

Ok computer and no surprises: a blend of melancholy and protest

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When listening to No Surprises by Radiohead, it is easy to become lost in the music and to not understand the true meaning of the lyrics. The intrinsic melody of the glockenspiel combined with the sounds of the acoustic and electric guitars have a hypnotic affect. Thom Yorke's hauntingly beautiful voice adds to the overwhelming melancholy of the song.

However, if the listener can overcome the hypnosis, the lyrics reveal a message that speaks of a corrupt government, a damaged society, and a fear of new technology. These themes can all be seen in the song No Surprises from the album "Ok Computer." No Surprises, and the remainder of the album "Ok Computer" are representative examples of Radiohead's ability to produce great music while also using the lyrical and instrumental composition to relay a significant message. No Surprises was released on the album "Ok Computer," the band's third studio album, which debuted on May 21st, 1997. No Surprises was then released as a promotional single on January 12th, 1998.

The song was the first track recorded in Radiohead's studio session in the Canned Applause studio for the "Ok Computer" album. This album has been known for its pessimistic tones regarding society and government. This may not have been the original intent of the album, since the band was looking to escape the morbid nature of their previous album, "The Bends," but songs on "Ok Computer" such as Fitter Happier, Electioneering, and Subterranean Homesick Alien provide evidence that this album is far from relaying a happy-go-lucky message. The lyrics and musicality agree with the public consensus, revealing the increasing homogenization and robotic nature of

Western society. 1996, the year of “ Ok Computer’s” recording, was a landmark year in the progress of technology.

In the first two months of that year, the world’s lightest phone was introduced and a chess computer defeated the reigning champion of the strategic board game (footnote 1). The first animal cloning took place as well in 1996(footnote 2). For Thom Yorke, a man who was wary if not fearful of technology since his infamous 1987 car crash, these developments were not positive ones(footnote 3). This accident caused him to develop a phobia of cars, and this terror can be seen in the songs Airbag and The Tourist. In the song Fitter Happier, Yorke uses an electronic voice to infuse the song, replete with superficial advice for a better modern life, with irony. The album covers the theme that society is turning into a system that is impossible to escape from; it serves as a musical warning to those who have not succumbed to the pressures of technology to run and consequently control their lives.

The music video for No Surprises shows Thom Yorke wearing a device akin to that of an astronaut’s helmet. The lyrics of the song reflect across the glass front of the helmet. As Thom sings, the helmet fills with water until Thom’s head is completely submerged. The singer manages to hold his breath for an impressive fifty-seven seconds before emerging for oxygen. The music video serves as a metaphor for society today.

As Thom struggles to hold his breath and not drown; he is also fighting the urge to yield to a homogenizing society. He is resisting with every ounce of his being the urge to give in and say, “ Ok computer.” If he does utter those

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words, he has lost himself to a late 20th century society that suffocates people by molding them into what is considered the norm, no matter how much the people dislike it. This can also be seen in the lyrics of No Surprises. The lines “ A job that slowly kills you” and “ Bruises that won’t heal” (No Surprises, Radiohead) suggest that people are accepting jobs that cause them suffering, and that these same individuals remain in their positions because to not do so would go against the rules of society.

Therefore, these people are forced to endure bruises that never heal, forever damaged by society and the public’s inability to confront its flaws. No Surprises addresses the role of the government in the lines “ Bring down the government...they don’t speak for us” (No Surprises, Radiohead). In 1996, the Freedom of Information Act was passed in the United States. This act was passed because there was a growing irritation among the public and a sense that the government was keeping information from the citizens. How could the government speak for its citizens if the citizens, prior to this act, were not allowed access to crucial information about the state of their country? Although Radiohead is a British band, their lyrics still apply to this situation.

The mellow undercurrents of No Surprises does not scream revolution when Thom Yorke sings, “ Bring down the government” (No Surprises, Radiohead). Instead, it speaks of an almost harmonious evisceration. If there were revolution, the lyrics imply, the people in charge would be spawns of an already unhealthy society, thereby contributing to an equally unhealthy new government. “ Ok Computer” also addresses the role that government plays in economics and society. The song Electioneering mentions “ Voodoo

economics” (Electioneering, Radiohead) and accusatorily links “ business, cattle prods, and the IMF” This negative attitude towards the international banking organization corresponds with the band’s anti-globalization beliefs.

Radiohead addresses the theme that we, as a society, are blindly accepting the conditions that the government puts upon us. Society is conforming to an unnatural and malevolent norm. Through No Surprises and “ Ok Computer,” Radiohead is suggesting that our social and political order is both self-destructive and conducive to harming other countries as well. No Surprises speaks of a conforming society and a corrupt government. Although some may find it difficult at times to distinguish the lyrics,, the clearest line that he sings is “ Bring down the government” (No Surprises, Radiohead). This is a call to bring down the system, a system that no longer speaks for its citizens and is out of touch with their needs.

The rest of the songs on “ Ok Computer” provide similar warnings of the dangers of a homogenized culture as well as the perils of technology advancing before the people are ready to use it in a mature fashion. Above all, this album goes against its title, urging the people to say no to the computer, the conformity, and the domineering government. 1 William Saletan, “ The triumphant teamwork of humans and computers,” 2007, The Slate Group, 8 Aug. 2012 . 2 “ 1996.” Year by Year Infoplease.

2000–2007, Pearson Education, publishing as Infoplease, 8 Aug. 2012 . 3

Marc Randall, Exit Music: The Radiohead Story. (New York: Delta, 2000) 38-39