

“Let Down and Hanging Around”: Time and Sound Quality in Radiohead’s Discourse of Disillusionment

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Abstract

Citizens of industrialized, capitalist societies inhabit cultural spaces that are saturated with sound, and of the sounds that compose our daily soundscapes (Schafer, 1977) –buzzing refrigerators, honking horns, humming laptops– none perhaps is as pervasive as music. Perhaps it is precisely because of music’s ubiquitousness in modern living that it has become an area of increasing interest in social semiotics with its capacity to serve as a tool for understanding the connections between music, the soundscape and ideology in our society (Tagg, 1990, 1994; Tagg & Collins, 2001). This paper sets out to explore what a social semiotic approach to music can reveal in terms of not only how pieces of music may make meaning but also in terms of the discourses we have for understanding these meanings and the wider cultural practices that inform them. Using a framework established by van Leeuwen (1999), the author will examine how the musical elements of timing and sound quality work together in three Radiohead songs to create meaning potentials. The writer will then consider the possible broader discourses connoted by these meanings before concluding with a reflection on the usefulness of van Leeuwen’s framework in conducting a social semiotic analysis of music.

Keywords: Radiohead, van Leeuwen, Social semiotics, Sociolinguistics, Discourse analysis, Capitalism, Culture

1. Introduction

Citizens of industrialized, capitalist societies inhabit cultural spaces that are saturated with sound, and of the sounds that compose our daily soundscapes (Schafer, 1977) –buzzing refrigerators, honking horns, humming laptops– none perhaps is as pervasive as music. In the car, on the television, at the supermarket or in the waiting room, music has, according to Jacques Attali, “invaded our world and daily life” (1985: 3). Perhaps it is precisely because of music’s ubiquitousness in modern living that it has become an area of increasing interest in social semiotics with its capacity to serve as a tool for understanding the connections between music, the soundscape and ideology in our society (Tagg, 1990, 1994; Tagg & Collins, 2001).

This paper sets out to explore what a social semiotic approach to music can reveal in terms of not only how pieces of music may make meaning but also in terms of the discourses we have for understanding these meanings and the wider cultural practices that inform them. Using a framework established by van Leeuwen (1999), the author will examine how the musical elements of timing and sound quality work together in three Radiohead songs to create meaning potentials. The writer will then consider the possible broader discourses connoted by these meanings before concluding with a reflection on the usefulness of van Leeuwen’s framework in conducting a social semiotic analysis of music.

2. Van Leeuwen’s Semiotics of Sound

The following sections will first address the basic principles of van Leeuwen’s (1999) semiotic approach to sound before considering the two semiotic resources of timing and sound quality.

2.1 A ‘Systemic-Functional’ Approach

In his framework for a semiotics of sound, van Leeuwen (1999) is concerned with describing what can be ‘said’ with sound, and how listeners can “interpret the things other people ‘say with sound’ ”. To do this, he uses a Hallidayan (1978) inspired ‘systemic-functional’ approach to classify a variety of system networks, each concerned with a particular resource, which, through a series of choices, creates meaning potentials. As van Leeuwen (1999) notes, “the ‘choices’ offered by semiotic resources have *semiotic value*. They carry with them a potential for semiosis, for meaning-making” (van Leeuwen 1999: 8). However, in order to access these meanings, it is important to put these semiotic systems in their social, cultural and historical setting. By doing so, van Leeuwen presents a referentialist view of the semiotics of music in which “music symbolizes extramusical concepts, objects or affects” (Feld & Fox, 1994: 28). In this way, music, as observed by Attali (1985), can be seen as a mirror of society –a way of perceiving the world– and van Leeuwen’s framework a means for interpreting it.

2.2 Semiotic Resources: Timing and Sound Quality

In his framework, van Leeuwen (1999) describes six semiotic sound resources of perspective, timing, interacting sounds, melody, voice quality and timbre, and modality as they have developed in Western culture. The following sections will outline van Leeuwen’s (1999) system networks for the semiotic resources of timing and sound quality, respectively.

2.2.1 Timing

Timing refers to the structured patterns of sound, or the rhythm, in a piece of music.

According to van Leeuwen's framework (1999), timing is classified as being either unmeasured or measured. Unmeasured time has no regular pulse and can either be fluctuating, in which sounds shift between different pitches, or continuous, which lacks any form of phrasing and does not usually vary in pitch. As per van Leeuwen, the meaning potential of unmeasured time "is given by [its] opposition to the characteristics of human productive work or dance, both of which have ...regular rhythmic patterns" (1999:54). Therefore, the resulting meaning potential of unmeasured time can come to signify "'God', 'nature', 'the universe', 'the supernatural', and so on, depending on the context" (1999: 54).

Measured time is divided into measures of equal duration, which are marked off by a regularly occurring accented pulse. For van Leeuwen (1999), this plays a key role in making meaning as the pulse marks the sound that is the carrier for the key information of each measure. Furthermore, each phrase (or grouping of measures) will have what van Leeuwen terms a 'key pulse', which is the "culmination of the 'message' of the phrase" (1999: 42). As per van Leeuwen (1999), Western music is dominated by two time signatures: triple (3/4) time, counted in threes (ONE two three), and duple (2/4 or 4/4) time, counted in twos (ONE two) or fours (ONE two THREE four). Of the two, triple time is considered a more 'artificial metre' and has been historically associated with the 'closed couple dance' while duple time has been associated with collectivity, public parades and marches (van Leeuwen, 1999). Western popular music typically utilizes 4/4 time with accented pulses on beats ONE and THREE (Machin, 2010) creating a highly regularized structure with key information falling on the first and third beat of each measure.

As per van Leeuwen's (1999: 61) system network of timing, measured time can be further classified as regularized or non-regularized, metronomic or non-metronomic, and polyrhythmic or monorhythmic. Table 1 below outlines the sub-classifications of measured time.

Table 1. Sub-classifications of measured time

Measured Time	Sub-classification	Description *(see Chapter 3 van Leeuwen 1999)
	polyrhythmic	In polyrhythmic music, each member of the group follows his or her own internal clock. Playing together does not require synchronization.
	monorhythmic	In monorhythmic music, members of the musical group must all synchronize to the same beat or pulse, “in the same way soldiers, or rush hour commuters in a narrow London Underground pedestrian tunnel, must march in step” (55).
	metronomic	If a song is metronomic, the timing of the melody is strictly in synch with the objective beat of the pulse. In this regard, the melody or music can be said to be aligned with clock (‘objective’) time.
	non-metronomic	In a song that is non-metronomic, the timing of the music or melody is not in synch with the beat or pulse. It could be described as following its own ‘subjective’ (lived, felt) time and struggling against the rigidity of the beat (clock time).
	regularized	Music can be regularized in the following three ways: (1) through a constant tempo (dependent on the time interval between pulses in a measure) (2) regularized amount of sounds per measure and (3) regularized amount of measures per phrase.
	non-regularized	In non-regularized music, the tempo and time signatures may vary as well as the number of syllables per measure within each phrase and the number of measures per phrase.

In addition to the distinctions outlined in Table 1, tempo, also a feature of measured time, is considered as having semiotic significance. According to Machin (2010), quicker rhythms are seen as more animated, excited or active while slower tempos are associated with feelings of calm, relaxation, laziness or reluctance. For Tagg, “tempo in music [is] an important parameter in determining the human/biological aspect of an affective relationship to time” (1984: 22; cited in van Leeuwen, 1999: 39) thus establishing tempo as another means in which music can present and represent how a society handles time.

All of these choices within this network have potentials for meaning. As per Machin (2010), regular rhythms can suggest the impersonal or official while irregular rhythms have potentials to communicate creativity as well as instability. For Tagg, the regular, metronomic beat of disco “represents a high degree of affective acceptance of and identification with clock time” (1984: 32; cited in van Leeuwen, 1999: 38) while in rock and roll, the vocals, lead guitar and other instruments use syncopation and non-metronomic timing to subvert the rigidity of the clock time stated by the bass drum and bass guitar (Tagg, 1990). Through these

examples it is clear that musical time can very directly reflect the way “time is lived in the lifeworld where the music is made as well as people’s affective relationship to that time, whether they embrace it or struggle with it” (van Leeuwen, 1999: 50).

2.2.2 Sound Quality

According to Tagg (1982), traditional music analysis can be characterized as a formalist practice, focusing on, amongst other elements, notable parameters of musical expression such as form and thematic construction while expressing a “nonchalance towards other parameters not easily expressed in traditional notation...such as sound, timbre...etc...which are ...ignored in the analysis of art music but extremely important in popular music” (Rosing 1981; cited in Tagg 1982: 5). Van Leeuwen (1999) addresses these less easily expressed parameters in his framework, identifying a set of seven key features of sound quality which work in combination to “help define what...sound quality presents or represents” (1999: 140) in a piece of music. Table 2 below outlines these features.

Table 2. Features of sound quality

Sound/Voice Quality Features	Description *(van Leeuwen 1999: 140-141)	Meaning Potential *dependent on context and other musical elements *see Chapter 6 (van Leeuwen 1999) and Chapter 6 (Machin 2010)
Tense/lax	Relates to increased alertness, self-control, and stress, i.e. situations where relaxation is not desirable or possible without restraint. Sounds can range from maximally tense to maximally lax.	<i>Tense:</i> Aggression, repression, excitement, fright, anguish, scorn, sarcasm <i>Lax:</i> emotional, lingering, contemplation
Rough/smooth	Relates to friction or irregularity in the voice. It can range from maximally rough to maximally smooth.	<i>Rough:</i> worn, dirty, contamination, aggression, excitement, tension, wear and tear, authenticity <i>Smooth:</i> polished, clean, ‘well-oiled’, pure
Breathiness	Derives its meaning from our knowledge of the kinds of situations in which it can occur, i.e. excitement, physical exertion.	Intimacy, confidentiality, sensuality, strain, euphoria, emotional intensity
Soft/loud	Relates most strongly to the need to cover distance. Often associated with dominance and power. The opposite applies to softness. It is a graded feature.	<i>Soft:</i> Intimacy, confidentiality, secrecy, weakness, thoughtful, gentle <i>Loud:</i> Threat, danger, importance, weight, overbearing, unsubtle,

		occupying space
High/low	Is associated with size (small things make high noises, large things low noises) power and status (rising pitches, high pitch). It is a graded feature.	<i>High voice</i> : dominance (in men—if loud), feminine (in men if falsetto), small, shrill, agitation, ethereal <i>Low voice</i> : assertiveness in women, non-assertiveness in men, bleakness
Vibrato/plain	Relates to increased emotionality or loss of control (inability to keep the voice steady). Relates to our physical experience of trembling. Different degrees and kinds of vibrato are possible. Meaning depends on speed, depth and regularity (Machin 2010).	<i>Vibrato</i> : love, romance, fear; high regularity might suggest something mechanical, alien or sacred <i>Plain</i> : unmoved, steady, dull, bland, firm, mechanical, technological, modernity
Nasality	Associated with tension and carries strong negative value judgments.	Pain, deprivation, sorrow (Lomax 1968: 193; cited in van Leeuwen 1999:136), restraint, control, repression, inhibition, reluctance, lack of enthusiasm

It should be noted that the understanding of the majority of the sound quality features described in Table 2 are based on what van Leeuwen terms (see 2.1) ‘experiential meaning potential’, in other words our experience of what we do physically when we produce these sounds, then subsequently turning this action into knowledge and metaphorically extending these experiences “to grasp similar extensions made by others” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; cited in van Leeuwen 1999: 140). For Machin (2010), experiential meaning potential extends more broadly to include associations of sounds produced by our physical environment, such as thunder which makes a booming sound that, when made artificially, communicates the qualities associated with thunder, i.e. vastness, power, and danger.

However, alongside using our physical experience of sound to make meaning, van Leeuwen notes that provenance plays a role as well:

When a sound travels, its meaning is associated with the place it comes from and/or the people who originated it, or rather, with the ideas held about that place or those people in the place to which the sound has travelled. (1999: 139)

Provenance, as described by van Leeuwen (1999) and Machin (2010), closely resembles the Barthesian concept of ‘connotation’, which Barthes describes as a “second-order semiological system” (Barthes, 1972: 113) that points to the broader concepts, ideas and values which the denotative meanings (i.e. the sounds themselves) stand for. As Machin notes:

These observations are useful for analyzing popular music. We can consider the associations of different kinds of sounds and the instruments that make them. We can ask what kinds of

places, cultures and times they suggest. (2010: 121)

With connotation's power to naturalize ideologies or the status quo (Barthes 1972), this becomes an increasingly important factor to consider when analyzing something as seemingly mundane or harmless as music, for as Cloonan and Johnson (2002) observe, "Disempowerment and oppression can be brutally imposed through state terror, but...quietly naturalised through the channels of everyday life.... And music is one of *the* most pervasive experiences of everyday life.

3. Timing and Sound Quality in Radiohead

The following section will utilize van Leeuwen's (1999) social semiotic approach to analyze three Radiohead songs in regards to their use of the semiotic resources of timing and sound quality to make meanings.

3.1 "No Surprises"

"No Surprises" (Radiohead, 1997b) is the tenth track on Radiohead's seminal album *OK Computer* (1997c). Released in 1997, it quickly became lauded as the voice of an anxiety-ridden and alienated generation. The following sections will look at the uses of timing and sound quality and their possible meanings within the workings of the song.

3.1.1 Timing

"No Surprises" (Radiohead, 1997b) opens with four measures of bass guitar and lead guitar which accent the first and third pulse of each measure, establishing the regularity of its signature of 4/4 time as is seen in Figure 1.



Figure 1. First four measures of "No Surprises"

The pattern is repeated for another four measures, this time with the addition of drums, rhythm guitar and what sounds like a toy piano or xylophone, sounding out each beat in the measure. The instruments fall easily in synch with the clock time established by the guitar and bass guitar in a metronomic fashion: the slow tempo and repetitive nature of the rhythm and notes give the song a lullaby-like quality.

In the ninth measure (0:25), the voice enters very much in the same way as the instruments in regards to falling in step with the rhythm of the song. In the measures that follow in the first verse, the words and notes of the melody fall on the pulse thus representing the singer giving himself over to objective time (van Leeuwen, 1999) though the slight syncopation in the second, fourth and sixth measures of the verse seem to indicate that this could be more a case of resignation than eager acceptance.

The rest of the song continues in much the same fashion, making it a highly regularized, mostly metronomic, monorhythmic piece of music. What, then, are some of the meaning potentials to be gleaned from the rhythmic qualities of this tune? In answering this question it is first helpful to locate the pulse of each measure and identify the message carried in it (see section 2.2.1). The words of the melody that fall on the pulses are as follows: “heart, that’s, full, like, land, fill, job, slowly, kills, you, bruises, won’t, heal”. The verbal message is direct, simple and desolate. The melody itself is fairly repetitive, mimicking the rises and fall in pitch as is heard with the innocuous sounds of the xylophone and lead guitar. However, the sweet and relatively harmless sounds are in fact inescapable in their repetitiveness, mimicking the drudgery of daily life complete with its daily commutes, paper shuffling and ‘clock slaving’. This is the song of the ‘clock slave’, “digitally quantified and atomized (worth so much an hour, so much for a bank loan, etc.)” (Tagg 1990: 38), oppressed by, and resigned to, the forces of a time he does not, and will not, control.

3.1.2 Sound Quality

The sound quality of the opening lead guitar and bass lines are smooth and soft with some vibrato. The bass guitar is lax and low while the lead guitar is high-pitched and somewhat tense. The xylophone, like the lead guitar, is high in pitch, soft, and smooth. However, it is more relaxed than the lead guitar as playing a xylophone softly also implies a more relaxed, light strike of the instrument. The rhythm guitar and drums are lax, soft, and smooth. The instrumentation seems far removed from the noise, grit and chaos of the urban soundscape (Tagg, 1990, 1994; Tagg & Collins, 2001). Instead, the instruments, through their sound quality, seem to communicate something more akin to the quietness and mildness of suburban life, away from the clamor of the city.

Though the sound quality of the instruments depicts the tranquility of suburbia, the voice quality indicates that all is not what it appears amongst the neatly lined houses and gardens. The vocals are tense, soft, and high in pitch, somewhat rough and worn, with strong vibrato and nasal expressions. Combined, these vocal features can signify anxiety, anguish, tension, weakness, smallness, fear and pain (see Table 2). Nasality, in particular, is associated with degrees of repression, reluctance and lack of enthusiasm (Machin, 2010). The voice in “No Surprises” (Radiohead, 1997b), then, could be interpreted as the voice of dissatisfaction and disillusionment within the confines of modern suburban life.

3.2 “The National Anthem”

The follow up record to *OK Computer* (Radiohead, 1997c) is *Kid A* (Radiohead, 2000a). The album represents a departure from the band’s previous vocal-guitar style rock and introduces various electronic and computer elements which are on par, in terms of salience, with many of the vocal and instrumental arrangements. The following sections will analyze timing and sound quality in “The National Anthem” (Radiohead, 2000b), the third song on the album, *Kid A*.

3.2.1 Timing

Like “No Surprises” (Radiohead, 1997b), “The National Anthem” (Radiohead, 2000b) is a measured song in 4/4 time that is regularized, mostly metronomic and monorhythmic. However, where the timing of “No Surprises” speaks of resigning oneself to the clock, “The

National Anthem” presents and represents defiance to the overbearing nature of objective time through the non-metronomic, polyrhythmic free jazz style brass section featured in the song.

The song begins with an aggressive bass line that states the “rehumanised version of humanly produced regularity [clock time]” (Tagg, 1990: 45) in a medium tempo that connotes the marching of soldiers or slowly moving tanks. The pulses on the first and third beats of the measures emphasize the song’s duple time and its associations with “progress, exploration, expansion and nationalistic values” (van Leeuwen, 1999: 49). The bass line drives relentlessly throughout the tune, and in fact is its only constant beat as the drums proceed to sporadically drop in and out of the song. In the ninth measure, the Ondes Martenot makes its appearance with a slow descending melody that glides down from note to note on the pulse of the measures. At minute 1:36 in the song, the voice comes in with short bursts of lyrics whose melody and words fall in unison with the pulse (though at times with a degree of slight anticipation).

Once again, objective time reigns supreme. However, in minute 2:39 a saxophone begins a rhythmic phrase, which evolves into a free jazz style improvisation by a horn section of trumpets, saxophones and trombones thus challenging the objective time of the bass line. For Attali, “The only possible challenge to repetitive power [clock time] takes the route of a breach in social repetition and the control of noisemaking (1985: 132). In “The National Anthem” (Radiohead, 2000b), the free jazz improvisation does just this. With its non-metronomic, irregular and polyrhythmic timings, it breaks from the “cultural alienation inherent in repetition, to use music to build a new culture” (Attali 1985: 138) that celebrates individuality and difference, rising up against the conformity of the clock.

3.2.2 Sound Quality

The sound quality of the bass is tense, rough, loud and low. Combined, these features point to meaning potentials of power, aggression and importance (see Table 2) and even danger with its deep, ominous pitch (Machin, 2010) that resonates throughout the space of the song. The bass seems to suggest an all-encompassing power, both threatening and insurmountable, driving forward at all costs, perhaps connoting the all-consuming power of the capitalist machine, its sound “flood[ing] spaces with power, to oppress and conquer” (Cloonan & Johnson, 2002: 29).

In contrast to the bass, the Ondes Martenot, though tense, is smooth, and soft. Its pitch is high, beyond the range of the human voice, and paired with a high regularity of vibrato, suggesting the ethereal (Machin, 2010), the extraterrestrial or sacred (van Leeuwen, 2010), i.e. the unattainable ideal. The horns, at the height of their improvisation, are tense, rough, loud and high-pitched (though within the range of the human voice), connoting aggression, scorn, fear and agitation (see Table 2). They emerge as the human voices, shouting over the rumble of institutional power, demanding to be heard.

The voice in “The National Anthem” (Radiohead, 2000b) starts out tense, high, and nasally, though moderately loud and with very little vibrato suggesting the steady or mechanical (Machin, 2010). Feedback behind the voice creates a degree of roughness indicative of aggression or contamination (see Table 2), which, as the song progresses, increases in its

intensity along with the volume and degree of tension in the voice. As the vocalist repeatedly sings, “It’s holding on” (Radiohead, 2000b), it becomes increasingly clear through the quality of the voice that he is barely holding on at all as his voice mimics the chaotic frenzy of the horns while both struggle to occupy the sound space dominated by the overpowering bass line. In the end, the voice and horns drop out and a piece of distorted orchestral melody is heard, reminiscent of the beginning of a national anthem, once again establishing order and control (Cloonan & Johnson, 2002).

3.3 “Nude”

“Nude” (Radiohead, 2008b) is the third song on Radiohead’s seventh studio album, *In Rainbows* (2008a). Self-released on 2007 as a download, then in album format in 2008, the album seems to merge together the more traditional vocal-guitar style of earlier records with their electronic experimentations of *Kid A* (Radiohead, 2000a) and *Amnesiac* (Radiohead 2001). The following sections will explore the uses of timing and sound quality and their potential meanings in “Nude”.

3.3.1 Timing

“Nude” (Radiohead, 2008b) is another example of a measured, monorhythmic, regularized and metronomic song. Again, the bass guitar and the drums state the objective time to which the vocal melody easily conforms too with its words and notes falling on the pulse. However, unlike “No Surprises” (Radiohead, 1997b) and “The National Anthem” (Radiohead 2000b), “Nude” (2008b) is played in a 6/8 time signature (ONE two three FOUR five six) with six beats to a measure and a pulse on counts one and four. This produces a ‘triple time feel’ that Machin (2010) suggests is used to create a sense of lightness, space or reluctance as “there is a sense of hesitation as the two pulses follow the accent on the first [and fourth] beat. This creates... a side-to-side motion rather than forwards” (128) thus implying a state of contemplation, conformity or caution. Similarly, van Leeuwen (1999) describes triple time as an ‘artificial time’ that connotes individuality or emotive expressivity. In this way, it expresses “the ethos of individualization, self-expression and privacy” (Marothy, 1974: 233; cited in van Leeuwen, 1999: 49) and is associated with “the private side of the industrial age” (49). Where as duple time is the rhythm of human activity and the public sphere, van Leeuwen likens triple time to the way “neighbours in a suburb might live close to each other yet not communicate” (1999:49).

Again, as with the previous two Radiohead songs analyzed, this song seems to suggest alienation from, and resignation to, the confines of modernity. Though the song utilizes a time signature associated with individuality, the lyrics warn the subject from getting “any big ideas” because “they’re not going to happen” (Radiohead, 2008b) thus repressing the ethos of individualization and emotive expressivity suggested by the triple time pattern. Furthermore, the use of this ‘private’ time, could be seen to emphasize the subject’s alienation from society as, like the waltz, he is physically together with others in the world—like a couple in a ballroom of other couples—yet no longer communicating with them (van Leeuwen, 1999).

3.3.2 Sound Quality

“Nude” (Radiohead, 2008b) begins with eleven seconds of synthesizer noise and sampled vocals that are soft, somewhat lax, high, and smooth with a high regularity of vibrato,

establishing a dreamlike or ethereal space for the song to inhabit. At 0:12 the drums come in quite softly, and are relaxed, smooth and high-pitched, using mostly the snare and symbols to establish the pulse with a soft muffled bass pedal on the first beat of each measure. The bass guitar, like the drums, is relaxed and smooth, played softly in the higher register without much vibrato. Unlike “The National Anthem” (Radiohead, 2000b), it is unobtrusive, gentle and steady (see Table 2), implying an intimacy indicated by the title of the song. Occupying less space than in “The National Anthem”, the instrumentation allows room for the emotive expression of the vocal melody in this private and contemplative setting.

There are two sets of voices to analyze in “Nude” (Radiohead, 2008b). The first set is comprised of falsetto “oooohs” which act as bookends to the song. They are moderately tense, entirely smooth, soft, nasal and vibrating. Like the synthesizer in the song, these “oohs” suggest something of the sacred or ethereal with their high register and vibrato. Likewise, their nasal quality connotes an element of sorrow or pain (see Table 2). These voices could suggest the unattainable ideal, be it spiritual or emotional, which the subject of the vocal melody is unable to realize.

Unlike the voice of the intro and outro, the voice of the vocal melody is anchored to the terrestrial. Though similarly sung in a soft falsetto with nasality and vibrato, it is notably more tense, somewhat rough and featuring a degree of breathiness giving it a far more human quality. This worn and weary voice suggests repression, anguish and scorn (see Table 2) while still retaining the intimacy of the instrumentation. Additionally, a reverb or echo effect is used on the vocal line. As Doyle (2006) observes, echo can be used to suggest space (cited in Machin 2010: 125) as echoes are generally experienced in large empty spaces; hearing reverb or echo allows us to make associations with isolation and loneliness. Similar to the meanings garnered from the timing of the song, the sound quality of the instruments and vocals highlights the estrangement of the melodic subject from his environment and, quite possibly, from himself: the self he wants to, but will never, be.

4. “Disappointed People”: The Discourse of Radiohead

The discourse of alienation in modern capitalist society is not new to popular music and figures as a prominent discourse in Radiohead’s music (Letts, 2005). Throughout the course of their eight albums, the band has actively articulated its anti-capitalist sentiments and consumer culture anxieties. The irony within this discourse, however, is two fold: firstly, music itself is a commodified good; as Attali (1985) aptly states, “wherever there is music, there is money” (3) and secondly, “music about alienation has proven to have a strong market worldwide” (Letts, 2005:1). In other words, anti-capitalist sentiment sells, and Radiohead has been generously rewarded by the system it so vehemently critiques thus finding itself trapped within the workings of the capitalist machine.

From this obvious disparity emerges a new discourse in the music of Radiohead, a discourse of disillusionment expressed through a distinct voice of disappointment and ambivalence (Morrison & Love, 1996), a voice that simultaneously distinguishes itself from corporate power, but can offer no alternative against it, as in order to hear its anti-corporate message, you must first buy the album. In each of the three songs analyzed in Section 3, the vocal melody finds itself subordinated to the rigidity of objective, capitalist time. Through the quality of the voice, one hears its struggle, but ultimately for the subject, and the listener,

there is no escape. Even in “The National Anthem” (Radiohead, 2000b), where the horns break free of metronomic time in their free jazz improvisation, order is once again restored through the distorted orchestral melody that finishes the song. Likewise, in “Nude” (Radiohead, 2008b), though space is given for the individual and his emotive expressions through its use of 6/8 time, the singer is ultimately undermined by his own self-awareness of the futility of his predicament: he wants to escape to achieve his ideal but cannot. He tells himself, “Don’t get any big ideas/They’re not going to happen/You paint yourself white/ And fill up with noise/But there’ll be something missing” (Radiohead, 2008b) which could be another form of saying, “There’s no escaping the capitalist machine, so don’t bother trying. Make your music, sell your records and resign yourself to the irony of it all.”

The discourse of disillusionment in Radiohead, then, articulates the disappointment of being trapped within a system that is seemingly inescapable. Even when speaking out against it, we are a part of it. As Frith (1987) argues:

What we know of pop music, even that which we have thought of as most creative as most anti-mainstream, has come to exist not in spite of commerce, but in harmony with it. (Cited in Machin, 2010: 30).

As a result we have become an ambivalent, resigned, and “disappointed people...let down and hanging around” (Radiohead, 1997a), a sentiment Radiohead’s music skillfully reflects. In Radiohead’s discourse of disillusionment, “we are all dehumanized and made into a commodity, just as the band itself has been” (Letts, 2005: 167).

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, van Leeuwen’s framework proved a useful tool for analyzing how the semiotic resources of timing and sound quality work together to create meanings in three Radiohead songs. By using his ‘systemic-functional’ approach to the semiotics of sound, it was possible to identify the broader discourses of alienation and disillusionment communicated in the music of Radiohead and investigate how these discourses are conveyed through timing and sound quality. By recognizing these discourses and how they are expressed, it becomes possible to perceive what is “‘deep and ‘hidden’ and below the surface” (van Leeuwen, 1999: 196) of our culture and society. Listening and understanding the music of our everyday lives, then, becomes an act of vital importance for, as Attali (1985) states, “By listening...we can better understand where the folly of men and their calculations is leading us, and what hopes it is still possible to have” (3).

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