

Hail to the Thief.
Strategies of Resistance in Radiohead's Musical Discourse

Radiohead represent one of the most important artistic and critical voices in contemporary British (and global) culture. Their music escapes the very notion of identity, to posit itself as a polyphonic soundscape in which different voices, stories and genres mix in rich and unpredictable ways. Their sound is, indeed, based on dialogical interactions among pop, jazz, world and electronic music. The richness and complexity of their artistic form is matched by the band's unique intellectual effort to articulate 'resistant' discourses against those who exercise power both at the political and economical levels. According to Stephen Duncombe,

cultural resistance can provide a sort of 'free space' for developing ideas and practices. Freed from the limits and constraints of the dominant culture, you can experiment with new ways of seeing and being and develop tools and resources for resistance. And as culture is usually something shared, it becomes a focal point around which to build a community Cultural resistance can also be thought of as political resistance. Some theorists [believe] that politics is essentially a cultural discourse, a shared set of symbols and meanings, that we all abide by. If this is true then the rewriting of that discourse – which is essentially what cultural resistance does – is a political act in itself.¹

¹ Stephen Duncombe, ed., "Introduction", in *Cultural Resistance Reader* (London: Verso, 2002), 5-6.

This paper investigates Radiohead's strategies of resistance in relation to the imperatives of mainstream pop both in terms of musical form (through the analysis of the band's musical and literary 'otherness') and musical communication (focussing on the potential of music to criticise socio-political dynamics and on the very fruition/distribution of music within society). Radiohead have often been criticised for their tendency to stand against a system (the musical establishment) of which they are an essential part; however, as White observes, "Radiohead's aesthetic strategy is not to avoid the enemy but to inhabit it and to reorient its energies".² In this perspective, the paper isolates four moments in Radiohead's musical career, which are particularly significant in order to investigate the band's musical and discursive strategies. The first coincides with the publication of the *Ok Computer* album in 1997, which is particularly important for its musical inventiveness and for its investigation of the relationship between technology, capitalism and the 'human'; the second with the publication within a few months of two experimental albums, *Kid A* and *Amnesiac*, in 2000/2001 (which, as we will discover, seem to enact contemporary technological alienation); the third with the publication of *Hail to the Thief* in 2003, the band's most political album, characterized by a sharp

² Curtis White, "Kid Adorno", in Joseph Tate, ed., *The Music and Art of Radiohead* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 13.

focus on American politics and the effects of globalised capitalism; and the fourth and last with the release of *In Rainbows* in 2007, which was first sold on-line with fans left free to choose the album's price, escaping in this way (at least in part) the constraints of the music industry. Before focussing on these four moments, it is worth making a brief reference to the origins of the British band and to their music before *Ok Computer*.

The band that would become Radiohead was formed in the mid-eighties by five schoolmates at the exclusive Abingdon school in Oxford; it is ironic that a band known today for its critique of capitalism is really the 'product' of the English public school system and that it was formed in a place – Oxford – which is unquestionably associated with high culture and the higher-education industry. Basically, Oxford stands for traditional Englishness, for an exclusive, often white and aristocratic world. On the contrary Radiohead's music represents an open space in which different languages (high and low) and different musical traditions mix to create something new. They are white musicians who are particularly fascinated by world and black music to the extent of enriching their musical lexicon with samples and rhythmic solutions often found in such genres as jazz, dance, jungle, etc, especially in the two experimental albums published in 2000-2001.

Radiohead's early musical efforts seemed to be particularly influenced by American grunge and more specifically by bands such as Nirvana, whose leader Kurt Cobain became in the early 1990s the spokesman for a generation of alienated American youth. A similar function was to be played in Britain by Radiohead's singer, Thom Yorke. "Creep" (1992) – possibly the band's most famous song – voices the sense of alienation felt by many young people living in 1990s Britain: "I wish I was special/ You are so fucking special/ but I'm a creep/ what the hell I'm doing here?/ I don't belong here".³ The term "creep", as Yorke explains, refers to a condition which is not completely negative: "It means people who hate themselves, but get something creative out of it".⁴ The ideas articulated in the song's narrative indirectly define the position of Radiohead within the homologized musical scene, which within a few years was to dominate Britain. Radiohead are basically middle-class boys, who are not particularly good-looking (an NME journalist will define Yorke "ugly"⁵) and who seem determined to speak for losers and outsiders of any kind. In this sense, Radiohead were to represent a sort of antidote to Britpop, the musical phenomenon which was to emerge in the mid 90s, dominating the media with the notorious rivalry between Oasis and Blur. Britpop and the Cool Britannia phenomenon in general (which also affected literature, art, football and fashion) were about winners, about a sense of belonging, about a rediscovered Englishness to be contrasted with any American influence. Radiohead didn't really care about this parochial trend (Britpop was

³ Radiohead, *Pablo Honey* (Parlophone, 1993).

⁴ Dave Jennings, "Jeepers, Creepers", *Melody Maker* (10 October 1992), 13.

⁵ Keith Cameron, "Radiohead, London Islington Smashed!", *NME* (19 December 1992), 69.

basically a white, working class, English rather than British, phenomenon); their concerns were in a sense 'transnational', they were preoccupied with the value of the human being in a hardly human world.

In 1997, Radiohead published one of the most important albums of the twentieth century: *Ok Computer*. According to Tim Footman, Radiohead's third album is "something which defines our age in the same way that Beethoven's Ninth Symphony and Eliot's *Waste Land* and Warhol's Marylins define theirs".⁶ Its relevance is given by the band's capacity to articulate the sense of alienation felt by many at the turn of the century, especially in relation to a technological reality which seemed to represent a menace for the 'human'. The band's intelligence resides in the very use it makes of the subject it criticises; *Ok Computer* is an album about hi-tech culture which speaks the language of technology. But before analyzing the complex dialectic between art and technology – which is at the basis of Radiohead's masterpiece – in a global perspective, it is worth referring to the album in terms of a complex political enunciation articulated in 1997 Britain.

1997 is a key year in the recent history of Britain; it was then that a number of very important events took place such as the cloning of the sheep Dolly, the death of Lady Diana (with the resulting crisis of monarchy), and the election of New Labour prime minister Tony Blair. According to many, Blair's success was due to his capacity to construct an image of himself which could be easily appropriated by young people. In June 1997 he declared to the *Daily Telegraph*: "within everyone of my generation there is an aspiring musician waiting to get out".⁷ He had also appeared with U2 at a party organized by pop magazine *Q* and included the Gallagher brothers (of Oasis) in the special guest list at No. 10 Downing Street. If, on the one hand, Britpop had already been considered in 1996 as a symbol of conservative Britain by the MP John Redwood, on the other Blair was capable of appropriating Britpop as part of the semiotic repertoire which was to provide the optimism, positivity and energy characterizing the New Labour strategy.⁸

Ok Computer was strongly at odds with this kind of cultural and political climate: both the music and the lyrics were characterized by a sense of pessimism and anxiety. As Cavanagh noted in 2007,

Radiohead have been criticised for their gloomy prognoses of humanity's inexorable meltdown but, ten years later, *Ok Computer* seems all the wiser for not being suckered into fashionable optimism. The distress in Thom Yorke's lyrics was – to say the least – emotionally at odds with 1997's widespread feelings of hope and renewal.⁹

The pessimism characterizing the album is in part influenced by a number of books read by Yorke in 1997, in particular a long essay called *The State We're in* by Will Hutton, which is "an analysis of Britain's predicaments in

⁶ Tim Footman, *Radiohead. Welcome to the Machine. Ok Computer and the Death of the Classic Album* (New Malden: Chrome Dreams, 2007), 10.

⁷ *The Daily Telegraph* (27 October 1997).

⁸ Redwood is a British Conservative Party politician, MP for Wokingham. During the years of John Major's cabinet he was appointed Secretary of State for Wales. Today he is co-chairman of the Conservative Party's Policy Review Group on Economic Competitiveness. Writing in *The Guardian* in the mid-Nineties, Redwood claimed that Britpop – with its emphasis on white working-class youth (lad) culture – was a healthy sign of Conservative Britain.

⁹ David Cavanagh, "Communication Breakdown", *Uncut* 117 (February 2007), 38.

the '80s and '90s, from the decline in social housing to the inexorable rise of BSKyB. The reader's conscience is pricked by the iniquities of income distribution and rampant elitism". Even though this situation was the outcome of Thatcher and Major's politics, Hutton warned that "unless Britain's entire economic framework was rebuilt from scratch ... voting for a Labour government at the next election would be useless".¹⁰

Yorke writes about politics in a song entitled *Electioneering*; here he describes an age in which "voters are treated as little more than customers in an extension of the service industry"¹¹ and he sings ironically: "I will stop at nothing/ say the right/ when electioneering/ I trust I can rely on your vote".¹² It is worth noting that Yorke wrote the songs for *Ok Computer* from his characters' viewpoint rather than his own (as was the case with *Creep*), even if the results are not apparent to the listener. Discussing this point in an interview, Yorke declares with a sort of literary awareness: "I'm not personally answerable for the characters in the songs, that's not me talking and I think that people who listen to us know that now".¹³ Yorke's is in truth a polyphonic consciousness, inhabited by different voices: that's why 'listening' to his lyrics is such a complex and challenging experience. As in poetry, the writer asks for a responsive interpretation by the reader/listener, who, in the end, is asked to embrace otherness to become other herself.¹⁴

Ok Computer's twelve songs explore different themes and ideas, which seem however to develop a central subject that is "alienated life under techno/bureau/corporate hegemony".¹⁵ "Airbag", the album's opening track, deals with the kind of machine everybody, in different ways, is involved with, the car, recalling how machine-dependent we all are: Douglas Robinson sees us as low-tech cyborgs because "we spend large parts of the day connected to machines such as cars, telephones, computers and, of course, televisions".¹⁶ As the singer explains, "Airbag" is about the idea "that whenever you go out on the road you could be killed". At a different level the song (through lines such as "in a deep deep sleep of the innocent") is a critique about all of us "selfish wage zombies who accept the mantras of industrial capitalism (that dollar sign) without a second thought".¹⁷ At the musical level the song exemplifies the key paradox which is at the heart of the whole album; as Footman observes, throughout the song (and the album) "the musicians and producer are delighting in the sonic possibilities of modern technology; the singer, meanwhile, is railing against its social, moral and psychological impact".¹⁸

In truth, Radiohead's strategy of resistance consists in 'using' technology in a non-functional way; here computers produce nothing but 'art', which asks listeners to 'use' their free-time to think critically about their own condition. It can be argued, as is often the case, that Radiohead are just one product to be sold within the capitalist system; however, as I will

¹⁰ Ibid., 40.

¹¹ Steve Lowe, "Back to Save the Universe", *Q*, *Radiohead Special Edition* (July 2003), 97.

¹² Radiohead, *Ok Computer* (Parlophone, 1997).

¹³ Thom Yorke, "The New Interview", in *Q*, *Radiohead Special Edition* (July 2003), 137.

¹⁴ See Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

¹⁵ Nadine Hubbs, "The Imagination of Pop-Rock Criticism", in Walter Everett, ed., *Expression in Pop-Rock Music: A Collection of Critical and Analytical Essays* (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), 3-29.

¹⁶ David Hess, "On the Low-Tech Cyborgs", in Chris Hables Grey with Heidi J. Figueroa Sarriera and Steven Mentor, eds., *The Cyborg Handbook* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 373.

¹⁷ Footman, *Radiohead*, 45.

¹⁸ Ibid., 46.

argue later, this product stands as a sort of platform for new ways of thinking about oneself within end-of-the-century society. This is also connected, as we will see, with Radiohead's (later) interest in critical consumerism and ecology.

The most 'technological' track in the album is entitled "Fitter Happier" and represents a sort of list poem in which Yorke voices his uneasiness with a number of prevailing yuppified social values. The song features a piano accompaniment which sharply contrasts with a Mac synthesized voice reading the following lines: "fittier happier, more productive/ comfortable/ not drinking too much/ regular exercises at the gym (3 days a week) getting better with your associate employee contemporaries/ at ease/ eating well (no more microwave dinners and saturated fat)/ ... sleeping well (no bad dreams)/ no paranoia".

The sense of alienation pervading the album is best voiced in what is often considered as the album's most experimental track: "Paranoid Android". The song is made of three different sections, which actually sound like three different songs, with the first and third 'noisy' sections enframing the highly lyrical and moving mid-section. For many, "Paranoid" is basically prog rock, but a comparison with the Beatles in their *White Album* period might be more appropriate, because of the complexity of music and words. In the opening of the song Yorke sings: "please could you stop the noise I'm trying to get some rest?/ from all the unborn chicken voices in my head/ huh what's that?". Speaking about the lyrics, Footman observes here:

Yorke offers fragments of dialogue, speaking in numerous voices, creating fleeting images of alienation and disgust, rather than any kind of coherent narrative. One possible interpretation is that a simple request for release from noise (the plea that pervades the whole album) ends in some kind of confrontation with wealthy, successful people; this provokes the protagonist for some sort of actual or spiritual cleansing.¹⁹

¹⁹ Ibid, 51.

This is exemplified in the lines: "rain down rain down come on rain down on me from great high". This invocation recalls the closing lines of the "greatest modern depiction of human despair", T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*.²⁰ As Footman observes:

²⁰ Ibid.

"the dust and screaming" paraphrases Eliot's promise of fear in a handful of dust; the barman ejecting the narrator from the yuppie hangout has a counterpart in the "Hurry up please it's time" refrain. More significantly, like "Paranoid Android", *The Waste Land* is composed of cultural fragments: Hindu myth sits alongside Tarot cards, Shakespeare and birdwatching guides.²¹

²¹ Ibid.

However, unlike Eliot's final "shantih", Yorke's final assertion of divine love is at once sarcastic and desperate.

It seems Yorke is trying to look for some possible exit from the techno-capitalist labyrinth he and we inhabit. In this sense, the final assertion of divine love of “Paranoid” introduces the theme of the album’s fourth track “Exit Music (for a Film)”, written for Baz Luhrmann’s film *Romeo+Juliet*. In Yorke’s rewriting of the Shakespearian tragedy death becomes the only possible escape from a system based on the logic of war and antagonism (exemplified by the relationship between the two families), and yet it seems that this desperate attempt is successful to the extent in which death (as extreme enactment of love) becomes a metaphor for the urgent need we have (as listeners and social actors) for ‘human’ relations in a world in which even emotions and feelings are sold as capital.

After the publication of *Ok Computer*, the band embarked on a very long tour after which Yorke “spiralled into a black period of confusion and creative block”.²² *Ok Computer* had turned the group into global celebrities, which is a paradox if we consider the critique of global techno-capitalism contained in the album. Yorke and the rest of the band were in a sense looking for an ‘exit’ from this situation. *Kid A*, published in 2000, was the intelligent response to all this. The band’s fourth album and its sequel – *Amnesiac*, published in 2001 – represent two of the most uncompromising artistic statements ever to be released in the realm of pop. Thanks to their first three albums – and especially *Ok Computer* – Radiohead had become known for its oblique, even disturbing, lyrics investigating man’s alienation within society, but “until *Kid A* the songs had only spoken of alienation, they never enacted it directly. They still followed a more or less conventional structure of verse and chorus. With *Kid A*, alienation takes form directly, absent the trappings of pop artifice”.²³ Simon Reynolds – in a notorious essay first published in the avant-garde magazine *The Wire* – describes the strategies adopted by the band in order to translate this sense of dislocation into sonic terms:

Yorke spoke of how he’d even contemplated changing the name of the band in order to make a break with Radiohead’s past recordings, towards which he felt utter alienation. Instead of self-destruction, Radiohead eventually set on self-deconstruction: discarding or tampering with the two things that the band was most celebrated for by fans and critics alike: the guitar sound, and Yorke’s singing and lyrics. *Kid A* is largely devoid of guitars ... As for Yorke’s singing, on *Kid A/Amnesiac* studio technology and vocal technique are both applied to dislexify his already oblique, fragmented words.²⁴

The process of self-destruction which is at the core of the two experimental albums can be read in terms of the band’s attempt to produce works capable of resisting the imperatives of the pop industry, while at the same time preserving its position within this same industry. The most important of these imperatives is immediate readability, and transparency; in other words, pop must be a vehicle for fun (something which prompted

²² Simon Reynolds, “Radiohead versus Brit-Rock/ Thom Yorke Interview”, in *Bring the Noise. Twenty Years of Writing About Hip-Rock and Hip-Hop* (London: Faber&Faber, 2007), 289.

²³ Marianne Tatom Letts, “How to Disappear Completely”. *Radiohead and the Resistant Concept Album*, Ph.D Dissertation (The University of Texas, Austin, 2005), 85.

²⁴ Reynolds, “Radiohead”, 286-287.

novelist Nick Hornby to write an article in the *New Yorker* on October 30, 2000 in which he attacks *Kid A*). Radiohead make fun of this imperative through the use of a number of devices, which turn their music into a complex statement asking for an active, committed response from the listener. It is interesting to note that no singles were released from *Kid A*: Radiohead wanted their listeners to focus on the work as a whole, with its complex internal dialogism.

Curtis White, with reference to Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, that is, to the complex dialectic between the administered universal and the particular, reads *Kid A* as an attempt to create a gap between the artwork and the law of the universal. In this sense, he identifies a number of musical devices used by Radiohead in order to enact their strategy of resistance in specific songs:

- Dissonant orchestral waves ("How to disappear completely")
- Avant-garde free jazz extrapolations à la Mingus ("The National Anthem")
- Surreal lyrics and aural landscapes ("Treefingers")
- Punk/grunge crudeness in bass lines and guitar crunching ("The National Anthem")
- Homage to The Beatles' avant-gardism in the echoes of Ringo's drum rhythms in "Strawberry Fields Forever"
- Electronic ambience à la Brian Eno ("Motion Picture Soundtrack")
- Psychedelic noodling in guitar lines ("In Limbo")
- Homages to Led Zep vocal and guitar breakthroughs ... ("In Limbo")
- Sampling and a general feel of the aesthetics of pastiche (rooting the band not only in hip-hop but also in Dada) ("Idiotique")²⁵

What is possibly the most important aspect of Radiohead's *Kid A* is, however, the subversive process through which songs are deconstructed. The voice becomes just one aspect of a dissonant soundscape asking for the listener's immersion: if the voice is subordinated to the general sound texture of the work, which according to Hansen is also a way of "overcoming the vococentrism of Western music",²⁶ and at times othered through the use of vocoders and ondes martenot – the listener becomes, in a sense, an active participant in the musical experience as a whole.²⁷ Both musicians and listeners share a sense of dislocation, of not feeling at 'home'. If "Creep" allowed listeners to think of Radiohead's music as a homely space providing a comforting centre with which to identify, as Hainge argues, *Kid A* creates a sense of isolation in which there is no safe, reassuring voice to listen to.²⁸ By enacting alienation, the album stages a complex conflict between voice and noise with the latter standing for the dark forces of techno-capitalism. In *Kid A* noise represents a constant menace – the very existence of the voice-as-subject is constantly threatened. In other words, if *Kid A* can be considered a concept album, it is about the existential death of the subject trapped in a world moved by forces he

²⁵ White, "Kid Adorno", 12.

²⁶ Mark B.N. Hansen, "Deforming Rock: Radiohead's Plunge into the Sonic Continuum", in Tate, *The Music and Art of Radiohead*, 136.

²⁷ A vocoder is a machine that can make a human voice sound synthetic. It is often used to speak like a robot, with a metallic and monotonous voice. The german group Kraftwerk used a lot of vocoder effects in their songs ("We are the Robots" for example). The ondes martenot is an early electronic musical instrument that Maurice Martenot created in 1928. The sonic possibilities of the instrument were later expanded by the addition of timbral controls and switchable loudspeakers. The instrument's eerie wavering notes are produced by varying the frequency of oscillation in vacuum tubes.

²⁸ Greg Hainge, "To(rt)uring the Minotaur: Radiohead, Pop, Unnatural Couplings, and Mainstream Subversion", in Tate, *The Music and Art of Radiohead*, 62-84.

cannot control. The album, as Yorke observes, is about “the feeling of being a spectator and not being able to take part”;²⁹ however, the whole *Kid A* experience stands as an enunciation waiting for an active, politically committed response by the audience. In Reynold’s interview-piece on Radiohead we read:

You could describe *Kid A/Amnesiac* as a Threnody for the victims of Globalisation. Yorke says that spending three years in the UK after a lot of time touring abroad was a big influence: reading newspapers, noticing the discrepancy between mainstream pop culture and what was going on ‘out there’. Three members of the band read Naomi Klein’s anti-corporate bestseller *No Logo*, and at one point [it] was rumoured *No Logo* would be the album title. Talking about the upsurge of anti-globalization dissent Yorke defends the movement from charges of ideological incoherence and being merely reactive. “That’s how it’s always dismissed in the mainstream media, but that’s because it’s this coalition of disparate interest groups who are all pissed off because they’ve been disenfranchised by politicians who are only listening to corporate lobby groups It’s not based on the old left/right politics, it’s not really even an anti-capitalist thing ... it’s something far deeper than that: ‘who do you serve?’”³⁰

²⁹ Reynolds, “Radiohead”, 293.

³⁰ Ibid., 294.

This is the kind of question you could ask Radiohead themselves. Indeed, Radiohead articulate their critical discourses mainly through the discursive channels offered by a music corporation such as Emi/Parlophone. Acknowledging this unsolvable contradiction, Yorke affirms: “unfortunately, if you’re interested in actually being heard, you have to work within the system”.³¹ This is a powerful image which the band, with critical self-awareness, has translated into visual terms in the artwork of *Kid A*’s sequel, *Amnesiac*. The soundscape of the 2001 album is not dissimilar from *Kid A*’s: the listener can experience the same sense of dislocation, even though there are more guitars and Yorke’s voice is sometimes in the foreground in such tunes as the Smiths-inspired “Knives Out”. *Amnesiac* should be about the idea of forgetting existential alienation and about the artist’s uncomfortable position as product of the recording industry. Nonetheless, according to Hainge, the artwork in *Amnesiac*

³¹ Ibid.

situates us in the space of trauma so that we are standing in the fire at the heart of a now absent centre. Fragmented street maps, blazing buildings, towering skyscrapers seen from the bottom up, interweaving power cables and Escherian drawings of arches and staircases all appear to give sets of punctual references and coordinated with which to orient ourselves, but ultimately have the opposite effect, creating that same sense of being lost and dislocated felt in *Kid A*.³²

³² Hainge, “To(rt)uring”, 78.

In this disturbing landscape one figure seems particularly interesting: that of the weeping minotaur, which according to Hainge represents the “unhomely space that Radiohead have come to inhabit within the homely space of the mainstream”.³³ The hybrid creature is the result of an “unnatural

³³ Ibid., 79.

coupling: the marriage of the mainstream record industry with genuine artistic experimentation”.³⁴ But why is Radiohead’s minotaur weeping? Hainge reads the tears as a symbol of “genuine, emotional expression”, of Radiohead’s unique and deeply felt art, something, however, which the band can produce in the “haven of calm from the mainstream” represented by the labyrinth.³⁵

³⁵ Ibid, 83.

Radiohead’s artwork is a product of the collaboration between Dr Tchock (Yorke’s alter ego) and artist Stanley Donwood. One of the most beautiful outcomes of their collaboration is the artwork for Radiohead’s 2003 album, *Hail to the Thief*, in which we are presented with a number of maps of real cities, filled with anti-global slogans. The cities are London, Grozny, Manhattan, Kabul, Baghdad and Los Angeles. In the artwork the cities are “homogenized and heavily regimented via Donwood’s reconception of capitalism’s glaring visual presence: an oppressive sameness of style and colour that mirrors globalization’s reduction of difference”.³⁶

³⁶ Joseph Tate, “Hail to the Thief: A Rhizomatic Map in Fragments”, in *The Music and Art of Radiohead*, 179.

The album’s title refers to George W. Bush’s ‘stolen’ elections victory in 2000: the expression “hail to the thief” is indeed a well-worn protest slogan which featured prominently during inauguration protests on January 20, 2001, in Washington. Although the band’s members have denied the connection in a number of interviews and Yorke himself stated that the songs are not about politics, *Hail to the Thief* is undoubtedly a ‘political’ album: “it is firmly grounded in and derived from the political present”.³⁷ However, the collection is characterized by an “uncontainable and fragile heterogeneity of subject matter” which asks for a reading aimed at isolating single texts within the sonic continuum.³⁸ Unlike *Kid A* and *Amnesiac*, Radiohead’s sixth album is not constructed on a specific aural poetics; there are a number of electronic experiments which however do not interfere with, or deconstruct, the songs.

³⁷ Ibid., 180.

³⁸ Ibid., 177.

The opening track, “2+2=5”, “targets the potential fascism of all governments” and in this it unveils its debt to George Orwell, whose *Nineteen Eighty Four* is a critique of the very process of governing. As Tate observes, “the absurdist mathematical formula is a recurring motif of Orwell’s books: a reversal of the axiomatic notion ... that there is an unreachable core of the self that those people in power can never affect”. In truth, those who hold power get inside you and you start to think according to their logic. The song includes the phrase “you have not been paying any attention” which is a reference to O’Brien’s conversation with Winston Smith in the novel. As Tate observes, through the line “it’s the devil’s way now”, the song also introduces the theme of the struggle between forces of good and evil, which other songs of the album then expand.³⁹

³⁹ Ibid., 181-182

The song entitled “Go to Sleep” looks backwards to Radiohead’s concern with technology, more specifically the song “echoes and enacts 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".⁴⁰ "The Gloaming", whose title comes from an archaic poetic term meaning 'twilight' or 'evening', stands as an attempt to deal with the aftermath of 9/11, while "Myxomatosis" – which is the name of a virus released by the Australian government in order to control the country's burgeoning rabbit population – is a song about "government sponsored mind control", something people could easily experience during the 2003 war in Iraq.⁴¹ "A Wolf at the Door" voices, once again, Radiohead's dissatisfaction with American world politics, with its title coming from a line from John Skelton's 1522 poem "Why come ye nat to courte?".⁴² After touring extensively in 2003, Radiohead took a long break in which Thom Yorke and guitarist Johnny Greenwood published their solo albums.

Radiohead's 2007 album *In Rainbows* stands as a very successful attempt to resist the imperatives of the music industry, in particular those concerned with the marketing and distribution of recorded music. After fulfilling their contract with EMI in 2003 with *Hail to the Thief*, Radiohead turned down multimillion-dollar offers for a new major-label deal, preferring to remain independent. *In Rainbows* was released via Radiohead's website on 10 October, 2007. Buyers could "pay zero or whatever they [pleased] up to £ 99.99 for the album in MP3 form" for what was to become the "most audacious experiment in years",⁴³ one in which the response of the audience to the musical event became, in a sense, the most important aspect of the event itself. One of Radiohead's managers – Mr Hufford – noted how "people made their choice to actually pay money... It's people saying 'we want to be part of this thing'".⁴⁴ In this perspective, the very idea of giving fans the chance to remix two of the album songs – "Nude" and "Reckoner" which would then be put to the public vote – stands as a response by the band to the community's commitment in the download strategy. However, as not all Radiohead's fans are used to downloading music, the band decided to release the album on CD and vinyl in December 2007. The album was sold in the form of a cardboard package which contained the lyric booklet, the CD, and some Donwood artwork stickers; this way of packaging encouraged a 'do it yourself' philosophy, whereupon the stickers could be placed on an unused case to create a proper package. The choice of the cardboard packaging is in line with the eco-sustainability campaign which the band promoted during their mid-2008 tour.

The focus on the release strategy risked overshadowing people's response to the music, which is absolutely striking in terms of musical freshness and lyrical directness. The ten brief narratives included in the album are extremely dense and "move together beautifully without a wasted moment to be found".⁴⁵ According to NME "the album sees Radiohead

⁴⁰ Tate, "Hail", 185.

⁴¹ Ibid., 182.

⁴² Ibid., 194.

⁴³ Jon Pareles, "Pay What You Want for this Article", *The New York Times* (9 December 2007), <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/09/arts/music/09pare.html?_r=1>, 30 July 2009.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Matthew Fiander, "Radiohead, In Rainbows. Things Kept, Things Left Behind", *PopMatters* (15 October 2007), <<http://www.popmatters.com/pm/review/49811/radiohead-in-rainbows/>>, 30 July 2009.

⁴⁶ NME Review of Radiohead, *In Rainbows* (14 december 2007), <<http://www.nme.com/reviews/9350>>, 30 July 2009.

⁴⁷ Fiander, "Radiohead".

⁴⁸ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/In_Rainbows>, 30 July 2009.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Fiander, "Radiohead".

⁵² Ann Powers, "Spellbound in a Radiohead Prism", *The Los Angeles Times* (13 October 2007).

reconnecting with their human sides – realising you could embrace pop melodies and proper instruments while still sounding like paranoid androids located somewhere around the outskirts of Venus".⁴⁶ The human aspect of the album is conveyed first of all in sonic terms, through the construction of a dynamic soundscape driven by Phil Selway's almost tangible drums. As Fiander maintains, "perhaps more than anything, *In Rainbows* succeeds at showing Selway's talent, opting for his energetic live drumming over machines for much of the record".⁴⁷ The conflict between man and machine, which is a constant concern of Radiohead's work, seems here to find a momentary resolution allowing the human being to reclaim its spaces within a digitalized existence.

Lyrically, the album investigates and develops some of the old obsessions of Yorke, who recently confessed that the songs are based on "that anonymous fear thing, sitting in traffic, thinking I'm sure I'm supposed to be doing something else. ... It's similar to *Ok Computer* in a way. It's much more terrifying".⁴⁸ In another interview Yorke said the album was "about the fucking panic of realising you're going to die".⁴⁹ The album opens with "15 Step" which – with lines such as "you used to be alright/ what happened?" – gives the idea of a descent into some 'lower' unpleasant situation. The following track "Bodysnatchers", inspired by Victorian ghost stories and by the 1972 novel *The Stepford Wives* by Ira Levin, translates Yorke's feeling of having his "physical consciousness trapped without being able to connect fully with anything else".⁵⁰ The key line here is "do the lights go out for you? Because the lights go out for me. It is the twenty-first century" which Yorke enunciates with extraordinary intensity, to the extent that it seems "he's fighting back again, maybe with the most verve he's ever had".⁵¹ A similar verve can be heard in the single "Jigsaw Falling into Place", which, juxtaposing chaotic and unsettling experiences, closes on a somehow positive note: "wish away your nightmare/ you got the light you can feel it on your back". In a sense *In Rainbows* is about light, 'human' hopes to be 'listened to'. The prismatic quality conveyed by the title is perfectly translated into the multiplicity of lights and colours of its sound. In this sense "Videotape", the last song on the album, in which "Yorke gently describes his own death and the personal legacy he hopes his loved one can preserve",⁵² also stands for the audiotape Radiohead's audience have been listening to; a tape which, in a way, has come to inhabit their imaginary and enrich their perception of others and of the world as a whole.

The title of the album can generate other sorts of associations, in particular those with nature and with the importance of our commitment to it. It is not by chance that the tour for *In Rainbows* has seen the band implementing a number of strategies aimed at reducing their own impact – as part of the rock industry – on the environment. Yorke got involved

with Friends of the Earth after reading the UN Report on climate change in 2003. In an article published by the *Observer* in March 2003 he writes:

With Radiohead, the most shocking yet obvious thing we discovered was that the way people travel to our shows has the biggest impact. So we now play in venues that are supported by public transport. We have a new lighting rig that is, hopefully, powered by super-efficient generators, and we've made deals with trucking companies to cut their emissions.⁵³

⁵³ Thom Yorke, "Editor's Letter", *The Observer* (23 March 2008).

Radiohead's is a strategy of resistance to a very common praxis in the (rock) industry to maximize profits without caring about the impact of 'consumerism' on the planet. The band's supporters have been highly responsive to a strategy which was also enacted through the internet: in December 2007 the following statement from members of the band could be found on their official website: "here you can try out our carbon calculator and compare different transport methods for getting to and from the venue. The list of tour dates will give you public transport information where available, and where not, there may be venue incentives for car sharing".⁵⁴ Few bands in the history of pop and rock have been capable of establishing such a dialogic relationship with their fans.

⁵⁴ <www.radiohead.com>, 30 July 2009.

This paper has investigated Radiohead's strategies of resistance in relation to the imperatives of the pop establishment both in terms of musical form – highlighting the literary and musical complexity of such works as *Ok Computer*, *Kid A* and *Amnesiac* – and musical communication, focussing on the political content of works such as *Hail to the Thief* and on the dialogic relationship established by Radiohead with their supporters through the alternative marketing and eco campaign behind *In Rainbows*. What has emerged from this immersion in the band's soundscape and politics is the very idea that art and intelligence can combine at times in fresh and unprecedented ways to create spaces of enunciation which (in resounding of a sort of collective conscience) can articulate a critique of the dark forces governing the world, within the same channels used by those forces to "get inside our head". Radiohead's appropriation of the protest slogan *Hail to the Thief* – with its satiric subversion of the American ceremonial tune "Hail to the Chief"⁵⁵ – has the transitory but destabilizing effect of getting the "chief" out of our head: with its mixture of melody and dissonance and its rejection of sameness, Radiohead's art insinuates difference within our minds, making us human again, or better, musical beings.

⁵⁵ Tate, "Hail", 180.