



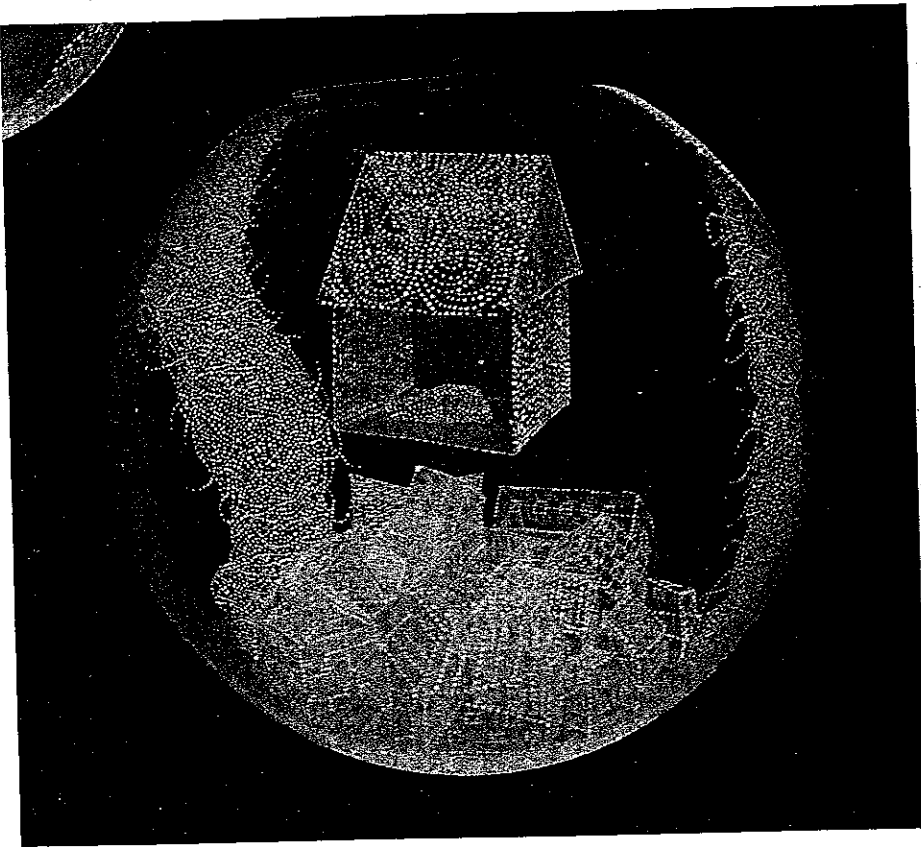
RADIOHEAD, OR THE PHILOSOPHY OF POP

Mark Greif

I'VE WONDERED WHY THERE'S NO PHILOSOPHY of popular music. Critics of pop do reviews and interviews; they write appreciation and biography. Their criticism takes many things for granted and doesn't ask the questions I want answered. Everyone repeats the received idea that music is revolutionary. Well, is it? Does pop music support revolution? We say pop is of its time, and can date the music by ear with surprising precision, to 1966 or 1969 or 1972 or 1978 or 1984. Well, is it? Is pop truly of its time, in the sense that it represents some aspect of exterior history apart from the path of its internal development? I know pop does *something* to me; everyone says the same. So what does it do? Does it really influence my beliefs or actions in my deep life, where I think I feel it most, or does it just insinuate a certain fluctuation of mood, or evanescent pleasure, or impulse to move?

The answers are difficult not because thinking is hard on the subject of pop, but because of an acute sense of embarrassment. Popular music is the most living art form today. Condemned to a desert island, contemporary people would grab their records first; we have the concept of desert island discs because we could do without most other art forms before we would give up songs. Songs are what we consume in greatest quantity; they're what we store most of in our heads. But even as we can insist on the seriousness of *value* of pop music, we don't believe enough in its seriousness of *meaning* outside the realm of music, or most of us don't, or we can't talk about it, or sound idiotic when we do.

And all of us lovers of music, with ears tuned precisely to a certain kind of sublimity in pop, are quick to detect pretension, overstatement, and cant about pop—in any attempt at a wider criticism—precisely be-



BUHM HONG, THE HOUSE OF RIVER AND SUNSHINE, INSTALLATION DETAIL FROM PASSAGES, 2005.
TRANSPARENT PLASTIC BALL, SCOTCH TAPE, AND LUMINOUS PAINT, 17 X 17 X 17". COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

cause we feel the gap between the effectiveness of the music and the impotence and superfluity of analysis. This means we don't know about our major art form what we ought to know. We don't even agree about how the interconnection of pop music and lyrics, rather than the words spoken alone, accomplishes an utterly different task of representation, more scattershot and overwhelming and much less careful and dignified than poetry—and bad critics show their ignorance when they persist in treating pop like poetry, as in the still-growing critical effluence around Bob Dylan.

If you *were* to develop a philosophy of pop, you would have to clear the field of many obstacles. You would need to focus on a single band, to let people know you had not floated into generalities and to let them test your declarations. You'd have to announce at the outset that the musicians were figures of real importance, but not the "most" anything—not the most avant-garde, most perfect, most exemplary. This would preempt the hostile comparison and sophistication that passes for criticism among aficionados. Then you should have some breathing room. If you said once that you liked the band's music, there would be no more need of appreciation; and if it were a group whose music enough people listened to, there would be no need of biography or bare description. So let the band be Radiohead, for the sake of argument, and let me be fool enough to embark on this. And if I insist that Radiohead are "more" anything than some other pop musicians—as fans will make claims for the superiority of the bands they love—let it be that this band was more able, at the turn of the millennium, to pose a single question: How should it really ever be possible for pop music to incarnate a particular historical situation?

RADIOHEAD BELONG TO "ROCK," and if rock has a characteristic subject, as country music's is small pleasures in hard times (getting by), and rap's is success in competition (getting over), that subject must be freedom from constraint (getting free).

Yet the first notable quality of their music is that, even though their topic may still be freedom, their technique involves the evocation—not of the feeling of freedom—but of unending low-level fear.

The dread in the songs is so detailed and so pervasive that it seems built into each line of lyrics and into the black or starry sky of music that domes it. It is environing fear, not antagonism emanating from a single

object or authority. It is atmospheric rather than explosive. This menace doesn't surprise anyone. Outside there are listeners-in, watchers, abandoned wrecks with deployed air bags, killer cars, lights going out and coming on. "They" are waiting, without a proper name: ghost voices, clicks of tapped phones, grooves of ended records, sounds of processing and anonymity.

An event is imminent or has just happened but is blocked from our senses: *Something big is gonna happen / over my dead body*. Or else it is impossible that anything more will happen and yet it does: *I used to think / there is no future left at all / I used to think*. Something has gone wrong with the way we know events, and the error leaks back to occurrences themselves. Life transpires in its representations, in the common medium of a machine language. (*Arrest this man / he talks in maths / he buzzes like a fridge / he's like a detuned radio*.) A fissure has opened between occurrence and depiction, and the dam bursts between the technical and the natural. These are not meant to be statements of thoughts *about* their songs, or even about the lyrics, which look banal on the printed page; this is what happens *in* their songs. The technical artifacts are in the music, sit behind our lips, and slide out when we open our mouths—as chemical and medical words effortlessly make it into the lyrics ("polystyrene," "myxomatosis," "polyethylene," "melatonin").

Beside the artificial world is an iconography in their lyrics that comes from dark children's books: swamps, rivers, animals, arks, and rowboats riding ambiguous tracks of light to the moon. Within these lyrics—and also in the musical counterpoint of chimes, strings, lullaby—an old personal view is opened, a desperate wish for small, safe spaces. It promises sanctuary, a bit of quiet in which to think.

Such a pretty house
and such a pretty garden.
No alarms and no surprises,
no alarms and no surprises,
no alarms and no surprises please.

But when the songs try to defend the small and safe, the effort comes hand-in-hand with grandiose assertions of power and violence, which mimic the voice of overwhelming authority that should be behind our

dread-filled contemporary universe but never speaks. Or else the words speak, somehow, for us.

This is what you get
this is what you get
this is what you get
when you mess with us.

It just isn't clear whether this voice is a sympathetic voice or a voice outside—whether it is for us or against us. The band's task, as I understand it, is to try to hold on to the will, to ask if there is any part of it left that would be worth holding on to, or to find out where that force has gone. Thom Yorke, the singer, seems always in danger of destruction; and then he is either channeling the Philistines or, Samson-like, preparing to take the temple down with him. So we hear pained and beautiful reassurances, austere, crystalline, and delicate—then violent denunciations and threats of titanic destruction—until they seem to be answering each other, as though the outside violence were being drawn inside:

Breathe, keep breathing.

We hope that you choke,
that you choke.

Everything
everything
everything in its right place.

You and whose army?

We ride—we ride—tonight!

And the consequence? Here you reach the best-known Radiohead lyrics, again banal on the page, and with them the hardest mood in their music to describe—captured in multiple repeated little phrases, stock talk, as words lose their meanings and regain them. "How to disappear completely," as a song title puts it—for the words seem to speak a wish for negation of the self, nothingness, and nonbeing:

For a minute there
I lost myself, I lost myself.

I'm not here. This isn't happening.

A DESCRIPTION OF THE CONDITION of the late 1990s could go like this: At the turn of the millennium, each individual sat at a meeting point of shouted orders and appeals, the TV, the radio, the phone and cell, the billboard, the airport screen, the inbox, the paper junk mail. Each person discovered that he lived at one knot of a network, existing without his consent, which connected him to any number of recorded voices, written messages, means of broadcast, channels of entertainment, and avenues of choice. It was a culture of broadcast: an indiscriminate seeding, which needed to reach only a very few, covering vast tracts of our consciousness. To make a profit, only one message in ten thousand needed to take root, therefore messages were strewn everywhere. To live in this network felt like something, but surprisingly little in the culture of broadcast itself tried to capture what it felt like. Instead, it kept bringing pictures of an unencumbered luxurious life, songs of ease and freedom, and technological marvels, which did not feel like the life we lived.

And if you noticed you were not represented? It felt as if one of the few unanimous aspects of this culture was that it forbade you to complain, since if you complained, you were a trivial human, a small person, who misunderstood the generosity and benignity of the message system. It existed to help you. Now, if you accepted the constant promiscuous broadcasts as normalcy, there were messages in them to inflate and pet and flatter you. If you simply said this chatter was altering your life, killing your privacy or ending the ability to think in silence, there were alternative messages that whispered of humiliation, craziness, vanishing. What sort of crank needs silence? What could be more harmless than a few words of advice? The messages did not come from *somewhere*; they were not central, organized, intelligent, intentional. It was up to you to change the channel, not answer the phone, stop your ears, shut your eyes, dig a hole for yourself and get in it. Really, it was your responsibility. The metaphors in which people tried to complain about these developments, by ordinary law and custom, were pollution (as in "noise pollution") and theft (as in "stealing our time"). But we all knew the intrusions felt like violence. Physical violence, with no way to strike back.

And if this feeling of violent intrusion persisted? Then it added a new dimension of constant, nervous triviality to our lives. It linked, irrationally, in our moods and secret thoughts, these tiny private annoyances to the constant televised violence we saw. Those who objected embarrassed themselves, because they likened nuisances to tragedies—and yet we felt the likeness, though it became unsayable. Perhaps this was because our nerves have a limited palette for painting dread. Or because the network fulfilled its debt of civic responsibility by bringing us twenty-four-hour news of flaming airplanes and twisted cars and blood-soaked screaming casualties, globally acquired, which it was supposedly our civic duty to watch—and, adding commercials, put this mixture of messages and horrors up on screens wherever a TV could only be introduced on grounds of “responsibility to know,” in the airport, the doctor’s office, the subway, and any waiting room. But to object was demeaning—who, really, meant us any harm? And didn’t we truly have a responsibility to know?

Thus the large mass of people huddled in the path of every broadcast, who really did not speak but were spoken for, who received and couldn’t send, were made responsible for the new Babel. Most of us who lived in this culture were primarily sufferers or patients of it and not, as the word had it, “consumers.” Yet we had no other words besides “consumption” or “consumerism” to condemn a world of violent intrusions of insubstantial messages, no new way at least to name this culture or describe the feeling of being inside it.

So a certain kind of pop music could offer a representative vision of this world while still being one of its omnipresent products. A certain kind of musician might reflect this new world’s vague smiling threat of hostile action; its latent violence done by no one in particular; a certain kind of musician, angry and critical rather than complacent and blithe, might depict the intrusive experience, though the music would be painfully intrusive itself, and it would be brought to us by and share the same avenues of mass-intrusion that broadcast everything else. Pop music had the good fortune of being both a singularly unembarrassed art and a relatively low-capital medium in its creation—made by just a composer or writer or two or four or six members of a band, with little outside intrusion, until money was poured into the recording and distribution and advertising of it. So, compromised as it was, music could still become a form of unembarrassed and otherwise inarticulate com-

plaint, capturing what one could not say in reasonable debate, and coming from far enough inside the broadcast culture that it could depict it with its own tools.

A HISTORICAL PARADOX OF ROCK has been that the pop genre most devoted to the idea of rebellion against authority has adopted increasingly more brutal and authoritarian music to denounce forms of authoritarianism. A genre that celebrated individual liberation required increasing regimentation and coordination. The development could be seen most starkly in hard rock, metal, hardcore, rap-metal—but it was latent all along.

Throughout the early 20th century, folk musics had been a traditional alternative to forms of musical authority. But amplification alone, it seems, so drastically changed the situation of music, opening possibilities in the realm of dynamics and the mimesis of other sounds, that it created avenues for the musical representation of liberation that had nothing to do with folk music’s traditional lyrical content or the concern with instrumental skill and purism. Specifically, it gave pop ways to emulate the evils liberation would be fighting against. Pop could become Goliath while it was cheering David. One aspect of amplification by the late 1960s stands out above all others: it opened up the possibility, for the first time, that a musician might choose to actually hurt an audience with noise. The relationship of audience to rock musician came to be based on a new kind of primitive trust. This was the trust of listeners facing a direct threat of real pain and permanent damage that bands would voluntarily restrain—just barely. An artist for the first time had his hands on a means of real violence, and colluded with his audience to test its possibilities. You hear it in the Who, the Doors, Jimi Hendrix. In the 1960s, of course, this testing occurred against a rising background of violence, usually held in monopoly by “the authorities,” but being manifested with increasing frequency in civil unrest and police reaction as well as in war overseas. All of which is sometimes taken as an explanation. But once the nation was back in peacetime, it turned out that the formal violence of rock did not depend on the overt violence of bloodshed, and rock continued to metamorphose. The extremity of its dynamics developed toward heavy metal during the 1970s—and some connected this to industrial collapse and economic misery. Later it was refined in punk and postpunk, in periods of political defeat—and some

connected the music's new lyrical alternations of hatred of authority with hatred of the self to the political, economic, and social outlook. Maybe they were right. But this is perhaps to give too much automatic credence to the idea that pop music depicts history almost without trying—which is precisely what is in question.

TO LEAP ALL THE WAY INTO THE AFFECTIVE WORLD of our own moment, of course, might require something else: electronic sounds. To reproduce a new universe, or to spur a desire to carve out a life in its midst, a band might need a limited quantity of beeps, repetitions, sampled loops, drum machines, noises, and beats. "Electronica," as a contemporary genre name, speaks of the tools of production as well as their output. Laptops, ProTools, sequencers, and samplers, the found sounds and sped-up breaks and pure frequencies, provided an apparently unanchored environment and a weird soundscape that, though foreshadowed in studios in Cologne or at the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center, didn't automatically fit with the traditions of guitars and drums that pop knew. But the electronic blips the music used turned out to be already emotionally available to us by a different route than the avant-gardism of Stockhausen or Cage. All of us born after 1965 had been setting nonsense syllables and private songs to machine noise, and then computer noise, since the new sounds reached our cradles. Just as we want to make tick and tock out of the even movement of a clock, we wanted to know how to hear a language and a song of noises, air compressors and washer surges, alarm sirens and warning bells. We hear communication in the refined contemporary spectrum of beeps: the squall of a microwave, the chime of a timer, the fat gulp of a register, the chirrups of cell phones, the ping of seatbelt alerts and clicks of indicators, not to mention the argot of debonair beeps from the computers on which we type.

Radiohead, up until the late 1990s, had not been good at spelling out what bothered them in narrative songs. They attempted it in their early work. One well-known and well-loved but clumsy song sang about the replacement of a natural and domestic world by plastic replicas ("Fake Plastic Trees"). That account was inches away from folk cliché—something like Buffy Sainte-Marie's "Little Boxes." Its only salvation may have been the effect observed rather than the situation denounced: *It wears you out*, describing the fatigue human beings feel in the company of the

ever-replaceable. *The Bends*, the last album produced before their major period, had this steady but awkward awareness, as the title implies, of being dragged through incompatible atmospheres in the requirements of daily life. But the band didn't yet seem to know that the subjective, symptomatic evocation of these many whiplashing states of feeling—not overt, narrative complaint about them—would prove to be their talent.

On the first mature album, *OK Computer*, a risk of cliché lingered in a song of a computer voice intoning: *Fitter, happier, more productive*—as if the dream of conformist self-improvement would turn us artificial. But the automated voice's oddly human character saved the effect—it seemed automated things, too, could be seduced by a dream of perfection equally delusory for them; then the new commensurability of natural and artificial wasn't a simple loss, but produced a hybrid vulnerability when you had thought things were most stark and steely. The band was also, at that time, mastering a game of voices, the interfiling of inhuman speech and machine sounds with the keening, vulnerable human singing of Thom Yorke.

Their music had started as guitar rock, but with the albums *Kid A* and *Amnesiac* the keyboard asserted itself. The piano dominated; the guitars developed a quality of organ. The drums, emerging altered and processed, came to fill in spaces in rhythms already set by the frontline instruments. Orchestration added brittle washes of strings, a synthetic choir, chimes, an unknown shimmer, or bleated horns. The new songs were built on verse-chorus structure in only a rudimentary way, as songs developed from one block of music to the next, not turning back.

And, of course—as is better known, and more widely discussed—on the new albums the band, by now extremely popular and multimillion-selling, "embraced" electronica. But what precisely did that mean? It didn't seem in their case like opportunism, as in keeping up with the new thing; nor did it entirely take over what they did in their songs; nor were they particularly noteworthy as electronic artists. It is crucial that they were not innovators, nor did they ever take it further than halfway—if that. They were *not* an avant-garde. The political problem of an artistic avant-garde, especially when it deals with any new technology of representation, has always been that the simply novel elements may be mistaken for some form of political action or progress. Two meanings of "revolutionary"—one, forming an advance in formal technique, the other, contributing to social cataclysm—are often confused, usually to

the artist's benefit, and technology has a way of becoming infatuated with its own existence.

Radiohead's success lay in their ability to represent the feeling of our age; they did not insist on being too much advanced in the "advanced" music they acquired. The beeps and buzzes never seemed like the source of their energy, but a means they'd stumbled upon of finally communicating the feelings they had always held. They had felt, so to speak, electronic on *OK Computer* with much less actual electronica. And they did something very rudimentary and basic with the new technologies. They tilted artificial noises against the weight of the human voice and human sounds.

Their new kind of song, in both words and music, announced that anyone might have to become partly inhuman to accommodate the experience of the new era.

THOM YORKE'S VOICE IS THE UNITY on which all the musical aggregations and complexes pivot. You have to imagine the music drawing a series of outlines around him, a house, a tank, the stars of space, or an architecture of almost abstract pipes and tubes, cogs and wheels, ivy and thorns, servers and boards, beams and voids. The music has the feeling of a biomorphic machine in which the voice is alternately trapped and protected.

Yorke's voice conjures the human *in extremis*. Sometimes it comes to us from an extreme of fear, sometimes an extreme of transcendence. We recognize it as a naked voice in the process of rising up to beauty—the reassurance we've alluded to in the lyrics—or being broken up and lost in the chatter of broadcasts, the destroying fear. In the same song that features a whole sung melody, the vocals will also be broken into bits and made the pulsing wallpaper against which the vulnerable pale voice of the singer stands out. Only a few other popular artists build so much of their music from sampled voice, rather than sampled beats, instrumental tones, or noises. The syllables are cut and repeated. A "wordless" background will come from mashed phonemes. Then the pure human voice will reassert itself.*

* The philosopher Stanley Cavell used to say that the first impulse opera evokes is to wonder where in the physical singer the immaterial song can be located. In live performance, the striking thing about Thom Yorke is how small a person he is; not only is his voice excessive, beyond human averageness, it is moored

A surprising amount of this music seems to draw on church music. One biographical fact is relevant here: they come from Oxford, England, grew up there, met in high school, and live, compose, and rehearse there. Their hometown is like their music. That bifurcated English city, split between concrete downtown and green environs, has its unspoiled center and gray periphery of modest houses and a disused automobile factory. Its spots of natural beauty exist because of the nearby huge institutions of the university, and if you stand in the remaining fields and parks you always know you are in a momentary breathing space, already encroached upon. But for the musically minded, the significant feature of Oxford is its Church of England chapels, one in each college and others outside—places of imperial authority, home to another kind of hidden song. The purity of Yorke's falsetto belongs in a boys choir at Evensong. And then Yorke does sing of angels, amid harps, chimes, and bells: *black-eyed angels swimming with me / ... and we all went to heaven in a little rowboat / there was nothing to fear and nothing to doubt.*

And yet the religion in the music is not about salvation—it's about the authority of voices, the wish to submit and the discovery of a consequent resistance in oneself. It is antireligious, though attuned to transcendence. The organ in a church can be the repository of sublime power: a bundling of human throats in its brass pipes, or all the instruments known to man in its stops. You can hear your own small voice responding, within something so big that it manifests a threat of your voice merely being played mechanically and absorbed into a totality. To sing with an organ (as Yorke does at the end of *Kid A*) can be to discover one's own inner voice in distinction to it; and at the same time to wish to be lost, absorbed, overwhelmed within it. A certain kind of person will refuse the church. But even one who refuses the church will not forget the overwhelming feeling.

Sublime experience, the tradition says, depends on a relation to something that threatens. Traditionally it depended on observing from a point of safety a power, like a storm, cataract, or high sea, that could crush the observer if he were nearer. (By compassing the unencompassable power in inner representation, it was even suggested, you could be reminded of the interior power of the moral faculty, the human source of a comparable strength.) Radiohead observe the storm from within it.

to a smaller-than-average body and onstage persona that seem to dramatize the question, in his music, of where voices come from—from individual people or the techniques that surround and overmaster them.

Their music can remind you of the inner overcoming voice, it's true. But then the result is no simple access of power. This sublime acknowledges a different kind of internalization, the drawing of the inhuman into yourself; and also a loss of your own feelings and words and voice to an outer order that has come to possess them.

THE WAY YORKE SINGS GUARANTEES that you often don't know what the lyrics are; they emerge into sense and drop out—and certain phrases attain clarity, while others remain behind. This de-enunciation has been a tool of pop for a long time. Concentrating, you can make out nearly all the lyrics; listening idly, you hear a smaller set of particular lines, which you sing along to and remember. It is a way of focusing inattention as well as attention.

The most important grammatical tic in Radiohead lyrics, unlike the habitual lyrical "I" and apostrophic "you" of pop, is the "we." *We ride. We awake. We escape. We're damaged goods. Bring down the government, they don't speak for us.* But also: *We suck young blood. We can wipe you out anytime.* The pronoun doesn't point to any existing collectivity; the songs aren't about a national group or even the generic audience for rock. So who is "we"?

There is the scared individual, lying to say he's not alone—like the child who says "we're coming in there!" so imagined monsters won't know he's by himself. There's the "we" you might wish for, the imagined collectivity that could resist or threaten; and this may shade into the thought of all the other listeners besides you, in their rooms or cars alone, singing these same bits of lyrics.

There's the "we," as I've suggested, of the violent power which you are not, the voice of the tyrant, the thug, the terrifying parent, the bad cop. You take him inside you and his voice spreads over all the others who—somewhere singing these words for just a moment—are like you. You experience a release at last, so satisfying does it feel to sing the unspoken orders out loud to yourself, as if at last they came from you. You are the one willing the destruction—like Brecht and Weill's Pirate Jenny the barmaid, washing dishes and taking orders, who knows that soon a black ship will come for her town, bristling with cannons. And when its crew asks their queen whom they should kill, she will answer: "Alle."

So the characteristic Radiohead song turns into an alternation, in exactly the same repeated words, between the forces that would defy

intrusive power, and the intrusive power itself, between hopeful individuals and the tyrant ventriloquized.

It has to be admitted that other memorable lyrics sing phrases of self-help. Plenty of these important lines are junk slogans from the culture, and of course part of the oddity of pop is that junk phrases can be made so moving; they do their work again. In a desperate voice: *You can try the best you can / if you try the best you can / the best you can is good enough.* Or: *Breathe, keep breathing / don't lose your nerve.* Or: *Everyone / everyone around here / everyone is so near / it's holding on.* On the page, these lyrics aren't impressive, unless you can hear them in memory, in the framing of the song. Again, one has to distinguish between poetry and pop. The most important lines in pop are rarely poetically notable; frequently they are quite deliberately and necessarily words that are most frank, melodramatic, and unredeemable. And yet they do get redeemed. The question becomes why certain settings in music, and a certain playing of simple against more complex lyrics, can remake debased language and restore the innocence of emotional expression. (Opera listeners know this, in the ariose transformations of "Un bel dì" [One fine day] or "O mio babbino caro" [Oh my dear papa]. But then opera criticism, too, has a longstanding problem with lyrics.)

In the midst of all else the music and lyrics are doing, the phrases of self-help may be the minimal words of will or nerve that you need to hear.

THE MORE I TRY TO CATEGORIZE why Radiohead's music works as it does, and by extension how pop works, the more it seems clear that the effect of pop on our beliefs and actions is not really to create either one. Pop does, though, I think, allow you to retain certain things you've already thought, without your necessarily having been able to articulate them, and to preserve certain feelings you have only intermittent access to, in a different form, music with lyrics, in which the cognitive and emotional are less divided. I think songs allow you to steel yourself or loosen yourself into certain kinds of actions, though they don't start anything. And the particular songs and bands you like dictate the beliefs you can preserve and reactivate, and the actions you can prepare—and which songs and careers will shape your inchoate private experience depends on an alchemy of your experience and the art itself. Pop is neither a mirror nor a Rorschach blot, into which you

look and see only yourself; nor is it a lecture, an interpretable poem, or an act of simply determinate speech. It teaches something, but only by stimulating and preserving things that you must have had inaugurated elsewhere. Or it prepares the ground for these discoveries elsewhere—often knowledge you might never otherwise have really “known,” except as it could be rehearsed by you, then repeatedly reactivated for you, in this medium.

BUT IS THE KNOWLEDGE THAT’S PRESERVED a spur to revolution? There is no logical sense in which pop music is revolutionary. That follows from the conclusion that pop does not start beliefs or instill principles or create action *ex nihilo*. It couldn’t overturn an order. When so much pop declares itself to be revolutionary, however, I think it correctly points to something else that is significant but more limited and complicated. There is indeed an antisocial or countercultural tendency of pop that does follow logically from what it does. That is to say, there is a characteristic affect that follows from a medium that allows you to retain and reactivate forms of knowledge and experience which you are “supposed to” forget or which are “supposed to” disappear by themselves—and “supposed to” here isn’t nefarious, it simply means that social forms, convention, conformity, and just plain intelligent speech don’t allow you to speak of these things, or make them embarrassing when you do. Pop encourages you to hold on to and reactivate hints of personal feeling that society should have extinguished. Of course this winds up taking in all classes of fragile personal knowledge: things that are inarticulable in social speech because they are too delicate or ideologically out of step, and things that should not be articulated because they are selfish, thoughtless, destructive, and stupid. That helps explain how these claims for “what I learned from pop” can go so quickly from the sublime to the ridiculous and back to the sublime. It explains why we are right to feel that so much of what’s promised for pop is not worth our credulity. But, again, risking ridiculousness, I think the thing that pop can prepare you for, the essential thing, is *defiance*. Defiance, at its bare minimum, is the insistence on finding ways to retain the thoughts and feelings that a larger power should have extinguished.

...

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN REVOLUTION AND DEFIANCE is the difference between an overthrow of the existing order and one person’s shaken fist. When the former isn’t possible, you still have to hold on to the latter, if only so as to remember you’re human. Defiance is the insistence on individual power confronting overwhelming force that it cannot undo. You know you cannot strike the colossus. But you can defy it with words or signs. In the assertion that you can fight a superior power, the declaration that you will, this absurd overstatement gains dignity by exposing you, however uselessly, to risk. Unable to stop it in its tracks, you dare the crushing power to begin its devastation with you.

Power comes in many forms for human beings, and defiance meets it where it can. The simplest defiance confronts nature’s power and necessity. In the teeth of a storm that would kill him, a man will curse the wind and rain. He declares, like Nikos Kazantzakis’s peasant Zorba, “You won’t get into my little hut, brother; I shan’t open the door to you. You won’t put my fire out; you won’t tip my hut over!” This will is not Promethean, simply human.

In all forms of defiance, a little contingent being, the imperiled man or woman, hangs on to his will—which may be all he has left—by making a deliberate error about his will’s jurisdiction. Because the defiant person has no power to win a struggle, he preserves his will through representations: he shakes his fist, announces his name, shouts a threat, and above all makes the statements, “I am,” “we are.” This becomes even more necessary and risky when the cruel power is not natural, will-less itself, but belongs to other men. Barthes gives the words of the French revolutionist Guadet, arrested and condemned to death: “Yes, I am Guadet. Executioner, do your duty. Go take my head to the tyrants of my country. It has always turned them pale; once severed, it will turn them paler still.” He gives the order, not the tyrant, commanding necessity in his own name—defying the false necessity of human force that has usurped nature’s power—even if he can only command it to destroy him.

The situation we confront now is a new necessity, not blameless like wind or water and yet not fatal as from a tyrant or executioner. The nature we face is a billowing atmospheric second nature made by man. It is the distant soft tyranny of other men, wafting in diffuse messages, in the abdication of authority to technology, in dissembling of responsibility under cover of responsibility and with the excuse of help—gutless,

irresponsible, servile, showing no naked force, only a smiling or a pious face. The "they" are cowardly friends. They are here to help you be happy and make fruitful choices. (*We can wipe you out anytime.*)

At its best, Radiohead's music reactivates the moods in which you once noticed you ought to refuse. It can abet an *impersonal* defiance. This is not a doctrine the band advances, but an effect of the aesthetic. It doesn't name a single enemy. It doesn't propose revolution. It doesn't call you to overthrow an order that you couldn't take hold of anyway at any single point, not without scapegoating a portion and missing the whole. This defiance—it might be the one thing we can manage, and better than sinking beneath the waves. It requires the retention of a private voice.

ONE OF THE SONGS ON *Hail to the Thief*, the last album released (at this writing, the band is back in Oxford, working on new material), has a peculiar counterslogan:

Just 'cause you feel it
doesn't mean it's there.

To sense the perversity of the appearance of these words in a pop song, you have to remember that they occur inside an art form monomaniacally devoted to the production of strong feelings. Pop music *always* tells its listeners that their feelings are real. Yet here is a chorus that denies any reference to reality in the elation and melancholy and chills that this chorus, in fact, elicits. Yorke delivers the lines with an upnote on "feel" as he repeats them, and if anything in the song makes your hair stand on end, that will be the moment. He makes you feel, that is, the emotion he's warning you against. Next he sings a warning not to make too much of his own singing: *there's always a siren / singing you to shipwreck*. And this song, titled "There There," was the first single released off the album, pressed in many millions of copies; it was played endlessly on radio and MTV.

The purpose of the warning is not to stop feelings but to stop you from believing they always refer to something, or deserve reality, or should lead to actions, or choices, or beliefs—which is, of course, what the messages you hear by broadcast like you to make of them. The feelings evoked by a pop song may be false, as the feelings evoked by all the

other messages brought to you by the same media as pop songs may be false. You must judge. If leading you to disbelieve in broadcast also leads you to disbelieve in pop, so be it; maybe you believed in pop in the wrong way. You must distinguish.

The broadcast messages are impersonal in one fashion. They pretend to care about you when actually they don't know or care that you, as a single person, exist. Impersonal defiance is impersonal in another way; it encourages you to withdraw, no longer to believe that there is any human obligation owed to the sources of messages—except when they remind you, truly, of what you already have subtly sensed, and already know.

You can see a closed space at the heart of many of Radiohead's songs. To draw out one of their own images, it may be something like a glass house. You live continuously in the glare of inspection and with the threat of intrusion. The attempt to cast stones at an outer world of enemies would shatter your own shelter. So you settle for the protection of this house, with watchers on the outside, as a place you can still live, a way to preserve the vestige of closure—a barrier, however glassy and fragile, against the outside. In English terms, a glass house is also a glasshouse, which we call a greenhouse. It is the artificial construction that allows botanical life to thrive in winter.

Radiohead's songs suggest that you should erect a barrier, even of repeated minimal words, or the assertion of a "we," to protect yourself—and then there proves to be a place in each song to which you, too, can't be admitted, because the singer has something within him closed to interference, just as every one of us does, or should. We'll all have to find the last dwellings within ourselves that are closed to intrusion, and begin from there. The politics of the next age, if we are to survive, will be a politics of the re-creation of privacy. +