moore notes that Jethro Tull's *Thick as a Brick* and *A Passion Play* (1973) were both "considered concept albums in that they played unbroken from beginning to end, with a musical and lyrical continuity sufficiently strong to lead from one quasi-song into the next … although exactly what the 'concept' was remained rather obscure."[58] In the process, the band eroded song boundaries so that the songs could be incorporated into a larger text; in a sense this is a means of controlling the listener, a way of listening *for*

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[55] Martin, *Listening to the Future*, 41.

[56] Macan, *Rocking the Classics*, 13.

[57] Ibid., 26.

[58] Moore, *Rock: The Primary Text*, 82.

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the listener by prescribing the terms of listening. If an entire album side were made up of one continuous track (or groove, on an LP), in which songs faded in and out, the listener would be hard-pressed to excerpt a particular "single" to play. Moore points out that "[d]espite the fact that very few classical pieces attempt to achieve a sense of unity across spans in excess of half an hour, there remains a widespread assumption that concept albums are intended to do so, playing in an uninterrupted fashion."[59] The unifying aspect of performability is also common to the early concept albums; Pink Floyd had been performing *Dark Side of the Moon* live as a "complete piece" well before its recording,[60] and the nine-minute "mini-opera" "A Quick One While He's Away" was a "staple of the Who's live set for years" after its release.[61] Pink Floyd and the Who also famously gave many live performances of the concept albums *The Wall* and *Tommy*, respectively. In such cases, the songs can be read as deriving their meaning through their context within a larger work, rather than the album-length work attaining coherence through an overarching unity of its individual songs.

In my research I have identified the broad categories of narrative and thematic concept albums. Narrative albums are typified by having an explicit plot and characters, or at the very least a protagonist who undergoes some kind of trial or life journey. The plot may be cyclical, as in Joseph Campbell's hero's journey[62] or Pink Floyd's *The Wall*. The story may be timeless or mythic rather than straightforward or may involve flashbacks or flashforwards. The characters may be imaginary or exist as aspects of the protagonist's psyche, as may the action. The protagonist might not be sympathetic or triumph over adversity. The accompanying music generally serves to propel the action

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[59] Ibid., 86.

[60] Alan Parsons, quoted in Holm-Hudson, "'Worked Out Within the Grooves.'"

[61] http://www.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&sql=33:qlavqj5roj6a (accessed 13 April 2005).

[62] See Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1948).

along but may support or challenge the protagonist, or may function as a chorus commenting on the action or as a soundtrack to his inner thoughts. One example of a narrative concept album is the Who's *Tommy*, in which the protagonist is silenced after witnessing the murder of his mother's lover by his father, and then undergoes a series of abuses and life changes that ultimately turn him into a messianic figure. Another is Pink Floyd's *The Wall*, in which a protagonist retreats into his music after a series of losses and ultimately creates a barrier between himself and his friends, family, and audience. This narrative is constructed as a cycle that repeats endlessly each time the album is played: the last song segues smoothly into the first, so that the actions recur on a loop inside the protagonist's mind. A narrative concept album's protagonist is normally heard as the lead singer, in some cases literally embodying him onstage (as in *Tommy*), although, as stated earlier, the events of a given album are unlikely to match those of the singer's life. Both *Tommy* and *The Wall* exhibit musical and lyrical unity as well, the latter album to the point of overload and almost of parody.

The thematic concept album can be further split into the categories of musical or lyrical. A musically thematic album may contain recurring motives that appear at crucial times in the plot line or are transformed to reflect a change in the protagonist's attitude. The theme may change from major to minor, or be truncated or extended, depending on the underlying action. Themes in a broader sense may exist as groups of instruments or genres invoked as musical codes to comment on a given topic. The album may play themes off each other or contrast them to make a larger or deeper point. This type of theme may be more universally applicable than the musical theme that exists solely to support a clearer narrative. It may comment on problems facing humanity or universal truths rather than simply presenting a localized set of conflicts for a given protagonist. One example of a thematic concept album is Jethro Tull's *Aqualung*, which pits groups of acoustic/folk, rock, and blues/jazz instruments against each other to articulate the

songwriter's feelings on homelessness and man's inhumanity to man.[63] Another example is Pink Floyd's *Animals*, a look at the cruelties of capitalism, inspired by George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945). A less musically strong thematic type is the lyrical concept album, which consists of a collection of songs on a given topic. This category may have strong links to the classic song cycle but might not include the tonal associations that would lead a series of songs through a sequence of actions supported by traditional harmonies and key relations. Examples are the Moody Blues' *Days of Future Passed*, which roughly matches to the times of day in an unnamed subject's life (the "classical" orchestrations also mark the album's unity), and Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds' *Murder Ballads* (1996), a dark collection of songs about murder (the unifying musical elements stem from Cave's overall style rather than an album-specific artistic choice). Other examples of concept albums in these categories are Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* (thematic, with recurring lyrical and musical elements), Jethro Tull's *Songs from the Wood* and *Heavy Horses* (1977 and 1978; thematic/lyrical, though the former also includes some acoustic musical elements that add to its "pagan" lyrical theme), Liz Phair's *Exile in Guyville*[64] (1999; thematic at the lyrical level), and Liars' *They Were Wrong So We Drowned* (2004; thematic, with lyrical and musical elements that relate to the overall theme of the witch trials), and Green Day's *American Idiot* (2004; thematic at the lyrical level).[65]

Some concept albums attain their impression negatively, as it were, by consistently resisting one or other of the categories. "Resistant" albums are those that stretch the parameters of the traditionally defined concept album (a clearly articulated

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[63] Scott Allen Nollen describes *Aqualung* as "half a concept album." *Jethro Tull: A History of the Band, 1968–2001* (McFarland & Company: Jefferson, NC, and London, 2002), 63. The band later released *Thick as a Brick*, described by frontman Ian Anderson as a "little bit of a satire about the whole idea of grand 'rock band concept albums.'" *Jethro Tull*, 15.

[64] Thanks to Andy Hicken and Lakshmi Bollini for bringing this album to my attention.

[65] I discussed the band Liars' concept album in an unpublished paper ("Liars on Trial: Authenticity and the Concept Album") given at the 2005 meeting of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music in Rome, Italy.

narrative, characters, or musical/lyrical theme), while still conveying some kind of concept beyond a single sequence of organized tracks over the course of an album. The protagonist may expire before the end of the album or be completely absent, and the musical elements may actively work to annihilate him or supersede the voice's normally active role in the texture. In addition, it may be difficult or nearly impossible for the listener to discern the "concept" without being told explicitly, either through marketing, statements by band members, or album packaging. In this type of concept album, the artist subverts expectations while still attempting to tie himself to the form. Examples of this category of concept album, which is more a strategy than a type in the pure sense, include the Circus Devils' *The Harold Pig Memorial* (2002),[66] which presents a wake for a dead biker in which he is reconstructed through his friends' memories; and the Radar Bros.' *And the Surrounding Mountains* (2002), which presents images of sacrifice and nature, loosely unified by references to family members. Radiohead's *Kid A* (2000) is also of this type. Here, the subject is gradually constructed until the midpoint of the album and then self-destructs, only to receive and discard a second chance in the second half. This subject is then revived for Radiohead's follow-up, *Amnesiac* (2001), but encounters similar challenges to create meaning from modern life. Singer Thom Yorke has stated that *Amnesiac* is "like getting into someone's attic, opening a chest and finding their notes from a journey that they've been on…. There's a story but no literal plot, so you have to keep picking out fragments. You know something really important has happened to this person that's ended up completely changing them, but you're never told exactly what it is."[67] The important point to consider with regard to the overall art form is that a concept album need not be strictly narrative to present a cohesive "concept" to the listener, nor should we necessarily be looking for one.

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[66] Circus Devils is a side project of Guided by Voices frontman Robert Pollard.

[67] Quoted in Doheny, *Back to Save the Universe*, 111; original interview in *Mojo*.

A beginning taxonomy of the different types of concept album might look something like this:

Table 1.1: Taxonomy of the concept album

I. Narrative
A. Plot
      1. Explicit
            a. Timeless/mythic
            b. Flashback/flashforward
      2. Implied
            a. Constructed by the listener with little effort
B. Characters
      1. Protagonist
            a. Sympathetic
            b. Anti-hero
      2. Aspects of one character's psyche
      3. Singer as protagonist (see lyrical/thematic below)

II. Thematic
A. Music
      1. Recurring motives that function to comment on action
      2. Orchestration/instrumentation
      3. Genres
      4. Broad themes denoted by instruments or motives
      5. Key associations (one key or closely related keys)
B. Lyrics
      1. Songs on a given topic
      2. Sung by a character but not containing a narrative other than a stage show
      3. May include key associations

III. Resistant
A. Non-explicit plot/characters
      1. Doesn't carry through entire album
      2. Protagonist expires or is completely absent
B. Musical discontinuity
      1. Musical elements may conspire against instead of supporting the lyrics/plot/protagonist
C. Unclear "concept"
      1. Listener may be on his own in figuring out the concept
D. Lyrics
      1. Obfuscate the action rather than furthering it

A further challenge in defining what constitutes a concept album is deciding what it is *not*. At some level a concept album must exhibit an intent toward cohesion on the part of the songwriter(s) or band, and this cohesion must come from an artistic level deeper than that of, say, a record company releasing a compilation album of Christmas songs by various artists. The recording artist's message may be interpreted by the listener to a greater or lesser degree, but it seems a stretch to call any album a concept album simply by virtue of being able to randomly assign a narrative to its songs. If this were the case, then any random shuffling of tracks and subsequent creation of a playlist could be compiled and burned into its own concept album. On the other hand, a musical artist's denial of whether a given recording is a concept album should not be taken as necessarily true. Particularly in the case of Radiohead, when part of the band's marketing strategy is toward resistance, any claims on the part of the artist toward the product should be taken with a grain of salt. And when the negative reception of concept albums in progressive rock is brought into the equation, it becomes clearer why certain bands might deny any link to this musical tradition, while still producing albums that are conceptual at some level. It is possible that the resistant type of concept album evolved in part as a reaction to this reception, but an exhaustive survey of concept albums in popular music is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

"BACK TO SAVE THE UNIVERSE": RECEPTION OF *OK COMPUTER*

Radiohead's third album, *OK Computer*, has received a great deal of analytical attention from music scholars, many of whom have treated the work as a concept album, at least in part.[68] James Doheny argues that the track sequence rather than just the subject makes

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[68] Drummer Phil Selway has complained about the "over-intellectualization of Radiohead's music by fans and critics alike … 'we don't want people twiddling their goatees over our stuff. What we do is pure

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this album a "song cycle" (that is, a "cohesive focused group of songs with an underlying theme") and compares it with Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*.[69] *OK Computer*'s theme of technological alienation is clearly articulated in such songs as "Karma Police," "Paranoid Android," and "Climbing Up the Walls." Doheny suggests that the album has both a "positive stream" and a "negative stream" that interlock and vie for supremacy; the positive stream loses strength as the negative gains it, and the negative stream wins out in the end, when the album ends on a weakly positive song ("The Tourist"). Nadine Hubbs likewise calls *OK Computer* a "concept album that immerses the listener in images of alienated life under techo/bureau/corporate hegemony.… [A] vivid flavor of alienation and disaffectedness … is built up by layers over the course of twelve album tracks."[70] Rather than presenting a straightforward narrative, as one might expect from a concept album, its lyrics are, Hubbs says, "already oblique in their written form" and "in … performance are often intelligible only in fragments." Because of this treatment of the words as "vowel and consonant sounds … molded, shifted, stretched in shadings of the texture-color," the "audible effect of these songs approach[es] pure musicality."[71] Hubbs also notes the alternating character of the songs as "violent embattlement" and "dreamy resignation, evoking a state of alienation into which actual aliens … figure along with

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escapism'." Tate, introduction to *The Music and Art of Radiohead*, 2; Selway quote from Alex Ross, "The Searchers: Radiohead's Unquiet Revolution," *The New Yorker*, 20 and 27 August 2001: 115.

[69] Doheny, *Back to Save the Universe*, 78.

[70] Nadine Hubbs, "The Imagination of Pop-Rock Criticism" in *Expression in Pop-Rock Music: A Collection of Critical and Analytical Essays*, ed. Walter Everett (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), 3–29.

[71]Ibid., 16.

androids,"[72] and the "neo-prog-rock grandiosity" of "Paranoid Android,"[73] with its layers of vocal counterpoint.[74] Moore and Anwar Ibrahim state that *OK Computer*

> gain[ed] its age-defining status through a combination of both musical and sonic exploration, with lyrics concerning the themes, simultaneously universal and personal, of alienation, information overload, and fear of an imminent new millennium. It is both a timely and a timeless record, unmistakably Radiohead but still managing to express sentiments shared by people in all walks of life.[75]

Many of the art-rock traits of *OK Computer* seem more organic than cerebral, in contrast with the original progressive bands; for example, Radiohead uses the Mellotron as simply part of the musical texture, rather than showcasing it as a solo instrument, and the band's metric shifts are less frequent or demanding on the listener. Rather than presenting an eloquently intoned poem to introduce and conclude the album, as the Moody Blues did on most of their albums, Radiohead included "Fitter Happier," a series of phrases about the alienation of man's modern condition read by a computerized voice and marking a pause between the album's halves. This is actually an anti-progressive characteristic, as the words are stripped of expression rather than drenched in significance.[76] In addition, some of *OK Computer*'s hypermetric complexity is backgrounded and is not performed by the entire band, as in the guitar's repeated five-note phrase in the introduction to "Let Down," which coincides with the downbeat every

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[72] Ibid., 15.

[73] Ibid., 16.

[74] Macan notes the progressive-rock characteristic of "rich vocal arrangements," which "can probably best be explained in the context of English music history," that is, as stemming from the medieval and early Renaissance periods of English vocal arranging. *Rocking the Classics*, 40.

[75] Moore and Ibrahim, "Identifying Radiohead's Idiolect," 139.

[76] Compare "Cold-hearted orb, which rules the night" with "Fitter, happier, more productive, comfortable, not drinking too much, regular exercise at the gym."

five bars.[77] While creating an album with elements of a somewhat archaic style, with the use of an instrument that was once cutting-edge but now sounds dated, Radiohead nevertheless managed to make a musical statement that was perceived at the time as being very much an account of the present. The *Sunday Express* wrote that the band had "produced the album of the year, and possibly the decade, in the brilliant *OK Computer.*"[78] *Q* magazine wrote that "[n]ow Radiohead can definitely be ranked high among the world's great bands."[79] Rock critic James Delingpole went a step further in assessing the album's significance: "If *The Bends* was the best album of the 1990s, *OK Computer* is surely the finest of the 21st century."[80] Alex Ross agrees that the album encapsulated the time period, saying that the band "caught a wave of generation anxiety" and created an album that "pictured the onslaught of the information age and a young person's panicky embrace of it."[81] Doheny adds, "*OK Computer* is quite a short album by modern standards [at 53'45"]—but feels like an age, in the most positive sense."[82]

Dai Griffiths views *OK Computer* as having a core of four songs (the sequence from "Let Down" to "Electioneering") around which the rest of the album is built.[83] He traces an "image trail"[84] through the album's lyrics to build the case for it being a concept album, and also notes its musical continuity, though he states that *OK Computer* is

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[77] Dai Griffiths comments that in this song, the listener "can achieve Zen Buddhist levels of concentration, by counting fives … with the guitar notes." *OK Computer* (New York and London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), 38.

[78] http://home.lanet.lv/~julita/liml/radiohead97.txt (accessed 27 January 2005).

[79] Quoted in Clarke, *Hysterical and Useless*, 125.

[80] "James Delingpole's rock records of the year," *Sunday Telegraph*, 27 December 1997, quoted in Doheny, *Back to Save the Universe*, 59. See also http://www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/1997/12/27/bmyeer27.xml (accessed 27 January 2005).

[81] Ross, "The Searchers," 115.

[82] Doheny, *Back to Save the Universe*, 82.

[83] Griffiths, *OK Computer*, 59.

[84] Ibid., 65 and 85.

ultimately a "diverse collection given greater unity by its context as an album,"[85] a

definition that would seem to apply to any album, concept or no. Moore and Ibrahim

compare *OK Computer*'s structure with *Pablo Honey*'s, stating that the later album

"works as a coherent whole in a similar but superior way ... mainly due to the similarly

slow pace at which its songs unfold."[86] The authors also note the "multisectional,

multilayered" characteristics of the songs, as well as their "lack of adherence to any

existing stylistic conventions," which works to create "the impression that ... the music is

very much Radiohead's own."[87] Griffiths extends the concept beyond the album to stress

its importance: "*OK Computer* might in time be a focal point for historians of life at the

end of the close of the twentieth century. 'This is what was really going on.' You want to

know what 1997 felt like? *OK Computer*: tracks six–eight ['Karma Police,' 'Fitter

Happier,' 'Electioneering']. Pushed for time?—track seven ['Fitter Happier']."[88] The

perception of *OK Computer*'s historical importance has persevered: it continues to rank

high in "best album" polls nearly a decade after its release.[89] While popularity and

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[85] Ibid., 96.

[86] Moore and Ibrahim, "Identifying Radiohead's Idiolect," 144. The authors seem to be talking about an unfolding through time at the song rather than the album level.

[87] Ibid., 145.

[88] Griffiths, *OK Computer*, 114.

[89] Recent reviews have called *OK Computer* "the greatest album, like, ever" (Craig McLean, *The Face*, January 2002: 56) and "one of the most hysterically praised releases in rock history" (Stephen Dalton, *Uncut*, August 2001: 57–58); quoted in Moore and Ibrahim, "Identifying Radiohead's Idiolect," 154. *OK Computer* was voted "best album of all time" by *Q* magazine readers in 1998, and, significantly, again in 2001. Doheny, *Back to Save the Universe*, 59. In 2003, *OK Computer* was number 2 on *Q* magazine's Greatest 100 Albums of All Time, *The Bends* was number 4, and *Kid A* was number 35. http://listsofbests.com/list/13/ (accessed 27 January 2005). *OK Computer* was also number 2 on Pitchfork Media's Top 100 Albums of the 1990s (1999), number 4 on the Virgin Top 100 Albums (2000), number 20 on *Melody Maker*'s All Time Top 100 Albums (2000), and number 8 on the *Rolling Stone* Readers' 100 (2002). *The Bends* scored in similar positions on these lists, but *Kid A* ranked only number 26 on the *Rolling Stone* poll and not at all on the others. http://listsofbests.com/details.cgi?id=383 (accessed 27 January 2005). In 2004, *OK Computer* was ranked number 4 on *Q* magazine's 50 Best British Albums Ever, and Radiohead was ranked number 11 on its 50 Bands That Changed the World. http://www.rocklist.net/qlistspage3.htm#The_Music_That_Changed_The_World (accessed 27 January 2005). *OK Computer* was ranked number 1 on *Spin*'s Best Albums 1985–2005 not for being a document of its own decade, but because it "uncannily predicted our global culture of communal distress." http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/entertainment/4110278.stm (accessed 21 June 2005).

historical importance do not necessarily coincide, the longevity of *OK Computer*'s appeal has undoubtedly contributed to the perception of it as marking an important moment in musical history.

The members of Radiohead have discounted the significance of *OK Computer*'s apparent unity and view it as somewhat less unified than do the critics: Jonny Greenwood has stated, "I think one album title and one computer voice [on "Fitter Happier"] do not make a concept album. That's a bit of a red herring." Indeed, the band claims not to have intended the album to be what has been claimed on its behalf—a "concept piece about the age-old fear of the mechanized world being dehumanized by computers and technology."[90] Thom Yorke has said, "It's not really about computers. It was just the noise that was going on in my head for most of a year and a half of traveling and computers and television and just absorbing it all."[91] Jonny Greenwood goes a step further, stating that "this album is too much of a mess to sum up. It's too garbled and disjointed, and the title is only supposed to introduce you to the record."[92] Mac Randall agrees with Greenwood about the album's lack of "meaning" but says that even if the band did not "plan this album to be a Big Statement," it is still possible to discern themes, such as the "dehumanization of the modern world," the "power of technology," and the "presence of machines."[93] In other words, the concept album is once again in the eye of the beholder. Other elements of *OK Computer* that Randall links to the earlier, "classic" concept albums are the "epic sweep of its songs" and the use of the Mellotron,[94] as well as Yorke's decision to write songs from the viewpoint of characters rather than as himself, even if the results were not apparent to the listener. Yorke has stated that "I

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[90] Clarke, *Hysterical and Useless*, 128.

[91] Randall, *Exit Music*, 204.

[92] Ibid., 205.

[93] Ibid., 205–06.

[94] Ibid., 208.

didn't feel any need to exorcise things within myself this time. It wasn't digging deep inside, it was more of a journey outside and assuming the personalities of other people."[95] This less acutely personal approach to songwriting also gave the album the potential to express broader meaning, as it explored themes having a collective, rather than just an individual, effect. With *OK Computer*'s release, suddenly Radiohead seemed to be spokesmen for a generation of disaffected youth, the "poster boys for a certain kind of knowing alienation."[96] Yorke had stated before recording *OK Computer* that he "could fall into the trap of thinking 'Oh my God, I've got to supply another maudlin one' but…. We're not trying to prove anything and I think that's a good thing for Radiohead."[97] Radiohead was aware of the potential for comparisons with progressive rock. During the tour before *OK Computer*, when the band was still working out the songs' arrangements, the members stated after a performance of "Paranoid Android" (eventually the album's first single): "Ignore that. That was just a Pink Floyd cover."[98] Guitarist Ed O'Brien has acknowledged some degree of musical exploration, or of playing with listeners' expectations, stating that "'Paranoid Android' is the song we play to people when they want to know what the album's like, 'cos it should make them think, 'What the fuck is going to happen on the rest of the album?'"[99] If listeners were confused by the musical experimentation on *OK Computer*, they were in for a shock with the band's next offering, *Kid A*.

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[95] Ibid., 211–12.

[96] Ross, "The Searchers," 115.

[97] Stone, *Green Plastic Wateringcan*, 63.

[98] Clarke, *Hysterical and Useless*, 107.

[99] Ibid., 117.

Chapter 2: *Kid A*—The First Half

After the global success of *OK Computer*, Radiohead seemed "tantalizingly close to rock deification. According to conventional wisdom, one more similar album, one more tour, would get them there for certain."[1] Or at least Doheny thought so. Still, Radiohead faced an artistic challenge: does the band duplicate its known formula for success or does it proceed in a new direction? According to Clarke, Thom Yorke was also having "deeply ambivalent feelings about the direction of the band as a whole, and his role within it," including "considerations about how to progress as a band and as a human being with any integrity, in the face of the massive success that subsumed Radiohead into the world of commerce."[2] He also wanted to integrate wider influences into the band's sound, moving beyond a simple guitar-and-vocal formula.[3] As far back as 1996, Yorke had said, "The most important thing in our lives is trying to maintain enough control for us to carry on being creative."[4] Instead of recording material designed to live up to the commercial success of its previous three albums, the band, or perhaps its management, decided to release an album with no promotional singles and fewer immediately catchy tunes than any of its previous albums.[5]

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[1] Doheny, *Back to Save the Universe*, 84.

[2] Clarke, *Hysterical and Useless*, 141.

[3] Ibid., 142. See also Tim Footman, *Radiohead: A Visual Documentary* (Chrome Dreams: Surrey, UK, 2002), 69.

[4] Stone, *Green Plastic Wateringcan*, 60.

[5] Some radio stations allegedly chose to promote *Kid A*'s "Optimistic." *Pablo Honey* spawned three singles ("Creep," "Anyone Can Play Guitar," and "Stop Whispering" [US only]); *The Bends* and *OK Computer* yielded six each, equivalent to half of the twelve songs appearing on each album ("My Iron Lung [UK 24]," "High and Dry" [UK 17; US 78], "Fake Plastic Trees" [UK 20], "Just" [UK 19], "Street Spirit (Fade Out)" [UK 5], and "The Bends" [UK 6]; and "Paranoid Android" [UK 3], "Karma Police" [UK 8], "Let Down," "No Surprises" [UK 4], "Lucky," and "Airbag," respectively). http://www.underworld.net/radiohead/discography.htm (accessed 18 December 2000). Singles from *Amnesiac*, the album after *Kid A*, included "Pyramid Song" (UK 5) and "Knives Out" (UK 13). Chart positions from Strong and Peel, *The Great Rock Discography* and Doheny, *Back to Save the Universe*,

The result was *Kid A*, which commentators called an "eerily comforting blend of rock riffs, jazz chords, classical textures, and electronic noise"[6] that "[drew] a line under the band's previous output and completely re-imagine[d] what Radiohead were about in this post–*OK Computer* world."[7] This "re-imagining" involved leaving behind the conventional pop-single formula of verses and choruses as well as changing the guitar sound to a more keyboard-based one, a striking move for a band with three guitarists. Radiohead also began relying on studio manipulation and electronic sounds less reproducible outside the studio. Greg Hainge notes that these shifts "entirely reformulated the conception of what a band is."[8]

Writing before the release of *OK Computer*, William Stone had stated: "Utterly concerned with their own sound, problems and potential, they're too bloody-minded, too damn stubborn to suffer easy categorization. As any scene-members, even the prime movers eventually discover to their own immense dissatisfaction, they either stand on their own or not at all."[9] The attempts at placing Radiohead and *Kid A* beyond classification seemed to already exalt the band, to place it in the company of such other

142–43; note that "Creep" is the only Radiohead single to have reached the Top 40 charts in the United States. Zev Borow quoted a "Capitol Records insider" on first hearing *Kid A*: "[I]t's amazing, but weird, there aren't any radio singles, and they hate doing press.… Roy Lott [Capitol president] is going to shit" (Borow, "The Difference Engine," *Spin*, November 2000, 111ff; quoted in Erin Harde, "Radiohead and the Negation of Gender," in Tate, *The Music and Art of Radiohead*, 53). Drummer Phil Selway has stated that the record company had had a similar reaction to *The Bends*, worrying that "there wasn't a single on it— and we ended up with five Top 30 hits from it!" *Uncut* (August 2001: 58), quoted in Hainge, "To(rt)uring the Minotaur," 63.

[6] Ross, "The Searchers," 112.

[7] Doheny, *Back to Save the Universe*, 84.

[8] Hainge, "To(rt)uring the Minotaur: Radiohead, Pop, Unnatural Couplings, and Mainstream Subversion," in *The Music and Art of Radiohead*, 70. David Cavanagh also discusses the reconception of Radiohead's sound for these albums. "I Can See the Monsters," *Q* magazine 169 (October), 94–104; quoted in Hainge, "To(rt)uring the Minotaur," 70–71.

[9] Stone, *Green Plastic Wateringcan*, 8.

uneasily categorized bands as the Beatles, though the Beatles ironically have become the yardstick of greatness against which other bands are measured, as the epitome of an innovative yet highly successful band. Yet conversely, this exaltation also incites an antagonism when a band goes against formula to create a product about which the marketplace feels ambivalent and can create an ambivalence in the artists themselves toward their own success. Based on the "buzz" from fans and critics alike, advance sales sent *Kid A* soaring into the *Billboard* charts at number 1. The album sold 200,000 copies in its first week of release, more than four times what *OK Computer* had sold in its first week.[10] During the second week, however, *Kid A* dropped to number 10, and just two months after its release, the album had fallen off the *Billboard* Top 100 altogether. The drastic fall in chart positions suggests that the album did not sell many copies beyond the band's dedicated core fan base. The reviews were tepid, and the lack of singles for radio play limited the album's exposure to a wider audience. Even reactions of hardcore fans were varied, with some stating that they appreciated the fact that Radiohead was striking out in a new, more innovative direction, but others complaining that they missed the old sound (and, no doubt, hit singles) of *The Bends* and *OK Computer*.[11]

Initial critical reaction similarly emphasized the peculiarity of *Kid A*. For many this was a positive trait. *Q* magazine, for instance, called the album "about as

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[10] http://www.wezl.org/rhead/newss.html (accessed 18 December 2000). *Kid A* also reached number 1 on the UK charts. Doheny, *Back to Save the Universe*, 143. *Amnesiac* reached number 1 on the UK charts and number 2 on the US charts. Richard Menta notes that the availability of *Kid A* in its entirety on Napster did not deter fans from buying it. Menta, "Did Napster Take Radiohead's New Album to Number 1?" *MP3newswire.net* (28 October 2000), quoted in Davis Schneiderman, "We Got Heads on Sticks/You Got Ventriloquists: Radiohead and the Improbability of Resistance," in Tate, *The Music and Art of Radiohead*, 25.

[11] For an example of this varied reaction of fans, see the discussion on the Radiohead message board on America Online. Harde takes the position that Radiohead's experimental phase was during the *Pablo Honey* and *The Bends*, and that the band began its evolution into its present state with *OK Computer.* "Radiohead and the Negation of Gender," 52.

experimental as a major rock record could get within the corporate straight-jacket [*sic*] that Radiohead despise."[12] *Billboard* said *Kid A* was "the first truly groundbreaking album of the 21st century"; *Spin* called it "a post-rock album"[13] and predicted that "fans will persevere and discover that *Kid A* is not only Radiohead's bravest album but its best one as well."[14] *The Village Voice* perhaps summed up the album best: "It's … really different. And oblique oblique oblique: short, unsettled, deliberately shorn of easy hooks and clear lyrics and comfortable arrangements. Also incredibly beautiful."[15]

Critics by and large drew comparisons between *Kid A* and the wildly successful *OK Computer*, observing that although the later album continued the same theme of alienation amid technology, its experimental sound made it less immediately accessible. Michelle Goldberg noted that "[w]hile *Kid A* is a big stylistic departure for the band, it captures the same sense of vulnerability and paralysis in the face of frenzied, overwhelming change that once coursed through *OK Computer*."[16] The alienation made explicit in *OK Computer*, by such "wordy" songs as "Fitter Happier," was scribbled in shorthand on *Kid A*, with the same fragile subject being perceived despite a lack of clear articulation. Douglas Wolk wrote that "[i]f *OK Computer* was an 'about' file for a 20-gigabyte suicide note, *Kid A* feels like a handwritten letter from somebody who's spared

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[12] Quoted in Clarke, *Hysterical and Useless*, 148.

[13] Reviews quoted from http://www.metacritic.com/music/artists/radiohead/kida (accessed 2 February 2005).

[14] Simon Reynolds, *Spin* review, quoted in Footman, *Radiohead: A Visual Documentary*, 73.

[15] Review quoted from http://www.metacritic.com/music/artists/radiohead/kida (accessed 2 February 2005).

16 In Andy Battaglia, Michelle Goldberg, Andrew Goodwin, and Joe Heim, "Radiohead's Kid A," *Salon*, 25 October 2000, http://www.salon.com/ent/music/feature/2000/10/25/radiohead/index.html (accessed 6 August 2005). The *Salon* article presents four critics debating the merits of *Kid A*.

his own life and wonders if he made the right decision."[17] This gendering of the subject aligns him with the male singer, a common act on such "classic" concept albums as the Who's *Tommy* and Pink Floyd's *The Wall*, each of which also staged performances of the albums with the lead singer literally embodying the dramatic subject. Whereas *OK Computer*'s conflicts were on the surface, the struggles in *Kid A* were masked by distorted vocals and baffling lyrics, hidden in a largely electronic texture; the indecipherable "handwriting" was apparently due to the subject's own fragility. Despite *Kid A*'s initial obscurity and lack of wide acceptance, critics still understood the album as having far-reaching effects. Tim Footman noted that *Kid A* was "designed to be influential rather than popular, thought-provoking rather than loveable,"[18] suggesting that Radiohead had by this point bought into its own mythologization. If *OK Computer* had made a significant statement on the modern human condition, Radiohead was now trying to replicate that importance with the new album. Much as the Beatles had with *Sgt. Pepper*, another "influential" album, the band, by refusing to release any singles from *Kid A*, effectively demanded that the album be considered as a whole. Curtis White states that rather than being self-indulgent, Radiohead actually proved its "artistic and political health" by refusing to bow to the pressures of commodification,[19] releasing an album whose importance would become clear only after its own time.

Not all critics, however, were willing to accede to such intellectualism. *Melody Maker*, for instance, stated that the band had "created a monument of effect over content,

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[17] Wolk, "Like Our New Direction?" *The Village Voice*, 10 October 2000, http://www.villagevoice.com/issues/0040/wolk.php (accessed 6 August 2005).

[18] *Radiohead: A Visual Documentary*, 73.

[19] "Kid Adorno," in Tate, *The Music and Art of Radiohead*, 13. Andrew Goodwin notes that "Theodor Adorno, dismayed by the possibilities for classical structures in a broken world, once argued that 'art of the highest caliber pushes beyond totality towards a state of fragmentation.'" "Radiohead's *Kid A*."

a smothery cataclysm of sound and fury signifying precisely f*** all."[20] Whereas *OK Computer* had been received as an important statement, *Kid A* was a mere vanity project. *Mojo* found the album lacking when compared with the band's other material: "*Kid A* is intriguing, eccentric, obviously a grower, but by Radiohead's standards it can't help but disappoint."[21] Radiohead's own "standards" being purportedly noncommercial, the band itself might have considered the album a success simply by eliciting the descriptors "intriguing" and "eccentric" from the reviewer. Other reviews noted the failure of the band's experimentalism. *Sonicnet* wrote:

> *Kid A* represents the first time in Radiohead's short history where their desire to do something different has outrun their ability to give their experiments a personal imprint. The problem with the album isn't that it's introspective, or obscure, or even that it's derivative…, but rather that the striking group personality so well defined on the last two collections has seemed to evaporate.[22]

This "striking group personality" had previously manifested itself as the straightforward, full-band sound of songs with verse and chorus, which were mostly missing on *Kid A*. Arguably, this very departure was the band's attempt at making a "personal imprint." *Resonance* magazine agreed that the album suffered from its lack of clearly delineated material, calling *Kid A* "a record that might've been amazing if the band had only bothered to write some actual songs."[23] This comment can be read as a criticism of Radiohead's progressive tendencies, if *Kid A* is viewed as containing larger musical moments than conventional pop singles.

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[20] Quoted in Clarke, *Hysterical and Useless*, 148.

[21] http://www.metacritic.com/music/artists/radiohead/kida (accessed 3 October 2005).

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid. *Resonance* 28, p. 62.

Critics seemed to agree that *Kid A* required some effort at interpretation, but they were divided on whether this was a reasonable request to ask of the listener. Again comparing *Kid A* with its predecessor, *All Music Guide* declared that "*Kid A* never is as visionary or stunning as *OK Computer*, nor does it really repay the intensive time it demands in order for it to sink in."[24] This "intensive time" might have been easier, of course, had the band released promotional singles to saturate the airwaves, so that listeners could be eased into the album's sound by encountering it in public forums amid other, more conventional songs, rather than having to experience it all on its own, as a totality. David Fricke wrote: "If you're looking for instant joy and easy definition, you are swimming in the wrong soup," and called the album a "work of deliberately inky, almost irritating obsession."[25] The band was perceived as trying to purposefully confuse the listener, rather than simply following its own muse. Andrew Goodwin stated: "The lyrics are a Rorschach test. What do you hear?"[26] Implicit in this metaphor for Radiohead is that the music has no meaning beyond whatever the individual listener can project onto it; since the band is the entity holding up the "cards," it can thus simultaneously decry any significance beyond the surface and pass judgment on whether the listener hears the "right" meaning. Nick Hornby wrote in the *New Yorker* that

> [y]ou have to work at albums like *Kid A*. You have to sit at home night after night
> and give yourself over to the paranoid millennial atmosphere as you try to

[24] http://www.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&sql=10:yzapqjkqojaa (accessed 8 November 2005).

[25] *Rolling Stone* review quoted in Footman, *Radiohead: A Visual Documentary*, 73.

[26] "Radiohead's *Kid A*." The Rorschach test is of course a method of psychological evaluation, consisting of ten inkblots on cards for the subject/patient to examine and respond to. The test is controversial because of its subjectivity and diagnosis based on finding latent sense in apparently meaningless images. See The Rorschach test is of course a method of psychological evaluation, consisting of ten inkblots on cards for the subject/patient to examine and respond to. The test is controversial because of its subjectivity and diagnosis based on finding latent sense in apparently meaningless images.

decipher elliptical snatches of lyrics and puzzle out how the titles … might refer to the songs.… *Kid A* demands the patience of the devoted; both patience and devotion become scarcer commodities once you start picking up a paycheck.… The album is morbid proof that this sort of self-indulgence results in a weird kind of anonymity, rather than something distinctive and original.[27]

These critics seem to be accusing the band of requiring listeners to do some detective work, rather than simply presenting an album that could be taken at face value with no need to derive meaning. Recall that the perception of *OK Computer* as "important" was not shared or promoted by the band members themselves, at least at the time of its release, so while they may have intended *Kid A* to be significant as an experimental piece of art music, and a step in a more innovative direction, the general listener was not necessarily intended to grasp any inherent "meaning." Footman observed that even the much-lauded *OK Computer* "hadn't been the sort of album to grab listeners by the ears and bellow 'love me!' But this [*Kid A*] was uneasy listening and then some. In spades. With a cherry on top."[28] While *OK Computer* had marked a moment in the band members' output that propelled them from being simply the creators of hit singles to message-bearers for a generation, the music had overcome the discomfort of the message (alienation amid modern technology), to produce a hit album despite the band's insistence that it was not setting out to make one. The music of *OK Computer* had amplified the message to the extent that the album was read as an important statement on modern life and a document for the future. Conversely, *Kid A* went so far in musical

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[27] Nick Hornby, "Beyond the Pale," *New Yorker* (30 October 2000), http://bmxmusic.com/articles/articles/excerpt_from_beyond_the_pale.htm (accessed 29 June 2005).

[28] Footman, *Radiohead: A Visual Documentary*, 73.

experimentation that any message, already encoded or obscured, would probably be lost because listeners were unlikely to put in the time needed to retrieve it.

The band members themselves seemed determined not to yield to the commercial pressure of promoting *Kid A*, choosing to release several "antivideos"[29] of animations set to short segments of the album's songs rather than participating in the more conventional videos, singles, interviews, or tour.[30] MTV and numerous music websites screened Radiohead's antivideo clips, which were also available on the band's own website, itself a study in obfuscation.[31] Rather than presenting fans with easily navigable areas from which to glean data (even such basic information as the release dates of new material), the website instead contained links labeled "waitingroom," "trapdoors," and "testspecimens." These links led the viewer through galleries of cartoons and obscured photos of the band with underlying politicized text: intriguing images and words, but no useful facts for anyone seeking concrete information on the band.[32] The booklet enclosed with the *Kid A* CD continued the mystery, containing pages of computer-generated and -

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[29] These "antivideos" are now available on a DVD collection, *The Most Gigantic Lying Mouth of All Time* (http://www.radiohead.co.uk, accessed 11 January 2005), which also contains four "episodes" of short films set to Radiohead's music that were originally meant to be screened on the band's streaming website, radiohead.tv. The band had solicited films through its website and also filmed some studio performances of its own. See also Joseph Tate, "Radiohead's Antivideos: Works of Art in the Age of Electronic Reproduction," in Tate, *The Music and Art of Radiohead*, 103–17.

[30] The band's record company, Capitol, did launch a chatbot (GooglyMinotaur) to promote the album, and both the band and Capitol encouraged fans to distribute the *Kid A* material through the Internet before the CD release. Martin Clarke states that Radiohead had "always been a band with a social conscience, but being trapped inside the commercial machine after *OK Computer* had reinforced their ideals." *Hysterical and Useless*, 145. Releasing and distributing the material for free was one way of thwarting this "commercial machine."

[31] The band periodically redesigns its website but keeps old versions archived. See http://www.radiohead.com and its alias, http://www.radiohead.co.uk (accessed 18 December 2000), as well as http://www.radiohead.com/Archive/Site7/03.html (accessed 2 May 2004).

[32] Even on Radiohead's current (2005) website, fans are referred to external links or search engines for facts about the band. "SORRY if you are looking for facts about the band, history etc we cant help, we cant remember. we're in the band you see?" (http://www.radiohead.com/offroad.html, accessed 10 July 2005).

manipulated art rather than the customary photos of the band.[33] The only human figures appear in a photo in the middle of the booklet, in which a stereotypical "nuclear family" stands with its back to the camera, staring at what appears to be a wall of graffiti. This wall is covered in faintly recognizable words and images of ice and snow, which also permeate the other pages of artwork. An additional booklet, containing pages of text arranged like handbills with artwork reminiscent of cartoonist R. Crumb, was concealed behind the back of the jewel case in the initial pressing of the CD and was later made available for download through the band's website. Some of the booklet's text is recognizable as lyrics from the songs of *Kid A*, but for the most part it merely serves to evoke, like the computer art, a feeling of desolation in a post-apocalyptic wasteland.[34] By creating a companion "art project" in the form of the antivideos, website, and booklet art, Radiohead furthered the notion of *Kid A* as high art, to be taken on its own terms rather than those dictated by the marketplace. The band members seemed to be saying they were above commerce and were simply releasing an album for its own sake, or for the sake of art.

Even in the "promotional" videos, the band members resisted commodification and thus linked themselves with the high-art tradition. Yorke has stated that "[w]hat frightens me is the idea that what Radiohead do is basically packaged back to people in

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[33] Hainge discusses the evolution in packaging over the course of Radiohead's albums from a straightforward presentation of band photos with *Pablo Honey* and *The Bends* to the increasing use of artwork and obscure snippets of text. "To(rt)uring the Minotaur," 64–68, 74–78. See also Lisa Leblanc, "'Ice Age Coming': Apocalypse, the Sublime, and the Paintings of Stanley Donwood," in Tate, *The Music and Art of Radiohead*, 85–102. Footman notes also that *Kid A* was the first Radiohead album not to include lyrics in its packaging. *Radiohead: A Visual Documentary*, 71. *Amnesiac* also did not include printed lyrics, but *Hail to the Thief* (2003) did.

[34] It is interesting to compare this booklet with the elaborate faux-newspaper packaging of Jethro Tull's *Thick as a Brick*, which Martin describes as a "great send-up of English pomposity, provinciality, and the class system." *Listening to the Future*, 211.

the form of entertainment, to play in their car stereos on the way to work."[35] The

frightening aspect of this packaging of art is that it makes the artist into a commodity, no

better than the corporate drones the band is complaining about. If a band's creative goal

is presumed to be an artistic statement, above or superfluous to the corporate culture, then

packaging that statement back to the consumer, in the process making money off the very

proletariat with which they claim to identify, is the ultimate irony. Yorke has further

stated that "[y]ou're lying if you're pretending it's not a product, that you're not trying to

sell something,"[36] so he is obviously conscious of the hurdles involved in negotiating

corporate culture. In this statement he reveals the man behind the curtain, creating the

smoke and mirrors of anticapitalism while still reaping benefit from the products' sales.

Part of Radiohead's marketing strategy appears to be creating riddles for fans to solve.

Alex Ross states that "[t]he records, the videos, the official Web site, even the T-shirts all

cry out for interpretation."[37] By being deliberately obscure in its presentation, Radiohead

creates a community of followers who gain insider status by sharing and debating the

clues left behind by the band. In addition, by creating an air of mystery, the band elevates

itself above mere "pop music" into the realm of the intelligentsia; only the astute can

interpret the music's true meaning.

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[35] Clarke, *Hysterical and Useless*, 97.

[36] Ibid., 146. Yorke has also stated, "I can't really see the difference between shooting a video and making a car advert." Quoted in Clarke, *Hysterical and Useless*, 99. Yorke has further described being in New Zealand, and having the experience of "one of the most beautiful places" he had ever seen ruined by realizing he was only there courtesy of MTV: "And all at once, the view lost all meaning." Stone, *Green Plastic Wateringcan*, 50.

[37] Ross, "The Searchers," 115.

"I'M NOT HERE, THIS ISN'T HAPPENING": EXPERIENCING *KID A*

The cold, alienating landscape of *Kid A*'s artwork can be viewed as the backdrop to its songs, if not the literal space within which the album's subject dwells. Set up by the scratchy images and computer-generated artwork of the CD booklet, the album requires several songs to form a complete musical and lyrical thought, let alone any kind of coherent subject. Just as different visual images are overlaid in the packaging, obscuring any overt meaning, so are the band's instruments distorted, filtered, and layered to build up an overall effect of bewilderment amid technology. Although the themes of *Kid A* are similar to those of *OK Computer* (alienation amid the onslaught of technology), *Kid A* challenges Radiohead's earlier methods of narrative cohesion by forming a hopeless, self-negating subject, a subject that disintegrates at the midpoint of the album, at the moment of the subject's maximum articulation. The layering of the instruments occasionally coalesces to form an interlocking groove, which stabilizes the music but also lends the opportunity for the voice-as-subject to be treated as a combatant rather than an ally. Rather than being bound to the singer, as in other "concept albums," the subject on *Kid A* is decentered and diffused among the other instruments and is subsumed by them midway through the album, in "How to Disappear Completely." As we take this subject to be human, it must be gendered; since the singer here is male, it is easier to identify the subject as such, even though there is not a strict mapping of one onto the other. Erin Harde has discussed Radiohead's ambivalence toward gender,[38] but any androgyny in the band's musical presentation cannot erase the perception of the male voice, even when it is heavily filtered and disguised, as on *Kid A*. Because of this, I will refer to the subject as "he" throughout my discussion.

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[38] Harde, "Radiohead and the Negation of Gender."

After the interlude of the instrumental "Treefingers," which represents a figurative space between the two sides of the album—no longer literally turned over—where the subject no longer exists, the second half of the album is spent reconstructing the subject and presenting him with a second chance to overcome life's challenges, which is likewise rejected. This midpoint "death" is analytically intriguing because it occurs at a surprising point in the narrative, immediately after the subject has finally been "made flesh," rather than at the end of the album as the listener might expect.[39] This death is apparently an internal one, an existential crisis, rather than an external event recognizable to the outside world. In a more conventional concept album, just as in a novel, the protagonist's premature death would lead to an overly long denouement, as other characters reacted to the subject's death.[40] In *Kid A*, as the singer-as-subject represents more or less the only real character, this reaction might have taken the form of several more instrumental songs, drastically reducing the role of the singer, an almost unfeasible option for a modern pop group. Instead the subject is reconstituted for the second half of the album and undergoes a less rigorous series of trials. Although the subject is no longer challenged by the instruments, as the songs on the album's second half have a more conventional pop-rock sound akin to Radiohead's earlier work, the subject does seem ultimately to expire at the end of the album.

On way of considering the double demise of *Kid A*'s subject is through the writings of Jacques Lacan. In Lacanian theory, as expounded upon by Slavoj Žižek, a subject must undergo a second death if the first death didn't "take"; if the dead are not

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[39] The subject in Pink Floyd's *The Wall* also undergoes two symbolic deaths, one occurring at the midpoint of the album (the end of side two in a four-sided album), and the other at the end of the album. Both "deaths" appear to be psychotic breaks.

[40] It could be argued that Circus Devils' *The Harold Pig Memorial* is nothing but denouement, as the protagonist dies before the start of the album.

properly disposed of, they return and demand a proper funeral rite.[41] On *Kid A*, the two "deaths" manifest as the subject playing the victim the first time and choosing his own destiny as suicide in the second. The second "death" is melodramatic, however, and conforms to popular culture's notions of what constitutes a "proper" burial; the subject dies dramatically in the last song of the album, apparently ascending to heaven accompanied by schmaltzy harp and choir.

 Kid A presents a compelling challenge for the listener to interpret or even discern narrative personae. Not only is there no clear persona to guide or even ground the listener, as in Bono's "Fly" or Bowie's "Ziggy Stardust," but there is no main character (as in the Who's *Tommy* or Pink Floyd's *The Wall*), and no clear dramatic action. Rather than giving the listener an immediate sense of the singer-as-subject, the lyrics to the first three songs consist of puzzling statements ("yesterday I woke up sucking on a lemon," "I slipped away on a little white lie," "everyone has got the fear"). Caryn Wys Jones has discussed the difficulty of locating "the position of the singer" given the album's heavy filtering of the voice,[42] which leads to the destabilization and fragmentation of the subject, who dissolves into the instrumental background. Allan F. Moore and Anwar Ibrahim note that "[w]here *OK Computer* featured 12 highly inventive and original takes on the concept of a rock song, *Kid A* … saw Radiohead producing tracks that not only defied categorization as rock music but that, on occasion, also challenged perceived notions of 'song.'"[43] Whereas Radiohead had been applauded for its earlier albums that,

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[41] See Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).

[42] Jones, "The Aura of Authenticity: Perceptions of Honesty, Sincerity, and Truth in 'Creep' and 'Kid A,'" in Tate, *The Music and Art of Radiohead*, 45. Jones ultimately concludes that "if the measure of authenticity is to be understood as the extent to which a song is an honest expression of the artist's self, 'Kid A' could be seen to succeed far more than 'Creep,' operating on a far more complex and reflective plane" (46). She is referring here to the song "Kid A," but the analogy could be extended to the full album.

[43] Moore and Ibrahim, "Identifying Radiohead's Idiolect," 145.

while innovative, still contained traditionally constructed songs, the songs of *Kid A* were viewed not as a further musical advance, but as something that threatened the pop-music genre. Because *Kid A*'s songs do not, for the most part, stand on their own as discrete three-minute pop "singles," with some kind of inherent narrative of their own, meaning can perhaps be derived from the song sequence, which, rather than presenting a straightforward plot with characters from the opening song onward, builds up the subject gradually and then abruptly erases him. While the voice and various other musical agents (piano, orchestra, etc.) are typically viewed as working together to construct a complete musical subject, or a "unified utterance of the composer's voice," as Edward T. Cone puts it, on *Kid A* these elements engage instead in a constant struggle for dominance.[44] Kevin J. H. Dettmar suggests that such conflict is a hallmark of Radiohead's style in general—"an almost epic battle between Thom Yorke's frail voice and the music which alternatively undergirds and overwhelms that voice."[45] In *Kid A*, this tendency is pushed to the breaking point: the band's "unified utterance" fractures, with all of the musical agents working actively against a coherent subject formation, normally centered in the voice, rather than for it.

Musical sparring between voice and instruments on *Kid A* can be parsed into the binary oppositions of nature versus technology, sense versus nonsense, and music versus noise. Table 2.1 shows how some elements from the first five songs of *Kid A* fit into these categories. Sounds can appear in more than one category; for instance, the "birth cry" at the end of the song "Kid A" can be taken to represent both nonsense and noise.

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[44] See Edward T. Cone, *The Composer's Voice* (13); David Brackett, *Interpreting Popular Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988).

[45] Dettmar, foreword to Tate, *The Music and Art of Radiohead*, xv.

The categories are not pure; the "organic" sounds of "Kid A" are actually sampled, and could thus also appear in that category's binary opposition of "technological." If "music" is taken as a way of encoding social norms and codes into organized sound, then "noise" is that which erupts and disturbs the order.

Table 2.1: Binary oppositions in the first half of *Kid A*

Song	Sense	Nonsense	Organic	Technological	Music	Noise
"Everything in Its Right Place"	lead vocals ask for clarification	sampled voice in background	voice is sampled from live performance	keyboards, sampled voice	repeating keyboard motive	voice cuts off like tape failing
"Kid A"	distorted lead vocals	birth cry at end of song	blowing wind, marimbas, strings (all sampled)	filtered voice, sampled music box	music box, marimbas (sampled)	birth cry, filtered voice
"The National Anthem"	lead vocals	horn glissandi, vocal cries, orchestral coda	horns, voice	ondes martenot	bass, horns	horn glissandi, distorted voice, orchestra tape winding down
"How to Disappear Completely"	lead vocals	strings, vocalese	acoustic guitar, strings, tambourine	electric guitar	voice, acoustic guitar, bass	strings
"Treefingers"		vocalese		filtered guitars		ambient sound

In terms used by French economist and cultural theorist Jacques Attali, noise represents an ambiguous intrusion that disrupts the musical texture; yet it is also the means by which

new order and meaning are created. When a network's existing codes cannot repress the attacking noise, the network will be destroyed and replaced by another that can organize the noise into a culturally accepted form. Noise thus precipitates a sacrificial crisis in order to "transcend the old violence and recreate a system of differences on another level of organization."[46] Attali is speaking of music in general historical terms, but here we will explore the possibility that this process occurs in microcosm, at the song or album level. Noise can emanate from an outside source, such as the sound effects that intrude beyond the band's normal instrumentation of guitars, bass, and voice, or from within, as when the voice moves into non-verbal utterances.

Dettmar extends the analogy of the voice versus the other instruments to the albums *OK Computer*, *Kid A*, and *Amnesiac*, a "triptych which is not quite a trilogy," in which "something of a closet drama is played out between the voice and the noise."[47] He notes also the band's exploration over the course of these three albums of "whether the human voice can retain its authority and authenticity in the reign of Walter Benjamin's 'age of mechanical reproduction,' through the inhuman processing of human utterance."[48] Dettmar observes that the intrusion of noise begins in the "big distorted guitar sounds" at the beginning of *OK Computer*, above which the singer struggles to be heard; this battle is staged more dramatically on *Kid A* and *Amnesiac*, where the singer's words are barely understood even when his voice is audible. The first half of *Kid A* can thus be understood in Attali's terms, as a fracturing of the musical structure that builds to a crisis point at which the subject is purged by the voice's escape into falsetto above churning strings; the

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[46] Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 34.

[47] Dettmar, foreword to Tate, *The Music and Art of Radiohead*, xvii.

[48] Ibid., xviii. See also Jones, "The Aura of Authenticity," 38–51. Harde notes that *Kid A* also presents the dichotomy between "the collective and the singular." "Radiohead and the Negation of Gender," 57.

album then attempts to build a new structure by resurrecting the subject for a new series of songs, but the subject fails to negotiate his struggles successfully and abandons his attempt at the end of the album. This failed attempt could be read as a suicide, as the album ends with the words "I will see you in the next life." Here, the subject again escapes into falsetto, but this time the underlying strings support the voice. The "transcendence of the old violence" is the falsetto escape, and the "other level of organization" is the "next life" to come, possibly as soon as the next album.

The members of Radiohead seem to have been conscious of subverting these opposing categories of musical sound when making *Kid A*. The ondes martenot represents a distinctive feature of Radiohead's style on this album, as well as a further step in the band members' experimentation with orchestration. In this way, they enrich and expand their sound with different instruments beyond the conventional guitar, bass, and drums of rock music. This had been illustrated on *OK Computer* by the use of the Mellotron, an artifact of progressive rock that helped draw comparisons with the style. The ondes martenot is likewise a throwback to the inclusion of new forms of technology in "art music" of the twentieth century, a parallel that furthers Radiohead's association with "high art."[49] The ondes martenot in particular brings to mind the work of Olivier Messiaen, whom guitarist Jonny Greenwood has admired since his youth. In speaking of the recording sessions that produced *Kid A* and *Amnesiac*, Greenwood has commented that

> a voice into a microphone onto a tape, onto a CD and through your speakers is all
> as illusory and as fake as any synthesizer.… But one is perceived as "real," the

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[49] Jonny Greenwood's affinity for the ondes martenot comes from his appreciation for Olivier Messiaen and especially the Turangalîla symphony. See Doheny, *Back to Save the Universe*, 106.

other somehow "unreal." It's the same with guitars versus sampler. It was just

freeing to discard the notion of acoustic sounds being truer.[50]

By calling into question the perception of acoustic instruments as being somehow more

"real" or "authentic" than electronic media, Greenwood further destabilizes these

categories. The album presents an unfamiliar sonic space that might normally represent

the unreal (in the form of distorted and/or non-acoustic instruments) but here must be

treated as the only true, and thus "real," space available to the subject. Yearning for the

unattainable ideal of the unconstructed real, the subject finds that the only way to reach

this state is to "disappear completely." Rather than escaping into a "more real" sonic

environment, however, the subject ends up in the gray nothing-space of "Treefingers"—

another non-acoustic soundscape—and must start his journey anew on the second half of

the album.[51] The subject's "suicide" becomes thus not an empowering act but instead the

ultimate failure. When viewed in this way, the story of *Kid A* can be understood as an

attempted resolution to an existential crisis, rather than as a simple tracing of a plot with

characters.

<div align="center">"EVERYTHING IN ITS RIGHT PLACE": KEY ASSOCIATIONS IN KID A</div>

Regardless of whether a convincing traditional narrative can be assigned to the album,

with a series of actions and motivations assigned to such a character, the key structure of

the song sequence implies that some thought went into assembling the album so that it

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[50] On the Internet, quoted in Doheny, *Back to Save the Universe*, 92. It is interesting to note the proliferation of "unplugged" performances in the 1990s, which were conducted to illustrate a given band's authenticity. Nirvana frontman Kurt Cobain committed suicide soon after his band appeared on MTV's *Unplugged* (filmed 13 November 1993; aired 16 December 1993; Cobain made an unsuccessful suicide attempt on 4 March 1994 and succeeded on 5 April 1994), almost as though the "real" were too much to cope with. See http://home.thezone.net/~sreid/nirvana/timeline.htm (accessed 26 February 2005).

[51] See Žižek, *Looking Awry*, in which he discusses the "grey and formless mist" of the Lacanian real in a Robert Heinlein novel, *The Unpleasant Profession of Jonathan Hoag* (13–15).

would flow harmonically, or at least avoid harmonic disruption. Doheny states that Yorke worked on the song sequence of *OK Computer* for two weeks after all the songs were recorded, and it can be assumed that similar care was taken on *Kid A*, particularly since the band had recorded over twenty songs from which to choose for both this album and *Amnesiac*.[52] Given the modal ambiguity of many pop songs, it is often misleading to force them into a major or minor key, as the chord progressions do not project a tonal center within functional harmony. Radiohead's tendency to use pedal tones and to oscillate between two chords related by a third further muddies the tonal waters.[53] Example 2.1 shows *Kid A*'s general harmonic flow.

Example 2.1: *Kid A*, general harmonic flow
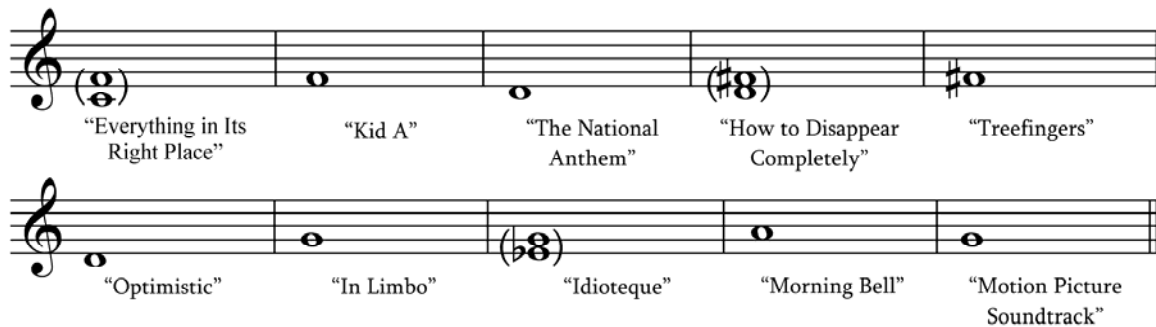
 "Everything in Its Right Place" alternates between the keys of C and F. "Kid A" is ostensibly in F,[54] one of the keys of the previous song. "The National Anthem" is in D;

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[52] Doheny, *Back to Save the Universe*, 78 and 110. This marks a contrast with earlier concept albums, in which the track order was often unified in performance before the album was even recorded.

[53] Ross has noted Radiohead's use of the pivot chord as early as "Creep." "The Searchers," 118.

[54] The transcribed piano/vocal/guitar score presents a bracketed F above the first measure. Warner Bros. Publications, 2001. Given the limitations of the published score in rock music, particularly when the music is as complex and layered as Radiohead's, the piano/guitar transcription should be taken as no more than a general road map to what is really going on in the recording. Lori Burns has written about the inadequacies of the transcribed score in attempting to replicate performance; see her "Meaning in a Popular Song: The Representation of Masochistic Desire in Sarah McLachlan's 'Ice,'" in *Engaging Music: Essays in Musical Analysis*, ed. Deborah Stein (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 141n16; and Burns and Mélisse Lafrance, *Disruptive Divas: Feminism, Identity and Popular Music* (New York and London: Routledge,

"How to Disappear Completely" shifts between D and F-sharp; and "Treefingers," the midpoint of the album, is in F-sharp. "Optimistic" returns to D, which could be heard as a dominant to the G of the next song, "In Limbo." "Idioteque" alternates between G and E-flat. "Morning Bell" is in A, the neighbor tone to G, and "Motion Picture Soundtrack" finally "resolves" to G in a high voice with overblown harp and choir accompaniment (suggesting a dramatically forced resolution), though the harmony does not present a G-major chord until after the main song has faded out. The ultimate resolution is thus represented as beyond the scope of the actual song.

Reducing the album to a single overall harmonic progression seems too pat a solution when the songs are examined more closely, however. Rather than one large progression in G, the album can be grouped into three series of three songs each, plus a separate concluding song, as seen in Example 2.2.

Example 2.2: *Kid A*, **three-song groupings**

"Everything in Its Right Place,"   "How to Disappear Completely,"   "In Limbo," "Idioteque,"   "Motion Picture Soundtrack"
"Kid A," "The National Anthem"   "Treefingers," "Optimistic"   "Morning Bell"

Each group is linked by lyrics or style and supported by harmonic underpinnings, if not functionally dictated by them. Each grouping also forms a dialectical triad, presenting a thesis, an antithesis, and a synthesis (though often a weak one). The first series ("Everything," "Kid A," and "The National Anthem") tentatively builds up the emerging subject of the album, and the ambiguous F of the first two songs is followed by a clear statement in D. Before the subject even appears, the stage is set for "everything" to be "in


2002). In reference to pop music, Moore has stated that the "only thing we have approaching an authoritative score is … the recording itself." *The Beatles*, x.

its right place." When the subject "Kid A" emerges in the title track, however, he finds it difficult to fit into the world. "The National Anthem" forcibly integrates him into a society of alienation. The next three songs ("How to Disappear Completely," "Treefingers," and "Optimistic") articulate, destroy, and then reconstitute the subject; the F-sharp of the middle song mediates between the D/F-sharp of the first song and the D of the third song. The subject finally finds his voice in "How to Disappear Completely," but immediately loses it again in the violent musical texture and is merely a ghost figure in the ambient landscape of "Treefingers." The subject then resurfaces as a more pessimistic entity in "Optimistic," continuing to exist only because he has failed to erase himself. The third series presents the renewed subject's continued struggles with modern existence, through "Idioteque" and "In Limbo," and concludes with a sort of wake-up call, or "Morning Bell": the subject is not having any greater success in this second incarnation. The A of the third song lifts the G of the first two songs to a higher pitch level. The final song ("Motion Picture Soundtrack") ends with the subject's second, "real" "death" (as opposed to the existential-crisis-as-death in "How to Disappear Completely") and furnishes a forced resolution and coda (the last a reminder that the music, and thus the world, continues to exist apart from the subject), along with a parting shot from the subject ("I will see you in the next life").

A further musical link occurs between the song that signifies the first "death" and the one that reconstitutes the subject. Example 2.3 shows how the closing notes of "How to Disappear Completely" (A–F-sharp) reappear in the opening notes of "Optimistic" (A–B–F-sharp) after the interlude of "Treefingers," illustrating that the subject is essentially picking up where he left off, after the unsuccessful suicide attempt.[55]

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[55] The songs have been transcribed in the same key here to make the comparison clear. "Optimistic" actually sounds in a higher key than "How to Disappear Completely," the brighter-sounding key articulating a false sense of happiness or hope, or perhaps mania or hysteria.

Example 2.3: End of "How to Disappear Completely" and beginning of "Optimistic"

"Aah..." (track 4: 5:22 to 5:34)   "Ooh..." (track 6: 0:00 to 0:10)
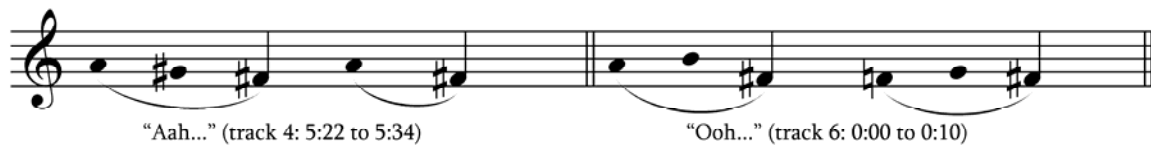
The would-be suicide of "How to Disappear Completely" is present again in "Optimistic" with a renewed energy and the opportunity for a fresh outlook on life, and the anguished "aahs" of "How to Disappear Completely" have been transformed into the soothing "oohs" of "Optimistic." We soon discover, however, that the negative attitude of the subject is still present, though it has been turned outward toward society.

The songs of *Kid A* are also tied together with lyrics, but rather than constructing a clear narrative, the words instead simply drop clues about the setting and the subject's state of mind. Each half of the album presents similar lyrics, which provide a bridge across the subject's attempted suicide. The statement "I slipped away on a little white lie" in "Kid A" returns in "Motion Picture Soundtrack" as "they fed us on little white lies," a comment perhaps on the paranoid environment that precipitated the album. The statement in "How to Disappear Completely" that "this isn't happening" is countered in "Idioteque": "this is really happening," another instance of the real battling with the unreal. Rather than trying to negate himself in order to reach some imagined ideal state of being, the subject seems in the latter song to be trying to force himself to accept a harsh and unwanted reality. The Orwellian reference in "Optimistic" ("living on an animal farm") can be linked to the dystopian "stop sending letters, letters always get burned" in "Motion Picture Soundtrack." The "dinosaurs roaming the earth" in "Optimistic" are

recalled in the apocalyptic "ice age coming" in "Idioteque." The calmly uttered command "rats and children follow me out of town" in "Kid A" returns as the hysterical stutter "the first of the children" in "Idioteque," as the subject must face up to his fate instead of trying to escape it. The words "laugh until my head comes off" in "Idioteque" indicate that even a moment of levity has dire consequences in Radiohead's post-apocalyptic wasteland. As expressed here, laughter negates reason, as the convulsing body literally loses its head. The lyric can also be linked to the "heads on sticks" in "Kid A," which have already been separated from their bodies and must rely on "ventriloquists" to choose and articulate their message.[56]

"HERE I'M ALLOWED EVERYTHING ALL OF THE TIME": MUSICAL ELEMENTS IN *KID A*

Let us now turn to more specific musical elements of *Kid A* to locate dramatic action, or at the very least to develop a clearer idea of its subject. As discussed earlier, the album's first three songs gradually build up the shaky picture of an unwilling pseudo-protagonist who is defined in negative space by his reactions to his environment. The instability of the musical structure (and of the subject) makes it easier for noise (whether emanating from an internal or external source) to eventually rip it apart. The first three songs of *Kid A* toy with the conventional song construction of verse/chorus and present nonsensical, fragmented lyrics in distorted tones. The three guitars customarily associated with Radiohead are heavily filtered and mostly unrecognizable. "Noise" thus exists both as altered versions of Radiohead's usual instrumentation and as the sound effects and synthesized strings that constantly interrupt the musical texture. Despite its title,

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[56] The "heads on sticks" could also relate to the "talking heads" of TV, which speak the messages of their governing corporations, filtered through the politics of the networks.

"Everything in Its Right Place" presents a musical scenario in which expectations of resolution are constantly thwarted. Its long musical introduction of a repeated keyboard riff gives it a prelude quality,[57] as though its purpose is to merely hint at what is to come later rather than to present a clear statement of the album's thesis.[58] The sections of the song can be labeled as chorus, verse, chorus, verse, and coda, departing from the more customary order of verse, chorus, bridge, verse, and chorus.[59] The lack of transition material, or a bridge, suggests an inability to move forward, which foreshadows the feel of the whole album.[60] Table 2.2 shows the structure of "Everything" as a modified A-b-A-b-A′ (or R-v-R-v-R′) structure, but the interplay of the instruments undermines the basic steadiness of the form.

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[57] Spicer defines "riff" as "a distinctive melodic-rhythmic idea—usually longer than a motive but not large enough to constitute a full phrase—which is frequently … sounded over and over again in the manner of an ostinato." "(Ac)cumulative Form," 30.

[58] The anticipatory feel of "Everything" should not be misconstrued as serving the more conventional purpose of an overture, as for instance in *Tommy*, with its introduction of forthcoming musical themes.

[59] See definitions of these terms in Everett, *Expression in Pop-Rock Music*, 272.

[60] This marks a contrast with *Dark Side of the Moon*, which O'Donnell says "generates a continual sense of forward motion" through the "prolongation of an extended melodic arch." "'On the Path,'" in Reising, *Speak to Me*.

Table 2.2: Structure of "Everything in Its Right Place"

Intro (7 mm.)	C—D-flat—C/E-flat motive established in keyboard
0:35 **A/Chorus (4 + 4 mm.)** **"Everything…"**	F—C—F in voice over E-flat—F—C—D-flat—E-flat in keyboard (which "resolves" incorrectly by leaping down a minor seventh to match the voice) C—B-flat—D-flat—C in voice over E-flat in bass (moves to C with voice, then goes back to motive)
1:14 **b/Verse 1 (4 mm.)** **"Yesterday I woke up…"**	Pedal C in voice over D-flat in bass (moves C—E-flat—D-flat); bass resolves to C to match voice, then both move to E-flat and F (bass motive continues)
1:37 **A/Chorus (4 + 4 mm.)** **"Everything…"**	Same as above
2:12 **b/Verse 2 (8 mm.)** **"There are two colors…"**	Voice and keyboard have same rhythm; keyboard moves to E-flat major when voice finally drops out; pedal C of keyboard is gone
2:55 **A′/Coda (15 mm.; fades out)** **"Everything…"**	Keyboard motive repeats over and over; voice is absent until babble comes in with the pedal C

The song is roughly in 10/4 meter (represented in the published guitar/keyboard transcription as alternating measures of 4/4 and 6/4), with the bass drum providing the quarter-note pulse. Such a large metric grouping produces a suspended feeling in the music that is furthered by the voice's slow melody seeming somewhat disconnected from the meter. The chord progressions can be grouped into larger harmonic motions, as shown in Table 2.3.[61]

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[61] Thanks to Mark Spicer for his assistance in this section in particular. The labels for harmonic motion should not be confused with the formal section labels in Table 2.2.

Table 2.3: Harmonic motion in "Everything in Its Right Place"

Harmonic Motion	Chord Progression (number of beats)
A	C (4) D-flat (7) E-flat (4)
B	F (2) C (2) D-flat (2) E-flat (4)
C	D-flat (6) C (2) E-flat (2)

A pedal C is present throughout the song, regardless of the underlying chords (variously D-flat major, E-flat major, and F major), and although the voice's initial statement introduces the melodic motion F-C-F, this pedal C should not be construed as serving a true dominant function to the F, as it might in traditional Western art music, as the harmony never moves on to a "tonic" chord.[62] Indeed, apart from presenting stepwise motion of major chords, the harmonic function remains vague and unsettled. Table 2.4 shows the harmonic motion in each formal section.

Table 2.4: Harmonic motion in "Everything in Its Right Place"

Section	Harmonic Motion
Introduction	A
Chorus 1	B and A
Verse 1	C
Chorus 2	B and A
Verse 2	C
Coda	B

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[62] Walter Everett noted the possible V-I relationship for "Everything" in "The Values of Historiographical and Theoretical Approaches for the Study of Rock Music," presented at the Society for Music Theory conference in 2000 in Toronto, Canada.

The tenuous stability of the initial keyboard motive is immediately threatened by the intrusion of a sampled voice babbling nonsensically in alternating speakers. The voice in one channel breaks up lyrics that are heard slightly later ("yesterday I woke up sucking on a lemon"[63]), while the voice in the other channel announces the album title, or possibly a lead character, though again, the subject is too nebulous to be a true protagonist: "Kid A." An undistorted voice then enters in the middle of the speakers with the word "everything." At first impression the lead vocals, as "acoustic" (though as Jonny Greenwood has stated, this is a faulty if inevitable comparison), seem to represent something like unadulterated nature, as well as music, and the babbling vocals technology, as well as noise; yet the relationship grows more complicated as we realize that one has been created from the other: the words of the main vocal (derived from live performance) have been spliced and rearranged into the babbling one.[64] Mark B. N. Hansen further states that this loss of speech triggered the band's "complex deterritorializations" of the voice and "its instrumental avatar, the guitar."[65] Though guitars are present on *Kid A*, as on Radiohead's previous albums, they are heavily filtered and function as background rather than as the more traditional lead/solo instruments. The noise element produces disharmony here by turning one of the musical elements (the voice) back on itself by reconfiguring it, and suggests already the triumph of technology over nature; music itself is also the triumph of technology over nature, tone over sound.

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[63] Footman has observed that this lyric could be an analogy for *Kid A*'s "whole listening experience—it hurts like hell, but it probably does you some kind of good." *Radiohead: A Visual Documentary*, 70.

[64] http://www.followmearound.com/lyrics/everythinginitsrightplace.html (accessed 21 October 2000). Hansen notes that this song alludes to Yorke's breakdown on Radiohead's yearlong *OK Computer* tour, with his main symptom manifesting as an inability to speak. David Fricke, "Radiohead: Making Music That Matters," quoted in Mark B. N. Hansen, "Deforming Rock: Radiohead's Plunge into the Sonic Continuum," in Tate, *The Music and Art of Radiohead*, 118.

[65] Hansen, "Deforming Rock," 118.

While the voice and keyboard in "Everything" seem to be battling each other to determine the key, the keyboard seems even to be battling itself. The opening keyboard statement is in C major but keeps moving to C minor by way of a D-flat major chord. The ambiguity is obvious from the opening keyboard descent (A-flat, G, C), which includes the dominant and tonic for C but also borrows A-flat from C minor. Over this initial keyboard statement comes the voice's C-F alternation over an E-flat in the bass line, creating a major-ninth dissonance between F and E-flat. The bass then moves down a minor seventh to F before returning to the C–D-flat–E-flat motive again under the voice's F. This minor-seventh leap in the bass anticipates the minor-seventh dissonance created by the voice's D-flat over the bass's E-flat on "right" and the major-seventh dissonance of the voice's C over the bass's D-flat in the verse beginning "yesterday." The vocal melody presents a pseudo-dominant/tonic (F-C-F) on the word "everything" that sounds stable. The bass's relationship to the voice, however, is forced and an ill fit. As the phrase continues with "in its right place," the voice moves to D-flat on the word "right," implying that all is *not* right with the musical space in which the ensemble is moving. The voice stresses this D-flat, seeming to concede that something is amiss. The minor-seventh dissonance formed by the voice's D-flat over the bass's E-flat does at least resolve "correctly," moving down a half step to C for "place." The bass's C comes in half a beat before the voice's C, to anticipate this resolution or guide the voice to it. This C creates the impression of a dominant when taken with the opening F-C. Rather than resting on this tentative resolution for long, the bass simply reiterates the C–D-flat–E-flat motive again while the voice continues to hold its C. The b section (or first verse) of the song adds an echo to the keyboard and to the lead vocals for the undistorted lyrics "yesterday I woke up sucking on a lemon." As Example 2.4 shows, the melody is stagnant, repeating the C over the C–E-flat–D-flat movement in the bass until the final

statement of "on a lemon," when the voice sings E-flat–F as the bass moves to F to take up its original motive again.

Example 2.4: "Everything in Its Right Place," reduction

In the second verse, the form mutates slightly so that each lyrical idea is repeated twice. The statement "there are two colors in my head" implies that the subject is at some level aware of a fracture. These "two colors" are reproduced sonically in the battle for dominance between F and C, the split between the two speaker channels, and an apparent split between a rational "conscious" voice and a babbling subconscious. As the rational voice tries to interact with the babbling one, asking "What is that you tried to say? What was that you tried to say?" it receives only nonsense in return. The move from present to past tense suggests passing action rather than an event that has already taken place outside the song. As the main voice asks for clarification, the babble strives for coherence but achieves only the static back-and-forth motion of a major second. The melody grows slightly more complex, mimicking the bass line. The repetition of "tried to say" implies an attempt at closure, the main voice growing stronger as it moves back to F, where the

babble recedes. The main voice tries to overcome the babble by simply drowning it out, but the babble triumphs in the end, cutting off the coda (A') statement of "everything" as the main voice moves from one channel to the other. The now-babbling main voice is itself cut off by the keyboard at the end of the song and descends into garbled synthesized sounds, being absorbed into the musical texture. This struggle for dominance between the music and noise elements grows increasingly violent over the course of the next several songs, until the midpoint of the album. The split between music and noise evident in the songs can be mapped onto a split between rational and irrational thinking, which produces a schizophrenia, literally a "shattered mind," in the subject.

The second song on the album, the title track "Kid A," continues to blur the categories of technology and the organic, presenting the synthesized sound of wind blowing and a slow keyboard pattern that sounds like a music box being wound. A counter-rhythm on a marimba-like keyboard enters and alternates between channels, along with occasional percussive tapping. The feel of the song is that of technology trying to replicate natural sounds, much like the blurred distinction between computer-generated and hand-drawn art in the booklets accompanying the CD. When the voice enters, it is distorted and mechanized, as though flattened by radio static. Doheny notes that "the character, the 'spirit' perhaps, of Thom's voice, has been electronically superimposed on the 'artificial' pitches of the onde."[66] This superimposition makes it possible for the "real" singer to absolve himself of responsibility for meaning; Yorke has stated that "the lyrics are absolutely brutal and horrible and I wouldn't be able to sing them straight. But taking them and having them vocodered … so that I wasn't even responsible for the melody … that was great, it felt like you're not answerable to the

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[66] Doheny, *Back to Save the Universe*, 92.

thing."[67] Thus technology creates a schizophrenia also between the singer and the subject, one that is furthered within the subject himself by the impenetrable lyrics and foggy harmonies. The aural incomprehensibility of the lyrics moves the main vocal into the nonsense category and maps it onto noise.

"Kid A" presents four short lyrical segments, each with a different melody: two verses, a chorus, a wordless bridge, and a final verse. The opening lyrics speak to the challenge between the real and the unreal, or acoustic authenticity and artificial technology, which underscores the ambiguity of the subject's identity: "I slipped away, I slipped on a little white lie." The second verse brings the voice and drums to the forefront and adds a second voice in nasal harmony, shifting to the collective first person for the words "we got heads on sticks, you got ventriloquists," which evokes the image of puppets whose voices originate from an unknown outside source. It is unclear who "we" and "you" are: the distinction could be made between band and listener, between parts of the subject's psyche (perhaps the schizophrenic "two colors in my head" from the previous song), between the band and its fans and some other entity (such as multinational corporations or big government), or between the protagonist/subject and someone or something else.[68] Despite the implied rivalry, the image suggests a shared effort, as the "heads on sticks" held by one side cannot have a voice without the "ventriloquists" of the other.

The opening "music box" motive of "Kid A" presents an interlocking pitch collection that changes the color of the chord over the course of each measure and

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[67] Interview with *The Wire*, quoted in Doheny, *Back to Save the Universe*, 92.

[68] This anti-corporate/government stance is similar to the one expounded upon in Naomi Klein's *No Logo: No Space, No Choice, No Jobs* (New York: Picador USA, 2000) and reappears on the band's website and in subsequent albums. Griffiths notes that Radiohead is to *No Logo* "what The Smiths were to vegetarianism." "Public Schoolboy Music," 162. Radiohead's political leanings would become more foregrounded on their post-*Amnesiac* release *Hail to the Thief* (2003).

produces a "diatonic fog" of constantly thickening and thinning layers of harmonic ambiguity. Example 2.5 shows an approximation of the complexity of this background harmony, which grows more intricate when the synthesized marimba comes in.
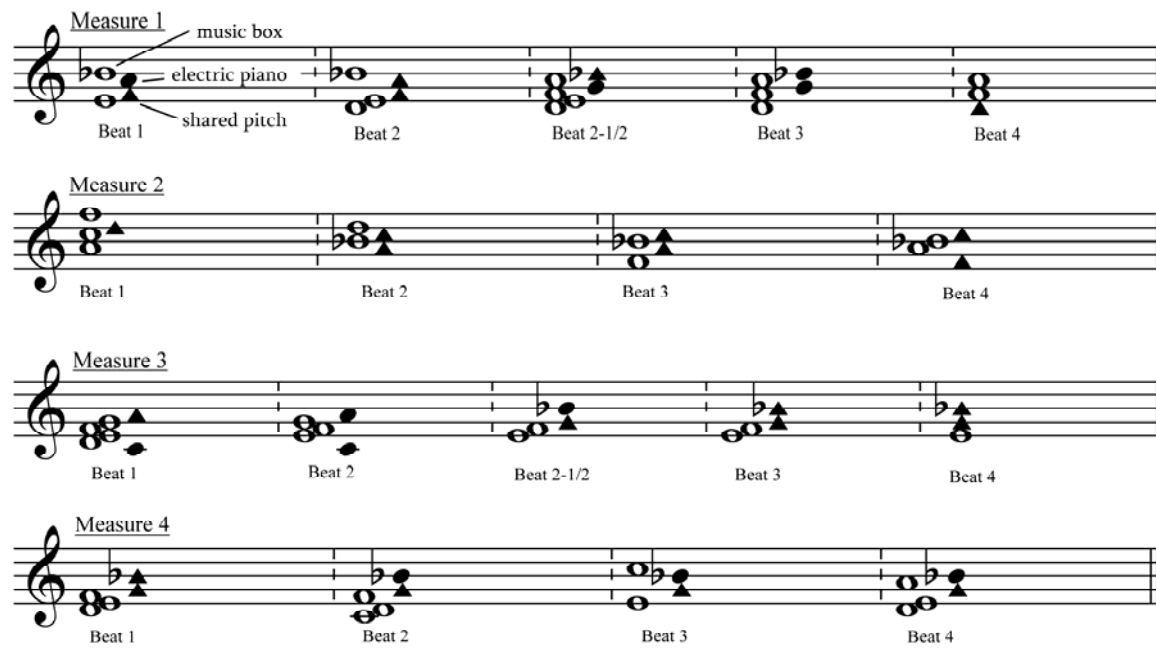
Example 2.5: "Kid A," music-box riff

(track 2: 0:11 to 0:19)

The "marimba" provides a slower series of parallel tenths, which clashes with the preexisting music-box melody. Although the marimba's pattern is harmonically unstable in that its chords are not in root position, it does provide an anchoring riff. When the marimba's series of first-inversion chords is coupled with the underlying music-box sound, up to six adjacent pitches are present at any given time, as shown in Example 2.6.

Example 2.6: "Kid A," introduction

The effect of the chord clusters is to arrest the song's harmonic motion (and also to make it chordally indifferent, inasmuch as most of the pitches are present at any one time) while still building up a sonic background over which the voice can enter. The voice presents yet a third unrelated melody, which fits more closely (though uneasily) with the marimba than with the music box. While the marimba riff remains the same, the voice slots into different chords in the pattern each time. Although the vocal line emphasizes members of the F-major triad, it does not present a strong F until the chorus. Even then the voice ends on C, which would be heard as scale degree 5 in the context of the key of F. For what passes as the chorus—the four-times-repeated statement "standing in the shadows at the end of my bed"—a bass guitar is added to the sound, and the drums grow much louder in the mix. At the end of the chorus, the bass comes in with a rhythmic motive on B-flat and C that is similar to the riff that begins the next song, "The National Anthem" (see Example 2.7a).

Example 2.7a: "Kid A," bass riff

(track 2: 4:09 to 4:26)

In the bridge section, a synthesized-string interlude presents a C^{13} chord, saturating the texture, a kind of reversion to the unorganized sound of nature. While the presence of strings normally humanizes a musical texture, its synthesized representation here appears almost sinister and unnatural, foreshadowing the use of the strings in "How to Disappear Completely." The original music-box motive finally returns under the strings, and the voice sings the final verse, again focusing on C and A rather than on F. The strings fade out as the singer comes back in for the last verse, but it seems that they are simply lying in wait to capture the voice, as they immediately rise in the mix again. The final words of

the verse, "rats and children follow me out of town," could refer to the band's feeling toward its audience: that they will naively follow the band anywhere, Pied Piper–like. The Pied Piper of legend lured away children only after the people of Hamlin failed to pay him for ridding their town of rats. Footman notes that "[t]he Piper is a clear precursor to the Rock Star as Messiah idea exploited so brilliantly by Bowie and with which Thom Yorke is profoundly uneasy."[69] The singer's halfhearted delivery of the closing words "c'mon kids" suggests that he is reluctant to lead the children away. The drums and bass rise in the texture again, with the music box still in the background under the increasingly encroaching strings, again emphasizing C. The unresolved C from "Everything in Its Right Place" has finally triumphed here, though seemingly only after being abandoned by (or cutting off) the voice. (The resolution does not last long, however, as the next interval heard, between the C in the bass and strings at the end of "Kid A" and the F-sharp in the bass at the beginning of "The National Anthem," is a tritone.) The strings ultimately fade out under an anguished vocal cry, which blends into high keyboard effects that are abruptly cut off by the next song. Although the voice itself lies under the "nonsense" heading this time, it is again overcome by the non-vocal sounds. Technology has again triumphed over nature, albeit a *faux* nature since all the sounds are synthetic.

The third song on *Kid A*, "The National Anthem," brings a sense of irony to its topic and lyrics while still expressing the subject's feelings of alienation. Traditionally a national anthem is conceived as a song that speaks of the unity and pride of a nation's people, but Radiohead's "The National Anthem" speaks instead of terror: "Everyone is so near, everyone has got the fear, it's holding on." Despite the proximity of the crowd, the

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[69] Footman, *Radiohead: A Visual Documentary*, 70.

subject still feels alone, perhaps even more so because of this stifling press of humanity.
This condition recalls David Riesman's observation that

> Caught between social character and rigid social institutions, the individual and
> his potentialities have little scope…. Modern industrial society has driven great
> numbers of people into anomie, and produced a wan conformity in others, but the
> very developments which have done this have also opened up hitherto
> undreamed-of possibilities for autonomy.[70]

The subject here is being pressured to conform to a "national" standard but finds that
everyone around him is connected only by a "wan conformity" of fear and alienation.
Ultimately his failure to conform produces an existential despair at the human condition.
"The National Anthem" begins with an aggressive bass line (confined within a major
third, furthering the claustrophobic feel) that repeats relentlessly throughout the entire
song (see Example 2.7b).

Example 2.7b: "The National Anthem," bass riff

(track 3: 0:22)

The drums fade in and out as though the drummer is reconsidering his participation. The
bass seems determined to make up for its limited motive at the end of "Kid A" and
articulates a new motive that stretches to F-sharp, F natural, and then E, but ends on D
each time. The voice's final A in "Kid A" on the words "c'mon kids" returns in the

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[70] David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001; first ed. 1961), 241, 257.

keyboard melody of "The National Anthem" that comes in after the bass riff has been established.

One of the hallmarks of Radiohead's musical style is a strong "groove," defined by Spicer as "the tapestry of riffs … that work together to create the distinctive rhythmic/harmonic backdrop which identifies a song."[71] Timothy S. Hughes notes that "groove" can refer also to the "various backdrops that support different parts of the song," and specifically to "a figure … designed to be repeated."[72] Griffiths has noted Radiohead's striking and complex "layering of the guitars and drums" on *OK Computer*,[73] and Ross has stressed the importance of the band's interlocking sound: "Take away any one element—Selway's flickering rhythmic grid, for example, fierce in execution and trippy in effect—and Radiohead are a different band."[74] Spicer has discussed Radiohead's use of the "accumulative groove" in *Amnesiac*'s "Packt Like Sardines in a Crushd Tin Box," in which "the addition of each new component seems to be a deliberate attempt to surprise the listener … so that when the groove ultimately does crystallize it sounds as if it has 'emerged' out of a state of rhythmic, metric, and tonal confusion."[75] Because the rhetoric of music theory is toward clarity, it is tempting to read this accumulation of sounds as emergence out of disorder, mastery won over the confusion of the piece itself. Given Radiohead's tendency toward ambiguity and creating deliberate puzzles for the listener, however, the band's use of the accumulative groove is unlikely to be an act of disclosure in moving from confusion to clarity; rather, the band is

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[71] Spicer, "(Ac)cumulative Form," 30.

[72] Hughes, "Groove and Flow: Six Analytical Essays on the Music of Stevie Wonder" (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 2003), 14.

[73] Griffiths, *OK Computer*, 49.

[74] Ross, "The Searchers," 115.

[75] Spicer, "(Ac)cumulative Form," 33.

more likely to strip off one veil only to reveal an even more opaque one. Any momentary clarity achieved by the groove once all the instruments have coalesced is immediately dispersed by part of the groove dropping back out, so that the listener is unsettled once again. The band toys with the technique and with listener expectations on "The National Anthem" by having instruments drop out and come back in after the groove has been established, lending emphasis to the voice (see Table 2.5).

Table 2.5: The groove in "The National Anthem"
(X = entrance; O = exit)

Intro: CD timings	0:02	0:09	0:13	0:23	0:25	0:39	0:46	0:49	0:53	1:01	1:04	1:17
Bass	X											
Drums			X	O	X							
Ondes martenot (melody)				X								
Horns											X	
Noise (babble, ondes, or electric guitar)		X	O			X	O	X	O	X	O	

Verse: CD timings	1:36	1:57	2:18	2:21	2:26	2:27	2:35	2:36	2:39	3:20	3:21	3:30	3:31	3:41	3:42
Voice	X	O	X						O	X	O	X	O	X	O
Bass	(X)														
Drums	(X)		O	X											
Ondes martenot (melody)		X	O						X						
Horns									X						
Noise (babble, ondes, or electric guitar)		X	O		X	O	X	O	X						

Outro: CD timings	3:43	3:53	4:00	4:50	4:53	5:11	5:30	5:46
Voice		X	O					
Bass	(X)					O		
Drums	O		X	O	X	O		
Ondes martenot (melody)	O							
Horns	X						O	
Noise (orchestral snippet; tape winding down)							X	O

The instruments punctuate the voice, dropping out at the word "everyone" at the beginning of each verse as though they are listening to the singer; ironically, "everyone" abandons the singer as he sings the very word. The musical texture is built up by the guitar and by vocal babbling (evocative of the crowd noise on *Sgt. Pepper*) that reoccurs later in the song, when the lead vocal drops out. The vocal line has slight feedback behind it, emphasizing the synthesized element, and is limited to the major-third range of the bass riff. As the vocalist sings "it's holding on," he grows more hysterical, as though he himself is barely holding on or is trying to hold the song together. His "aahs" on A and G-sharp near the end of the song foreshadow the "aahs" in "How to Disappear Completely" that signify the loss of the subject in the noise of the strings and guitar. Footman notes that "The National Anthem" is "threatening music, harnessing the incendiary rage of free jazz to what's supposed to be a pop song."[1] In the second verse, the natural sound of Charles Mingus–style horns presents a challenge to the technological supremacy of the synthesized sounds (ondes martenot, filtered voice, keyboard effects) heard thus far on the album.[2] The horns begin a rhythmic minor-seventh riff (see Example 2.8), with free improvisation by a trumpet and saxophone representing babble or nonsense over it.

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[1] Footman, *Radiohead: A Visual Documentary*, 70.

[2] http://www.followmearound.com/lyrics/everyone.html (accessed 21 October 2000). Though guitarist Colin Greenwood's allusion to Mingus in an interview was apparently to just the sound of his ensemble, Bryan Sale brought to my attention in private conversation the tendency of Mingus to present several distinct lines at once, so that although the surface seems cacophonous, each line is credible on its own. This observation could equally apply to the structure of "The National Anthem."

Example 2.8: "The National Anthem," horn riff

(track 3: 2:39)

The horns' riff never "resolves," but serves as a confining frame from which the higher sounds try to escape.[3] In effect, the other instruments seem to be closing in on the voice, furthering the subject's paranoia. Here, the category of nature has been remapped onto noise. The nature element seems to triumph when the horns finally break free. After several repetitions of "holding on," we are left with the bass, isolated horns, and vocal cries evocative of the earlier ondes martenot melody. Noise takes over the texture in the end, when the horns let loose with screeching glissandi. Again babble has had the last word, although this time it is a purely instrumental one. After the horns are cut off, a snatch of orchestral melody reminiscent of Edward Elgar is heard. This melody is distorted to sound like a tape being wound down, as though to represent the failure of technology's use in society, or to indicate that music, too, is but a representation, ultimately a reproduction that is only as convincing as the technology that made it possible.

    After a moment's pause, a high string cluster is heard just before the strummed acoustic guitar that opens the next song, "How to Disappear Completely (and Never Be

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[3] The idea of trying to break free from a confining musical frame is discussed in greater detail by Susan McClary in "Excess and Frame: The Musical Representation of Madwomen," chap. 4 in *Feminine Endings* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 80–111. See also my article "Mining for 'Goldheart': A Sketch Study in Popular Music," *Indiana Theory Review* 21 (Spring/Fall 2000): 147–67, for a discussion of this concept in a Guided by Voices song.

Found)." Once again the synthesized strings seem to be simply lying in wait to engulf the voice. A single high B-flat is left to sound above the guitar, a subtle yet discordant noise over the alternating D-major and F-sharp-minor chords (again, the third-related pivot). The B-flat sounds above the melody until the beginning of the chorus. The alternating chords and pentatonic bass line (see Example 2.9) present an ambiguity that provides an unstable background upon which the noise can readily encroach.

Example 2.9: "How to Disappear Completely, tonally ambiguous pentatonic bass riff

(track 4: 0:21)

Example 2.10 presents a reduction of "How to Disappear Completely" that illustrates how the music and noise elements interact.[4]

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[4] Note that this graph is not meant to be a strict Schenkerian interpretation of the song. See also Burns and Lafrance, *Disruptive Divas*, 42–46, for a summary and analysis of some of the issues surrounding Schenkerian graphs in popular music.

Example 2.10: "How to Disappear Completely," reduction

The noise intrusions are represented on the top staff, with the boxes indicating notes or patterns that repeat throughout a section. The song can be heard as building to a crisis at which the noise that has been threatening the musical texture over the course of the album forces things to the breaking point. Although "How to Disappear Completely" presents the most complete construction of our hypothesized subject thus far, with its coherent lyrics and relative lack of distortion, the singer seems to be denying his very existence and challenging notions of the real and the unreal: "That there, that's not me." In a sense, the singer is speaking of his recorded voice from outside the song, calling to mind Attali's notion of reproduction, in which the original is supplanted by its copy.[5] The singer describes a dreamlike situation: "I go where I please, I walk through walls, I float down the Liffey."[6] This song was written in 1997 and performed on tour the next year;[7] its performance in the tour documentary *Meeting People Is Easy*[8] evokes the feeling of the unreality of being on the concert stage and the singer's apparent disconnect from the public persona created for him by his audience. Jones has noted the "schism between Thom Yorke the icon and Thom Yorke who experiences mundane, everyday life."[9] Elsewhere on *Kid A*, Yorke has used "other voices" (that is, filtered ones) as "a way of saying, 'obviously it isn't me.'"[10] Yorke has stated that "How to Disappear Completely"

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[5] "[P]eople originally intended to use the record to preserve the performance, and today the performance is only successful as a simulacrum of the record." Attali, *Noise*, 85. Tate points to the literalness of the song's statement, noting that the band is not present as the listener is experiencing the music and that the "performance" not only is not happening as the album plays, but in fact may never have happened. "Radiohead's Antivideos," 108.

[6] The Liffey is a river in Dublin.

[7] Footman, *Radiohead: A Visual Documentary*, 71.

[8] EMD/Capitol (1999), directed by Grant Gee.

[9] Jones, "The Aura of Authenticity," 46.

[10] Simon Reynolds, "Dissent into the Mainstream," *The Wire* 209 (July), 25-33; quoted in Jones, "The Aura of Authenticity," 46.

refers to a dream in which he was flying around Dublin,[11] and the vocal line reflects this imagery by sounding more disembodied as the song progresses. The bass line presents a "two against three" feel against the "fast three" feel of the guitar's rhythmic pattern, which also contributes to the effect of being out of time. The A to F-sharp minor-third interval dominates the texture, stated by the electric guitar before the voice comes in and eventually moving to the other instruments.[12] The vocal line begins with a minor third ("that there") but immediately adds a major one ("not me"), alternating between a major and minor sound. The guitar's minor third returns at the end of the first verse, and at the end of the second and third lines of the chorus ("this isn't happening" and "I'm not here," respectively).

The drums and tambourine enter for the second verse, in which the singer contradicts his earlier assertion of non-existence: "In a little while, I'll be gone." The strings reenter during this section, following the dynamics of the vocal line. With the next chorus, the singer's claim that "this isn't happening" begins to ring hollow, as hornlike ascending and descending scalar patterns (spanning B to F-sharp) begin to permeate the texture, along with more insistent minor thirds. The singer no longer seems to be able to deny the reality of the intrusion of the noise. As the strings and electric guitar fight for dominance in the bridge section, the crisis point is described by the singer in terms of cataclysmic scenes of the concert stage and the outdoors (or technology and nature):

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[11] http://www.followmearound.com/lyrics/howtodisappear.html (accessed 21 October 2000). Yorke has spoken elsewhere about a dream he had the night of a concert in Dublin with 33,000 people in attendance: "It was sheer blind terror. My most distinctive memory of the whole year was the dream I had that night. I was running down the Liffey, stark bullock naked, being pursued by a huge tidal wave." Quoted in Clarke, *Hysterical and Useless*, 129 (original quote from a *Rolling Stone* interview). Whether or not this dream is the same one that inspired "How to Disappear Completely," the river seems to represent an attempt at escape.

[12] The beginning intervals of the song recall the Moody Blues' "Tuesday Afternoon" (*Days of Future Passed*). The high falsetto "aahs" at the end of "How to Disappear Completely" also recall the Moody Blues' work.

"Strobe lights and blown speakers, fireworks and hurricanes." In the final chorus, the singer grows yet more insistent, holding out the ends of lines and enunciating more clearly. He vehemently denies his existence just before his death throes, when he transcends the increasingly violent texture and climbs into a higher tessitura with vocalese ("aah"), claiming the minor third as his own. At first the strings support him, but as he holds out a suspension, the strings grow discordant and finally drop out to leave the voice hanging precariously alone, as if abandoned. When the strings return, it is in unison with the electric guitar, proclaiming the minor third until the end. The forces have been joined, but it is an uneasy truce that has come only with the elimination of the voice. As Cone has stated, musical accompaniment can "symbolically suggest both the impingement of the outer world on the individual represented by the vocal persona, and the subconscious reaction of the individual to this impingement."[13] Thus the violence expressed in the musical battle between voice and strings can represent not only external forces working on the subject, but his subconscious bubbling up and spilling over as a reaction to the events of the world. Within the context of this album, the subject himself is unable to cope in the soul-draining alienation of modern society and longs for release.

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[13] Cone, *The Composer's Voice*, 35–36.

## Chapter 3: "Treefingers"—Gray Nothing-Space as Allegory

After repeatedly proclaiming that "I'm not here, this isn't happening," the tenuous subject of *Kid A* does disappear, nearly completely, in the next song. "Treefingers" marks the space between the two halves of the album, neither the end of side one nor the beginning of side two. It is an imaginary dividing point between "A" and "B" sides of the nonexistent vinyl album, a space where nothing happens and yet everything does. In that sense, the track is the very sound of an ambivalence under erasure: neither A nor B, neither dead nor alive, neither music nor noise. The subject has erased himself at the end of "How to Disappear Completely" and will not appear again until "Optimistic," the simulacrum of a side-two single. In "Treefingers," the subject has lost all words, reverting to a pre-verbal state, and his voice is present only in stray "aahs" heard in the distance of the ambient texture.[1] The previously battling instrumental forces are absent from this song as well; the only sounds present are New Age–style filtered guitars, which change tones quite slowly. Rather than representing a literal beyond-death experience, the absence of the subject in the technological soundscape of "Treefingers" might suggest that a constructed "real" or "nature" exists apart from and is thus superior to the subject. Not only does technology triumph over nature, it forms a new "nature" that absorbs and subjugates the subject. Yet the background "nature" that exists apart from and is thus superior to the subject consists in the end solely of technology. Radiohead understands that culture is at root technological, that is, a human intervention into nature, and that nature as such appears only in the way that culture manages its "other." Art is in a sense that which both conceals and reveals the technology that makes society possible. It is

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[1] Martin Clarke states that the song "comes as close as Radiohead ever could to pure ambience, but … still acknowledges their musical foundations: resting on what seem to be synthesizers, the song is actually based on an elongated guitar sample." *Hysterical and Useless*, 149.

impossible to escape technology into a nature that exists outside technology, and we become acutely aware of this when technology fails. In the course of a "normal" concept album, the musical journey would end upon the protagonist's death; here, however, since the subject is diffused and undefined for so long, the background of instruments filtered by technology becomes the force that drives the album forward. "Protagonist" is perhaps too strong a label for this subject, which is unnamed and in danger of shattering apart at any moment. Because of the continued existence of the stage on which the dramatic action has taken place, represented by the electronic instruments, the album's final judgment does not have to occur upon the death of the voice-as-subject; instead, the subject can be revived and given a second chance.[2]

Jonny Greenwood's Messiaen influence is evident in his chord choices here, in subtler ways than his use of the ondes martenot. The series of add6/add9 chords in "Treefingers" is harmonically unstable, moving very slowly and producing a languorous rather than a dizzying effect. As Example 3.1 shows, the chords in the introduction move from F-sharp major add6 to E major add6 to B major add9 to C-sharp major add9, holding out a particular chord for up to sixteen seconds, an eternity in pop music.

Example 3.1: "Treefingers," chords

track 5: 0:00   0:16   0:22   0:37
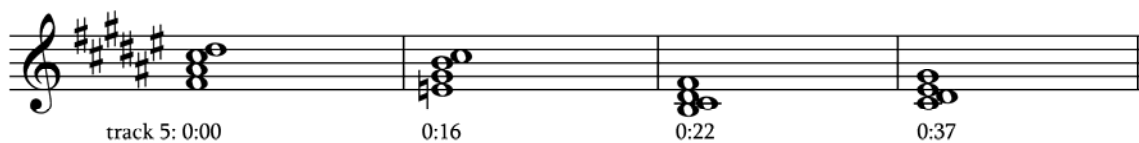
This series of chords is repeated, and the rest of the song continues to emphasize F-sharp major add6. The chords alternate slowly between E-major and F-sharp-major chords, and

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[2] See Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (New York: Viking Press, 1971), 160.

then move to B major add9 for several seconds before returning to F-sharp major add6. A descent from F-sharp to E to D-sharp then returns again to F-sharp add6, moving up to G-sharp add6 and then finally back to F-sharp add6 for the end. Taken together, this progression forms the pitch collection B, C-sharp, D-sharp, E, E-sharp, F-sharp, G-sharp, A-sharp. This collection is symmetrical (E-sharp–F-sharp–G-sharp–A-sharp is the inversion of B–C-sharp–D-sharp–E) and can be linked to Messiaen's modes of limited transposition.[3]

The position of "Treefingers" halfway through *Kid A* saps what little momentum had developed. Experiencing a dichotomy between nature and the ego-self over the first few songs on the album, the subject attempts to quell his internal struggle, which takes form as an attempt to domesticate sound as music. He fails to keep his demons at bay, and they erupt as noise, sporadically until "How to Disappear Completely." This eruption of noise dislocates the subject, so that he is ungrounded for "Treefingers." The new musical space that results seems amorphous, musically flat. It almost sounds like a reversion to nature, music before the subject has placed its mark upon it. Yet it is also the ground on which the subject can reinvent itself. And this subject *must* rediscover himself—*his self*—to fill in, that is, complete the form of the commodity: only half the album has played. The pause between album halves is a trace of the physical act of turning over of an LP. The irony of course is that there is no album to turn, and no band is actually present; the hiatus is completely imaginary, though real. This pause also plays with the idea that vinyl is more real, more authentic than the CD, whose shiny, reflective surface returns the narcissistic image of the listening subject rather than the enigmatic

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[3] Paul Griffiths, "Messiaen, Olivier (Eugène Prosper Charles)," in *Grove Music Online*, ed. L. Mach (accessed 31 October 2005), http://www.grovemusic.com.content.lib.utexas.edu:2048.

hole of despair of the vinyl album. Here, the tropes are inverted, and the pause calls to mind that very place of desolation. How is that blank space to be filled in?

"Treefingers" can also be read as playing out, in microcosm, the allegory of the band's own dilemma, which is worked through in *Kid A* and *Amnesiac*. Just as the subject takes his leave from the "music" to regroup between "death" and his seemingly empty reconstitution, so the band took a long (three-year) break before turning in a new direction with the studio sessions that precipitated these two albums.[4] While "Treefingers" thus maps onto the break between the still "commercial" *OK Computer* and the "experimental" *Kid A*, it also maps onto the break between *Kid A* and *Amnesiac*. If the first half of *Kid A* presents a baffling series of experimental songs, and the second half appears to return to a more commercial sound, then *Amnesiac* functions as a "commercial" savior for the experimental *Kid A*. Thus, *Kid A*'s first half is to its second half as *Kid A* as a whole is to *Amnesiac*. In this analogy, "Treefingers" anticipates on a lower level the hiatus, the period of reflection between *Kid A* and *Amnesiac* during which Radiohead reacted to *Kid A*'s reception and produced *Amnesiac*. The subject that expires on the first half of *Kid A* is revived for the album's second half, and this subject is resurrected yet again for *Amnesiac*.

The precariousness of this subject moving back and forth across the threshold of death can thus be read as an allegory of Radiohead's own feelings toward its success. The subject is conflicted about its very existence. Radiohead is likewise conflicted about whether and how to proceed within the mainstream music industry, torn between continually reproducing its old, successful sound, and forging ahead with new musical

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[4] Radiohead waited two years between *Pablo Honey*, *The Bends*, and *OK Computer*, and then two years again between *Amnesiac* and *Hail to the Thief*. At this writing, the band is working on material for their first album in nearly three years. Radiohead has been blogging its studio experience at http://www.radiohead.com/deadairspace/ (accessed 19 October 2005).

ideas that may not be received favorably by fans or critics. After the divided reception of *Kid A*, the band had promised a return to its old sound in the follow-up release, but the resulting album, *Amnesiac*, smacks of artifice. Unlike *Kid A*, the subject in *Amnesiac* seems fully present, but the subject has now become nothing more than a shell, hollowed out by the process of commodification into a mere "head on a stick" waiting for the audience to put words in his mouth.[5]

Given the enormous pressure under which the members of Radiohead found themselves during the production of *Kid A*, trying to push themselves artistically while satisfying market demands after the success of their previous two albums, one can guess that they might literally have wanted to "disappear completely and never be found." In this sense, the studio sessions that produced *Kid A* and *Amnesiac* represent the band members' attempt to reclaim their artistic voice from the "ventriloquist" critics, fans, or music-industry executives who wanted to put words in their mouths. Radiohead's own experience of artistic commodification within the market culture of popular music shapes *Kid A*'s critique of the conditions of alienation and repression under which the subject lives in post-industrial society.[6]

The band members' pessimism over escaping the very public consumption they had courted as a struggling rock band manifests itself as the false hopefulness in "Optimistic." With this puffed-up pseudo-single, Radiohead almost seems to be mocking the demand to create another hit in the "old style." The industry itself was apparently unsure what to make of this. Some radio stations even allegedly promoted "Optimistic"

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[5] This brings to mind T. S. Eliot's poem "The Hollow Men" (1925). See http://www.cs.umbc.edu/~evans/hollow.html (accessed 19 October 2005).

[6] See Hansen, "Deforming Rock," 118, as well as Grant Gee's tour documentary *Meeting People Is Easy*, in which the rabid adulation of the crowds serves merely to alienate the band from its audience.

as a single, in spite of the fact that it was never officially released as such. Yet the song

presents a jaded subject much like the members of Radiohead were, preferring instead to

make provocative comments and let listeners puzzle out whatever meaning it might

contain for themselves. Coupled with *Kid A*'s reluctant subject, the political and anti-

corporate messages sent, particularly by the band's resistant marketing strategy, create a

sort of cognitive dissonance. While the band seems to be appealing to people to stand

united as individuals (a return to the "together yet alone" message of "The National

Anthem"), it repeatedly abandons them without a leader, as in "Treefingers." This refusal

to lead makes the subsequent upbeat message of "Optimistic" sound even more hollow,

just as big business and government proffer only empty slogans for the masses, a literal

"Electioneering."[7] Although the band points out that the mainstream political messages of

the media lack substance, Radiohead's own substance can be expressed only by negation

in the album's obtuse lyrics.

Radiohead had championed Naomi Klein's book *No Logo* in its online blog prior

to *Kid A*'s release, and the band purportedly even considered calling the album *No Logo*

to underscore its anti-corporate stance.[8] *No Logo* offers an examination of the abominable

conditions under which market goods are produced in developing countries, in which any

allowances made go to the producers rather than to the workers or consumers. Klein

discusses the separate tax status for export processing zones (EPZs) in communist

countries. These EPZs ignore the mistreatment of their workers, and the working

conditions may have even served as a lyrical inspiration for "How to Disappear

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[7] Martin Clarke states that "Electioneering" had been influenced by Noam Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent* (1988). *Hysterical and Useless*, 113.

[8] Doheny, *Back to Save the Universe*, 97. Radiohead toured with what it called the No Logo tent after *Amnesiac*'s release, publicizing the tour by word of mouth over the Internet in an attempt at subverting the corporate ticketing structure. *Back to Save the Universe*, 108.

Completely": "[T]his is *definitely* not really happening, *certainly* not here where the government in power maintains that capital is the devil and workers reign supreme."[9] Yet ironically enough, Radiohead's own situation is perilously close to that of the countries that Klein berates. Like the government and the media, the band makes money off the populace whom it exhorts to reclaim power. In a sense the audience does have power, since the sale of CDs—the profits that accrue—bestows the ability of the band to "speak" on the channels controlled by international corporations. Yet Radiohead, too, benefits financially from its relationship with capital. The band creates a product that it hopes its audience will consume, while simultaneously telling them that the society that urges such consumption is bad. In this way, Radiohead thrives within the very system it purports to seek to destroy. The failure of the subject on *Kid A* to master the noise of technology, to transform it into compelling music, thus becomes critique, an allegory for the band's inability to escape the clutches of the capitalist record industry and commodity culture that it underwrites. Just as the human voice is unable to overcome the electronic instruments manifesting as noise on the first half of *Kid A*, so too is the subject unable to cope with the demands of living in modern society, and so too is Radiohead unable to thrive outside the very corporate music industry it despises.

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[9] Klein, *No Logo*, 207. Italics are in original text.

Chapter 4: *Kid A*—The Second Half

After the gray nothing-space of "Treefingers," the nebulous subject of *Kid A* is resuscitated and given a second chance at life, in "Optimistic." The second half of *Kid A* forms something of an opposition with the first, yet the mood created by the tentative sound of the songs leading up to "Treefingers" both permeates and sets the stage for the rest of the album. The subject returns to a concrete form and existence, but although he has been reborn, he is now but a hollow, cynical shell. Consequently, the self-doubt and negativity expressed in the earlier songs turn outward to a scathing, almost psychotic critique of the modern world.

Part of the appeal of "Optimistic" as a single comes from its placement in the album's song sequence, a stark contrast to the surface formlessness of "Treefingers" that precedes it. This placement is remarkable in itself, as a single customarily appears quite early in an album's track listing. David O. Montgomery explains that the LP and single traditionally have had a symbiotic relationship: "An LP … could be released to capitalize on the strength of a successful single, while additional singles could be drawn from the LP for simultaneous or future release."[1] Furthermore, "the single, from which clear profits were made, was also the leading form of advertising for the LP, which, because of the nature of the material, yielded still further singles."[2] Thus a single could be released to herald the album on which it would appear, and upon the single's success (and the increased sales of the album), further singles could be selected for release. Presumably the more singles with which listeners were familiar from radio airplay, the greater the likelihood that they would buy the album. Noted producer George Martin provided the following rule of thumb for assembling an album: "Always make side one strong, for obvious commercial reasons…. Another principle … when assembling an album was

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[1] Montgomery, "The Rock Concept Album," 51.

[2] Ibid., 171.

always to go out a side strongly, placing the weaker material towards the end but then going out with a bang."[3] The placement of an album's songs probably derives from live performance; just as an artist wants to make a good first and last impression on the audience, so too the strength of an album's first side can dictate whether the listener ever makes it to side two. Ending the second side "with a bang" leaves the listener with good feelings toward the band, leaves them wanting more, and so encourages future consumption of the recording artist's other products. In the old LP format, for a single not to appear until side two would have been highly unusual and probably frowned upon by a record company's marketing department. In addition, if listeners had purchased the album on the strength of the single heard on the radio, as was dictated by the marketing, they would expect to hear something familiar immediately, rather than several tracks later, after turning the record over.

Over halfway through the CD, with little so far to hold on to, *Kid A* almost seems to require the appearance of a single. Not just the apparently dead subject but the confused and imperiled listener needs a point of orientation. Even the empty form of a simple, conventional pop song would be a relief. As James Doheny has stated, "[a]ny fans who found the first half of *Kid A* intrinsically baffling must have been profoundly relieved by 'Optimistic.'"[4] Radiohead had already become known for its uncomfortable lyrics detailing man's alienation within society, but up until *Kid A* the songs had only spoken of alienation, they never enacted it directly. They at least followed a more or less conventional structure of verse and chorus. With *Kid A*, alienation takes form directly, absent the trappings of pop artifice. When "Optimistic" appears, these trappings of artifice are revealed for what they are: false, sloganistic. Yet this revelation does not open only onto emptiness: Doheny also points out that this song marks the first on the album to

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[3] George Martin, *Summer of Love: The Making of Sgt. Pepper* (London: Macmillan, 1994), 63; quoted in Montgomery, "The Rock Concept Album," 20.

[4] Doheny, *Back to Save the Universe*, 96.

"deal explicitly with … political issues,"[5] that is, those of capitalism and modern society rather than just the subject's own existential crisis, and in a sense, the clearer subject matter, though still bleak, is comforting because we are no longer confronted with the embarrassment of the subject's death-wish.

The lyrics of "Optimistic" detail evolution as a dead-end process within the capitalist machine ("this one just crawled out of the swamp … fodder for the animals living on an animal farm"). The subject's reaction to his failure to end his own life puts emotional distance between himself and the listener but also encourages the listener to side with him on more universal issues. Rather than making baffled statements about the unreality of his situation, as on *Kid A*'s first half, the subject now makes harsh, hyper-real statements about the human condition: "Flies are buzzing around my head, vultures circling the dead." He has failed to actually kill himself, but in a spiritual sense he is already dead, trapped within the cogs of society.[6] It is tempting to say that the subject has lost his humanity in the act of attempting suicide; but as a product of the modern world, perhaps the subject never had any humanity to lose. Despite (or because of) his status as a drone in a dog-eat-dog society, the subject lacks empathy toward others suffering from the same conditions of oppression. He first makes the careless statement "not my problem" and then seems willing to offer assistance ("I'd really like to help you, man"), but immediately makes the snide observation "nervous, messed-up marionette, floating around on a prison ship," indicating a laissez-faire reluctance to help the less fortunate. The song's catchy hook[7]—"if you try the best you can, the best you can is good

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[5] Doheny, *Back to Save the Universe*, 97.

[6] See George Orwell, *1984*, in which the phrase "We are the dead" is said first by O'Brien and echoed later by Winston and Julia. ("We are the dead. Our only true life is in the future.")

[7] Richard Middleton defines "hook" somewhat obliquely via Theodor Adorno's discussion of the "idea": "a relatively independent, memorable element within a totality." Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1988), pp. 34–37; in Middleton, *Studying Popular Music* (Bristol, PA: Open University Press, 1990), 51. Middleton also states that the hook is a "repeated phrase" or "riff structure" that provides a structure of repetition "against which variation can take place." This repetition "offer[s] a route through the song to both producer and listener." *Studying Popular Music*,

enough"—seems to be an afterthought; despite the band's purported efforts not to market itself, a single has emerged after all, complete with a singable chorus containing a hollow slogan for those depressed and disenchanted by their daily lives. The hook also provides the only tangible, vaguely positive link with the title of the song. While on the surface the chorus seems positive and encouraging, its placement after the lyrics "living on an animal farm" and "floating around on a prison ship" makes it sound sarcastic and insincere.

Doheny mentions that both "Optimistic" and *OK Computer*'s "Electioneering" appear halfway through their respective albums' tracks. However, as Table 4.1 shows, *OK Computer* had presented several (four) potential and actual singles by the time "Electioneering" appeared. The table also shows the track listings and single placements of Radiohead's other albums. *Pablo Honey* and *The Bends* reflect the old LP single placement of singles early on each side of the album, while *OK Computer* distributes the singles more evenly, reflecting the different format of the CD, which was commonplace by the time of *OK Computer*'s release.[8] While *Kid A* dispenses with "real" singles altogether, *Amnesiac* returns to the formula of a second single appearing halfway through the tracks. The placement of "Optimistic" might be akin to that of *Amnesiac*'s second single, "Knives Out," had there been a single on *Kid A* prior to "Optimistic." Thus, although "Optimistic" occupies the traditional placement of a second-side single, *Kid A* itself lacks the other necessary trappings: at least one strong single, if not two or three, on the first half of the album, followed by "filler" or weaker songs leading up to the aural/physical break of turning the LP over and encountering another single as the first song on the second side. Instead, *Kid A* has presented only one real "song" with verse and chorus up to this point, and that at track 4, "How to Disappear Completely," much later than it would have appeared in the old LP format. "Optimistic" thus represents a mere

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138. In this sense, a song's chorus can function as a hook by providing something familiar for listeners to hold on to, though a hook can also be a recurring musical riff, such as the guitar line in the Rolling Stones' "Satisfaction." In "Optimistic," the chorus is short enough to function as both.

[8] *Hail to the Thief*'s singles are spaced evenly throughout the tracks, similar to *OK Computer*.

shell of a "single" after the rest of the album's form has been stripped. After his failed suicide, the subject reemerges in "Optimistic" in what is traditionally a strong position, but his placement lacks the authority of that found on Radiohead's other albums. Rather than presenting a clear protagonist from the first song onward, the album has gradually built up a shaky subject whose disappearance is almost inconsequential, and whose reemergence is startling.

Table 4.1: Song placement on Radiohead albums (singles are in bold)

Track number	*Pablo Honey* (1993)	*The Bends* (1995)	*OK Computer* (1997)	*Kid A* (2000)	*Amnesiac* (2001)[9]
1	"You"	"Planet Telex"	**"Airbag"**	"Everything in Its Right Place"	"Packt Like Sardines in a Crushd Tin Box"
2	**"Creep"**	**"Bends"**	**"Paranoid Android"**	"Kid A"	**"Pyramid Song"**
3	"How Do You?"	**"High and Dry"**	"Subterranean Homesick Alien"	"The National Anthem"	"Pulk/Pull Revolving Doors"
4	**"Stop Whispering"**	**"Fake Plastic Trees"**	"Exit Music (for a Film)"	"How to Disappear Completely"	"You and Whose Army?"
5	"Thinking about You"	"Bones"	**"Let Down"**	"Treefingers"	"I Might Be Wrong"
6	**"Anyone Can Play Guitar"**	"Nice Dream"	**"Karma Police"**	"Optimistic"	**"Knives Out"**
7	"Ripcord"	**"Just"**	"Fitter Happier"	"In Limbo"	"Amnesiac/Morning Bell"
8	"Vegetable"	**"My Iron Lung"**	"Electioneering"	"Idioteque"	"Dollars and Cents"
9	"Prove Yourself"	"Bullet Proof…I Wish I Was"	"Climbing Up the Walls"	"Morning Bell"	"Hunting Bears"
10	"I Can't"	"Black Star"	**"No Surprises"**	"Motion Picture Soundtrack"	"Like Spinning Plates"
11	"Lurgee"	"Sulk"	**"Lucky"**		"Life in a Glass House"
12	"Blow Out"	**"Street Spirit (Fade Out)"**	"The Tourist"		
13	**"Creep"** (radio version)[10]				

9 Chart placements for *Amnesiac*: "Pyramid Song" 5 UK, "Knives Out" 13 UK. *Amnesiac* reached number 1 on the UK charts and number 2 on the US charts. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Radiohead#Studio_albums (accessed 11 July 2005).

10 The radio version of "Creep" changes the lyrics "you're so fucking special" to "you're so very special."

Examining "Optimistic" and "Electioneering" in terms of the songs immediately before and after them does yield several similarities. Table 4.2 compares the album placements for "Electioneering" and "Optimistic." Each song comes after an atypical break in the flow of the album: "Optimistic" after the ambient "Treefingers," and "Electioneering" after "Fitter Happier," in which a computer-generated voice intones a description of the perfect conformist lifestyle ("an empowered and informed member of society").[11] On *OK Computer*, this midpoint pause had occurred after "Karma Police," which ends with the words "phew, for a minute there, I lost myself."[12] Here, the singer-as-subject is playing an active role, conscious of having slipped into a reverie (or paranoid episode), and of wanting to return to reality instead of negating the self. Dai Griffiths discusses this "phew" as an embodying exclamation, a sigh of relief:

> What's happening is a genuine thing: the knowledge of karma police (whatever that is, or they are) has got so bad that as a solitary individual the singer has lost his sense of self…. You could imagine saying "Phew!" all the way from small things like a small faint brought on by physical exertion, through a momentary sense of stress getting the better of oneself, to some dreadful political suppression.[13]

This type of "returning to the body" reoccurs on *Amnesiac* in the sharp intake of breath on "You and Whose Army" and the heard guitar frets on "Hunting Bears," each of which make us conscious of the person generating the sound. Rather than being bodily present, on *Kid A*, conversely, the subject to this point has been active only in trying to make

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[11] Martin Clarke describes the song as "listing a two-minute litany of platitudes to aim for in a perfect modern life—advert slogans, media myths, lifestyle ideals and so on." *Hysterical and Useless*, 121.

[12] There is no equivalent pause on *Pablo Honey* or *The Bends*. On *Amnesiac*, the instrumental "Hunting Bears" (track 9) provides a break from the lyrics, but it comes quite late in the album, the third track from the end. It occurs between what are arguably the two most anxiety-producing tracks on the album, "Dollars and Cents" and "Like Spinning Plates."

[13] Griffiths, *OK Computer*, 62.

himself "disappear completely" (and even then, his activity is confined to trying to convince himself that the subject is not "here," that the subject is not identical with the self, the lyrical "I"). While "Treefingers" has no lyrics, "Fitter Happier" by contrast is "all lyrics."[14] Each song presents an interruption to the flow of the album, though *Kid A*'s narrative (or lack thereof) is markedly different, and less commercially directed, than *OK Computer*'s.

The structure of "Electioneering" is verse, chorus, verse, chorus, bookended by a long intro/outro instrumental section dominated by guitars. The song sounds "live" and raucous, a stark contrast to the preceding, computer-generated "Fitter Happier." The key moves from D minor to C major and then A minor, and the voice emphasizes scale degrees 1 and 5 in D (over an A-minor chord) at the midpoint and end of each section. Lyrically, the verse divides into a rhymed couplet and then the sloganistic "I trust I can rely on your vote." Each rhyme of the couplet ends on A minor, while the "slogan" ends on D minor (see Example 4.1).

Example 4.1: "Electioneering," chorus

The chorus presents a counterpoint between the lead voice and a lower voice in unison with the guitar. The lead voice moves C-G-F-E (which does not fit the D-minor accompaniment) before finally coming to rest on D, while the lower voice moves upward from D to end on A. The voices moving in opposition are recalled in "Optimistic" in the

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[14] *Amnesiac*'s "Pulk/Pull Revolving Doors" is similar to "Fitter Happier" in its lack of a melody to go with the lyrics. It occurs on track 4, between the placid "Pyramid Song" and "You and Whose Army."

91

form of a rapidly ascending guitar against descending bass under a fairly static vocal line. The formal structure of "Electioneering" is simpler than that of "Optimistic" and demonstrates the band's earlier, guitar-driven style, and the melody of "Electioneering" conforms to conventional motion more than the melody of "Optimistic" does. In each song, the verse goes straight into the chorus, which feels like a relief after the anxiety of the verse. *OK Computer*'s song sequence moves next to the creepy "Climbing Up the Walls,"[15] and then includes two more singles before the album ends.

Table 4.2: Album placement of "Electioneering" versus "Optimistic"

OK Computer	*Kid A*
"Karma Police" "phew, for a minute there, I lost myself"	"How to Disappear Completely" "I'm not here, this isn't happening"
"Fitter Happier" spoken-word, no vocal melody	"Treefingers" no lyrics, wordless "aahs" in background
"Electioneering" guitar intro, verse, chorus, verse, chorus, guitar outro	"Optimistic" verse, chorus, verse, chorus, bridge, verse, chorus, coda

On *Kid A*, "Optimistic" starts with renewed energy and follows a fairly traditional verse/chorus construction. As shown in Example 4.2, the song begins with an echo of the vocalese that appeared at the end of "How to Disappear Completely."

Example 4.2: "How to Disappear Completely" and "Optimistic," vocalese

"Aah..."   "Ooh..."
"How to Disappear Completely"   "Optimistic"

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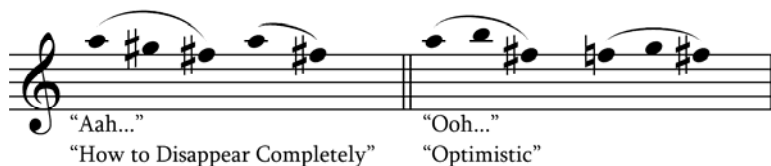
[15] Both Doheny (*Back to Save the Universe*, 75–78) and Griffiths (*OK Computer*, 70–71) discuss "Climbing Up the Walls" as a horror-movie piece.

The smooth, wordless "oohs" at the beginning of the song are transformed into more plaintive "aahs" near the end, returning to "oohs" in a coda that revives the melody from the intro.[16] The vocal line in both the verse and chorus of "Optimistic" is static and echoes the rhythm of the drums and guitar. A loud, rough guitar line underscores the vocals; the heavy-handedness of the guitar after its previous absence gives the impression of an awkward attempt at belatedly producing a "single." Here, the guitar becomes an uncomfortable signifier of Radiohead's old (and seemingly abandoned) style, playing against the singer's ambivalent delivery. Despite this purported "single" status of "Optimistic," which might imply a typical Radiohead harmonic progression, the verse is based in D major but begins and ends on ii rather than on I. A more accurate way of reading the progression is as neighbor tones to D. Harmonic progressions unconventional to traditional music theory are not unusual in popular music, but until *Kid A*, Radiohead's music had not presented such a stark dichotomy between the instrumental lines and the vocals; in "Optimistic," the vocal line often does not fit into the accompanying chords at all. As Example 4.3 shows, the midpoint of verse 1 ends on an A over an E-minor 4/2 chord ("crumb"), and the verse ends with a D over the same chord ("some").

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[16] Footman ties these "oohs" to the "woo-woos" of the Rolling Stones' "Sympathy for the Devil." *Radiohead: A Visual Documentary*, 71.

Example 4.3: "Optimistic," verse 1

The chorus (Example 4.4) at first seems more conventional on a harmonic level.

Example 4.4: "Optimistic," chorus

The bass presents a descending progression against an ascending statement in the electric guitar, and the two lines meet with a major third at the end of the last line. The vocal line leaps a fifth for the start of the chorus and is more melodically interesting, holding out a 4-3 suspension over a D chord at the midpoint of the chorus ("can"), but then returns to the static verse melody and ends on the same D over E minor 4/2 as before ("enough"). The overall structure is conventional (verse 1, chorus, verse 2, chorus, bridge, verse 3, chorus, coda), furthering the illusion of a "single"; however, verse 3 ("nervous messed-up marionette") ends prematurely, without a rhyme for the first half. The voice breaks off

and is subsumed by feedback, as though the image of the marionette is too horrifying to proceed with another lyric. Society's cruelties manifest as technology have apparently overcome the subject once again. The still-static melody of verse 3 is a third above the melody of verses 1 and 2. This higher, somewhat shrill-sounding melody ends, without resolution, on E. As Example 4.5 shows, the third verse changes the progression slightly, repeating the motion from D minor to C major before moving from E minor to D major.

Example 4.5: "Optimistic," verse 3

"I'd really like to help you, man..."
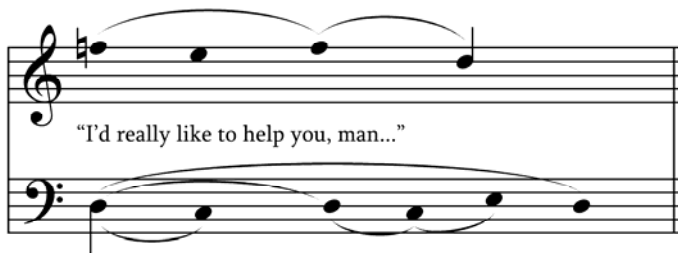
The "optimism" of the final chorus seems even more false after the imagery of the aborted verse 3. This final chorus (Example 4.6) ends with the repeated phrase "dinosaurs roaming the earth" on the transposed 3-2-1 line of "How to Disappear Completely."

Example 4.6: "Optimistic," final chorus

"Dinosaurs roaming the earth..."   "Aah..."
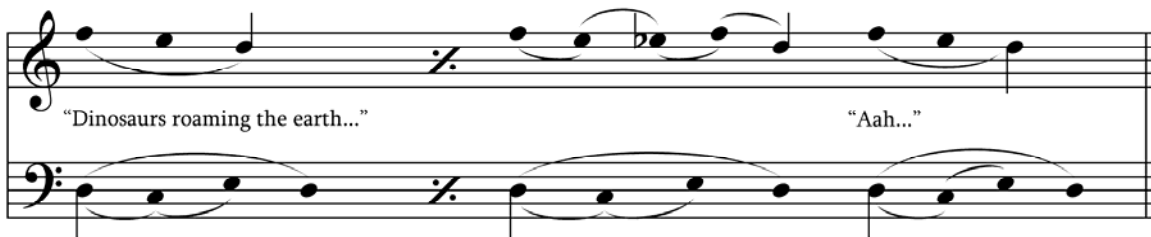
The last statement adds an E-flat to the descent and then moves to "aahs" for more repetition. The coda brings back the beginning "oohs" for an even more forced optimism, as though the singer is determined to end on a soothing, positive note, with a veneer of calm, despite the appalling imagery he has just related in the lyrics.

"Optimistic" ends with an instrumental vamp on the neighbor tones to D that segues into a hammering rhythm focused around D, which then falls into the spiraling

triplet feel of "In Limbo." Here the album returns to its earlier method of disorientation: as in "Kid A," the voice is buried deep in the mix, creating a swirling cloud of sounds. The subject now appears humanized, singing "I'm on your side," but nevertheless falls through "trapdoors that open, I spiral down."[17] The subject does not seem to mind this peril, however, dreamily asserting that "I'm lost at sea, don't bother me, I've lost my way." This contradicts his earlier beckoning in "Kid A" ("c'mon kids") but furthers his attempts to cast off the role of leader.[18]

"In Limbo" begins with quiet babbling: "I'm the first in the Irish Sea, another message I can't read." These words are, ironically enough, incomprehensible without reading them (and are not included in the album's packaging, though the published guitar/keyboard transcription and various fan websites list them); the song ends with the same words muttered under vocal howls that are eventually distorted and then dissolve into feedback. The vocalized "ahh" ("How to Disappear Completely") and "ooh/ahh/ooh" ("Optimistic") reemerge at the end of "In Limbo," transformed into a sustained "aagh" over the sound of throbbing machinery; the subject is in the process of being ground down.[19] The peaceful "Liffey" of "How to Disappear Completely" has here grown into the raging "Irish Sea." The song's return to babble and final reversion to howling might thus be read as a primal cry from the subject's subconscious against the condition of modern humanity, a theme that has been growing more and more articulate over the course of the album. The clearest lyrics in "In Limbo" are those that proclaim the subject's helplessness ("I'm lost at sea"). These comprehensible lyrics could be taken as being sung by a different persona than the one muttering, in which case the howling at the end of the song could be a cry for help from a drowning man, unheeded by the

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[17] This imagery is recalled in *Amnesiac*'s "Pulk/Pull Revolving Doors."

[18] This attitude is expressed perhaps best in the Moody Blues' "I'm Just a Singer in a Rock and Roll Band."

[19] This recalls the image of the students being fed into the meat grinder in the film *Pink Floyd: The Wall* (1982).

persona who "can't read" the message. The refusal to hear such a clear message hearkens back to the coldhearted proclamation in "Optimistic" that it's "not my problem." Perhaps both voices exist as a schizophrenic split within the subject, a divide that has existed since the "two colors in my head" of "Everything in Its Right Place."

As Example 4.7 shows, "In Limbo" begins with a contracting triplet progression, perfect fifth to perfect fourth to minor third to major second, and finally moves to a minor third to begin the progression anew.

**Example 4.7: "In Limbo," contracting triplet progression**

The voice first outlines a C-minor chord but then emphasizes the pitches F-sharp and G (scale degree 5) over a C chord. The triplet feel evokes the song "Nice Dream" from *The Bends*, although that song does not contain the cross-rhythms used here. The conventional- or classical-sounding triplets of "Nice Dream" seem positive, outlining major chords, while the triplets of "In Limbo" simply "spiral down" into negativity, despite their actual upward-reaching melody. As Example 4.8 shows, the words "I spiral down" are sung over this C chord and the contracting progression, with a leap of a major sixth illustrating the physical drop.

Example 4.8: "In Limbo," chorus

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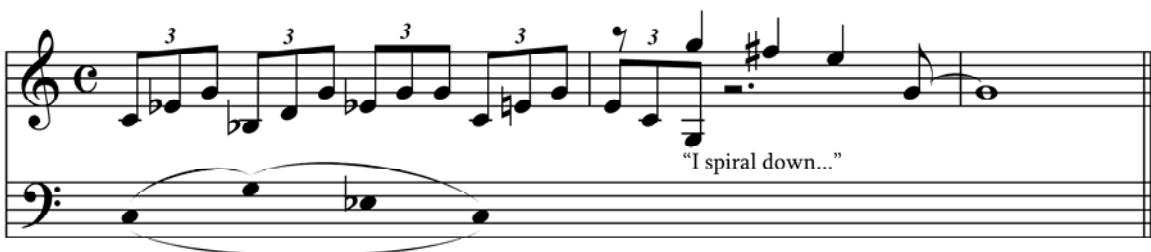
Over the triplet figure in the guitar, the voice sings a square, syncopated 4/4 riff that gives the sense of struggling against the eddy of music: "I'm lost at sea.… I spiral down.…" Even after being reconstituted for the second half of the album, the subject is apparently still battling for his existence. His acknowledgment of this struggle foreshadows his eventual "second death" by choice, at the end of the album. Example 4.9 illustrates the rhythmic interaction between the vocals and the spiraling guitar line.

Example 4.9: "In Limbo," rhythmic interaction of guitar and voice
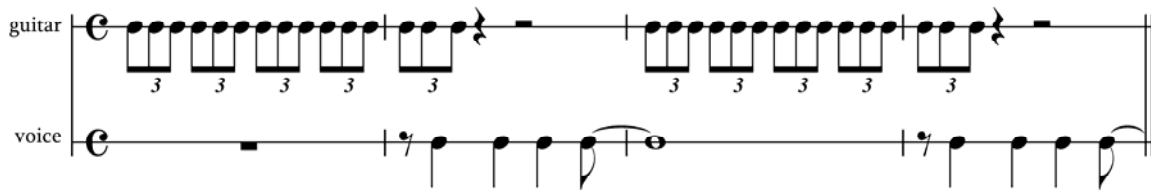
The chorus alternates between G and B-flat over the original contracting triplet progression. The outro returns to the C-minor progression for the words "I can't read." No longer maintaining the false optimism of the previous song, the lyrics "you're living in a fantasy world" ring out in the chorus, standing more as a bitter existential comment about abject denial than as a wish to escape the world. The world, it seems, is obscured by fantasy, and only a glimpse of that world can be caught behind the "optimistic" screen constructed by the forces of capitalism. The opaque lyrics obscure any message the band is trying to send, with the result that the message becomes ambivalence itself, and interpreting *Kid A* a metaphor for surviving in modern society.

"Idioteque" begins with heavy drums that serve as a ghost of the bass riff in "The National Anthem"; as the subject has been reconstituted but still barely exists, so too the earlier musical elements have begun to re-emerge as shades of their former selves. The quickly changing keyboard chord clusters (four beats each, changing on the second half of the fourth beat of each measure, which produces a moving-forward feel due to the

syncopation) present an animated contrast to the languorous chords of "Treefingers."[20]

The harmonic motion is static, oscillating between G minor and E-flat major, with simple

reiterations and inversions of the chords at a higher pitch level. As Example 4.10 shows,

the rhythm of the vocal line is identical to that of the bass line in "The National Anthem";

the rhythm of the drums at the beginning of "Idioteque" has surged into the vocals.

Example 4.10: "Idioteque," vocal line, and "The National Anthem," bass line

"Idioteque" (P4 range)

"The National Anthem" (M3 range)

Rather than being destroyed by the musical elements as in "How to Disappear

Completely," the voice-as-subject is now being possessed by them. While the bass line of

"The National Anthem" had been confined to a major third, the vocal line of "Idioteque"

is confined to a perfect fourth. The song makes use of the accumulative groove (see Table

4.3), and the keyboards drop out as the vocalist sings "we're not scaremongering, this is

really happening," an explicit refutation of the denial expressed in "How to Disappear

Completely" that "this isn't happening." Again the band plays with listener expectations

by having instruments drop out at surprising moments in the song, so that any comfort

derived from the accumulative groove is immediately thwarted.

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[20] "Idioteque" is built around an electronic composition by Paul Lansky, "mild und leise." See Lansky, "My Radiohead Adventure," in Tate, *The Music and Art of Radiohead*, 168–76.

Table 4.3: The accumulative groove in "Idioteque"
(X = entrance; O = exit)

CD timings	Intro			Verse 1	Chorus	Verse 2	Chorus		Outro		
	0:00	0:12	0:38	0:59	1:34	1:52	2:35	3:10	4:05	4:19	4:49
Drums	X										
Sound effects	X					O	X				
Keyboards		X	O	X		O	X	O	X		O
Voice				X				O		X	O

Of all the songs on *Kid A*, "Idioteque" relates most closely to the post-apocalyptic images of the CD booklet art, with such lyrics as "Who's in a bunker, who's in a bunker? Women and children first … Ice age coming … throw it on the fire." This apocalypse has in reality never happened and is thus an analogue for a suicide that never happened. Just as the subject is no better off after his attempted suicide, so too we are in a sense no better off for the lack of an apocalypse, to the extent that we do nothing about changing the world in which we live so as to avert disaster. Panic over a would-be apocalypse leads only to the condition of fatigue over the world's condition and apathy toward trying to effect actual change. The subject's jadedness at the end of the album shows the inevitable reaction to his hysteria here.

The other lyrics of "Idioteque" also recall the album's earlier songs: the lines "here I'm allowed everything all of the time" and "take the money and run" evoke the capitalist message of "Optimistic"; and the chant "the first of the children" in the background at the end of the song brings to mind the "rats and children" following the protagonist in "Kid A." Though at first it seems that these children will be safe in the bunker, as they are going in "first," they may well be less safe in the end, as the bunker will only produce a fear that will make them prisoners of their condition, an analogy for the individual in modern society. Footman links the phrase "the first of the children" to

the "slaughters of the first-born in the Bible,"[21] which were a consequence of the Egyptian pharaoh's refusal to release the Israelites from slavery, a parallel to the Pied Piper's taking of the children after the residents of Hamlin reneged on their payment for ridding the town of rats. This reading, which links the muttered aside "c'mon kids" in "Kid A" to the hysterical stuttering "the first of the children," reinforces the subject's growing agency over the course of the album. Whereas before he had been a reluctant and half-formed leader, now he is fully present and reacting violently to the imagined destruction around him. This reaction furthers the split in his personality. The lyric "I laugh until my head comes off" illustrates this split musically by adding a second voice split between channels just after this lyric. The next line, "I swallow till I burst," shows that the excess of being allowed "everything all of the time" can lead to self-destruction through overabundance. This imagery could also relate to the drowning man in the Irish Sea of "In Limbo," although an explanation has been posited that it refers to the hazard of drinking too much water after taking Ecstasy on the dance floor, which can lead to hyponatremia,[22] or "water intoxication." The song's heavy dance beat and the *-eque* suffix on the title, a play on "discotheque" as well as "idiotic" (perhaps a glimpse of the world behind the screen after the hollowness of "Optimistic"), make this at least a plausible explanation. The title also plays on the word "idiolect," the individual's unique way of using language, which ties notions of individuality and discursive formation with the "idiocy" and the dance of the "mindless" body. In this way, the title "Idioteque" suggests an idiotic (and ideological) fragmentation of the subject along the fault line of the mind-body split, a schizophrenia of the body as well as the mind.

Circling a tentative tonic, the singsong, stuttering vocal line of "Idioteque" recalls that of "Optimistic." The chorus marks a change to a connected melodic line that feels

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[21] Footman, *Radiohead: A Visual Documentary*, 72.

[22] http://www.clubber.co.uk/news/article.asp?a=198 (accessed 18 December 2000).

somewhat false, akin to the sloganistic chorus of "Optimistic." While the verse of each song is speechlike and confined to a narrow range, each chorus moves to a higher, more songlike melody to articulate the song's "slogan" ("the best you can is good enough" in "Optimistic"; "here I'm allowed everything all of the time" in "Idioteque"). The chorus melody of "Idioteque" begins a fifth higher than the verse (like the higher verse 3 of "Optimistic"). The higher tessitura lends a sense of hysteria, which is followed by a descent that implies a deflation at being "allowed everything all of the time." The addition of harmony vocals further marks the chorus, adding counterpoint to contrast with the fractured "two colors in my head" of the album's first half. The second voice mumbles "laugh until my head comes off" but sings clearly in the chorus, in which the two voices work together to make what seems an important declaration ("here I'm allowed everything all of the time"). These lyrics contrast with the imagery of the verses, making a blanket, sloganistic statement rather than offering a clarification of the hysterical verses. It is not clear whether the subject is speaking from the "bunker," simply commenting on capitalism itself, or doing both at the same time. The safety of the bunker is a metaphor for the false sense of security of modern society. In capitalist society, almost everything is allowed for a price, within the constraints of what is available, but this is not necessarily a healthy state of being.

Prompted by revulsion at such doublethink, "Idioteque" ultimately rejects the indulgent present, as the subject "laughs until [his] head comes off" and "swallow[s] till [he] burst[s]," again dissociating the subject from the body, as he had in "Kid A" with the "heads on sticks" and "ventriloquists." The second verse of the song abandons the chords to emphasize the voice and the beat, and the hysterical stuttering cuts off the last "take the money" before the final chorus. The drums keep going, lending the vocals a primal urgency. Coming right after the chorus, this verse underscores the importance of the message ("we're not scaremongering, this is really happening") by making the vocals

clearer. The song ends with babble over a strong dance beat; the music has been completely stripped away.[23]

The constant negation of the earlier songs has grown into overindulgence, an excess of verbiage as babbling. Not only is the subject no longer denying his existence ("I'm not here, this isn't happening"); he is simultaneously reveling in and decrying the effects of hedonism. The negation itself is hedonistic, or selfish, just as suicide is a refusal to own up to the responsibility of living within society, that is, of trying to change the world for the better. However, this existential suicide, a fall into cynicism, is no better than actual physical suicide; the negation of the subject demands the negation of that negation: not a return to the subjectivity that once was, but to the subject as "cured" of cynicism. This cure is short-lived, however, as the subject soon pleads for release once more.

The penultimate song on *Kid A*, "Morning Bell," marks a further humanizing of the subject, with an opening up of the melody and a rise in tessitura. Over and over the voice plaintively asks "release me," although it is not clear to whom the plea is addressed.[24] "Morning Bell" fluctuates between A minor and A major. On the words "release me," the voice alternates between A and F-sharp before finally resolving down to E on "please." In the second verse, the voice emphasizes E and finally resolves to D over a G chord, a temporary respite in the form of a modal half-cadence. The song then modulates, now oscillating between E minor and G-sharp minor chords for "cut the kids in half," which marks the drastic action of the lyrics here; the song then returns to the key

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[23] This is a contrast to *Amnesiac*'s "Morning Bell," in which the beat has been stripped away to provide only crashing chords. The beat is also stripped away in "Treefingers" and in *Amnesiac*'s "Hunting Bears."

[24] *Amnesiac*'s version of "Morning Bell" is reorchestrated, lending the song a different interpretation within that context. Hansen observes that because of the albums' order of release, the *Amnesiac* version derives its "true significance … if it is heard and analyzed after and in light of the *Kid A* version." "Deforming Rock," 137. This song was reworked for *Amnesiac* and is thus even more subject to multiple interpretations; a "hybrid" version of "Morning Bell" also exists on the *I Might Be Wrong* live recordings. See "Deforming Rock," 130–31, for further discussion of this "hybrid" version.

of A for the ending, still alternating ambivalently between A minor and A major. The song devolves into babble, with the voice singing "dum dum dum" while floating between C and A, then "ohh" through a scalar descent C-B-A, ending with a mumbled but rhythmic "dum dum dum" and the tinny sound of a keyboard.

The album's last song, "Motion Picture Soundtrack," evokes the song "Exit Music (for a Film)" from *OK Computer* (written for Baz Luhrmann's 1996 film *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*, though the song does not appear on the soundtrack).[25] Martin Clarke has described the film's final scenes: "Juliet holds a Colt 45 to her head, which particularly disturbed Thom [Yorke]."[26] The same theme of suicidal lovers is repeated in "Motion Picture Soundtrack," but the subject here states that "it's not like the movies," implying that a happy ending is not necessarily going to follow. Of course the ending of *Romeo + Juliet* is not a happy one either; the unhappiness of the reality of the human condition sometimes spills over into film. "Motion Picture Soundtrack" actually seems to make a conscious attempt to end "like the movies," with the subject's melodramatic rise into falsetto over swirling chorus and synthesized harp.

The structure of "Exit Music" is verse 1, verse 2, bridge 1, verse 3, bridge 2, and verse 4. Verses 1 and 2 appear in succession and are based in B minor/major, as shown in Example 4.11.

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[25] Radiohead's single "Fake Plastic Trees" had already appeared in the movie *Clueless* (1995). Stone, *Green Plastic Wateringcan*, 54. Radiohead's "Talk Show Host" does appear on *Romeo + Juliet*'s soundtrack.

[26] Clarke, *Hysterical and Useless*, 120. See also Hubbs, "The Imagination of Pop-Rock Criticism," for a longer discussion of "Exit Music (for a Film)."

Example 4.11: "Exit Music (for a Film)," verse

The first bridge is in B major/minor, moving vii to V to I to i. The song can be read as a 5-line, with the vocal line beginning on F-sharp and descending to B. The second bridge presents a descending vocal sequence that ascends to an F-sharp and then descends again to B. The words "we hope that you choke" are stated three times over the harmonic motion F-sharp to B. As Example 4.12 shows, the F-sharp–G–F-sharp neighbor-note motive from the beginning of "Exit Music" returns at the climax for the words "now we are one in everlasting peace" and then immediately begins to descend again.

Example 4.12: "Exit Music (for a Film)," neighbor-note motive

This marks a contrast to "Motion Picture Soundtrack," which ends on the F-sharp–E–G of "in the next life." While the song from the actual "motion picture soundtrack," "Exit Music," ends quietly, slipping away unobtrusively, the song "Motion Picture Soundtrack" ends with great dramatic flourish, despite having first declared that "it's not like the movies."

The introduction of "Motion Picture Soundtrack" presents an ambiguity between C and G, recalling the ambiguity between F and C in "Everything in Its Right Place." The chorus ends on D, or V in G, which strengthens the overall sense of G. The voice climbs into a higher range for the end of the song, as it had in "How to Disappear Completely." As Example 4.13 shows, the song ends on G, but the resolution seems forced because of the underlying chords (C-sharp to C, and a G that appears only after the rest of the music has faded out).

Example 4.13: "Motion Picture Soundtrack," resolution

The subject seems to be on his way to achieving the release pleaded for in "Morning Bell." With the song's closing words, "I will see you in the next life," marking the second, "real" (or bodily) death on the album, the singer's voice climbs to a high falsetto

pitch that is subsumed into a heavenly chorus of other voices and harp strings.[27] After

several moments' pause, the music returns without the voice, another indication that the

world not only continues to exist apart from the subject, but is indifferent to his existence.

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[27] Footman states that the end of "Motion Picture Soundtrack" constitutes an "acknowledgment of the previous holders of the ['greatest band in the world ever'] title," the Beatles. *Radiohead: A Visual Documentary*, 72.

Chapter 5: Putting It All Together—*Kid A* as a Whole

Although the two halves of *Kid A* can be parsed separately, the construction of the album-as-CD dictates that it be experienced as a whole. Even if listeners can hit "stop" at any point on the CD, a "second side" continues after the hollow midpoint of "Treefingers." *Kid A* is open-ended enough that it can have any kind of narrative attached, from the birth of the "first human clone," as Thom Yorke has suggested,[1] to a new adventure with the aliens of *OK Computer*—*Kid Alien*, perhaps. Given the obtuse lyrics and atypical interactions between the musical elements, however, any such reading seems overly forced. Rather, an analysis of recurring motives and lyrics may allow an interpretation that ties the album together as a whole greater than its two disparate halves.

"[HE] LOOKS LIKE THE REAL THING": THE SUBJECT AS *HOMME FATAL*

One way of approaching such an interpretation of the vanishing subject of *Kid A* might be to take this subject as a sort of *homme fatal*; Slavoj Žižek defines *femme fatale* as a "'pure,' nonpathological subject fully assuming her own fate" but donning "a series of inconsistent masks without a coherent ethical attitude."[2] Just as Radiohead's "ethical attitude" is somewhat contradictory, as it is not always clear what the band stands for and against, that of *Kid A*'s subject is also inconsistent. While the subject encourages solidarity against such entities as big business and government, his reasons for doing so are not clear. Although he complains about feeling "lost at sea" and being "fed on little white lies," the subject himself is unwilling to take any steps toward helping others ("not my problem," "don't bother me"). The classic *femme fatale* reaches her "final hysterical breakdown" when she "assumes her nonexistence … [and] constitutes herself as

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[1] Posted on a Radiohead message board, quoted in Clarke, *Hysterical and Useless*, 145. Harde has linked "Kid A" to the "mass-produced, assembly-line Alpha children" of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. "Radiohead and the Negation of Gender," 56.

[2] Žižek, *Looking Awry*, 65. Given the subject's presumed male identity because of the male singer activating him, I have chosen to change *femme fatale* to *homme fatal* throughout.

'subject': what is waiting for her beyond hystericization is the death drive at its purest."[3] The analogous moment for the *homme fatal* of *Kid A* is in "How to Disappear Completely," when he sings "I'm not here, this isn't happening" and then ascends into a falsetto wordlessness—ascension through feminization. The hysteria leads to emasculation, which in turn leads to feminization. This progression might in turn lead back to a reconsideration of the "necessary" gendering of the subject, the "grounding" of subjective difference in nature, that is, the "natural" condition of anatomy—ultimately an insistence on aligning sex and gender in defining the identity of the subject.

The subject finds its identity, according to Žižek, when it "freely assume[s] what is imposed on us, the real of the death drive," by "experiencing oneself as an object."[4] The subject of *Kid A* assumes this death drive first by literally disappearing in "Treefingers," and then by presenting a series of relentlessly negative scenarios (despite the slogans of "Optimistic") until departing for good in "Motion Picture Soundtrack" with the words "I will see you in the next life." This "second death," Žižek says, goes "beyond mere physical destruction, i.e., entailing the effacement of the very symbolic texture of generation and corruption."[5] Thus when the subject dies for the second time, he seems at first to take the entire background environment with him, as normally happens at the end of a concept album: the music dies with the subject. The second death, by contrast, is more a social problem of inscribing the subject into social memory than a problem for the subject, who is, after all, dead. The harp's return after the last notes of the final song have faded out is a sign that the world has continued to exist apart from the subject, or that the world does not depend on the existence of the subject.

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[3] Ibid., 65.

[4] Ibid., 66.

[5] Ibid., 64.

The 3-2-1 line that I have termed the *homme fatal* motive resurfaces throughout the second half of *Kid A*, in the form of the motive from the crisis point of "How to Disappear Completely" (see Example 5.1).

Example 5.1: *Kid A*, *homme fatal* **motive**

This motivic link is far more subtle than that of such "classic" concept albums as Pink Floyd's *The Wall* or *Dark Side of the Moon*.[6] The motive in "How to Disappear Completely" begins as A–F-sharp, is expanded into A–G-sharp–F-sharp, and is later compressed back into just A–F-sharp. After the blankness of "Treefingers," the motive

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[6] Moore and Ibrahim ("Identifying Radiohead's Idiolect," 156n47) note the use of "four linking passages" as a unifying factor in *Kid A*; the authors do not detail them, but evidently they are including the coda to "Motion Picture Soundtrack." The other links occur between "Kid A" and "The National Anthem," "Optimistic" and "In Limbo," and "Idioteque" and "Morning Bell," or tracks 2 and 3, 6 and 7, and 8 and 9.

returns in "Optimistic" with the change of G-sharp to G, the addition of a B above the A, and an F-natural between the F-sharp and G. While the motive in "How to Disappear Completely" had been sung on a plaintive "aah," the one in "Optimistic" is sung first on a more soothing "ooh." The chorus of "Optimistic" returns to the upward boundary of the A and uses the G–F-sharp to form a 4-3 suspension over a D in the bass. The last half of the line transposes the motive to F-natural–E–D (a literal transposition of the motive in "Disappear") for the lyrics "the best you can is good enough." The motive remains at that pitch level for the coda, "dinosaurs roaming the earth," but interjects an E-flat (flat 2). Immediately after the 3-2-1 line with the flatted E, the voice begins to sing "aah" over the original 3-2-1. The voice then riffs on these three notes until the outro, when the 3-2-1 line is sung at the original pitch level (A–G–F-sharp) and with the earlier vocalese ("ooh"). The *homme fatal* motive reappears at several transposition levels in "In Limbo." The vocal line is G–F-sharp–E for the beginning of the verse ("I'm on your side"), and then E-flat–D–C for the midpoint ("trapdoors that open"). The chorus statement, "you're living in a fantasy world," uses B-flat–A–G, emphasized again in "this beautiful world." The melody of "Idioteque" is static, more of a singsong chant, but segments of the verse can be excerpted as the motive, such as "I laugh until my head comes off" at pitch level E-flat–D–C. Rather than remaining on the 1, however, the voice continually returns to the 2 and 3.

More than any other song on *Kid A*, "Morning Bell" is supersaturated with the *homme fatal* motive. It appears in the verse as G–F-sharp–E and C-B-A, and in the chorus at the original "How to Disappear Completely" level of A–F-sharp, with an interjected E. Significantly, this original motive appears at a poignant point in the song, the cry "release me," evoking the ending "aah" of "How to Disappear Completely" as the voice is finally disappearing into the noise. Rather than ending on the F-sharp over a D-major chord here, however, the voice moves to an E on the word "please" over an A-minor chord. The second verse proceeds in a similar fashion, and after a brief pause, the

voice again pleads "release me," but this time it does not move to E. The third verse grows more aggressive in its tone, confronting the listener and culminating in a hammered-out "round and round and round and round…" on an insistent E over an A-minor chord. The last "round" moves to D over a G-major chord that then moves to a D-major chord, but the resolution is brief. The third verse consists solely of the statement "cut the kids in half," moving from E to G in the same minor-third relationship from the original motive, but in the opposite direction (1-3 instead of 3-1). The line "cut the kids in half" perverts the 3-2-1 line by introducing a D-sharp, which in the version of "Morning Bell" on *Amnesiac* ultimately resolves to E. Here, the motive resolves only briefly to an E before moving to the original D-major/A-major alternation. The subject's extreme solution—the division in half (i.e., schizophrenia)[7]—has briefly disrupted the fabric of the music, but the song then moves on to a less tentative resolution without the voice, as though to show that this lyrical eruption hasn't affected the music, which exists in a world apart from the subject and has moved on in spite of him.

While the world is indifferent to us, we are indifferent to it only at the expense of ourselves. The challenge for the subject is to live in the modern world; his attempted indifference to it ("not my problem") ultimately destroys him. The *homme fatal* motive is literally one of "grounding," of moving down to the tonic; existentially, it is a return to the world through death, the revenge of the world through mortality, and ultimately our deathly grounding in the grave: dust to dust. Death, the fall to the tonic, is the only ground for the subject, which is also the point of impossibility of the subject. "Motion Picture Soundtrack" brings back the *homme fatal* motive only at the very end, on the words "in the next life," which move F-sharp–E–G (2-1-3). The motive has been transformed in a way that allows an escape into the upper boundaries of the voice. The absence of the motive on *Amnesiac* lends credence to the idea that the experiences on *Kid*

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[7] "Cut the kids in half" is presumably an allusion to the biblical story of Solomon and the women who each claimed that a baby was hers.

A are self-contained and that *Amnesiac* truly does represent the "next life" available to the subject.

Yet another way of viewing the narrative of *Kid A* is to continue treating "Treefingers" as the hollow midpoint, or "space between," but to link the songs on either side of it. Not only can "How to Disappear Completely" and "Optimistic" be paired as bookends around this empty space, but the other songs can also be paired around this midpoint. Like Pink Floyd's *The Wall*, the song sequence can be mapped onto a circle, as shown in Table 5.1. Unlike *The Wall*, however, which proceeds in a never-ending loop, *Kid A* seems to fold in on itself and create relationships between songs on either half. If "Treefingers" is the empty space between two sides, then "Motion Picture Soundtrack" is the album's epitaph. The subject first takes his leave in "How to Disappear Completely"; he does this more explicitly and arguably more cheerfully on "Motion Picture Soundtrack." Rather than denying that he is present ("I'm not here, this isn't happening"), he muses over his presence but ultimately says that he is leaving ("I will see you in the next life"). Instead of vanishing into vocalese, he exits melodramatically in full voice with clear lyrics. While the last song on *The Wall* cycles around to the first song again in a never-ending loop, starting with the completion of a sentence that is begun at the end of the album ("Isn't this where we came in?"), the last song on *Kid A* looks ahead to the next album instead ("I will see you in the next life"). It is hard to view *Kid A* as allowing for a renewal to take place within a continuous loop of playing the CD over and over unless the first song is taken as a rebirth. If "yesterday I woke up sucking on a lemon" is a state of mind the subject wants to leave behind, then the loop becomes an entrapment because he persists in negativity over the course of the album. Regardless of how "optimistic" the subject may seem in insisting that "everything" is "in its right place" in this new day or new life, he is still trapped in the human condition. "Motion Picture Soundtrack" can thus be read as either a springboard to the next album or, more

philosophically, as the subject's perpetual cycle of death and rebirth within the same cycle of negativity.

Table 5.1: Song foldings in *Kid A*

5 "Treefingers"	
4 "How to Disappear Completely"	6 "Optimistic"
3 "The National Anthem"	7 "In Limbo"
2 "Kid A"	8 "Idioteque"
1 "Everything in Its Right Place"	9 "Morning Bell"
10 "Motion Picture Soundtrack"	

A look at *Kid A*'s lyrics shows some similarities between the song pairs created by folding the song sequence in half. "Everything in Its Right Place" and "Morning Bell" both deal with division, the former with an internal split ("two colors in my head") and the latter with an external split, or divorce ("cut the kids in half"). The "morning bell" could be read as triggering the protagonist's awakening to a new day ("yesterday I woke up sucking on a lemon"). The benign question of "Everything in Its Right Place" ("what was that you tried to say") is transformed into the accusatory "where'd you park the car" of "Morning Bell." The escape in "Morning Bell," the plea to "release me," is a recognition of the fact that "everything" is indeed not "in its right place." The babbling second voice of "Everything in Its Right Place" trying to strive for clarity becomes the mumbled "dum dum dum" at the end of "Morning Bell." The subject in the earlier song is still trying to make sense of his surroundings; later, the subject has accepted that things are not going well and wants to get out at any cost. While the earlier song had attempted to force everything into place without admitting that it is not in place already, the later song is an admission of the wrong fit and an attempt at escape.

The similarities between "Kid A" and "Idioteque" are more subtle. The subject can be seen as a "holy fool," or "idiot," who issues the Pied Piper–like call "c'mon kids" in "Kid A" and is later hysterically stuttering in "Idioteque." While the subject complains lethargically in the former song of "rats and children" following him out of town, in the latter, he commands shakily that the "women and children" should go into the bunker first. The voice of "Kid A" is manipulated electronically, with the second voice coming in for harmony on the second line, "we've got heads on sticks." In "Idioteque," the two voices present a cogent harmony, but the second voice enters only after the words "laugh until my head comes off," suggesting an internal split in the subject. While in "Kid A" the subject lazily suggests "c'mon kids," in "Idioteque" he is urged to "take the money and run" after ushering the women and children into the bunker. The earlier song speaks of "ventriloquists" and "heads on sticks," suggesting an insurmountable divide but also an interplay between the two sides; in the later song, the subject wants to "hear both sides" about the "ice age coming," but this truer, non-manipulated voice is hysterical in its request for information that may come too late.[8]

"The National Anthem" is paired with "In Limbo." The former song talks of "everyone" being together yet alone in their fear, while the latter states "I'm on your side." This sense of security in "In Limbo" is false, however, as the chorus abandons the pretext of being on the listener's side with the words "don't bother me" and "you're living in a fantasy world." The subject creates an epitaph for the world, while shaking his head with the post-chorus comment "this beautiful world." "The National Anthem" has a square 4/4 feel, while "In Limbo" consists of triplets that "spiral down." The closing statement of "In Limbo" is a howled "I can't read" grinding down to an "aagh" that descends into machinery noises, while "The National Anthem" ends with a horn riff falling into chaos, a distorted orchestral recording, and the sound of a tape winding down.

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[8] Presumably the song is talking about global warming, an issue that is already too late to act against; see recent (spring 2005) articles in the *New Yorker*.

After the passive "we're all in this together, alone" stance of "The National Anthem," the subject at first takes a more active role in "In Limbo" ("I'm on your side") but then immediately relinquishes his leadership ("don't bother me"), admonishing the listener not to follow.

Taken within the context of the folded song pairings, "Motion Picture Soundtrack" functions as an epitaph to the whole album. The schmaltzy synthesized harps and chorus emphasize the theatrical ending and the notion that "the world is but a stage." The *homme fatal* finally assumes his fate in the end by accepting his existence as an object of capital. The chorus enters on the words "I think you're crazy, baby," dramatizing what one might expect instead to be an ultimate proclamation of love after the verses about "red wine and sleeping pills … cheap sex and sad films." The singer's voice soars into the heavens with a falsetto G, even though the chords under him do not resolve until much later, after several seconds of silence. This forced resolution leaves the listener wanting more, a salvation that comes only with forgetting the trauma of *Kid A*, on *Amnesiac*.

Chapter 6: *Amnesiac*—The Antidote

An even richer opposition than the one between the two halves of *Kid A* results when the album as a whole is juxtaposed with Radiohead's 2001 follow-up, *Amnesiac*, recorded during the same sessions but containing songs that on the surface appear somewhat less experimental. Recognizing—or perhaps anticipating—the baffled reaction to *Kid A* by both fans and critics, the band returned if not to the old sound, then certainly to more conventional song forms and marketing techniques.[1] Singer Thom Yorke stated somewhat facetiously before *Amnesiac*'s release that "with the next one we are definitely having singles, videos, glossy magazine celebrity photo shoots, children's television appearances, film premiere appearances, dance routines, and many interesting interviews about my tortured existence."[2] His words are a caustic overreaction to the somewhat negative reception of *Kid A* and are playing on audience and critical expectations. Though the *Amnesiac* tracks were not selected from the body of studio work until after *Kid A* had been released, Radiohead has resisted the temptation to say that *Amnesiac* comprises simply the dross left over after *Kid A* was compiled.[3] Allan F. Moore and Anwar Ibrahim state that *Amnesiac* is "more a consolidation of Radiohead's new experimental direction than another leap. As opposed to the sense of a coherent whole created by both *OK Computer* and *Kid A*, the album is more akin to *The Bends* through being more a collection of separate songs."[4] The release of several singles from *Amnesiac* could further the perception of it as a "collection of separate songs," as the singles were heard apart from the album. James Doheny has argued that the difference between *Kid A* and *Amnesiac* is the "difference between surveying new influences and reconciling with

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[1] Yorke has stated that the band wanted to give *Amnesiac* "a fair chance within the giant scary cogs of the bullshit machine." Quoted in Clarke, *Hysterical and Useless*, 152.

[2] Posted on Radiohead message board, 30 December 2000, http://acrushdtinbox.tripod.com/id12.html (accessed 3 August 2005).

[3] Doheny, *Back to Save the Universe*, 110.

[4] Moore and Ibrahim, "Identifying Radiohead's Idiolect," 145 and 156.

existing."[5] The release order of the albums as much as their content gives this impression, since by the time of *Amnesiac*'s release, listeners had grown somewhat accustomed to, if not completely accepting of, the experimental sound of *Kid A*. If Radiohead's previous work is the thesis, *Kid A* the antithesis, then *Amnesiac* is the synthesis, but this is as much a by-product of the listener's comfort level with the material as any effort on the part of the band.

Yorke has said that *Amnesiac*'s title refers to the Gnostic belief that "when we are born we are forced to forget where we have come from in order to deal with the trauma of arriving in this life."[6] If the same subject is presumed for both albums, then *Amnesiac* can be understood as an attempt to forget the trauma of *Kid A*, in keeping with the subject's promise on "Motion Picture Soundtrack" to "see you in the next life." Gnosticism is in essence the doctrine of salvation through an intuitive knowledge of the mysteries of the universe, ultimately overcoming the "grossness of matter" and returning to the universal spirit.[7] This could be read as both the subject and the band attempting to triumph over the commodification of modern society (expressed as "noise" on *Kid A*) to return to a "pure" musical state. The title *Amnesiac* also works as a fulfillment of Radiohead's promise that the album would be a return to its old sound, an erasure of the experience of *Kid A* for both band and listener. However, since the band had recorded the tracks for *Amnesiac* at the same time as those for *Kid A*, this erasing is a false construction, unless the band somehow recorded all of *Kid A*'s tracks first, then all of *Amnesiac*'s, in an attempt to erase the studio's first batch of results, in which case *Kid A*'s release would have been wholly unnecessary. The naming of *Amnesiac* seems a calculated attempt at repositioning

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[5] Doheny, *Back to Save the Universe*, 110.

[6] David Fricke, *Rolling Stone* (August 2001); quoted in Hainge, "To(rt)uring the Minotaur," 73.

[7] "Gnosticism," *Catholic Encyclopedia*, http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06592a.htm (accessed 17 October 2005).

the band in the audience's minds by dismissing *Kid A* as an aberration in Radiohead's output and by acknowledging the subject's need to move on after the trauma of *Kid A*.

The relationship between *Kid A* and *Amnesiac* is nevertheless ambiguous. Bassist Colin Greenwood has stressed the continuity and cohesiveness of the albums: "I'm not sure they are two records.… [*Amnesiac*] is a combination of … more conventional, perhaps, but also more dissonant stuff. But it continues on from *Kid A*. It was all done in the same recording period. It is all a whole."[8] Like most critics, Yorke has argued that the cohesion between the two albums is a product of contrast: "*Amnesiac* is about seeing really awful things that you try to forget and can't quite. Whereas *Kid A* is deliberately trying to keep everything at a safe distance."[9] The irony in this statement is that the subject on *Kid A* had not actually been able to keep the trauma of modern life at bay and requires *Amnesiac* to start over, try again. Yorke also recognizes a continuity between the albums: "If you look at the artwork for *Kid A* … that's like looking at the fire from afar. *Amnesiac* is the sound of what it feels like to be standing in the fire."[10] Here, the "fire" can be read as a metaphor for man's condition in modern society. R. J. Smith likewise writes: "If *Kid A*'s songs seem rooted in a pitched battle over the future, *Amnesiac*'s feel recorded the moment after."[11] In *Kid A*, the subject's effort to keep society's ills at bay is so traumatic that existential negation—suicide—seems the only rational solution. The subject of *Amnesiac*, by contrast, reacts to the same horrors with a deadpan nihilism as he learns to live with the inanity of the world.

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[8] Posted on Radiohead message board, 30 December 2000. http://acrushdtinbox.tripod.com/id12.html (accessed 3 August 2005). Some listeners believed that the albums should have been cut down and released as a single unit. In private communication, Mark Pittman stated that "*Kid A* and *Amnesiac* were only half good each, so I combined the best songs for the single album I thought the two released albums should have been."

[9] Ian Watson, "The Ballad of Thom Yorke," *Rolling Stone* (Australian edition), 589 (July), 46; quoted in Hainge, "To(rt)uring the Minotaur," 72.

[10] Quoted in *The Big Issue*, January 2001. http://acrushdtinbox.tripod.com/id12.html (accessed 3 August 2005).

[11] Smith, "Sounds Like Music," *The Village Voice*, 25 June 2001, http://www.villagevoice.com/issues/0126/rjsmith.php (accessed 6 August 2005).

For the most part, critical reception to *Amnesiac* has deemed it more accessible than *Kid A*, in part because of its reduced use of synthesized sounds, fewer filtered instruments, and more readily discernible lyrics. Guitarist Ed O'Brien has quoted art designer Stanley Donwood, who has worked with Radiohead from *The Bends* to the present, as saying that "*Kid A* is like you pick up the phone, you call somebody, and there's an answering machine on the other end. With *Amnesiac*, you get through to that person. And you're engaged in the conversation." This analogy views the subject of *Kid A* as being detached from and thus alienating the audience; fans had bought the album perhaps expecting to relate to it in the same ways as with previous Radiohead albums, and were instead put off by it. *Amnesiac* was marketed as a return to the band's old ways of connecting with its listeners, and critics picked up on this contrast between the two albums. David Fricke has stated that "the effect [of *Amnesiac*] is like *Kid A* turned inside out.… On *Kid A*, Yorke often sounded like a ghost trapped inside an ice sculpture. On *Amnesiac*, he sings in front of the music with confrontational intimacy."[12] While the vocals on *Kid A* were for the most part heavily filtered and distorted, those on *Amnesiac* were moved to the forefront and stripped of effects. At times the singer's breath is audible, as he literally animates the subject. *Amnesiac* was described by *Q* magazine as "similarly shy, textural and embroidered by electronica, but where it differs vitally from *Kid A* is in being 1) better balanced, 2) more emotionally intelligible, and 3) even more grimly beautiful."[13] This implies that with *Amnesiac*, the band had managed to integrate the elements that had interrupted the texture of *Kid A* into something that the listener could better relate to; however, as mentioned above, it could simply be that listeners were more accustomed to the strange electronic sounds the band was employing and were themselves integrating these sounds into an accessible musical experience. Just as the

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[12] David Fricke, "Radiohead: Making Music That Matters," *Rolling Stone*, 874 (August 2, 2001), 48; quoted in Hainge, "To(rt)uring the Minotaur," 72.

[13] Quoted in Clarke, *Hysterical and Useless*, 156.

band claimed to be using *Amnesiac* as an antidote to the bafflement of *Kid A*, so did the critics treat the new album in that manner, recognizing *Kid A* as a problem-as-artistic-statement that needed to be resolved.

The vocals and lyrics on *Amnesiac* appear easier to decipher than those of *Kid A*,[14] at least on an audible level, as they are less filtered or distorted. The album packaging does not include lyrics, however, despite the limited-edition release being in the form of a book. Just as the album is in some sense an ironic rant against commodification because the band derives its income from its music as a commodity, managing its critique in such a way that its protest is not simply a means of further commodification, so too is the album-as-book an empty vessel without meaningful words. Perhaps in Radiohead's post-apocalyptic world, commodification has caused words to lose all meaning; commodity qua commodity is empty.[15] Amnesia here is figured as a loss, a forgetting, a decontextualization, an emptying, and ultimately a condition of survival in a world emptied by the universal form of the commodity. For Radiohead to succeed on a level beyond the commodity, reaching the status of "artist," it must at least pretend to forget its condition as a product of the recording industry and create art that furthers that forgetting—ultimately an impossible act.

As mentioned, the instruments of *Amnesiac* are less distorted than those of *Kid A* and support the musical structure rather than overtly working to split it apart. Some have commented that the "warmer" sound of *Amnesiac*'s songs offers a respite from the harshness of *Kid A*, in which even the so-called "natural" sounds are synthesized, filtered,

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[14] Hainge points out that although Yorke's lyrics are easier to hear, they are not necessarily more comprehensible. "To(rt)uring the Minotaur," 77.

[15] Radiohead seems to be taking the "rock in opposition" movement a step further, by turning the idea of refusing to compromise over art into a hollow art project. See http://www.squidco.com/rer/RIO.html (accessed 11 July 2005) for a discussion of Rock in Opposition (RIO) plus the text of the pamphlet distributed at the original RIO concert on 12 March 1978. On the website, Phil Zampino defines "rock in opposition" as "music that is difficult to pigeonhole, which embraces progressive rock, improvisation, folk forms and often extreme experimentation, drawing source from the musics of many cultures, and utilizing modern techniques and technologies."

and used to disrupt and alienate the musical texture. Stephen Dalton has noted that *Amnesiac* "appears to build a bridge between its sister album's *avant*-noise post-rock soundscapes and more traditionally recognizable pop forms, from acoustic ballads to big-band jazz."[16] Some of the elements that disrupted the musical texture of *Kid A* are altered into a more conventional and thus redeeming state on *Amnesiac*; the "Charles Mingus horns" that were given only a repeated minor-seventh riff on *Kid A*, for example, return as an ensemble of intertwining solo lines to support the vocalist on *Amnesiac*. Alex Abramovich writes that "on *Amnesiac*—the more accessible, and more rewarding, of the two records—electronic experimentation alternates with straightforward melody, often within the confines of a single song."[17] This can be read either as the musical elements finally taking control of the noise, or as the noise still managing to interrupt the more conventional pop-rock structures. Whereas on *Kid A* the noise had constantly interrupted the musical texture, on *Amnesiac* the noise is to some extent controlled by the voice and the returned, non-filtered guitars. Ian Watson disputes the notion of *Amnesiac* being "more listener-friendly or, rather, more old-Radiohead-fan-friendly"[18]:

> The sequencing of the songs and often bleak lyrical tone makes *Amnesiac* a very troubling album indeed. Where *Kid A* eased you in with the comforting warmth of "Everything in Its Right Place" and rewarded you after that draining emotional journey with the serene beauty and reassurance of "Motion Picture Soundtrack," *Amnesiac* is a far more desolate experience.[19]

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[16] Dalton, "Anyone Can Play Guitar: Radiohead on Record," *Uncut* 51 (August 2001), quoted in Hainge, "To(rt)uring the Minotaur," 72.

[17] Abramovich, "The Anti-Christs: Radiohead Defies Rock's Own, Personal Jesus Myth," *Slate*, 8 June 2001, http://slate.msn.com/?id=109743 (accessed 6 August 2005).

[18] Hainge, "To(rt)uring the Minotaur," 72.

[19] Watson, "The Ballad of Thom Yorke," 44–50, 111; quoted in Hainge, "To(rt)uring the Minotaur," 73.

Watson here is reading beyond the surface comfort of *Amnesiac*'s more conventional song structures and instrumentation, to recognize that the subject is just as disturbed, and possibly more so, as he is now repressing the agonies of *Kid A* to pretend that everything is "in its right place." The temptation, again, is to read *Amnesiac* as an antidote, to view its sounds in opposition to those of *Kid A*, as trying to redeem the lost subject. However, a peek beneath the album's surface shows that the subject is still trying desperately to find meaning in modern society.

Just as the less distorted vocals do not make *Amnesiac*'s lyrics any less opaque than *Kid A*'s, the album's apparently more straightforward musical elements do not mean that a clear narrative is present. Table 6.1 shows some musical elements of *Amnesiac* divided into the same categories as *Kid A*'s. The elements are more integrated than on *Kid A*, although as mentioned above, this should not be read as being due to the band's synthesis of new musical sounds, since all the tracks of *Amnesiac* and *Kid A* were recorded during the same sessions; a reading of *Amnesiac* as integrative implies that it was recorded subsequent to and as a reaction to *Kid A*. Rather, any perceived integration of the sounds is largely due to the listener's new-found comfort with them, after the confusion of *Kid A*.

Table 6.1: Binary oppositions in *Amnesiac*

Song	Sense	Nonsense	Organic	Technological	Music	Noise
"Packt Like Sardines in a Crushd Tin Box"	voice ("I'm a reasonable man")	muttering voices, sound effects	"gamelan," voice (breathy, sibilant)	drum beats; "gamelan," keyboards	repetitive melody (chorus)	distorted voice, sound effects
"Pyramid Song"	voice	meter (out of time), dreamy "oohs," sound effects	voice, piano, strings, "live" drums, builds	sound of "wind," sirens, fluttering strings/keyboard effects	piano, strings (supporting)	fluttering string sounds under piano (like *Wings of Desire*)
"Pulk/Pull Revolving Doors"	all words, no melody	rhythm drops in and out, hard to understand lyrics		samples; broken-up text; drum loops	bells	all beat, no melody, effects (sirens), distorted
"You and Whose Army?"	vocals (begins with breath)		voice close to mike, guitar, "live" drums, piano, string bass	radio mike	guitar, voice, harmony vocals	
"I Might Be Wrong"	catchy chorus ("let's go down the waterfall")	reverb on vocals, falsetto, "covered" voice	guitar/bass riff, "live" drums	synthesized sounds	harmony vocals, postlude (string melody), local "aahs" and riff returns	relentless riff
"Knives Out"	catchy chorus, speaks directly to listener ("I want you to know")		non-distorted vocals		guitar, bass, drums, guitar solo	

"Morning Bell/Amnesiac"	same lyrics as *Kid A* (familiar)		"bells"		stripped of all but chords, counter-melody[20]	
"Dollars and Cents"[21]	strings in unison with voice (heart of album)	hard to understand words	strings	relentless bass riff	strings counter-melody	synthesized chords
"Hunting Bears"	no lyrics/vocals (nothing to say)		guitars, sound of fingers on strings		all pitch, no beat	fingers on frets
"Like Spinning Plates"	"backwards" vocals rearranged into new phonemes	source = backwards song		effects, playing song backwards	voice	sound effects, strobing effect
"Life in a Glasshouse"	clear vocals	meandering voice, as jazz instrument	jazz ensemble	sound effects, begins with burst of "god music" from end of *Kid A*, erases previous song	interweaving instrumental lines	sound effects, erupting solo lines

Mapping the songs of *Kid A* and *Amnesiac* onto one another suggests that

Amnesiac appears as a salvation of sorts for the subject condemned in *Kid A*—or for the

listener baffled by it. This impression turns out to be false: while at a surface level the

music appears to draw the listener in and offer comfort that the subject can find a place of

reconciliation, in fact, the subject remains alienated; this reconciliation is only an

apparent one. As Table 6.2 shows, many of the same musical elements that caused such

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[20] The countermelody comes in especially at the statement "cut the kids in half" and ends with the Beatleseque recorders at approximately the same tempo as the next song. This melody is cut off by the riff of "Dollars and Cents," so it functions as a counting-off to the next song.

[21] The statement "won't you quiet down" is an attempt at quashing the erupting noise (equivalent to "How to Disappear Completely"). The command "quiet down" returns over the clear statement "we are the dollars and cents," when all instruments except the guitar and cymbal drop out.

anxiety on *Kid A* return throughout *Amnesiac*: drum loops, sampled text, jazz riffs, and so forth.

Table 6.2: Song mappings between *Kid A* and *Amnesiac*

Kid A	*Amnesiac*	**Common elements**
"Everything in Its Right Place"	"Packt Like Sardines in a Crushed Tin Box" "Like Spinning Plates"	broken-up texture sampled text played backwards
"Kid A"	"Pulk/Pull Revolving Doors" "Like Spinning Plates"	sampled and broken-up text
"National Anthem"	"I Might Be Wrong" "Life in a Glass House"	repeating bass riff jazz horns
"How to Disappear Completely"	"Pyramid Song"	lyrical imagery, instrumentation
"Treefingers"	"Hunting Bears"	lack of vocals/lyrics
"Optimistic"	"Knives Out"	catchy sound, "single"
"In Limbo"	"Dollars and Cents" "I Might Be Wrong"	lyrics
"Idioteque"	"Pulk/Pull Revolving Doors"	sampled drum loop
"Morning Bell"	"Morning Bell/Amnesiac"	same lyrics
"Motion Picture Soundtrack"	"You and Whose Army?"	slow tempo, dreamy quality

"Pyramid Song," for example, contains musical elements similar to those in "How to Disappear Completely" but presents them more conventionally—or rather, less subtly. Martin Clarke notes that Yorke's "ethereal vocals are clearer than on *Kid A*, buoyed up, rather than drowned, by gentle drums and instrumentation."[22] Likewise, the strings and other instruments work in tandem with Yorke's vocals rather than against them. The overall musical impression is that of a scenario where the subject is fully present, surrounded by peaceful images of "a moon full of stars and astral cars" rather than the violent "strobe lights and blown speakers, fireworks and hurricanes" of "How to Disappear Completely." The "warmer," more natural sound of *Amnesiac* has also been perceived as more commercially accessible than that of *Kid A*, an idea supported by the promotion of two singles from *Amnesiac* ("Pyramid Song" and "Knives Out") but none from *Kid A*. However, the subject that is present on *Amnesiac*, although produced through less technologically distorted means, seems insincere and overblown—more willing to accept the commodification of the world—than the vanishing subject of *Kid A*, who struggles for survival in a musical texture fractured in the clash of music and noise. Offering the furthest thing from authentic expression, the "commercial" subject that occupies *Amnesiac* seems to be constructed and sustained through its investment in an artificiality that only appears authentic. The "authentic" subject promised by commodity culture in this sense becomes a chimera: it appears only at the point of existential negation, the point where it disappears completely.

As *Amnesiac*'s first single, released before the album itself, "Pyramid Song" sets the stage for the album's reception. Without the album to contextualize its meaning, the song first appears as a pure musical commodity, the single. Then, too, its tone is quite unlike that of *Kid A*. The song gives the impression that the subject will be spared this time—if the forthcoming album will even contemplate subjective existence. Within the

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[22] Clarke, *Hysterical and Useless*, 153.

context of the album, however, the song takes on a distinctively darker hue, and we recognize an affinity with the theme of *Kid A.* The subject's one moment of peace comes from beyond the grave ("we all went to heaven in a little row boat"): before the album even arrives, we know that the subject is already dead. Lyrical imagery from *Kid A* returns on *Amnesiac*: most strikingly, the subject who had been floating "down the Liffey" in "How to Disappear Completely" is now jumping "in the river" and swimming with "black-eyed angels" in "Pyramid Song." In "Like Spinning Plates," his dead body is "floating down a muddy river." The "trapdoors that open" in "In Limbo" become "trapdoors that you can't come back from" in "Pulk/Pull Revolving Doors." Rather than escape, *Amnesiac* offers the subject only further imprisonment. The surface positivity of "Optimistic" returns in "Dollars and Cents" (a link to the false, buyable happiness offered by commodity culture) with the lyrics "there are better things to talk about, be constructive" and in "I Might Be Wrong" with the words "think about the good times, never look back" and "have ourselves a good time, it's nothing at all." These commands exemplify the very definition of amnesia, the forgetting of past trauma (i.e., of *Kid A*). A play on words also exists, implying that it is impossible to actually have a "good time," as it doesn't exist, that is, "it's nothing at all."[23] The lyrics of *Amnesiac* provide an "image trail"[24] of death and violence, as shown in Table 6.3. Rather than being possessed by a suicidal drive to existential negation, as on *Kid A*, the subject here is existentially already dead. Such is Radiohead's depiction of "life" in modern society; the happiness and comfort of both the album and the human condition exist only at the surface level.

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[23] These lyrics recall the Beatles' "Only a Northern Song": "If you think the harmony is a little dark and out of key, you're correct, there's nobody there. It doesn't matter what chords I play, what words I say or time of day it is, and I told you there's no one there."

[24] Griffiths uses the term "image trail" in *OK Computer* to describe categories of images found on that album and particularly in "Fitter Happier." *OK Computer*, 85–87.

Table 6.3: Image trail of *Amnesiac* lyrics

"Packt Like Sardines"	"your life flashed before your eyes"
"Pyramid Song"	"we all went to heaven in a little row boat"
"Pulk/Pull Revolving Doors"	"there are trapdoors that you can't come back from"
"You and Whose Army?"	"we ride tonight, ghost horses"
"I Might Be Wrong"	"I used to think there was no future at all"
"Knives Out"	"he's not coming back"; "cook him up, squash his head, throw him in the pot"; "he's frozen and bloated"
"Morning Bell/Amnesiac"	"release me"; "cut the kids in half"
"Dollars and Cents"	"we're gonna crack your little souls"
"Hunting Bears"	Instrumental (missing subject)
"Like Spinning Plates"	"you feed me to the lions"; "my body's floating down a muddy river"
"Life in a Glasshouse"	"packed like frozen food and battery hens"

"AFTER YEARS OF WAITING, NOTHING CAME": THE MUSIC OF *AMNESIAC*

Amnesiac contains many of the compositional techniques used in other Radiohead albums, including the pivot tone, the accumulative groove, and the use of a series of fifth-related chords. The album begins with "Packt Like Sardines in a Crushd Tin Box," discussed by Spicer as an example of the accumulative groove.[25] Spicer does not delineate the instrumental entrances, but they can be mapped out as in Table 6.4.

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[25] Spicer, "(Ac)cumulative Form in Pop-Rock Music," 33–34.

Table 6.4: The accumulative groove in "Packt Like Sardines in a Crushd Tin Box"
(X = entrance; O = exit)

CD timings	Intro 0:00	0:15	0:36	Verse 1 0:52	1:18	Chorus 1:23	Verse 2 1:38	1:55	Chorus 2:09
"Gamelan"	X			O	X		O		
Keyboards/ bass/ guitar			X						
Drums		X							
Voice				X					
Second voice								X	
Sound effects									

CD timings	Bridge 2:32	2:47	2:55	3:01	Verse 3 3:03	Chorus 3:18	Outro 3:49
"Gamelan"		X				O	
Keyboards/ bass/ guitar	O		X				
Drums	O			X			
Voice	O				X		O
Second voice	O				X	O	
Sound effects	X						O

"Packt Like Sardines" begins with a long "gamelan" sample[26] and is followed by the entrance of a drum kit and then a keyboard. The voice finally enters at 0:52 with the nihilistic statement "after years of waiting, nothing came." Doheny notes the ironic juxtaposition of the Eastern instrument with lyrics that mock the quest for enlightenment, two ideas pursued by George Harrison of the Beatles.[27] The lyrics may have more to do with nirvana as a sort of state of nothingness, the abnegation of the self, which is the fulfillment of the "years of meditation." The challenge is being receptive to the nothingness when it arrives. Here, the emptiness of the album-as-commodity has displaced, even instrumentalized, that place of nothingness for which the subject longs. The disillusionment that comes with the unmasking of the illusion that a successful spiritual quest escapes the emptiness of the commodity could thus be read as a comment on Radiohead's dissatisfaction with the conventional pop-music world typified by the Beatles, who were of course passed out of the mainstream in their own time.

This allusion to the Beatles could also be read as a recanting after the "tribute" of "Motion Picture Soundtrack" discussed by Tim Footman: the "overblown, neo-classical arrangement" recalls "Good Night," the final song on the Beatles' "White Album"; there is a long pause after the song, as at the end of *Abbey Road*; and *Kid A* "closes with a burst of abstract noise," like *Sgt. Pepper*.[28] The juxtaposition of "Motion Picture Soundtrack" as the last song on *Kid A* next to "Packt Like Sardines" as the first song of *Amnesiac* furthers this interpretation. "Packt Like Sardines" casts the lyrics in the second person ("as your life flashed before your eyes … you realize you're looking in … the wrong place"), drawing listeners in and making them feel as though the subject is passing judgment. The lyrics also create the confusion characteristic of the second person,

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[26] Doheny says this is technically a "'field recording' of the gently modulated Hare Krishna water drum." *Back to Save the Universe*, 112.

[27] Ibid., 112.

[28] Footman, *Radiohead: A Visual Documentary*, 72.

whether it is meant to be a plural "you," a dialogue between a lyrical "you" and "me," or a direct address to the listener. The structure of "Packt Like Sardines" is conventional (intro, verse 1, chorus, verse 2, chorus, bridge, verse 3, chorus, outro), though verse 3 cuts up the lyric and intersperses it with drums and gamelan. Each chorus grows four bars longer (from eight bars to twelve and then sixteen). Conversely, each verse grows briefer: the first verse is a full sixteen bars, as is the second, but the second four bars of the second verse are instrumental. The third verse is only eight bars, and its second four bars too are instrumental. The effect is that the subject is growing more insistent with his claim of being a "reasonable man," as those lyrics are repeated over and over. As Example 6.1 shows, the vocal melody emphasizes D dorian and is tightly confined to a mere fifth, furthering the notion of social confinement and claustrophobic musical space articulated on *Kid A*, particularly in "The National Anthem."

Example 6.1: "Packt Like Sardines in a Crushd Tin Box," verse

"Af- ter years of wai - ting no - thing came..."

Example 6.2 illustrates that the chorus is even more confined, to a minor third. With the chorus, the subject asks the listener to leave him alone: "I'm a reasonable man, get off my case."

Example 6.2: "Packt Like Sardines in a Crushd Tin Box," chorus

"I'm a reas- 'na - ble man get off my case..."

The small melodic range and the repetition first of "get off" and later of "get off my case" lend the chorus a singsong or chant-like melody. The voice sings a syncopated rhythm recalling that of the gamelan introduction. A second voice comes in at the middle of verse

132

2 (the second "after years of waiting" statement of that verse) and sings in unison with the first until the final chorus ("I'm a reasonable man").

The title of the song echoes the claustrophobic melody; even the words of the title are confined, with letters missing ("packt," "crushd"). The word "reasonable" in the chorus is also contracted to something more like "reas'n'able," with three syllables. The verse states that any meaning must be found elsewhere, as meditating for "years of waiting" has led only to the realization that the subject's confinement has forced him to look in the wrong place. (On an allegorical level, this could be read as an admonishment to Radiohead's fans not to look for meaning in the band's music.) This realization has come as the result of a near-death experience, in which "your life flashed before your eyes." As the first song after *Kid A*, "Packt Like Sardines" serves as a reaction to the death(s) of "How to Disappear Completely" and "Motion Picture Soundtrack." With the subject's continued insistence that he is a "reasonable man," he seems to be advocating a return to logic, that is, to Enlightenment reason, and thus to the confinements that this form of reason places on action and thought. However, in being confined and contracted in the lyrics, language no longer represents a logical syntax, and thoughts and actions may be short-circuited. The first verse elides with the chorus, forming the lyric "you realize … I'm a reasonable man," implying that any epiphany has to do with the subject rather than with the listener; that is, with the listener's perception of the subject. If the subject is the same as that in *Kid A*, his statement on his "reasonable" condition seems strange, given that he had attempted suicide twice over the course of that album, not the most reasonable of actions. In his repeated insistence on the reasonableness of an unreasonable action, the subject articulates the idea that the most reasonable, or rational, response to modern society is an attempt at escaping it, which thus sets up the nihilistic style of *Amnesiac*.

Mark B. N. Hansen states that "Packt Like Sardines" sets the tone for the album just as "Everything in Its Right Place" did for *Kid A*:

[The song] begins to explain the rationale of its demarcation from *Kid A*, despite its having been compiled from the same recording sessions. "Packt" gives us a feel for the dominant movement of the album, a movement that, through the preservation of a certain autonomy of both voice and instrumentation, will begin a perhaps more complex process of reterritorialization … toward a post-rock mode.

Hansen further states that this process is completed on the live *I Might Be Wrong* recordings.[29] *Kid A* had, by contrast, deterritorialized "the voice and its instrumental avatar, the guitar."[30] That is, the territory normally occupied by Radiohead's prominent lead vocals and three guitars had been redistributed on *Kid A* by heavily filtering the voice and mostly exchanging guitars for keyboards; when guitars do appear on the album, they are filtered to sound like keyboards. This bold move not only reimagined Radiohead's own sound, but threatened the voice-guitar interplay and co-dominance so typical of pop-rock music, probably contributing to the album's ambivalent reception. On *Amnesiac*, the guitars return unfiltered, and the vocals are much clearer. Since "Packt Like Sardines" introduces these more conventional elements right away, the album immediately reclaims the musical space as belonging to voice and guitar. The sounds that appear later on the album (the sharp intake of breath in "You and Whose Army" and the guitar frets on "Hunting Bears") function not only as a reterritorializing, but almost as a bodily marking of the musical space.

The heavy, rhythmic feel of "Packt Like Sardines" contrasts with the slow, dreamy rhythms of the next song, the single "Pyramid Song," in which the syncopated piano creates a sense of timelessness, especially with the voice in 4/4 over it (see Example 6.3).

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[29] Hansen, "Deforming Rock," 126–27.

[30] Ibid., 118.

Example 6.3: "Pyramid Song," rhythm of verse

The "oohs" in the intro and chorus can be linked back to the 3-2-1 "aahs" of "How to Disappear Completely" and throughout *Kid A*, though this time the voice enters on scale degree 2 and extends down two more notes (see Example 6.4).

Example 6.4: "Pyramid Song," intro and chorus

The intro and chorus "oohs" are much higher than the vocals in the verse, lending an unearthly feel to the chorus in particular that furthers the song's dreamy quality. Because the verses are full lyrical statements and the sounds not filtered, as were the songs of *Kid A*, the song feels more grounded. Each verse offers a return to reality, as it were, from the otherworldly chorus. The vocal line centers around F-sharp, emphasizing C-sharp at the middle of the verses. The underlying harmony, however, moves stepwise, F-sharp to G major 7 to A to G major 7 to F-sharp, ending on G major 7 for the F-sharp in the voice so that the voice, stable-sounding in isolation, becomes a seventh over the harmony (see Example 6.5).

135

Example 6.5: "Pyramid Song," verse

"Jumped into the river..."   "Black-eyed angels..."

F♯   G   A   G   F♯   F♯m   E   G

The harmony finally resolves to F-sharp after the voice has died out in the coda with the repetition of the words "there was nothing to fear, nothing to doubt." The music here, rather than battling the subject, instead confirms his comforting statement with the F-sharp resolution.

This is only a surface calm, however, as the memory of past trauma can only temporarily be erased; the subject can only momentarily forget his human condition. The music of "Pyramid Song" goes on with a postlude of synthesized strings over the same syncopated piano chords, finally ending on F-sharp. The song soothes the manic energy of "Packt Like Sardines" but fails to progress harmonically, though it does build and finally "resolve." Doheny states that "Pyramid Song" began as "Nothing to Fear" and was then called "Egyptian Song," taking as its subject matter the flight of Moses and the Israelites from Egypt by way of Charles Mingus's song "Freedom."[31] This can be linked to Footman's discussion of the purported slaughter of the "first of the children" in *Kid A*'s "Idioteque."[32] By changing the song's title over time, Radiohead buries its meaning, similar to the way that Yorke's vocals and the various musical sounds are buried in layers of filtered electronica on *Kid A*, and the very method that Radiohead uses to market itself, burying its political leanings and anti-corporate messages in riddles for its audience to

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[31] Footman notes that the line "And we all went to heaven in a little row boat" comes from "The Clapping Song," "recorded by Shirley Ellis in 1965 and covered by the Belle Stars 17 years later." *Radiohead: A Visual Documentary*.

[32] Ibid., 72.

solve. Just as Radiohead cannot both evade and function successfully within the commodity culture it decries, so the subject's escape in "Pyramid Song" is only a temporary one. As a human living in modern society, he must return to face the trauma he is trying to forget.

"Pulk/Pull Revolving Doors" erases the security of "Pyramid Song" and returns to the full-blown paranoia of *Kid A*. While "Pyramid Song" contains all natural sounds, "Pulk/Pull" is all filtered electronica. Its computerized voice is built up from sampling Yorke's voice and playing it back in snippets, a contrast with *OK Computer*'s "Fitter Happier," which had used the computer's "actual" voice to read lyrics written by Yorke. Here, the human subject has apparently been merged with machine. Hansen notes that the "technical mediation" present on "Pulk/Pull" "does not so much blur the voice and sound as bring them together into a productive relationship while continuing to preserve their separation."[33] The song gives the voice "its most characteristic, most articulated function: producing vocalic effects that mimic the content of the utterances" and speaking in complete sentences.[34] The lyrics list various types of doors, liminal spaces of transition, points of escape: barn doors, revolving doors, sliding doors, and so forth, and end with the statement "there are trapdoors that you can't come back from." At the word "trapdoors," the voice is further distorted by feedback, but the rest of the line is stated clearly. This line jumps out at the listener as a mark of the real; the escape described in "Pyramid Song" is only a temporary one after all, and a slide through a trapdoor means no coming back.[35] The sounds of sirens from "Pyramid Song" come in just after this, marking the rest of "Pulk/Pull" as an interlude between danger signals. Rather than being a human cry for help, however, the voice is flattened and mechanized. The subject has been absorbed into the "machine" of technological sounds, and the earlier

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[33] Hansen, "Deforming Rock," 127.

[34] Ibid., 128.

[35] This downward slide leads to the statement in "Knives Out" that "I'm not coming back."

reterritorialization of clear vocals and unfiltered guitar is threatened by this absorption. Though the musical sounds on *Amnesiac* are less altered, the subject is no less threatened by technology. In merging with the subject, the machinery not only threatens his humanity, but defeats it and forces the continuance of a zombie-like existence animated by technology.

The next song, "You and Whose Army?," immediately brings a bodily experience back to the album, beginning with a sharp intake of breath followed by a short pause before the voice begins singing. The subject appears to have reclaimed control from the electronic elements of the previous song. The verse of "You and Whose Army?" presents a series of chords related by fourth and fifth: D-sharp minor, G-sharp, C-sharp minor, F-sharp, B minor, E, A, and finally C-sharp minor. The structure of the song is verse 1, verse 2, bridge, and chorus. As Example 6.6 shows, the chorus is centered around C-sharp, presenting C-sharp, E, F-sharp, C-sharp until the end of the song.

Example 6.6: "You and Whose Army?," chorus

Doheny calls the song "probably Radiohead's most politically pointed song to date." Yorke admits that the song is about Tony Blair's election and subsequent perceived betrayal of his electorate,[36] which might have expected radical social change from the Labor Party even if it wasn't explicitly promised during the campaign. The lyrics address "you and your cronies" but mention the "Holy Roman Empire" rather than the British

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[36] Doheny, *Back to Save the Universe*, 118.

Empire. Despite the hearty first breath, the voice starts out sounding weak and highly filtered, like the radio static sound of the song "Kid A."

Doheny notes that the World War II–style vocals "underline the third-wave conflict between Big Money and the anti-globalization/No Logo movement."[37] The "third wave" of corporate branding involves multinational corporations launching local brands to try to connect with the consumer at a personal level;[38] consumers in the know would presumably feel conflicted between supporting a "local" brand that was owned by a large corporation and seeking out a brand that had more relevance to the community. It is also possible that the WWII-style vocals are used to recall the radical social programs instituted by the British Labor Party at the end of the second World War (national health service, welfare state) when it took over from the Conservatives. The style also evokes the rise of global brands at the end of WWII, suggesting a politics that has come to accept the emptiness of the commodity form as "natural" and the acquiescence to consumer capitalism as the way of the world. Such a way of thinking creates a cognitive dissonance when Radiohead's message is considered against its actions; the band simultaneously decries the capitalist culture and thrives within it. In purchasing a Radiohead product, the consumer is supporting both a global rather than a local entity (Radiohead) and a multinational corporation (its record company). Radiohead manages to successfully participate in third-wave branding by building Internet communities among its audience and creating a positive "whisper campaign"; its No Logo tour in support of *Amnesiac* was facilitated through this technique, and *Kid A* was "leaked" in its entirety to Napster and distributed throughout an underground community of listeners. The anonymity of the Internet allows for a feeling of localized access to the band and its material and the false perception that the band has a personal relationship with its own "army" of listeners.


[37] Ibid., 118.

[38] See http://feed.proteinos.com/item/1586 (accessed 7 September 2005).

Footman notes that the syncopated "come on, come on" intro of "You and Whose Army" recalls *OK Computer*'s "Karma Police." At the climax of the song, the chorus, however, the "mood … [swings] completely from irony to evocation to rallying call,"[39] offering hope and an escape for those betrayed: "we ride tonight, ghost horses." The voice employs chromaticism to try to fit into the constantly shifting fifths harmony. In the bridge ("you and whose army … you and your cronies"), the voice sounds questioning, rising to a G-sharp over A-sharp minor 7 flat 5 (see Example 6.7); the harmony then alternates between D-sharp minor 7 flat 5 and G-sharp 7 before the second half of the bridge, "you forget so easily" (see Example 6.8), which then leads into the C-sharp of the chorus.

Example 6.7: "You and Whose Army?," bridge 1

"You and whose army…"

Example 6.8: "You and Whose Army?." bridge 2

"You forget so easily…"
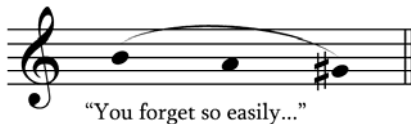
A second voice in fifths harmony comes in over the main one for the duration of the chorus but then finally resolves to parallel sixths for the words "ghost horses." This "ghost" voice is a return to the falsetto of the "oohs" in "Pyramid Song" as well as the wordless sections of "How to Disappear Completely" and "Optimistic." The subject is dying over and over again: consumed by the noise of the violent musical texture of "How to Disappear Completely," then choosing suicide in "Motion Picture Soundtrack," here he is attempting to escape on a "ghost horse," being already dead. The false cheer of the

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[39] Doheny, *Back to Save the Universe*, 119.

rallying cry, "we ride tonight," leads only to another futile attempt at escape: a "ghost horse" that is intangible and ethereal and cannot bear the subject's weight. There is no escape within the modern human condition, just as Radiohead itself is trapped in the capitalist machine.

The hopeful attitude expressed in "You and Whose Army?" is undermined by the next song, "I Might Be Wrong," in which even the title is an admission of insecurity. The first verse refers back to the empty search for enlightenment in "Packt Like Sardines" ("after years of waiting, nothing came"). Here, the subject states "I might be wrong, I could have sworn I saw a light coming on." The subject thinks he has caught a glimpse of the light of enlightenment, a utopian flame that he senses but can't quite catch hold of, unsure of whether it is real or an illusion.[40] This light could also represent a reanimation of the subject's defeated spirit, but that light has been extinguished for good. The next line recalls the nihilism of *Kid A* but suggests the subject has moved on: "I used to think there is no future left at all." The next "I used to think" is then cut off, and the pre-chorus comes in with the words "open up, begin again" in falsetto, showing that the subject beginning anew has been denaturalized and in fact emasculated. Though the subject seems to be reminding himself to leave his previous nihilism behind, the higher voice sounds slightly hysterical, as though the subject has regressed to a childlike state. The chorus presents conflicting ideas: "let's go down the waterfall"[41] suggests risk-taking behavior, but also a return to the natural sublime, with a current of inevitability as the subject races headlong over the edge of the cliff. The next line, "think about the good times, never look back" (second chorus: "have ourselves a good time, it's nothing at all"), recalls the hedonism of "Optimistic" ("here I'm allowed everything all of the time"). The

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[40] This notion brings to mind the ending poem on the Moody Blues' album *Days of Future Passed*: "Cold-hearted orb, which rules the night … we decide which is right, and which is an illusion."

[41] Footman links this imagery to the "fake idylls of 'Nice Dream' and 'In Limbo.'" *Radiohead: A Visual Documentary*, 78.

structure of "I Might Be Wrong" is intro, verse 1, bridge, pre-chorus, chorus, verse 2, bridge (no words), pre-chorus, chorus, bridge 2 ("keep it moving"), outro/coda. In the coda, the voice returns to a falsetto A–F, A–F–G–B-flat–A on "aah," recalling the *homme fatal* motive from *Kid A*. Rather than gradually accumulating, the groove coalesces immediately after the free-time filtered-guitar intro; a guitar riff (see Example 6.9) comes in for four bars and is then followed by four bars of drums, and then by the vocal melody.

Example 6.9: "I Might Be Wrong," guitar riff
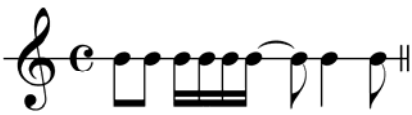
The song's harmony is based in D minor, but the voice continually returns to A, revealing the idea of the frozen scale degree 5: The indecision of the lyrics is reflected in the voice's inability to descend from this scale degree. Footman states that "I Might Be Wrong" "fulfills a similar function to 'How to Disappear Completely,' a relatively conventional song that startles because it sounds so out of place in the midst of all this experimental noisemongering."[42] "I Might Be Wrong" is more easily linked back to the first song on *Amnesiac*, however, with its ties to enlightenment or lack thereof. By contrast, "How to Disappear Completely" emerged uneasily out of the noise of the three previous songs, none of which presented coherent lyrics, let alone a conventional verse-chorus structure. Because of the straightforward song presentation, the subject on *Amnesiac* seems more clearly articulated, more fully present, if even less hopeful than that of *Kid A*.

Rather than next presenting a "hollow space" between sides, as did *Kid A*, *Amnesiac* instead proceeds immediately to its next single. The second half of the album begins with "Knives Out"; in contrast to *Kid A*, here the second-side "single" is real, in

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[42] Ibid., 78.

the sense that it was actually released on its own to the public to promote the album. However, unlike "Optimistic," with its sloganistic, surface-positive lyrics, "Knives Out" makes no pretense at positivity and thus inverts the construction on *Kid A* to present a "false" version of a "true" single. Verse 1 makes the statement first that "he's not coming back" and then that "I'm not coming back," a reference to the subject of *Kid A* and the insistence that "I'm not here, this isn't happening." Verse 2 notes that everyone is at the mercy of society: "if you'd been a dog, they would have drowned you at birth." Both verses 1 and 2 ask the unnamed "you" to "look into my eyes" to discover the sincerity behind the words: verse 2 states that "it's the only way you'll know I'm telling the truth." In restoring the Enlightenment privileging of sight, only the eyes can see the truth. The irony is that the subject is beyond sight, technologically—in being represented through recording—and existentially—in being no longer present. "Truth," which depends on the presence of the subject, forces "you" (the listener) to fend for "yourself" in a violent society in which we all look out only for ourselves, wherein the premise of existence is self-preservation: "knives out, catch the mouse, don't look down, shove it in your mouth." You should eat without looking at what is being eaten, lest the horror be too great. Not looking down also ensures that someone else cannot come along and kill you for the mouse. The lesson here is that because we are so intent on protecting ourselves and what is ours, we do not notice the destruction we must necessarily inflict on nature in order to survive.

The second chorus furthers the violence, making the command "cook him up, squash his head, throw him in the pot," an exploitation of the other constructed by culture's managing of nature. The third verse is the most startling, repeating again the words "I want you to know he's not coming back." This time, however, the subject states that "he's bloated and frozen, still there's no point in letting it go to waste." There is an efficiency in exploiting nature, in that the damage we do to nature is a reflection of the damage we do to ourselves. The last repetition of the chorus then makes clear how the

143

body will be used: "catch the mouse, squash his head, throw him in the pot." The knives are to be used for butchering and serving up dinner. A link can be made here back to the fairy-tale Pied Piper of "Kid A," with the idea of the "three blind mice," blindness corresponding to enlightenment and the inability to "see" the truth. The subject is now to be cannibalized, creating a literal dog-eat-dog society. Though undesirable, as a "bloated and frozen" "it," no longer a lyrical "I" or even a "he," the subject can still be consumed.[43]

The outro to the song is fairly short, as though the subject has nothing more to say on the matter; as in the aborted verse 3 of "Optimistic," with its "nervous, messed-up marionette," the horror of the imagery is too great to continue. Once the subject has literally been consumed, of course, there is no point in continuing the song. The structure of the song is intro, verse 1, chorus, verse 2, chorus, verse 3, and chorus, after which the song quickly ends. The third-related chords return, and the harmony alternates between C minor and E minor. This time, however, the E minor has an added sixth above the root (C-sharp), which undermines the stability created by the C. The chords progress stepwise: C minor, B-flat major, A-flat major 7, G minor 7, F major, E minor. Over this in the verse the voice sings scale degrees 3, 3, 3, 5, 6, and 6, making the tune less stable as the verse goes on (see Example 6.10).

Example 6.10: "Knives Out," verse

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[43] This cannibalistic imagery returns in *Hail to the Thief*'s "We Suck Young Blood."

This growing instability reflects the mounting horror of the subject's actions in catching and killing the mouse, and then being killed and eaten himself.

The cannibalization of the subject continues in the next song, "Morning Bell/Amnesiac." *Amnesiac* itself cannibalizes not only the theme of the vanishing subject lost in modern technological society, but also the song "Morning Bell," the penultimate song on *Kid A*. The *Amnesiac* version exorcises the song's rhythm and changes its key to an alternation between A minor and C-sharp minor, from the A-major/A-minor alternation on *Kid A*. The slowed-down rhythm emphasizes the vocals, which already sound hysterical when separated from the rhythmic harmony of the *Kid A* version. The alternating chords recall the tolling of a bell. Doheny notes that on *Kid A*, the rhythm takes five beats, while on *Amnesiac* it takes only two. Though recording technology has made it possible to create multiple versions of the same song, most often in the form of alternate mixes, the *Amnesiac* version of "Morning Bell" is given greater weight by virtue of its being the "title" track: "Morning Bell/Amnesiac."[44] One other important deviation from the *Kid A* version exists: at the key change at the phrase "cut the kids in half," at which point the chords alternate between E minor and G-sharp minor, the vocal line resolves to E rather than staying on D-sharp as it had in the *Kid A* version. This resolution comes first over a D chord, which then alternates with A until returning to the A minor/C-sharp minor dichotomy. The voice sings a last plaintive "release me" as the chords begin to fade out in the coda. While the *Kid A* version had a driving intensity, the *Amnesiac* version has desperation instead, with its lack of rhythm and foregrounded

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[44] Doheny, *Back to Save the Universe*, 123–24. The live version on *I Might Be Wrong* uses "*Kid A*'s 5/8 blues lament reading" but is a "far more swung version." *Back to Save the Universe*, 132. Hansen states that *Kid A*'s "Morning Bell" had been a "tour de force in vocalic doubling and complex fusion of fragmented voice with machinic instrumentals." Thus the voice had been subordinated to the instruments. In contrast, "'Morning Bell/Amnesiac' invests in the harmonic interchangeability of voice and instrumental sound…as if the band has simply lost its fear of vocalic imperialism." On the live recording, "something like the effect of balance achieved via the acoustic mode of 'Morning Bell/Amnesiac' is wrought through second-order simulation." That is, the band uses guitars to realize *Kid A*'s electronic sounds. "Deforming Rock."

vocals. The line "cut the kids in half" is particularly clear, and its resolution to E is poignant in that the voice-as-subject is making the choice rather than the harsh musical environment, as in *Kid A*. Doheny reads this line in the *Kid A* version as being the "heart-wrenching" climax of the song, but on *Amnesiac* as simply a "comically horrific denouncement of what we've suspected from the song's start."[45] That is, the subject is seen as a raging madman bent on revenge for the split with his spouse; after throwing the "clothes out on the lawn with the furniture," the final indignity is to divide up the children too. The resolution to E after "cut the kids in half" is ambiguous, meant to signify either a real solution or a mere surface fix to a deeper dilemma. The near-immediate return to the A minor/C-sharp minor alternation indicates that such a solution was only temporary, in any case. Placed here, after the statement that "he's/I'm not coming back" of "Knives Out," the plea in "Morning Bell" to "release me" takes on a new meaning: the subject seeks a release from the dog-eat-dog society of capitalism, in which he is at least figuratively being cannibalized. The phrase "light another candle" signifies an appeal to a higher power, after the bell for matins has rung. This light is also an image of enlightenment, which still has not been achieved. Whereas on *Kid A* the bell had led immediately to the escape of "Motion Picture Soundtrack," here there is no true release for the subject, as the subject itself becomes commodified in the next song.

"Dollars and Cents" is another of *Amnesiac*'s statements on capitalism; Radiohead makes a literal reference to the band as commerce in the chorus: "we are the dollars and cents, and the pounds and pence, and the mark and yen." The fact that the dollar is listed first suggests that the United States is the center of this universalizing global capitalism; "cents" is perhaps a pun on the "sense" of Enlightenment reason. This statement is followed by the words "we're gonna crack your little souls," a startling image for a normally nonvolatile commerce. Doheny describes this section of the song as

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[45] Doheny, *Back to Save the Universe*, 123.

the proponents of the No Logo movement rising up against globalists.[46] Footman refers to this song as Radiohead's "first explicitly political song, taking on the identity of global antichrists like the WTO [World Trade Organization] and the IMF [International Monetary Fund]."[47] In this sense the band is speaking of the "common people" as a commodity for global capitalists. The song is somewhat freely composed; its lack of recurring verse or chorus is a sort of resistance to the commodity form of music embodied in the closed form of the pop song. Given that the song is about global capitalism, its critique may be anarchist, but it also becomes rather amorphous, the musical image of the disorganized masses. A seductive bass riff continues throughout the song, alternating B major/minor. The B major 7 is substituted only in the second verse, "even when it's only warnings.…" The song is through-composed but can be parsed as six discrete verses, as shown in Example 6.11.

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[46] Ibid., 125.

[47] Footman, *Radiohead: A Visual Documentary*, 79.

Example 6.11: "Dollars and Cents," verse

Table 6.5 shows the interaction of the voice, instruments, and noise eruptions. The strings enter with the voice's pitches and/or rhythms except where noted, when they bring a counter-melody in verse 5. The function of the second voice changes over the song. At first it exists only as feedback behind the lead vocal, but then it becomes a shouted counter-melody behind the first "quiet down" statement (verse 3), then harmony in thirds,

148

and finally joins the strings with a counter-melody for the words "quiet down" in the final

verse.

Table 6.5: Noise eruptions in "Dollars and Cents"
(X = entrance; O = exit)

CD timings	Intro 0:00	Verse 1 0:13	0:26	0:40	0:44	0:48	Verse 2 1:09	1:17	1:23	1:36
Guitar/bass	X									
Drums	X									
Voice		X								
"Noise"/strings		X	O	X	O	X	O		X	O
"Noise"/sound effects										X
Second voice								X (feedback)		

CD timings	Verse 3 1:53	2:24	Verse 4 2:35	Verse 5 3:02	3:30	Verse 6 3:44	4:12
Guitar/bass	(X)						
Drums	(X)						
Voice	(X)		X				
"Noise"/strings	(X)			X (counter-melody)	O	X (voice in unison)	O
"Noise"/sound effects/	(X)	O					
Second voice	X (shouting)	O	X (harmony)			X (second melody with strings: "quiet down")	O

149

The lyrics of "Dollars and Cents" begin with the words "there are better things to talk about," followed by the admonition to "be constructive." The following warning, "be constructive with your blues, even when it's only warnings, even when you're talking war games," recalls the phrase "we're not scaremongering, this is really happening" from *Kid A*'s "Idioteque." A synthesized string swell ushers in the phrase "why don't you quiet down," which is repeated three times. The next verse, "you don't live in a business world," employs vocal harmonies in thirds to further sweeten the texture. The subject chastises the listener for not being able to understand his situation, an ironic statement since although the subject may live in a "business world," a world of commerce and commodity, he does not fit into it easily and has himself become only a commodity in this world. Addressing the listener as "babe" at the end of the verse seems insincere and out of character for the band, despite the change to a major-third harmony. Perhaps the only expression of humanity left in the music is the commodification of the infantile love object. The next verse grows harsh again, stating "it's all over, baby's crying … all over the planet's dead" (the crying baby representing hunger, and the baby itself representing humanity's self-propagation) and "I can see out of here … let me out of here." The melody of the first five verses is focused around B, but the final verse, "we are the dollars and cents," hammers out a rhythm on F-sharp. The riff of the vocals occasionally lines up with that of the guitar (see Example 6.12).

Example 6.12: "Dollars and Cents," guitar riff and rhythm of voice

The song's melody constricts as the message tightens to a slogan that, rather than a puffed-up, false message as on "Optimistic," acknowledges the reality of the world, that our true value to society is our economic worth.

"Hunting Bears" represents the "all music, no lyrics" form of "Treefingers," though it occurs after the "capitalist triptych" of "Knives Out," "Morning Bell/Amnesiac," and "Dollars and Cents" rather than at the midpoint of the album as "Treefingers" had. Doheny calls "Hunting Bears" a "timbral tone poem,"[48] words that could also be used to describe "Treefingers." After the lack of "real" guitars (i.e., nonfiltered) in *Kid A*, "Hunting Bears" presents sounds that are so clearly made by guitars that the sound of the player's fingers moving along the frets is audible. The organic is reclaimed here as it was in the opening breath of "You and Whose Army?" Like the singer's breath, however, the sounds are only signs—that is, representations—of human presence, or authenticity; despite these sounds of live performance, the album remains a recording. Ironically, the subject is absent from this song, though the title "Hunting Bears" implies some kind of action. The action implied is ambiguous: the bears

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[48] Doheny, *Back to Save the Universe*, 126.

are as likely to be hunting themselves as being hunted. The images of grimacing cartoon bears had appeared in the limited-edition release of *Kid A*; Hainge discusses these images and the later minotaur of *Amnesiac*'s packaging as problematizing the idea of nostalgia: the menacing bears evoke a childhood "of trauma that we do not wish to go back to,"[49] and likewise the trauma of *Kid A*. The menacing bears could be seen as hunting the subject. Since the subject is absent from this song, perhaps they have already caught and eaten him. This action can be mapped onto the band members' feelings at this point in their career, as being hunted by the critics, the media, or even their audience, in danger of being smothered with adulation.[50]

Next to the rhythmless "Hunting Bears," the heavily rhythmic, spliced-up intro to "Like Spinning Plates" is that much more striking, and recalls the gamelan of "Packt Like Sardines." The harmony of "Like Spinning Plates" was constructed by playing an unreleased song called "I Will" backwards; Thom Yorke then wrote new lyrics based on the phonics of the backwards melody.[51] The lyrics speak to politics and the harsh truth behind them: "while you make pretty speeches, I'm being cut to shreds." The statement "this just feels like spinning plates" evokes a variety-show juggling act, a pointless and anxiety-producing activity much as the act of listening to the album produces an anxiety in the listener and any act of interpretation seems both necessary and impossible. The subject makes the statement "I'm living in cloud cuckoo land," a reference to a fantasy world, but then sings "my body's floating down a muddy river," a sign of the real, as the subject had been described as already dead in "Knives Out." This marks also the subject's final journey from "floating down the Liffey" in "How to Disappear Completely" to "jumping in the river" in "Pyramid Song." The body floating down the

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[49] Hainge, "To(rt)uring the Minotaur," 76.

[50] This image brings to mind the movie *The Big Broadcast* (1932), in which Bing Crosby is nearly ripped apart by fans, as well as the Beatles' escape from fans at the train station in *A Hard Day's Night* (1964).

[51] Footman notes that Radiohead moves from "singing about cannibalism [in 'Knives Out'] to doing it." *Radiohead: A Visual Documentary*, 79. Arguably, this was already done on "Morning Bell/Amnesiac."

muddy river in the verse is a stark contrast to the chorus image of plates spinning in the air. The song is slight in its vocal presentation, presenting only a single verse and a chorus between a long intro and a short outro. The chorus is sung more clearly than the verse (which uses a covered tone), bringing a sense of reality to the statement "this just feels like spinning plates." The phrase "spinning plates" has an unnatural break in the syllables, leaping a fourth (D-sharp to G-sharp) for the second syllable of "spinning." This puts an unnatural emphasis on the second syllable as well. The verse has no chords under its chromatic melody until the last word or syllable of each line, but the chorus is fleshed out into the progression A–C-sharp minor–G-sharp. The ending of "river" on 4-3 over G-sharp sounds incomplete and as though the subject has given up.

After beginning with a burst of the same "god music" extraneous to the subject that ended *Kid A*, "Life in a Glasshouse" brings back the horns (led by trumpeter Humphrey Lyttleton) from *Kid A*'s "The National Anthem," but this time the horns are in concert with the voice and present a unified accompaniment from the get-go. The voice in the verse seems more like another ensemble instrument than a lead, with its chromaticism winding around that of the other instruments. The bluesy sound of the instruments accompanying the singer gives the air of a jazz funeral, providing a counterpoint or sympathetic accompaniment to the singer's words. At the chorus, the voice comes more to the fore as the horns play a block rhythm until the voice holds out a long note, at which point the horns erupt into their own wandering lines. At the line "there's someone listening in," the horns play a more discordant, arpeggiated rhythm. In contrast to the twice-voluntary leave-taking of *Kid A*, the subject here seems reluctant (at least on the surface) to bid farewell: "well of course I'd like to sit around and chat, well of course I'd like to stay and chew the fat." His leaving is put off to the fact that "there's someone listening in." The vocal line's rhythm is fluid and contrasts with the squarer horn line. The vocal rhythm at the chorus is much more rhythmically rigid and moves A-B-C (the inverse of *homme fatal*) instead of meandering through a B-flat as it had in the

verse. The lyrics suggest that someone (the subject's "only friend") is trying to help him overcome a mistake, presumably that of throwing a stone at his own glass house, since "she [the friend] is papering the windowpanes." The subject admonishes "your royal highnesses" in the next line: "don't talk politics and don't throw stones." He is asking for compassion ("think of all the starving millions") rather than politicizing the world's problems and casting blame for them. Verse 3 observes that "once again we are hungry for a lynching" and states that "you should turn the other cheek, living in a glass house." The subject conflates "we" and "you" in making a statement about society's appetite for finding a scapegoat and casting stones while remaining open for scrutiny ourselves. The final chorus/coda expresses regret at not being able to stay because "there's someone listening in." The horns end the album with a blatted held A-minor chord, no "god music" this time, as on *Kid A*. The ending of the vocal line is C-B-C-D-C, which would seem to be tonicizing C but occurs over an A-minor harmony. The harmony of the chorus is the most conventional on the album: A minor, E, E7, F, A minor, and an interceding B-flat before a return to A minor. The word "only" is a 4-3 alternation of F-E over a C major 7 chord. Footman notes that "the theme ['don't talk politics and don't throw stones'] goes back to the central figure in [*OK Computer*'s] 'No Surprises,' a man who's given up the political fight and retreated into bourgeois conformity."[52]

"Life in a Glasshouse" can also be linked to the statement "I'm a reasonable man, get off my case" of "Packt Like Sardines."[53] Doheny describes the message of "Life in a Glasshouse" as the "strange way that fame can both provide a privileged platform from which to speak, and at the same time be used to undermine the credibility of whatever might be said from it."[54] The band is clearly aware of the contradiction between "railing against the greed of multinational corporations" and "simultaneously collaborating with

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[52] Ibid., 79.

[53] Doheny, *Back to Save the Universe*, 129.

[54] Ibid., 128.

them in the creation of million-dollar fortunes for all concerned."[55] The band members have continually retreated from their own political statements: As Thom Yorke has said, "I should shut the fuck up because it's pop music and it's not anything more than that."[56] The members of Radiohead themselves are the ones living in a glass house, and any criticism they make of the commodity culture can be lobbed back at them as hypocritical for profiting from that very culture. The "someone listening in" at the end of each chorus is both literally listeners of the album (*Amnesiac* itself being the glass house) and figuratively governmental scrutiny of the people pointing out the world's problems: we too are the ones living in a glass house, and global capital has made it impossible to speak the truth. To the extent that truth can appear, it appears only face-to-face, through the eyes ("look into my eyes, it's the only way you'll know I'm telling the truth") rather than in the words expressed. The last refuge of humanity occurs face-to-face, when one can find what little truth of humanity remains by looking into the eyes of the other. Behind this idea, however, lies the figure of authenticity, the suspicion of representation and of writing, and a belief in the power of presence (the mouth intaking breath, the hands sliding down a guitar fret). Even in reading the truth from the eyes of the other, however, one is still "reading," that is, deferring the presence of the truth. As well, the listener "listening in" has become a form of Big Brother, an unwitting agent of capital by the very act of buying and consuming the album. This is perhaps the final irony: that we can only "see" the other and recognize the "truth" of that other's words insofar as the other is willing to let a Big Brother figure see, determine, and appropriate that truth as well. We are apparently left with the open "truth" of Big Brother, making what community we can out of it, or with the closed delusions of the self, an escape from the world that leads to the prison of self-delusion. Yorke's statement that "it's pop music and it's not anything

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[55] Ibid.

[56] Clarke, *Hysterical and Useless*, 97.

155

more than that" breaks the spell of the commodity, the myth that the commodity is more than what it is. Only our mythologizing discourse, a discourse promoted by the music industry, prevents us from recognizing the commodity character of the music we buy. Of course, Yorke should not be taken literally as saying that music ought therefore to simply give itself over to its commodity status; it must continue to resist the commodity form— not as markers of authenticity that simply serve as the terms under which the mythologization takes place, but as a means of unveiling the very process of mythologization, the ways in which the commodity appears as the illusion of something more than a commodity. In the end, music as a commodity must become self-critical, must confess its commodity character without surrendering its utopian content: that the world might be otherwise.

Amnesiac is not, then, an antidote for the bleakness of *Kid A* at all, but rather an unsympathetic eulogy for a subject who is dead before the album even begins. Although *Amnesiac* does succeed to some extent in blurring the memory of the traumas of *Kid A*, it cannot completely obliterate them. The warmer and less distorted sound of *Amnesiac*'s "singles" functions merely as a mask for the nihilistic subject, whose humanity is unable to be redeemed in the face of commercialism. In the end the subject is, as the album and as Radiohead itself, only a commodity, something to be exchanged for "dollars and cents" in a capitalist society.

Chapter 7: Epitaph

Some authors have treated *Amnesiac* as a collection of disparate songs rather than a series with an underlying structure and an end in sight; Radiohead has stated that *Kid A* and *Amnesiac* are really one huge album. Though it is not clear whether they should be read in sequence, the latter should at least be considered as a companion piece. By its release after *Kid A*, *Amnesiac* thus becomes by default the consequent to the antecedent of *Kid A*, the solution to the problem presented by the lack of a subject.[57] But although the songs of *Amnesiac* can be linked to and perhaps shed light on those of *Kid A*, there is no linear narrative to "solve" the problem posed on *Kid A*, of the subject's would-be suicide or self-negation.

Examining the structures of the albums may aid our interpretation. While *Kid A* starts tentatively, with a repeated keyboard melody, *Amnesiac* starts with a loud rhythmic gamelan figure. It takes just as long for the voice to enter, and we hear that the band has pulled one over on us again; rather than returning immediately to their conventional guitar-based, melody-driven sound expressed on the earlier albums, Radiohead has presented another experimental anomaly in the rock music sound space. Doheny discusses the song sequence of *Amnesiac* and how it relates to those of Radiohead's previous albums, making the case that *Amnesiac*'s sequence is not so different after all.[58] Ian Watson states that *Amnesiac*'s "sequencing of … songs and often bleak lyrical tone" make it a "very troubling album indeed."[59] Greg Hainge links the despair and anguish to Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea*, in which the protagonist "undergoes a kind of breakdown

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[57] Footman states that *Amnesiac* "seems less of a sequel or companion piece … more of an indecently hasty remake. Which doesn't make it a waste, just something of a disappointment—although, if *Amnesiac* had been released first, opinions might well have been reversed." *Radiohead: A Visual Documentary*, 80. Doheny notes that if Radiohead had released *Kid A* as a double album, as they had considered, they would have prevented this misinterpretation. *Back to Save the Universe*, 108.

[58] Doheny, *Back to Save the Universe*, 116–17.

[59] Watson, "The Ballad of Thom Yorke," quoted in Hainge, "To(rt)uring the Minotaur," 73.

following his realization of the terrible contingency of the universe." Eventually he realizes his nausea can be cured only by a jazz melody that "seems … to have an internal coherence and justification, for every note in its melody needs to be in its place for the melody to work." Rather than presenting a solution, despite the jazz feel of the final "Life in a Glasshouse," Radiohead's music "serves merely to express this sense of being lost, to give voice to the space of trauma that modern man can feel when faced with a global economy in which the individual can have little effect."[60]

Radiohead released *Kid A* three years after its immensely popular *OK Computer*, choosing to proceed in a more experimental direction rather than follow its classic, popular sound. Six months after *Kid A*'s ambivalent reception, the band released *Amnesiac*, billing it as a return to the original, popular guitar-driven sound but instead presenting more strange studio experiments and lyric obfuscation. Ultimately the album did present a salvation in the form of a warmer, non-filtered sound and songs that work as companion pieces, if not antidotes, to those of *Kid A*, though the subject present on both is similarly damned in his position in modern society. The band toured in support of *Amnesiac* but included songs from *Kid A* as well. For many listeners, it took the tour to make sense of both albums by presenting them together in performance. Apart from a few TV appearances and tour performances of earlier versions of *Kid A*'s songs, that album did not exist in live performance until *Amnesiac* was released. While fans normally attend a live show with the expectation of hearing how the band treats album material live, in this case they might have been looking to have the songs interpreted, after not being able to make sense of them from the album. Amazingly, given the technology involved in the albums' production, Radiohead managed to realize the material live without resorting to hiring additional tour personnel.[61] Jonny Greenwood

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[60] Hainge, "To(rt)uring the Minotaur," 73–74.

[61] The band performed "The National Anthem" and "Idioteque" on *Saturday Night Live* in 2000, coming across as an experimental music-art collective with Jonny Greenwood furiously twiddling the knobs of his electronic equipment.

has stated that "[t]he more concerts we do, the more dissatisfied we get with trying to reproduce the live sound on the record. In a way it can't be done and that's a relief, really. When you just accept that, recording becomes a different thing."[62] Perhaps without the saving sound of the songs from *Amnesiac*, performing songs from *Kid A* would have further confused the audience and led them into a different kind of alienation, a distancing from the band rather than a shared "us against the world" mentality.

"WE ARE THE DOLLARS AND CENTS": RADIOHEAD AS COMMODITY

Despite the supporting tour for *Amnesiac*, the album failed to sell in the numbers that *Kid A* had. Perhaps listeners were wary of being fooled again, despite Radiohead's promise of a return to the guitar-driven sound. It was no secret that the albums had been recorded during the same studio sessions, and the timing of *Amnesiac* only six months after *Kid A* might also have discouraged listeners from buying both. The tour, however, sold out across the United States. Listeners were obviously eager to hear the band live again after the long wait between the *OK Computer* tour (1997) and the present one (2001). The band, too, seemed to have renewed energy, ready to give the crowds what they wanted instead of holing up petulantly and refusing to bow to commercial demands. Presumably the band had earned enough from the massive success of its second and third albums that there was no immediate financial need to tour. Too, the band members might have realized that commercialism is not a bad thing after all, and that it was to their benefit to keep their presence active in the minds of the fans rather than retreating to the insular world of the studio. Joseph Tate notes that in the song "Dollars and Cents" from *Amnesiac*, the "we" of "we are the dollars and cents" is "metaphorically Radiohead, a product we buy with pounds and pence."[63]

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[62] Quoted in Doheny, *Back to Save the Universe*, 133; original in *Wire.*

[63] Tate, introduction to *The Music and Art of Radiohead*, 3.

The tour rooted the band in a reality that the studio experience could not, which further breaks down the categories of the real and the unreal and brings full circle Jonny Greenwood's statement about all studio recording ultimately being equally unreal as a reproduction of acoustic/live sound. The touring experience humanized the band for its fans in a way that the studio album could not and brought them together in a group sense of alienation against the rest of society rather than isolating them from one another as well as society. The band was quite willing to make money from selling tour merchandise, also sold through its subcompany W.A.S.T.E.[64] Now fans could declare their alienation on a T-shirt or hooded sweatshirt. Radiohead once declared they would never again perform "Creep," after touring with it incessantly when it was a hit single. Now, however, they seemed to recognize the benefits of supporting their albums and singles on the road.

For Radiohead's sixth album, *Hail to the Thief* (2003), the band once again promised a return to the guitar-driven sound. The album packaging and lyrics were just as obscure as the previous two releases, however. This album also went to number one in the charts.[65] Yorke has stated that the sound of *Hail to the Thief* is "*OK Computer 2*," going on to say that "What we will do from now on, should not be anything like we've done before.… Radiohead will be completely unrecognizable in two years. At least I hope so. It's the only perspective of the future that I can live with."[66] Guitarist Ed O'Brien seems to agree with this assessment, saying that *Hail to the Thief* is "the end of an era."[67] Allan F. Moore and Anwar Ibrahim note that opinion is divided on "whether

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[64] Tate notes that W.A.S.T.E. is named after "the underground postal system in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*." "Hail to the Thief: A Rhyzomatic Map in Fragments," in Tate, *The Music and Art of Radiohead*, 195.

[65] Clarke, *Hysterical and Useless*, 164.

[66] Interview with the Dutch magazine *OOR*, quoted in Tate, "Hail to the Thief," 194.

[67] Klosterman, "Meeting Thom is Easy"; quoted in Moore and Ibrahim, "Identifying Radiohead's Idiolect," 139.

Hail is the 'real' successor to *OK Computer*, with the more extreme experimentation of the *Kid A*/*Amnesiac* sessions the work of a band fleeing the responsibility of writing a 'proper' follow-up, or that *Hail* is somehow the inevitable outcome of these albums, in the same way as Radiohead viewed *Kid A* as the only way forward from *OK Computer*."[68] Table 7.1 shows the song placement on Radiohead's six albums; *Hail to the Thief* returns to the conventional formula of presenting a single as the first song and interspersing others throughout the tracks.

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[68] Moore and Ibrahim, "Identifying Radiohead's Idiolect," 139. See also Danny Eccleston, *Q* magazine, Radiohead Special Edition, EMAP Metro Limited: 34–35; Jake Kennedy, *Record Collector*, November 2000: 33; Gareth Grundy, *Q* magazine, Radiohead Special Edition, 122; David Cheal and Andrew Perry, "Radiohead: Are They Still the Best?" *Daily Telegraph* (5 June 2003: 21).

**Table 7.1: Song placement on Radiohead albums
(singles are in bold)**

Track number	*Pablo Honey* (1993)	*The Bends* (1995)	*OK Computer* (1997)	*Kid A* (2000)	*Amnesiac* (2001)[69]	*Hail to the Thief* (2003)[70]
1	"You"	"Planet Telex"	**"Airbag"**	"Everything in Its Right Place"	"Packt Like Sardines in a Crushd Tin Box"	**"2 + 2 = 5"**
2	**"Creep"**	**"Bends"**	**"Paranoid Android"**	"Kid A"	**"Pyramid Song"**	"Sit Down, Stand Up."
3	"How Do You?"	**"High and Dry"**	"Subterranean Homesick Alien"	"The National Anthem"	"Pulk/Pull Revolving Doors"	"Sail to the Moon"
4	**"Stop Whispering"**	**"Fake Plastic Trees"**	"Exit Music (for a Film)"	"How to Disappear Completely"	"You and Whose Army?"	"Backdrifts"
5	"Thinking about You"	"Bones"	**"Let Down"**	"Treefingers"	"I Might Be Wrong"	**"Go to Sleep"**
6	**"Anyone Can Play Guitar"**	"Nice Dream"	**"Karma Police"**	"Optimistic"	**"Knives Out"**	"Where I End and You Begin"
7	"Ripcord"	**"Just"**	"Fitter Happier"	"In Limbo"	"Amnesiac/Morning Bell"	"We Suck Young Blood"
8	"Vegetable"	**"My Iron Lung"**	"Electioneering"	"Idioteque"	"Dollars & Cents"	"The Gloaming"
9	"Prove Yourself"	"Bullet Proof…I Wish I Was"	"Climbing Up the Walls"	"Morning Bell"	"Hunting Bears"	**"There There"**
10	"I Can't"	"Black Star"	**"No Surprises"**	"Motion Picture Soundtrack"	"Like Spinning Plates"	"I Will"
11	"Lurgee"	"Sulk"	**"Lucky"**		"Life in a Glasshouse"	"A Punchup at a Wedding"
12	"Blow Out"	**"Street Spirit (Fade Out)"**	"The Tourist"			"Myxomatosis"
13	"Creep" (Radio Version)					"Scatterbrain"
14						"A Wolf at the Door"

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[69] Chart placements for *Amnesiac*: "Pyramid Song" 5 UK, "Knives Out" 13 UK. *Amnesiac* reached number 1 on the UK charts and number 2 on the US charts. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Radiohead#Studio_albums (accessed 11 July 2005).

[70] Chart placements for *Hail to the Thief*: "There There" 4 UK, "Go to Sleep" 12 UK, "2 + 2 = 5" 15 UK. *Hail to the Thief* reached number 1 on the UK charts and number 3 on the US charts. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Radiohead#Studio_albums (accessed 11 July 2005).

Hail to the Thief presents, at least on the surface, a further defragmenting of the narrative. The cover art and booklet with the special edition of the album present a series of maps that serve not to clarify but to further obscure any meaning. Tate has described the album in terms of Deleuze and Guattari's "rhyzomatics," a way of looking at something as a series of connections from any one point to any other rather than as a clear linear path or progression.[71] While, admittedly, Tate's reading of *Hail to the Thief* is not meant to be the final summation of the album, he leans a bit heavily on the biblical comparisons and neglects the music altogether in favor of the lyrics. That said, he does open up the text to multiple possibilities rather than pinning a single narrative on it. Davis Schneiderman also notes the use of this strategy on the band's website.[72]

Fans immediately assumed that the title was a reference to the stolen US election in 2000, but Jonny Greenwood has stated that its subject matter reaches much further: "We'd never name a record after one political event.… The record's bigger than that."[73] Martin Clarke states that *Hail to the Thief* is "a coda to *OK Computer*, *Kid A* and *Amnesiac*, rooted in Thom's concerns about the dark political forces that move in the shadows." Regardless of whether the album is overtly political in the sense of referring to a single event, it still contains numerous references to Orwellian dystopias: the very title of the first song, "2 + 2 = 5," warns us that we are entering the same type of world as on *Kid A* and *Amnesiac*. The song also has the phrase "You have not been paying attention," a reference to O'Brien's conversation with Winston Smith in *1984*.[74] The next song, "Sit Down, Stand Up," ends with the chanted words "the raindrops," recalling the "rain down, rain down" of "Paranoid Android." Here, rather than soothing the listener, the beat is incessant and unyielding and beats him into submission. In "Sail to the Moon," the lyrics

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[71] Tate, "Hail to the Thief," 177–97.

[72] Schneiderman, "Radiohead and the Improbability of Resistance," 22.

[73] Capitol Records website, quoted in Tate, "Hail to the Thief," 196.

[74] Tate, "Hail to the Thief," 182.

discuss build[ing] an ark and sail[ing] us to the moon," ending on a dreamy falsetto that abruptly descends, leaving the piano to continue the climb on arpeggiated chords. "Backdrifts" contains the lines "all evidence has been buried, all tapes have been erased," another possible political link: to Watergate. The subtitle "Honeymoon is Over" could refer to the end of the "honeymoon" period after an election, in which the elected leader is given the benefit of the doubt by the legislature and his legislation treated favorably. "Go to Sleep" suggests another alternative to political action: "I'm gonna go to sleep, let this wash all over me." Tate suggests a link to Slavoj Žižek's "estimation of the situation that what we do in the face of technological change is simply 'go to sleep' and let it wash all over us. The perfect response is to let the capitalist machinery go on without interruption."[75] The next song, "Where You End and I Begin," has the line "the dinosaurs roam the earth," a link back to "Optimistic" on *Kid A*. The line "there'll be no more lies" recalls the "little white lies" of "Kid A" and "Motion Picture Soundtrack." Tate notes that the last line of this song, "I will eat you alive," segues nicely into the first line of the next ("We Suck Young Blood"[76]): "are you hungry?"[77] "The Gloaming" refers to twilight, "to the shadows blue and red," and the next song, "There There," begins "in pitch dark."[78] The next song "I Will," is the song from which *Amnesiac*'s "Like Spinning Plates" was derived. The narrative of "A Punchup at a Wedding" can be described as simply that, but it can also be given a more political reading than just "corrupted societal functioning."[79] Yorke has stated that "Myxomatosis" has to do with mind control rather than a literal

[75] Ibid., 185. Tate refers to Žižek's *On Belief* (Routledge: London and New York, 2001).

[76] This song recalls the *New Yorker* article on homeschooled Christian evangelicals being groomed for right-wing political service at a Christian university that emphasizes public service.

[77] Tate describes a marketing campaign for *Hail to the Thief* in which flyers with lyrics from this song were posted around Los Angeles. The 800 number included was for the "*Hail to the Thief* hotline, a voicemail labyrinth in which callers can easily be lost but can also hear songs from the album." "Hail to the Thief," 187–88.

[78] Tate notes that the band considered naming the album after the subtitle to "There There": "The Bony King of Nowhere," but the title was deemed "too prog." Ibid., 189.

[79] Ibid., 191.

statement about the rabbit-killing virus,[80] and this can also be related to the Orwellian themes. The swirling guitars drop out, ironically, for the stuttered words "I don't know why I feel so tongue-tied." In "Scatterbrain," the song begins with a very calm delivery of the words "I'm walking out in a force ten gale." Tate notes that "A Wolf in the Door" discusses "a flan in the face," a possible reference to cabinet minister Clare Short being hit in the face with a pie in 2001.[81] The triplet arpeggiation in the guitars and bass recalls the Beatles' "I Want You (She's So Heavy)," while the quasi-rapped lyrics recall Bob Dylan. The beginning of the song sounds like the Beatles' "Because."

Joseph Dettmar notes that on *Hail to the Thief*, Yorke's voice is less processed than on the two albums that preceded it. He posits that this is because of the more overtly political character of *Hail to the Thief* and notes that the "somewhat cleaner distinction between man and machine" hearkens all the way back to *The Bends*.[82] The song "Sail to the Moon" evokes "Pyramid Song" from *Amnesiac*, with its "moon full of stars and astral cars" and its dreamy sound. Links can be drawn between the songs of *Kid A*/*Amnesiac* and *Hail to the Thief*: "Sail to the Moon" has an instrumentation, melody, and dreamy quality similar to "Pyramid Song" and "How to Disappear Completely." Yorke's voice is less filtered or abstract than on either of the two preceding albums, possibly because his message is clearer, or because he wishes to convey it more strongly. The voice is no longer simply part of the texture, but a subject in its own right. In a sense, Yorke has undergone his own disappearance/self-effacement and reemergence similar to that of the subject on "How to Disappear Completely" through "Treefingers" and "Optimistic."

Taken next to *Kid A* and *Amnesiac*, *Hail to the Thief* sounds much less coherent; it is possible that this is because the previous two albums required more work to make them hang together, with the lack of singles contributing to the idea that there must be an

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[80] Klosterman, "Meeting Thom is Easy," 62–70; quoted in Tate, "Hail to the Thief," 192.

[81] Tate, "Hail to the Thief," 194.

[82] Dettmar, foreword to Tate, *The Music and Art of Radiohead*, xix.

overriding concept controlling things. Since *Hail to the Thief* immediately brought to mind for many the taunts of the 2000 election, a concept is presumed from the get-go.[83] It is possible to read an underlying politicism to all the songs of the album, but that could also be said of Radiohead's other works, depending on whether one defines political writings as statements on man's alienation in modern society. Even the band's first single, "Creep," could be read as making a statement on alienation, albeit at a very personal level.

With *Amnesiac*, the artwork of the preceding albums attained the level of art object, with a limited-edition book of drawings, complete with a fake library reference card inside the front cover. The band members created a false artifact that artist Stanley Donwood has said is "designed to be left for decades in a drawer, in an old cupboard, in a dusty attic, in an abandoned house, and found after I am dead."[84] The packaging for *Hail to the Thief* contains, along with the map of drawings with anti-capitalist slogans, what looks like a playbill with actual song lyrics, the first included since *OK Computer*. The design of the packaging recalls Jethro Tull's concept album *A Passion Play* (1973). We seem to have a concept album on the surface without the coherence in the music to support it, an empty signifier, whereas with *OK Computer* and *Kid A* (and *Amnesiac*) listeners were forced to divine the concept for themselves. The members of Radiohead have stated that they are moving in yet another new direction after *Hail to the Thief*. The challenge will be to retain their audience without selling out critique.

Radiohead's *Kid A* and *Amnesiac* ultimately function as resistant concept albums—resistant in their musical and lyrical presentation, in that they rarely offer complete and coherent pop songs, and resistant in their thwarting of expectations for

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[83] Bryan Sale noted in private conversation that he would have bought the album on the title alone, because of the presumed subject matter.

[84] Quoted in Leblanc, "'Ice Age Coming,'" 100. Leblanc discusses how Donwood has worked with the band since *The Bends* to create "an iconographic language" that "provid[es] a strong visual analog to the music" (85).

Radiohead's musical style. The band subverts the concept album tradition by presenting material that requires effort on the part of the listener to make sense of, yet offering little to no plot, characters, or dramatic action to clarify the concept. The band also challenges the progressive-rock tradition to which Radiohead has so often been compared by disavowing any claims of meaning in the albums. While embracing the technology required to produce these albums, the band also rails against its ultimate effects on not only the albums' vanishing subject, but mankind; in the end, we are all dehumanized and made into a commodity, just as the band itself has been. It is of course ironic that a band making its living from the sale of goods in a capitalist society would be so vehemently anti-capitalist in its work, at least on the surface. By articulating the subject in *Kid A*/*Amnesiac* with regard to a culture of consumption, Radiohead maps itself onto that subject as well. The whole notion of the rock band is itself constructed within capitalism, and by operating within such a system, Radiohead at some level relinquishes its autonomy and thus its power over its own product, making the band subject to control by its fans, its record company, and the marketplace. In the end, the "concept" is larger than simply one, or even two, albums: Radiohead the band ultimately becomes Radiohead the brand, yet another empty signifier for the consumer to buy, despite the band's pretensions to the contrary.

Appendix: Radiohead—Select Discography

1993 *Pablo Honey* (Capitol CDP 0777 7 81409 2 4)

1995 *The Bends* (Capitol CDP 7243 8 29626 2 5)

1997 *OK Computer* (Capitol CDP 7243 8 55229 2 5)

2000 *Kid A* (Capitol CDP 7243 5 27753 2 3)

2001 *Amnesiac* (Capitol CDP 7243 5 32764 2 3)

2001 *I Might Be Wrong*: *Live Recordings* (Capitol CDP 7243 5 36616 2 5)

2003 *Hail to the Thief* (Capitol CDP 7243 5 84543 2 1)

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