



sample chapter

RADIOHEAD

AND PHILOSOPHY

FITTER HAPPIER
MORE DEDUCTIVE



EDITED BY BRANDON W. FORBES
AND GEORGE A. REISCH

Popular Culture and Philosophy®

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Fitter Happier More Deductive
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16.

The Mutilation of Voice in “Kid A” (Or, My John Mayer Problem)

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When I was a kid, back in the era of cassettes, my friend Brandon made me a copy of *Pablo Honey*. He pressed his stereo up against mine, hit “play,” and then hit “record” on mine. Since we used the external mic on my stereo, *Pablo Honey* came through layered with echoed static and the sounds of Brandon trying to be quiet: taps set to the beat of the songs, his dog running through the halls in the background, and later, Brandon’s mother calling him over to eat. You can also hear him shout: *Quiet, Mom! I’m recording!*

I loved that tape. Before it went the way of all my cassettes, that copy of *Pablo Honey* accompanied me to school; it was with me while I was on the bus; it played between mix-tapes of songs I’d recorded off the radio (complete with DJs’ voices bleeding into and out of songs); and it took its rightful place next to *Mellow Gold*, *Ten*, and *Nevermind* in my tape collection.

Yes, *rightful* place—I know people who cringe when I tell them that I love *Pablo Honey*. Of course, I agree that *The Bends* is brilliant and that *OK Computer* and *Kid A* are masterpieces. But I still love *Pablo Honey* not only because “Anyone Can Play Guitar” is beautiful and “Creep” (despite what anyone—even Radiohead themselves—says about it) is one excellent song. I love it also because of the sounds of the springs in Brandon’s bed squeaking as he got

up, because I loved hearing him tap along when he sat back down, because I loved his dog, Benny, and because I'll never know what got Benny so excited so as to run up and down the hallway, paws clacking the length of their apartment. I loved that Brandon's mother called him over to eat. It reminded me that someone *made* this for me.

But it wasn't until I heard *Kid A* that any of this made sense to me.

Surprises and Alarms

As most Radiohead fans remember, *Kid A* was kind of shocking when it was released. One friend of mine, when I asked him what he thought, said that he couldn't listen to their old stuff anymore. Their core *sound* had changed. Radiohead had *evolved*. They'd picked up electronic music, yet couldn't quite be called "electronic" themselves. They had abandoned the naturalistic realism of rock albums and embraced the very technology used to record them. They weren't pretending that a person playing an acoustic guitar and singing into a microphone was any less technologically determined than a band that drew from drum samples, distorted vocals, and software. When we hear Thom Yorke's voice at the beginning of "Everything in Its Right Place," we hear it disfigured—cycled frontwards and backwards through some machine. It's spooky, weird, and clearly marked a new direction for the band.

One thing that I still love about *Kid A*—and which is, no doubt, one of the shocking things about it—is that you're always reminded that someone *made* this. The music doesn't disappear into the transparency of recording technologies—even "How to Disappear Completely" uses guitars as easily as it does studio effects. At nearly every turn, we're reminded of the synthetic quality of the songs and the technology used to compose the album—or, at least, the texture of that technology. Years after its release, when I was teaching writing, one of my students was surprised that I had never seen the band live. I was (relatively) young at the time, but my response was, *I don't think I have to*.

I said that because seeing the band live didn't seem to be the point. (Later, when *I Might Be Wrong: Live Recordings* came out, I learned that I might be wrong about that.) At the time, though, the whole point was artifice. Radiohead had long been lamenting the

artificiality of things early in their career (with, for example, “Fake Plastic Trees” and “Fitter, Happier”) and *Kid A*, as shocking as it was, seemed like a logical step: use the technology that alienates us, crawl into it, and turn it into something else *from the inside*. For the media-saturated youth-culture that rallied around *Kid A*, the album seemed to speak simultaneously from within the technology wrapped around us as well as about it. Where *OK Computer* was *about* the low-level panic and anxiety produced by living in “the information age,” *Kid A* was an artifact *of* that information and that age, the first child born from the very technology rock music traveled. (Okay. Maybe not the *first*. But let’s not get hung up on origin myths.)

To me, the album is inseparable from the artifice used to compose it. And it’s inseparable from what I see as *Kid A*’s technologically determined conundrum—the question: how does the withdrawal and making-evident of artifice shape anything *Kid A* might say? Does this inseparability of music and the technology used to create it mute, mutilate, or magnify Radiohead’s voice? Is it part of some larger comment by the band on the ways technology is thinned out into a nearly invisible backdrop against which we live? Consider this chapter my attempt to figure this out and record what I hear in *Kid A*. And I’ll try to be quiet while the tape plays.

Kid A, Heidegger, and the Question of Technology

Science fiction writer William Gibson says that cyberspace is where telephone conversations take place. I imagine this is the same place where we listen to *In Rainbows* (and a case could be made for that, I’m sure), but what interests me most about Gibson’s definition is not necessarily the space we occupy when on the phone, but the role of the phone itself. It shimmies between connection (as it presents our voice to the person on the other end) and distortion (as it makes that voice different, distorted, and electronic). The telephone determines and enables. Conversations may take place in cyberspace, but they get there through an electrocution that seems to manipulate and facilitate our voices equally. Or, switching metaphors, imagine listening to your voice played back on tape. That’s not what you sound like. Is it? *Yep*, *Kid A* says, *that’s you*.

That's the best way I can explain the kind of anxiety I feel when I listen to *Kid A*. Actually, scratch that—it's not anxiety. It's familiarity, philosophically speaking, especially when I hear Yorke's distorted voice, digitally bubbling up, saying something like "Kid A, Kid A/Kid A, Kid A." This kind of disfigurement recurs again after the distorted voice of "Everything in Its Right Place" blurs and repeats. It asks, "What was that you tried to say?" while the disfigured samples cycle through their own continual distortions in the background. The album's title track, "Kid A," is so disfigured we can't even understand it. We hear the technology. Its part of the song. *Somebody made this*, it says. *Listen*.

Martin Heidegger had a lot to say about such disfigurement in his analysis of *Being* and the notion of *presence* in western philosophy. In *Being and Time*, he claimed that technology amounted to a collective human effort to control and manipulate nature, at the expense of understanding the ways in which technology turns around and controls and manipulates us. This is a lesson that we've learned well from Radiohead. It's right there in the band's name (bringing to mind images of machine-like brains working through millions of signals that register and millions that don't). It's there in *OK Computer* ("I might be paranoid, but not an android," the computerized voice reassures us). And it's there in *Kid A* ("Strobe lights and blown speakers / fireworks and hurricanes / I'm not here / This isn't happening"). The world of *Kid A*, after all, is one in which we're here, but we're not here. "In Limbo" says we're "living in a fantasy world," and then "Idioteque" tells us "this is really happening." We've shimmied in between space and cyberspace. And we get there through the technological atmosphere *Kid A* orchestrates around us.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger argues that most of our everydayness is spent firmly in the realm of the ordinary—we need to study, go to work, buy groceries, pay bills. In the process, much of what enables such ordinariness retreats from our attention and becomes invisible to us. For Heidegger, western philosophy has spent far too much time investigating what is present to us—or presence (or existence), more generally—and too little time investigating the ways such presence tends to erase that which enables it by virtue of rendering it ordinary. Technology is one of mankind's biggest enablers of ordinary lives, and yet, when all is working appropriately, it retreats from our daily attention. The *dan-*

gers of technology (such as the risks of identity theft or car accidents on the way to the grocery store) actually help right this imbalance by pointing us to the world that lies ordinarily withdrawn from view or experience—an absence that is so very important for Heidegger's ongoing critique of the persistence of presence in philosophy.

Heidegger's demand that western philosophy re-think what it means by presence—and his point that attempts to investigate the nature of existence, therefore, will always privilege the presence implied by the word “is”—centers around the concept *Dasein*. Put simply, *Dasein*, as its German definition suggests, refers to “being”—specifically, *human* “being.” In Heidegger's scheme, human “being” is not something static—it is not exclusively presence—but rather something bound up in its particular temporal and material circumstances. It's a movement through a world of material possibilities. So to privilege what “is,” according to Heidegger, is to ignore that which has withdrawn from “being,” but which, nevertheless enables that “being.” To privilege presence is to erase its conditions as well as the many opportunities that may be possible when we re-imagine what has enabled those opportunities. Technology, he argues, is one of the primary withdrawn tools that enables that “is” to the degree that we don't think about it—or see its alternative potentials. Think email. Think cell phones. Think cars. Think iPods. Think laptops, even tables and chairs. Think *Pablo Honey*.

Technology is an invisible backdrop in *Pablo Honey*. It's merely the vehicle for hearing (in my opinion) damn fine alternative rock. We'd expect the band to sound much the same playing live. Who cares about the ways studios provide technological environments that quite seriously shape the music we hear? I want guitars. I want drums. I want infectious bass lines. I want microphones amplifying screams. Forget that these are technologies themselves. But in *Kid A*, it's different. Technological environs become very, *very* important. The studio *is* an instrument. Sound and technology merge. New possibilities arise. Who cares about standard guitar rock? I want samples. I want drum machines. I want disfigured vocals. Think email viruses. Think dropped calls. Think strobe lights and blown speakers. Think *Kid A*.

We're shaken out of our ordinary understanding of rock music—and the ways it renders its technologies invisible. And that's kinda scary. But it's also very familiar. I've been assaulted by technology in ways designed to attack me (computer viruses, identity theft) and I've been assaulted by technology in ways designed to "help" me (advertisements in every virtual and physical place my eyes can go, dropped calls, laptops that crash while I'm working, and yes, even car crashes). When technology makes itself visible, I usually don't want to see it. I'm sure this would be different if I were a programmer. Or an engineer. But I'm not. I'm a teacher. I require that the equipment that surrounds me work properly so that I can get through my day. When it doesn't, I'm pissed. I don't have the time to worry about it making itself visible. I want it to shut up and do its job. I *want* it to withdraw.

Which helps explain the particular, familiar, anxiety or panic that domes *Kid A*. My desire for withdrawal, *Kid A* says, is a fantasy. There's no such thing. Maybe the anxieties produced by my technologically situated lifestyle are something that haven't found adequate expression in the culture of "the information age"—the culture into which I was born. The synthetic opening keyboard of "Everything in its Right Place" immediately announces that this is not the standard guitar-driven, withdrawal of technological and musical opportunity. Perhaps this making-evident of artifice is the depiction of a new kind of pop music. Perhaps this is a new voice articulating something we haven't heard pop music say before. Maybe *that's* why it sounds disfigured.

Making Sense by Not Making Sense

The song "Kid A" itself is striking not only because its voice is disfigured to the point of unintelligibility. Nor is it only because it's the second in a trio of opening songs that dramatically announce a new direction for a very popular band. To me, "Kid A" is striking because it is beautiful—and I'm not sure why. The electrocution of (I assume) Yorke's voice doesn't enable what technology usually enables: communication, connection, (the illusion of) clarity. The song doesn't communicate in the way we ordinarily communicate, and the degree to which anything sung is at the mercy of the technology presenting it to us should send shivers down

our (very human) spines. And it does. So how is that song so beautiful?

First, it's willful. No matter how oppressive the technological marring becomes, the voice still sings. It may be trapped, but it's not going to quit. It may not be understood, but it's still going to sing. And the evocative quality is as intoxicating as it is terrifying. Human expression may be entrapped, our avenues of expression becoming more and more ways toward dead ends rather than entry-points into effective, clear communication. But the digitally soaked voice of that song doesn't care. So what if its very humanity is scarred by the very technologies meant to announce it? That's no reason not to try.

And second, its failure makes it *feel* human. This is how Radiohead can embrace electronic music with *Kid A* without actually *becoming* electronic. In fact, they still remain inside the realm of pop music. It wasn't as if Radiohead heard some interesting avant-garde electronic music and thought that they should imitate it for artistic or (even less likely) commercial success. Rather, the synthetic feel of *Kid A* seems more the product of a band exploring their surrounding technologies—technologies that were ready-at-hand when *Kid A* was recorded—and using those technologies to express something very human: the anxiety of living in an information age that claims to want to help us, yet feels more like an imposition than anything else. The song “Kid A” and its electronic saturation feel very much like a saturation in which we operate daily, whether through television, radio, internet, or phone lines.

Just as Gibson noticed, much of our lives are lived through the circuitry that enables our lifestyles. And the music we listen to is an important part of that electronic saturation. Radiohead's evolution from *Pablo Honey* to *Kid A* itself reflects the degree to which we have become electronic in order to survive in “the information age.” “Kid A” is as much *of* technology as it is *about* technology. It disfigures voice as much as it is concerned with singing about disfiguring voice. Such an accommodation suggests that in order for humans to say anything in “the information age” we must become partly technological ourselves (or acknowledge how dependent on technology we always have been). Humanity itself isn't enough. We need to use our technological environs. We need *help*.

I listened to the song “Kid A” for seven years before I became in any way interested in what the lyrics were saying. As far as I was

concerned, for seven years, when that song emerged from the silence following “Everything in its Right Place” all I cared about was being washed in the strange familiarity of the way it feels, rather than the acknowledgement of anything particular that the lyrics might say. That was a beautiful experience because it felt, actually *felt*, like there was suddenly a band out there in mainstream global pop culture that knew how inarticulate I felt in the torrent of media I swam through daily, how trapped and protected I felt in my little world of global connection. How was it possible to say anything that might be heard, let alone *understood*, in a globalized culture that, no matter how much I depended on it, created a technological environment that trapped me as much as it protected me? The benefits of the world wide web, cell phones, laptops, television—all that stuff—were benefits that I depended on, but didn’t understand. So I lived with a low-level anxiety about the technology that surrounded me. The bands I listened to didn’t seem to understand this, or know how to articulate it. Radiohead did. And they did it by being inarticulate.

At Ease

I became interested in the lyrics of “Kid A” when I came across John Mayer’s acoustic cover of it. I listened because I thought, *No, there’s no way this guy covered Radiohead. This must be a different “Kid A.”* But there was his acoustic guitar muting the rhythm of “Kid A.” And there, in just the places where the voice of Radiohead’s “Kid A” kicked in, he started singing. *Oh man*, I thought, *this guy just doesn’t get it.* Now, I’ve got nothing against John Mayer and I’m not interested in being a snob about rock music. He seems like a perfectly nice guy and I genuinely think he loves what he does (which is more than I can say for many artists). And, in a way, he did me a favor. Because as soon as I realized that this was indeed Radiohead’s “Kid A,” I took the opportunity to listen intently and try to figure out what the lyrics were saying. As Mayer told MTV, he covered the song in order to bring out the lyrics and melody:

There’s a tune there, but it was almost purposefully obscured, like a robot was singing it. It was one of the few songs I could do something with—if you’re gonna do a cover, leave the song

somewhere different than where you picked it up. (March 17th, 2004, MTV.com)

But it's also good not to leave a knife plunged into the song. I could hardly pay attention to the lyrics, overshadowed as they were by the clash between the two renditions. Think Dylan's (or even The Byrd's) "Mr. Tambourine Man" compared to William Shatner's stilted and clueless performance. Who's the real robot here?

The clash suggested to me a kind of spectrum with which to make Heideggerian sense of Radiohead's conundrum—an axis between understanding plain-spoken words articulated by Mayer (or Shatner) at one end, and being able to understand by *not* being able to hear the words that are *not* articulated, at the other. And it lets me articulate (!) why the original is so much more effective than Mayer's cover.

Kid A is an album that at once shows us how popular rock music can point us toward the synthetic, technological textures of our lives that we've come to depend on while at the same time enacting how we have come to accommodate the dangers and anxieties that such dependencies produce. It's popular music that reconfigures what we consider popular not in terms of fashion or trend, but in terms of what we use in order to connect fashions and trends. It asks popular music to start thinking about *how* we rally around our (globalized) culture. How does the circuitry that brings us together also breed alienation? How can popular music think through this? The result is often panicky music, shaking with anxiety, and nearly cyborg-like in its depiction of humanity. The title track of *Kid A*, if at all meant to be emblematic of the album, and by extension, the new direction the band took at the time, seems, to me, to suggest that, while there are no easy solutions, the attempt to think through these issues means risking not making sense—and that risk is becoming more and more a daily requirement.

John Mayer's cover seems to work as a comforting moment in an otherwise difficult existence. Sure, I hear the words articulated. But do I understand what is being said? This is where I find Radiohead's original more (and ironically so) comforting: the risk of trying to make sense means as much to me (perhaps more) than any sense made. I admire the will to face the technological satura-

tion of our cultural moment and to try not only to make sense out of it, but to make it sing. *Kid A*, it seems to me, does just that. It shakes us out of our ordinary dependencies and shows us the risks we take on a daily level. It's not always easy to hear that, and often requires that we listen to the layers around us. It asks us to listen not just to the songs, but to the fact that there are people and technologies at work in the background who have produced those songs—and that there is a whole other life withdrawn from what we ordinarily hear. Our responsibility is not only to listen, but to understand. And that's not easy. But it can be beautiful.