



An 'Indiscriminate Seeding', Or How Radiohead's Pyramid Song Will Help Me Take Over The World

by Adam P.

Sometimes, as a thought experiment, I think about how to take over the world.

To take over the world you would need to make a lot of money, and I'm not talking even about the amount of money that individual persons make, or perhaps even some companies, but rather sums greater than those currently made: to have so much money that one could channel it into world-changing projects and tilt the gravitational axis of the planet itself. The second thing one would do is slowly change people's perception of reality so that they wouldn't know that you were in the process of slowly taking over the world because the forces of the world would no doubt conspire together to stop you long before you succeeded.

It would seem that popular culture, theoretically, could go a long way in adequately covering these two needs. Dominant power structures have consistently been the targets of pop music's revolutionary zeal: the social and military turbulence of the 1960s may have taken the folk musics of the first half of the century and amplified them for a youth to hit out at the older generations in power, but it's been the last couple of decades that have seen popular music in turn become its own set of power structures, from the financial clout of its revenue to its societal impact and how it has altered the very hard-wiring of how each of us think about and relate to our being in the world. If you look at the history of humanity over the last 25 years you see an increase in apparent personal liberty matched by an ever increasing yearning for an expansion of the personal horizon: the wish for holidays more and more elaborate, adventure in its most pure form, fame, fortune, celebrity, the drawing out of the self in the diagram of an equation marked by exponential growth. This is embodied in the pop star. Of course we're used to young people dreaming of becoming their favourite pop idols, or becoming famous — for years now we've become immune to the strange and stringent desire to be famous for the sake of being famous. We're all celebrity wannabees, get us out of here.

Think of Justin Bieber as being in fact an android on a mission, Obama really having just been a dream of Jay Z, or K-Pop a Trojan horse created by the North Koreans. If an individ-

ual wanted to take over the world they could certainly think about starting a music band to produce four minute tracks to be disseminated on broadcasting channels that they in turn own¹. It used to be that religion would be a good place to start a global conquest; pop music could be a more apposite field to enter if you wish to reach into the minds of billions. The Beatles, I have recently learned, were more popular than Jesus.

If I were to start such a process, I would probably start by learning from others. I like to imagine, like a lot of people I guess, that the lyrics to pop songs are in fact imbued with meanings we only barely understand and which need to be slowly eked out into the light of day, much like literature and poetry has traditionally been parsed and explored. There have been many efforts to theorise pop culture and in recent years Bob Dylan has received the Nobel Prize for Literature, elevating his songwriting into the vaulted halls of Nobel laureateship, which in turn gives credence to the need for unpacking and explanation, for keen studying and interpretation.

Applying theory to pop music, and in particular to Radiohead, the essayist and cultural critic Mark Greif has written an essay called 'Radiohead, Or The Philosophy of Pop', and it is a good place to start when considering what it is pop music, and Radiohead as a case study, can actually teach us about the world (and its possible subjugation). In particular, there's a line that I find of great interest: '[Radiohead's] 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.²' If we're entering a new era, and certainly feels like we are, than perhaps the best money making, mind changing apparatus available could in fact be a music act such as Radiohead! Could music — electronic, enervated, visceral and cerebral — create a transhuman response in the listernor, exalting them into new realms previously unimagined?

Speaking of eras, and case studies, let's look then at 'Pyramid Song', from Radiohead's 2001 album *Amnesiac*, for where better to start the inculcation of new beliefs and paradigms than in the clean slate of amnesia? According to Wikipedia and other attendant notes on the internet, lyricist Thom Yorke was inspired by an exhibition about ancient Egypt that he visited when once in Copenhagen³. The title alone immediately gives us the image of those ancient monuments that have stood facing the dessert for three millennia and besides from making you realise how many civilisations have risen and fallen in the short lifetime of man they speak of how we treat the dead. It's worth recalling that the cover art of the single by long time Radiohead art collaborator Stanley Donwood depicts an electrified mushroom cloud like an after-image of the cause of our extinction, and likewise the music video by artistic collective Shynola follows the underwater dive of a spectral lone figure as they explore the flooded world of a vanished civilisation, namely one we recognise as our own. The song is doing a number of things at once: it's exploring the possibility of knowing extinct civilisations, our explorations of them and how our knowledge of them

doesn't necessarily make us help ourselves in the present or future, while it also looks at death, the individual death of the singer, or of the listener — of what happens when each one of us dies. The afterlife, the rapture, being ferried across the river Styx to the underworld of Hades: we have many ways of imagining this time beyond our last breath. Popular music's great ability would normally be said to be its depiction of love in all its myriad forms, but it is also its ability to show this love in four minute loops of infinitude, to show how time itself can be circular, that our dreams are in fact the dreams of a dreaming person, that we're nothing other than avatars in someone else's created simulation:

All my lovers were there with me
All my past and futures
And we all went to heaven in a little row boat
There was nothing to fear, nothing to doubt

The ultimate fear, the fear of death, is solved in one way with a promise of eternal life; with no doubt you could reach the end of philosophy's long quest of finding the answers to why anything should exist at all. But does this song have an answer to actually reaching such a state? Or the music of Radiohead in general, or indeed pop music?⁴

I jumped in the river, what did I see?
Black-eyed angels swam with me
A moon full of stars and astral cars
And all the figures I used to see

So if this is the river Styx or the Ancient Egyptian's River of the Dead, the *Duat*, as the presence of those haunting black-eyed angels would suggest, then it would seem that after extinction, both singular and collective, we've expanded out into the black night sky, with an inky reflection of the heavens (*moon full of stars*) and strange transporting star machines (*astral cars*). But is this a vision of the future? A bittersweet, classic Thom Yorke piece of pessimistic imagery of despair? If it is, it is also populated by acquaintances from the past however, an oddly reassuring vision (*all the figures I used to see*). The overall feeling of the song is one of optimism, of hope, a beautiful ethereal hope that something lies beyond our lived experience, if you put on headphones and listen to its sombre, shimmering piano chords one experiences a *transformative* and *transportative* vision of a 'new era'.

And where was Thom Yorke and his bandmates when they wrote this song? I don't mean which studio, but rather what epoch or 'new era', what was the zeitgeist that saw a band more famous for the loser love song Creep than for dark prophecies of beauty such as Pyramid Song, that fed them in their creating it? If we turn back to Mark Greif we see in fact further markers toward how the turn of the century saw the individual at the centre of

an ever more intricate and all consuming messaging network, perfect for a project such as the slow changing of the receiver's perception of reality:

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 left 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.⁵

This was an age of consumerism and consumption, one we still live in, that was driven by messages (sound, image, touch, the message had long ago become the medium) and our networked sense of our self was heightened even more by disclosures of how our governments or their security agencies had the means and the will to record all of these messages: there is nowhere any longer to hide. Get us out of here. Of course pop music, cheap to make and radically honest, has always been a good place for dissent, rebelling against the system is part of its very make-up even when it is sold and packaged and seeded so indiscriminately in our lives, as Greif points out.

The rebellions to come will be over our right to privacy, to an agency that is protected from outside intrusion and interference — bad news for would be world conquerors, but only if they lose the means of managing the message. To end with Mark Grief: 'The politics of the next age, if we are to survive, will include a politics of the re-creation of privacy.' The catharsis felt upon listening to the janus faced track Pyramid Song is worth more in any takeover of the world than the money made from the track's dissemination. If you control that feeling you have the power to send these messages deep into the imagination of your listeners, slowly allowing for the possibility of forging the world anew.

Notes

1. It can of course be pointed out that Jay Z's streaming network Tidal fails to make a profit (much like Spotify) and indeed cooks the books, but the point being made is that creating the infrastructure to disseminate your belief and message is a powerful tool in global domination. <https://medium.com/s/story/what-jay-zs-struggles-with-tidal-say-about-hip-hop-and-the-end-of-capitalism-f606703eeac2> last accessed, September 6, 2018.
2. Mark Grief, 'Radiohead, Or The Philosophy of Pop' in *Against Everything: On Dishonest Times*, page 109, italics mine; Verso, London, 2016.
3. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pyramid_Song, last accessed September 5, 2018
4. The looped infinitude of the totality of existence is further alluded to in a quote from Hermann Hesse's novel from 1951 *Siddhartha* which echos the song's lyrics and which was posted by the band in the 'imaginary prisons' section of radiohead.com at the time *Amnesiac* was released in spring 2001: "They all became part of the river. It was the goal of all of them, yearning, desiring, suffering; and the river's voice was full of longing, full of smarting woe, full of insatiable desire. The river flowed on towards its goal. Siddhartha saw the river hasten, made up of himself and his relatives and all the people he had ever seen. All the waves and water hastened, suffering, towards goals, many goals, to the waterfall, to the sea, to the current, to the ocean and all the goals were reached and each one was succeeded by another. The water changed to vapour and rose, became rain and came down again, became spring, brook and river, changed anew, flowed anew. But the yearning voice had altered. It still echoed sorrowfully, searchingly but other voices accompanied it, voices of pleasure and sorrow, good and evil voices, laughing and lamenting voices, hundreds of voices, thousands of voices". <https://citizeninsane.eu/music/amnesiac/pyramidsong.html>, last accessed September 6, 2018.
5. Mark Grief, 'Radiohead, Or The Philosophy of Pop' in *Against Everything: On Dishonest Times*, page 103, italics mine; Verso, London, 2016.