Radiohead’s sixth album, Hail to the Thief, was released in June 2003, but fans only knew of its existence by just the autumn beforehand. The band recorded the album in two weeks while on tour, producing an astonishing “track a day” (Fricke). This urgency comes across in the songs, which trap the listeners in a world of surveillance, oppressive measures, and mysteriously infected rabbits. What is the cause of such urgency and paranoia? Radiohead scholars (yes, they exist) maintain that the work is politically focused, inspired by the band’s outrage at America’s recent ventures into Iraq.

What evidence is there that it’s political? Considering the political landscape at the time, as well as the album name being lifted from protest posters preceding the war in Iraq (Fricke), there is an undeniable political influence that persuaded the conception of the album. The year the album was released, the American and British governments began an invasion into Iraq, which many citizens around the world were hell-bent on protesting. On February 15, 2003 there were worldwide protests in a demonstration which has been called “the largest protest event in human history” (Verhulst). Informed by this political landscape, scholars quote lead singer Thom Yorke’s lyrics to show obvious political undertones in the album, describing the album’s content as portraying a “darkly authoritarian world” (Burt 164). The band, however, often denies the album’s political affiliation. Considering the band’s disavowal of any “claims of meaning in the album” (Letts 185), Hail to the Thief’s real political status must be further explored. In order to look into this more closely, I tapped into scholars’ opinions on the album and saw if they would align with my own.

What followed was the finding that Hail to the Thief’s narrative seems to slide away from the real world in order to critique it silently. It is ultimately an album depicting a fantasy world that is as interested in politics as it is with criminals, doom, and paranoia. Through the album, we are immersed in a world where politics are just as dangerous as any other threat to human freedom. Radiohead does not protest openly, for that would create a protest album that was too conventional. They instead embed their political views in with the narrative of the album, which blends everything together, creating a fearful aesthetic. The scholars that describe Hail to the Thief as mostly political talk about the album in terms of its commercial success, philosophical approach, and affiliation with “silent protest” in order to assert that it is political but in subtle ways. Their articles are expanded upon, and ultimately the point is made that the album is not exclusively political, but is a protest against everything.

Worth noting is that the band won’t clearly admit to what Hail to the Thief is protesting, making its status as a political album blurry and subjective even to scholars. Those who have studied the album cannot seem to agree on whether to take the band’s comments on the album seriously or not. Thom Yorke has claimed that “it’s pop music and it’s not anything more than that” (Letts 181), while also saying, “They’re not so much songs about politics as me desperately struggling to keep politics out. If I could have written about anything else, I would have” (Lee 184). These conflicting views on whether it is political or not make it even more difficult to find the album’s true nature, but that’s where the fun lies.

Scholar Conrad Amenta’s work in “Why Protest Albums Can’t Teach Dissent” states that Hail to the Thief is a protest album, referencing the “Orwellian paranoia in [the song] ‘2+2=5’” (Amenta 66). This paranoia is explicit in lyrics like, “It’s the devil’s way now / there is no way out / you can scream and you can shout / it is too late now” as well as “Don’t question my authority or put me in a box / cause I’m not, cause I’m not” (“2+2=5”). Here, Yorke sees the present state as hopeless against “the devil” and screams at an antagonist to not box him in or label him. Amenta’s main contribution to interpreting the album is his analysis of its commercial stand against traditional political rebellion. In his essay he comments on protest music being a commercial
entity since the 1960s, going on to describe the album as a perfect example. He mentions that Hail to the Thief is the last album released by the band on Capitol Records, and it was released in a traditional protest music top-down sequence: “the artist who articulates a broader dissatisfaction, the record label that capitalizes on that artist's potential resonance, [and] the marketing firm that introduces the artist to buyers and propagates the artist's resonance.” After releasing the album, the band left Capitol; this can be seen as the band’s attempt to separate from such ridiculous top-down marketing, as Amenta points out. And it is ridiculous. Amenta purports that Yorke was paranoid of the label's clutches, and he notes that the album's content can be seen as a frustrated attempt by Thom Yorke to deeply analyze not only the political atmosphere around his work but also the industrial marketing around it.

These notes on the politics of the album’s marketing strategy can be used to show how Radiohead is concerned with the vanishing boundaries between us and our political views. Amenta says that post-9/11 politics have become more user-friendly. As the speeds at which we communicate increase, “emergent systems” are created in how we consume. These are things that cater to our preferences, like Spotify and Facebook. Marshall McLuhan notes that as communication speed increases, politics “move away from representation and delegation of constituents toward immediate involvement of the entire community in the central acts of decision” (204). So in Radiohead’s rejection of top-down consumption, they are against the deep relationships that are being created between politics and us. Politics are being read and critiqued so instantly now, through social media and instant news, they are part of our lives. In “Where I End and You Begin,” Yorke explores the toxicity of this relationship further. He sings, “I can watch but not take part / where you end and where I start,” which broadly describes the fading boundaries between two individuals. As these boundaries fade, the narrator feels helplessly out of touch with himself and the other. These lyrics can be seen as not just about relationships but politics; they resemble Thom’s quote on how he was “desperately struggling to keep politics out” when writing the album. Through the extremely quick political feeds we get, it becomes hard to see where they end and we start.

Other scholars also make the connection that Yorke's lyrics are very much about the deep crossing that is occurring between individuals and politics. Prolific author and UK professor Jason Lee writes in “Evil and Politics in ‘Hail to the Thief’” that “philosophy navigates and creates the border between the self and the other… [it] is no longer sovereign” and “is part of the world, not above it” (189). An example of this is in the song, “Wolf at the Door.” In the song, Yorke sings about antagonists surrounding us that are “dragging out the dead” and who “take all your credit cards.” In the chorus, he describes these evils as overwhelmingly insidious with the lyrics, “I keep the wolf from the door / but he calls me up / calls me on the phone / tells me all the ways that he’s gonna mess me up.” Lee’s main point is that the album's content reflects Yorke’s philosophies on the fading lines between us and the evils we experience. He also mentions how the album’s production shows Radiohead’s interest in activism and consciousness against not just political but environmental strain.

Lee's views of the interaction between art and philosophy, inspired by French philosopher Alain Badiou, are essentially that philosophy, like art, is part of everything that we do and is not exactly separate from our lives. This argument helps us see the politics of Hail to the Thief as a blend with the lives affected by it. It is concerned with politics, only insofar as they affect our lives negatively. He writes that Yorke's lyrics specifically show the broken boundaries and limits that are consequences of “the loonies taking over” in the track “Go to Sleep.” The loonies are feared in the album, just like the wolf in “A Wolf at the Door.” But interestingly enough, these monsters are the only real characters we see in the album. It is as if monsters are the only living things that exist in the world, which implies that the narrator is one, too. He even sings about being assimilated: “This is how I ended up sucked in / over my dead body” (“Go to Sleep”). Lee describes assimilative evils as existential boundary crossers when he writes, “Yorke seems to point to an ultimate fear, to evil itself, emerging within this question of boundaries between our self and the world, between what is familiar and friendly, and what is other, very hungry, and inspires our greatest fears” (185).

Something else Lee importantly mentions is the optimistic tone that secretly surrounds Hail to the Thief that shows us the band’s quiet waltz into the activist community. The album had an attached film of which few other scholars take note, The Most Gigantic Lying Mouth, which consists of fan-made videos for each of the album's songs and shows us Radiohead’s “participatory approach” to their art. Lee notes that this film is a glimpse towards the “less apocalyptic view of the world after Hail to the Thief” (188). Thom Yorke joined
Friends of the Earth after 2003 to decry climate change and to announce that “you should never give up hope.” We can see the album as dystopian, but also as a silent request to not give up hope. This beckons to one of the darkest songs on the album, “I Will.” The lyrics depict a bunkered family who cries for better times. Even in the short piece, Yorke’s sad, harmonized voice sings, “I will rise up.” Yes, Hail to the Thief seems to depict a fearful, politically doomed world, but do not give up.

In a way, this entirely explains the album’s silent protest. When you are inseparable from something as close as the end of times like in “I Will,” the only form of protest possible is hope. Though Lee sees the album’s content as “an enduring metaphysics of deception, fear, violence, and want” (Lee 184), the theme of hope gives a light to a possible world where the fear is gone. Hope is pitted against fear in other instances, like in “The Gloaming” when Yorke sings, “Your alarm bells / they should be ringing,” just beckoning for alarm bells to wake someone up from immediate danger.

Another scholar, Joseph Tate, researched the album in order to map out every song and their meanings in his essay, “A Rhizomatic Map in Fragments.” He looks at the album as a confused drama where Yorke imagines the world where oppressor and oppressed are one. He does this in a fresh and revealing view, showing the world in the album to be one where Yorke’s voice is both an antagonist and a protagonist. He mentions the lyrics to “2+2=5” and says that “the speaking voice shifts character position several times.” This is apparent when the brainwashed speaker of the song who says, “I’ll stay home forever / where two and two always makes a five,” shifts to the dictator announcing, “It’s the devil’s way now,” who shifts to the mix between both, screaming, “You have not been paying attention!” This shows that Yorke’s speaker has an interchangeable mind and identity in the song, which shows the speaker’s absence of boundaries and excitement in declaring such a fallacy as “hail to the thief.”

This mixing of voices relates to Lee’s analysis of the album, as a place for Yorke to show that the cultural climate and paranoia has somewhat pushed him to live in this fearful realm where the voices around him are neither rooting for himself nor his oppressors. Lee and Tate agree that this aspect of the album is not a response to political oppression but to general oppression based on real disasters and dangers like climate issues, surveillance, and general crime. These issues lead the narrator to sing about escaping ruined Earth in “Sail to the Moon” (“Or in the flood / you’ll build an ark / and sail us to the moon”) and hiding from monsters in “Wolf at the Door.” The issues that Yorke’s paranoia responds to are not politically derived. And as we know, Yorke “continually disavows” that they are so (Tate 180). Yorke, in fact, told Time magazine that the title of the album is “trying to express, without getting angry about it, the absurdity of everything, not just a single Administration.” Tate sees the album as a philosophical outcry, a fear of the nastiness around which is “channeled down Yorke’s lyrical horn,” as if there is no other way to say these things (Lee 180).

One other scholar tries to analyze what themes Thom Yorke channels down his horn and why those make this album so effective and important. Sean Burt in “The Impossible Utopias in Hail to the Thief” summarizes the album as basically a storybook parody mixed with a dystopian world. His main point is that in the album, “Dreamers imagine future hopes, but then backslide. Individuals consider resistance but are either assimilated or hole up in bunkers and wait” (Burt 170). There is hope, but it is not long-lasting. He sees the album as story-like, a play-by-play of a “thief,” “loonies,” a “Boney King” (from “There, There”), and a president who knows “right from wrong” (from “Sail to the Moon”) just doing the nasty things that people do. He says that showing this world with animated characters makes it feel more real, allowing us as listeners to feel that we are within it.

Burt claims that the band is conscious that “effective protest music is not possible” and that “neither is a disavowal of engagement” (164). He, like Amenta, believes that in this contemporary culture there is no way to mix the speed and frequency of normal human issues with protest. It is just not effective, like how complaining openly about issues will not simply fix them. Yorke recognizes the futility in merely complaining by ironically painting this storybook world where the complainer is the one being complained about, where there is no boundary between the two. It’s a scary world, but of course Yorke believes in this scary world. He does not protest this world, but paints its picture and then holds his hands up and says, “See? Now what do we do?”

We see that the authors all agree on a few things. They all assert that the album is protesting something, not only a political something but a general antagonistic parasite. A few of them conclude that the album is a narrative that paints a dystopian world and that Yorke and the band, instead of critiquing it openly, consciously
live in that world in order to show its negative effect on the people living there. We see the relations between these points; by painting this upsetting world, Radiohead need not actively protest, but simply show us that the world of the album is real. By mixing ourselves with our politics, we are falling into a deep and terrifying hole of dread.

Quickly, we can look at conventional protest albums to further understand how this one differs. For one, the real world is blatantly referenced in conventional protest, and the lyrics of any protest song are usually direct and accusatory to some clear enemy. To contrast this, we see there is something unique of the combined hope and surrender in the melancholic “Sail to the Moon”: “Maybe you’ll be president but know right from wrong / or in the flood you’ll build an ark and sail us to the moon,” Yorke sings to his son Noah. Yorke sings of saving Earth or leaving Earth, seemingly the only options in such a cruel system. This fantasy is a far cry from previous protestors like “Vietnam-era Bob Dylan,” “Civil rights-era soul” artists like Marvin Gaye, and funk heroes Sly and the Family Stone (Amenta 57). Though those artists’ styles differ, we can pull lyrics to show that their protests are unambiguous and openly critical, unlike Yorke’s. On “Family Affair” from There’s a Riot Going On, Sly Stone sings, “One child grows up to be / somebody that just loves to learn / and another child grows up to be / somebody you’d just love to burn / Mom loves both of them.” His lyrics are direct and easily understandable. Though children and people are different, they all have mothers, and therefore do not deserve discrimination. There are unknowns presented, but Sly presents an everyday situation delivered in a pointed and thoughtful angle. Yorke’s lyrics on the other hand are told by “an ironic meta-protester” as Burt describes (165).

The other scholars agree there is an ironic narrative level being delivered. I take this further to say that the album takes this narrative level, puts us within it, and twists it to somehow express our own futility and self-dissatisfaction. Yorke includes us in his silent protest against everything by immersing us in his world. The album is not obsessed with politics, but uses them to understand the futility of trying to grasp politics in the current day, therefore subverting the protest genre. The protest album at one point called for a group to stand up and rise against an injustice. However, his album is speaking to a more internet savvy and therefore innately powerful crowd of voices. The crowds of 2003 and beyond can talk about the presidency and climate change in the same breath. Their power is their voice, a great responsibility that can also be their oppressor. And so in the commanding second track, when Yorke sings, “Sit down stand up / walk into the gates of hell” (“Sit Down. Stand Up.”), we see that this is his audience singing these words.
Works Cited:


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