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RADIOHEAD: THE GUITAR WEILDING, DANCING, SINGING COMMODITY

by

SELENA LAWSON

Under the Direction of Jeffery Bennett

ABSTRACT

In 2007, Radiohead released a downloadable album, *In Rainbows*, allowing consumers to pay what they thought the album was worth. The band responded to a moment of change in the music industry. Since then, other bands, like Nine Inch Nails and Coldplay, have made similar moves. Radiohead's capability to release an album and let the fans decide its worth relied on the image they built, which foregrounded their commodification. The historic move redefined the boundaries between art and commodity, a well know tension in popular music studies. The thesis focuses on popular music as communication in the changing industry. Using Radiohead's album as a case study, it looks at the changing boundaries in the tension between art and commodity. The thesis examines Radiohead's performance, its mediation by the press, and what the album's distribution method meant to the fans.

INDEX WORDS: Radiohead, Popular music studies, Commodification, Art and commerce, Music press, Music fandom

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by

SELENA LAWSON

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Selena Lawson

2009

RADIOHEAD: THE GUITAR WEILDING, DANCING, SINGING COMMODITY

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May 2009

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to music lovers and Radiohead fans everywhere. We take our obsessions seriously. I want to thank God, my Mom, and Scott Poor for all their support. Thank you to Melissa Bazhaw-Hedlius for helping me to eat the elephant.

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Thank you to Dr. Jeffery Bennett. Without all of your hard work and dedication, I would never have made it through this process. Thank you to my committee members for believing in a somewhat unconventional project. I really could not have asked for a better group of people to guide this thesis.

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INTRODUCTION

"You know, 'cause you're using phrases like commodity, I think we understand each other."—Thom Yorke, 19981

The music industry is in crisis. Compact disc sales have decreased each year since 2001.[2] Since the industry relies on profit from recorded music as its primary revenue source, their profits are declining. Much of this financial crisis can be linked to the invention of the MP3, which allows listeners to download songs in digital form to their home computer. In the late 1990s, the industry waged war against services that allowed users to download music for free. Now, many paid services, including Apple's iTunes, have replaced the free services. However, they did not cure the financial problems.

Due to this crisis, we have entered into a time period where industry studies are out of date, and little is known about what the structure or economic status of the music industry will look like once the crisis has past. Artists, labels, and other members of the profession have been forced to choose what to do next. Some artists have changed their marketing plans, while others have stayed the course, choosing to wait out the crisis. Major labels have reacted by dropping bands, firing employees, and changing the terms of the new deals they sign.

Artists have also had to choose how to respond to these financial issues. One band, Radiohead, decided to take matters in their own hands. They dropped their label and released a digital version of their new album, allowing the fans to decide what to pay for it. Though

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1 Rabid, J. (1998, Feb. 23). The Great Rock Hope, *Rolling Stone*.
2 Hiatt, B. & Serpick, E. (2007, Jun. 28). The Record Industry's Decline. Record sales are tanking, and there's no hope in sight: How it all went wrong [Electronic Version]. *Rolling Stone*.

Radiohead refused to share their Internet sales figures, the physical form of the album, released on January 1 2008, hit number one on the Billboard charts.[3] This is a historical move in the industry, and now other bands have taken similar actions. Nine Inch Nails announced they would follow the same model in October of 2007, and Coldplay decided to release their single, "Violet Hill" for free on their website. The Coldplay website got so many hits that it crashed.[4] As the industry changes, artists have responded innovatively. Now, Radiohead has continued their creative solution by allowing fans to create a video for one of the songs and mix one of the singles, "Nude."

The digital release of *In Rainbows* is not the first time Radiohead has innovatively responded to the uncertainties of the market. Radiohead foregrounds their commodification to respond to a changing industry and economic structure, thereby redefining the borders between art and commodity. The thesis will examine their image, and explain how the borders have potentially been shifted. The tension between art and commodity is a story told over and over again in popular music. Popular music theorists Michael Coyle and Jon Dolan argue, "New sounds are most invariably proclaimed as liberations from the devitalizing control of an industry. Real rock is always a rebellion."[5] However, new moments in the industry mean shifting boundaries between commodity and art.

The study is important to popular music and communication studies because there have been few studies on artistic reactions to this specific economic moment in the industry. Other music industry studies have focused on the ways new technologies are changing the industry, but none have focused on the ways that the artists' reactions to the industry structure may possibly

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3 Turner, M. (2008, April 28). "Yorke: Radiohead's 'In Rainbows' Strategy a 'One-Off'." *Billboard.* Retrieved May 1, 2008 at http://www.billboard.com/YorkeRainbowsStrategyWasAOneoff.htm.
4 Ibid.
5 Coyle, M. & Dolan, J. (1999). "Modeling Authenticity," in Dettmar, K. & Richey, W. (eds.) (1999). *Reading Rock and Roll: Authenticity, appropriation, aesthetics,* p.24.

change the industry. Furthermore, this study will provide further insight by looking at how an image created in the industry made Radiohead's unique reaction possible.

Before their response can be analyzed, some background information on the band is needed. In 1986, five friends: Thom Yorke, Jonny and Colin Greenwood, Phil Selway and Ed O'Brien, formed a band called On Friday. Once high school ended, the five parted ways to attend university, with Yorke going to art school in Exeter, England. By the time they reunited to sign their major label deal, they changed their name to Radiohead. Jonny Greenwood thought of the name because he did not like the thought of never being able to escape radio waves.[6] The newly named band released their first record, *Pablo Honey,* in 1993 on Capitol Records.[7] Until last year they stayed with Capitol/EMI and released several other rock records including: *OK Computer, the Bends, Kid A, Amnesiac,* and *Hail to the Thief.*

Radiohead used the albums' artwork to critique capitalism, using themes of surveillance, corporate takeover, and images to illustrate they are commodities. The band foregrounds their commodification much like Andy Warhol or the Sex Pistols.[8] While they do not make screen prints of Campbell Soup cans or wear past styles safety pinned together while singing about anarchy, they do create artwork that criticizes the very system in which they exist.[9] While critiquing capitalism, Radiohead has also resisted Western star culture. They are seldom in the celebrity magazines, and Thom Yorke often makes statements regarding the absurdity of star culture in interviews.

In addition to resisting the star culture, they do not tout the bad boys of rock image. They do not partake in the drug or groupie scene, and all of the members are college educated. They

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6 Clarke, M. (2003). *Hysterical and Useless.* 2nd Edition. New York: Plexus Publishing, p. 32.
7 Capitol Records is affiliated with EMI Records and Parlophone Records.
8 Walcott, J. (2005). "A Conservative Impulse in the New Rock Underground." in D. Brackett, *The Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader.* New York: Oxford University Press, p. 308.
9 Ibid.

perpetually diverge from the status quo of the music industry, even as they continue to be one of the most influential bands in the industry. [10] Though they are certainly not the only band with these qualities (both the Who and Rolling Stone are college educated), the combination of these things make them an interesting case study. The band's rebellion seems to lie in their commodification and response instead of relying on a "bad boy" image.

The "pay what you want" album release, *In Rainbows,* shunned the music industry, proving that the dominant structure could, in some ways, be resisted. They used technology to allow fans to download the album a few months after it was finished, instead of going through the typical industry avenues. Shunning marketing campaigns that generate a buzz for products, Radiohead used their status as artists to generate hype for the album. *In Rainbows* arrived to fans quickly, and allowed the listeners to determine the worth of the product.

Though there has been work analyzing the artistic importance of their music and lyrics, the image of Radiohead constructed through journalism, videos, documentaries, artwork, and other mediums and how they are mediated has largely been ignored. This is important to understanding the ways in which they are redefining the border between art and commodity.

Literature Review

Art and Commodification

Examining Radiohead's innovations for rethinking the shifting boundaries between art and commodity first requires us to define the theoretical models associated with this supposed binary in popular culture. Three models are commonly cited in popular music studies to discuss the tensions produced between art and commodity. These perspectives include works by T.W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Simon Frith. Collectively, they represent the most influential

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10 In his collection of academic essays on Radiohead, Joseph Tate says, "In a large part, twenty-first-century music is a physical commodity made in a factory (Tate, 2001, p. 3)." This, in turn, makes Radiohead's reminder that they are just a product significant even within the mainstream music industry.

theorists on this topic. The art versus commodity debate originates with Adorno and Benjamin, while Frith is one of the most influential modern writers within popular music studies.

The first model used when exploring the dynamics of art and commodity comes from the writing of T.W. Adorno. He was a German writer who theorized that the effects of mass culture on society were dangerous. He witnessed the effects of the Nazi regime and the political control of the masses.[11] His critique of the masses stemmed out of his belief that the passivity imposed by the cultural industries led to political domination by the ruling class.[12]

Adorno believed that popular music as perpetuated by the mass media cannot be art because its "cultural quality is determined" by the fact that is a produced for a mass audience.[13] Though Adorno spoke of jazz, and not rock, it follows that his disapproval of the "standardization" of mass produced jazz applied to rock as well. This standardization required no active engagement from the audience, meaning that Adorno thought popular music was formulaic and did not provoke the audience to contemplate the worth of the music. Instead, the cultural industry could find a formula the audience found pleasurable, and reproduce it in different forms. Furthermore, it encouraged what some Marxists have called the "false consciousness" of the masses.[14] By "false consciousness" they mean that the ruled class accepted the version of reality given to them by the ruling class.

Art, for Adorno, is predicated on aesthetics that are "'practically useless," and "imaginative." [15] Art is a "utopian protest against reality," and is the "inspiration to the struggle for social change." [16] Popular music cannot be art, according to his definition, because it is

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11 Negus, K. (1997). *Popular Music in Theory: An Introduction.* London: University of New England, p.8.
12 Ibid., p. 9.
13 Adorno qtd in Frith, S. (1981). *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock 'n' Roll.* New York: Pantheon Books, p. 42.
14 Ibid. p. 43.
15 Ibid. p. 44.
16 Ibid.

controlled by the very economic and political system that true art would be against. Mass culture, he said, "settles with reality and so corrupts its imaginative base."[17] The standardization of mass culture did not challenge the dominant ideology, while true art gives its audience a vision of the future, a way to challenge the ideals forced upon them by the ruling class.

Adorno wrote at a time when music was disseminated through radio and phonographic record. Thus, recorded music was beginning to take precedent over live performance, and was available to a wider audience.[18] The fear of new technology and its effects resonate today as MP3s and the Internet overtake the use of store bought CDs. One music theorist, David Holbrook, echoes Adorno's anxiety and believes that pop is the "degradation of art. It is false art creating a false community."[19] Popular music critic Anthony DeCurtis believes that the music industry, especially as new technology threatens its financial grounding, itself limits artistic ability.[20]

Adorno's earliest critic was Walter Benjamin. Both Benjamin and Adorno belonged to the Frankfurt school. Benjamin thought Adorno's definition of art was too restrictive. Benjamin's views of mass culture differed greatly from Adorno's. He argued that the aesthetics of art had changed with technology.[21] Benjamin's interest lied in the fact that his argument laid the foundation for the "revolutionary demands in the politics of art."[22] He said that art in an age of mechanical reproduction is stripped of its aura, therefore, asking questions of its authenticity is unnecessary, since the "prescreens of the original is prerequisite for to the concept of

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17 Ibid.
18 Negus, K. (1997). *Popular Music in Theory: An Introduction*, p. 8.
19 Holbrook qtd in Frith S., (1981), *Sound Effects*, p. 52.
20 DeCurtis, A. Lost in the Supermarket: Myth and Commerce in the Music Business, in Kelley, K. & McDonnell, E. (eds.) *Stars Don't Stand Still in the Sky: Music and Myth.* New York: New York University Press, p. 34.
21 Benjamin, W. (1992). The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, in Mast, G.; Cohen, M. & Braudy, L. (Eds.). *Film Theory and Criticism* 4th edition. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 266.
22 Ibid.

authenticity."[23] In an era of mass reproduction, people could see art without having to see the original work. It is no longer privileged to the ruling class since it is no longer trapped in far away museums, and can be seen by all.

According to critical visual cultural theorist John Berger, who wrote about Benjamin, when a piece of art starts to be reproduced in forms which can easily be transported into people's homes, the meaning of the work of art multiplies.[24] The work of art, he explains, is no longer simply for the elite only visible in a certain building. In turn, people now use the work for their purposes, and therefore, can negotiate its meaning. For example, when Van Gogh's "Starry Night" gets put on a coffee mug, and then brought to someone's home in Atlanta, the meaning can now be negotiated. No longer does a viewer have to go to the Louvre in Paris to view the piece of art in a controlled setting, nor does the person have to be rich enough to fly to Paris.

It follows that once a piece of music is recorded and brought into someone's home, the meaning is different from the days when one had to go to the theatre to hear a piece of music. In an age of sound amplifiers, sampling machines, distortion pedals, and mixing programs that can be installed on home computers, the way we hear music is different. Technology has changed sound and visual art in similar ways.

Benjamin explains the music of his age put the original piece of art "into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself."[25] For our purposes the original piece of art would be the music being performed. These works challenge dominant ideology by breaking down the rational, "which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and the renewal of mankind."[26] These new versions of the original take works of art out of the hands of the ruling class, forging new

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23 Ibid. p. 267.
24 Berger, J. (1977). *Ways of Seeing.* London: Penguin Books, p. 19.
25 Benjamin, W. p. 4
26 Ibid.

democratic possibilities. According to Berger, as soon as a piece of art is reproduced, even the meaning of the original changes. It is now the original of the reproduction.[27]

To Benjamin the masses were not passive cultural dupes, as in Adorno's theories, but were active participants in creating their social reality and understanding the world around them. Not only does the meaning of the work of art change upon consumption, according to Benjamin but "creation had become a collective process."[28] The audience's negotiation of the meaning, becomes part of the art. To Adorno, mass culture creates passivity, but to Benjamin consumption is necessary. Technology has allowed art to become part of the democratic process.

Simon Frith, a modern popular music theorist, responds to Adorno and Benjamin and wholly rejects the idea of debating popular music as art. "Rock as art," he says, "is unconvincing—rock is a mass medium with different possibilities."[29] Frith suggests that an analysis of rock through the lens of Benjamin is problematic, largely because there is no individual artist directly communicating to an audience.[30] He states that rock music is unlike any other art form in the age of mechanical reproduction. He prescribes not to Benjamin's or Adorno's definition of art, but to that of Jon Landeau, who says that art must "instruct" or "improve" its audience. [31] Frith claims that rock music does not function as art under this definition, as it neither instructs nor improves.

However, Frith acknowledges that a works' musical value can differ from its commercial value,[32] which seemingly acknowledges an opposition between art (music value) and commerce (commercial value). Frith says that art and commerce are conflated and the binary is non-

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27 Berger, p. 21.
28 Frith, *Sound Effects*, p. 47.
29 Frith S., *Sound Effects*, p. 54
30 Ibid. p. 52
31 Ibid. p. 54
32 Frith S.(1996*) Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, p. 52.

existent. He contends that since the market and the art are so dependent on one another, the binary hasn't existed since the 1970s, and is a marketing ploy, not a site of tension.[33]
Many viewpoints for understanding popular music extend from these three models. Some modern writers believe that the art versus commerce binary is a myth, or a narrative which helps to structure our understanding of how popular music functions in culture. First, there are those who believe that art and commerce are opposed but that they rely on one another. So, while artists like Radiohead may be stifled creatively because of the compromises they may make for their labels, whether it is creating videos to sell songs, changing a song for the radio, or recording a follow up album hurriedly to keep industry buzz going, it is the industry that provides the financial backing to produce their work. They see this polarity as a tension mediated by the artist.[34]

According to Deena Weinstein, the tension between art and commodity is not only mediated by the artist but, in addition, is critiqued through music journalism, creating a site of cultural struggle.[35] She says that rock should be art and music journalists know that it should be "inimical" to commerce.[36] However, in order to be "popular" music must reach a vast audience. Therefore, industry is necessary.[37] The industry not only provides financial backing, but it also offers marketing tools, networking opportunities, and award shows, which offer fans a unique picture.

Still others believe that though rock may be art, the fact that the artists refuse to acknowledge their commodification simply act as a marketing ploy.[38] Karl Marx wrote about the

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33 Frith qtd in Weinstein, D. Art versus Commerce, p. 63.
34 Shukar, R. (2001) *Understanding Popular Music*, 2nd Edition. New York: Routledge, pp. 31-32
35 Weinstein, D. Art versus Commerce, pp. 56-57
36 Ibid.
37 Turner also says that pop music cannot escape its need for industry. Qtd in Shuker, 2001, p. 3
38 Ibid. p.8

effects of commodification and commodity fetishism. Once the actual labor behind the production of the commodity is hidden, it takes on a life of its own.[39] Marx illustrates this idea through the scene of the dancing table. Suddenly, the wooden table gets up and dances. It is a fantasy, creating a false reality, hiding the labor and the conditions of its production. Thus, the band becomes the commodity, and they are conflated with their work, becoming the dancing table.[40] From this perspective, media conglomerates only care about sales figures (the direct representation of the value of the commodity) and not about the artistic quality of the music or the conditions under which it is produced.

Anthony DeCurtis, a contributing editor to *Rolling Stone* with a PhD in American Studies, would agree that the industry is not concerned with the artistic quality of the work. He argues artists who do not fit the industry's pop formula must justify their deviations with large sales figures.[41] Whether or not the music is rebellious or thought provoking is of no concern to the industry. They want to see a direct reflection of the value of the commodity they have financed as represented through sales figures.

Deena Weinstein would insist that both the industry and the artist benefit from the binary, allowing them to sell more records and increase the value of their image.[42] She posits the tension between art and commerce is a false one, because the band benefits from their image as artists struggling with the world of commerce and industry restrictions. It follows that they willingly become the dancing table. They do not mind hiding their commodification in order to appear primarily concerned about art and not about sales figures.

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39 Marx, K. (1976) The Commodity in Capital: A Critique of Political Economy. Vol 1. trans. Fowle. London: Penguin Books, p. 164.
40 Marx, K. (1976), p. 167
41 DeCurtis, A. (1999), p. 31 & 35
42 Weinstein, 1999, p. 64

The result of this conflation of art, entertainment, and commerce is that rock music is no longer rebellious, that instead, it "embraces the star system."[43] In this conflation, according to DeCurtis, not only does the industry not care about art, but the popular music artists care only about money, not about the social ramifications of their music. He adds that people do not see the social ramifications of conflating these forms. He says, "Desperately lost in the supermarket and, far from being able to shop happily, as the Clash suggested, they now mistake sneaking a couple of extra items through the express lane for an act of rebellion."[44] The conflation causes what Marx and Adorno deem "false consciousness." The dominated class passively accepts their place in the social order because they have bought the version of reality sold to them by the ruling class. The artists and the fans become passive consumers. The industry worries about sales, the artists worry about their profit, and the listeners think that rebellion rests with their buying power.

Each of these perspectives has some validity when analyzing Radiohead. While the myth of art versus commerce may be used as a marketing ploy, there is a tension which creates a site of cultural struggle. Radiohead has shown that they attempt not to fully accept the star culture, and they do not fully depend on the structure of the industry to disseminate their art. I argue that there is a tension between art and commerce though the two depend on one another. In the current industry structure, Radiohead has used this tension to potentially redefine the boundaries between art and commerce. Their image gives them the market power to resist the dominant structure of the industry. It challenges traditional aesthetics of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. Therefore, it is important to ask questions about their image: how their identity is constructed and how it is appropriated.

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43 Rimmell and Hill qtd in Shuker, R. (2001), p. 32
44 DeCurtis, A. (1999), p. 35

Auteur Theory

There are two models used to understand the image of artists and stars in popular music. The first model is auteur theory, derived from the work of film scholars.[45] From this perspective, the musician, songwriter, or band, is not an artist, but rather an auteur. [46] In this view, the emphasis is on an individual, and everyone else involved in the process of creating the music (the producer, engineer, label) are simply a part of disseminating the music.[47] Shuker lists the criteria used to determine whether or not an individual is an auteur. First, the individual must be able to "break new ground" by operating outside, re-defining or "blurring genre boundaries."[48] Also, the individual must write their own songs, and be in charge of a substantial amount of the production of their music. Furthermore, they must have a have a general idea of how their music "fits into the canon."[49] Finally, they must either historically have a high profile in music, or keep this profile.[50]

While potentially productive, this theory side steps the issue of music as part of a collective artistic endeavor. It singles out an individual instead of acknowledging that many people contribute to a piece of music. Howard Becker said art could not be understood without taking the collective interests and labor that went into producing it. He termed this collective as an "art world."[51] This idea of art worlds coincides with the idea that if music is art, it relies on the collective effort of the producers, engineers, promoters, journalist and industry to produce and disseminate it.

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45 Both Frith and Shuker are proponents of this theoretical framing.
46 Merriam-Webster Online defines this as "an artist (as a musician or writer) whose style and practice are distinctive."
47 Frith S., *Sound Effects*, p.54 See also Shukar, 2001, p.118
48 Shuker, 2001, p. 118
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
51 Becker qtd in Negus, K. (1997), p. 57

Star Studies

Rather than focusing on an individual as an auteur to analyze how the dissemination of their image in the public works while still giving way for their music to be art which is created in a collective, other popular music theorists use star studies. According to Evelyn McDonnell, an artist consists of both performance and image. One cannot simply look at the music (performance); one must also take into account the image (what audience receives).[52]

Star studies attempt to explain how celebrity works in the public sphere. While star studies, originally analyzed the way film stars functioned in the public, it can also be productive to look at popular music stars the same way film stars are analyzed. In terms of the dichotomy of performance and image put forth by Evelyn McDonnell, they analyze the image, or what the audience receives. For the purpose of this thesis, star studies will be used to analyze how the tension between art and commerce is mediated within the image of Radiohead.

The most influential work on star studies is *Stars* by Richard Dyer. He says a star's "image" is made up of all of their appearances, movies, and anything used to sell their persona.[53] According to Dyer, "Star images are always extensive, multimedia, intertextual." Thus, to Dyer, the image of the star is not just a visual picture, but would also consist of anything the audience could see, read, or hear that shapes the way we think about a star. Therefore, everything a person sees involving Radiohead (a documentary, a music video), hears about Radiohead (their music or an interview, for example), or reads about Radiohead contributes to a particular image of Radiohead.[54]

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52 McDonnell, E. (1999), p. 73
53 Dyer, R. (2004). *Heavenly Bodies* 2nd Edition. New York: Routledge, p. 2.
54 This is not determinism. Fans can receive a message, and not do anything with it.

Star studies as they apply to popular music styles reveal that the pop music star has been historically significant in establishing the authenticity of the music produced for the masses.[55] In popular music studies, the term "authentic" refers to the idea that a band is committed to the artistic intentions of the music.[56] The opposite of authentic would be a band or song that was simply produced by the industry. For example, a boy band constructed by an entertainment lawyer would not be considered authentic. Before the 1920s, the music industry once organized itself around the selling of sheet music.[57] Thus, live performances of an artist would help connect a certain song to a music star. Then, they were able to sell people the sheet music so they could play the song in their own home. Thus, the popular music star emerged at the same time that the selling of sheet music became important.[58]

Today, the industry relies on recorded music.[59] According to David Marshall, the possession and purchase of recorded music gives a fan a sense of owning a piece of both the music and the artist.[60] And, indeed, current star studies posit that people are obsessed with knowing the "real" person behind the star.[61] The performer stands to prove that the recorded music is authentic music.[62] If the audience connects with the performer they are likely to deem the music creative, rather than just a produced commodity.

Radiohead also plays with this concept of authenticity, but they complicate it. By foregrounding their commodification, they create a more authentic relationship with their

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55 Marshall, 2006, p. 196
56 Negus, p. 34.
57 Frith, Sound Effects, p. 32.
58 Marshall, D.P, (2006). The Meanings of the Popular Music Celebrity: The Construction of Distinctive Authenticity. In D.P Marshall (ed.), *The Celebrity Culture Reader*. New York: Routledge, p. 196.
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid. p. 199
61 King qtd. in Holmes, S. (2005) Starring…Dyer?: Re-visiting Star Studies and Contemporary Celebrity Culture. *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, p. 13.
62 Marshall, D. P. (2006), p.198

audience. Radiohead is seen as being an honest band, committed to their fans in a different way than other music stars. This theme will carry through the analysis of their image.

The star studies model for pop stars acknowledges that rock music is often a collective process.[63] Therefore, a band can stand in the place of an individual. The star studies model leaves open the idea that the artist works in concert with others to create his or her art, but maintains a public image not wholly based on the idea that only they are responsible for the art. To analyze the way that Radiohead's star image functions a method for examining the image and the mediated message is needed.

Methodology

The data for this study will consist of materials collected from several mediums. First, I will analyze a documentary, *Meeting People Is Easy*, was released about and by the band. This material would be part of the band's performance. Performance in these terms follows the definition stated above from McDonnell who said that a band's performance consists of materials the band releases to their fans.[64] This material helps in analyzing the band's image because it encompasses the message they release to fans. In addition, the rockumentary is important because it combines images of the band with their songs. This makes it easy to analyze several portions of what goes into creating Radiohead's persona. This combination makes it easier to scrutinize the band on a symbolic level because their music adds more to their images.

Next, I will analyze journalism published about Radiohead since their third major label album release in 1996. I will use American periodicals including: *Rolling Stone, Wired, Billboard,* and *Spin*. These magazines represent the most popular music publications in the United States. The articles from these periodicals will be obtained from online archives,

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63 Ibid. p.205
64 McDonnell, E. (1999), p.73

microfilm, and the holdings from the surrounding libraries. I am limiting the materials to American periodicals because the U.S. music market has a wide global influence.

I have chosen *Rolling Stone* because it does a good job painting the personalities of the band. In addition, *Spin* is a younger version of *Rolling Stone* and they create similar depictions of the rockstars. I have chosen *Billboard* because it is the premier source for the music industry business. Though *Wired,* the leading publication on technology, is not a music magazine, I feel it necessary to include this publication since the *In Rainbows* release was made possible due to technological advancements. All of these periodicals have blogs associated with them. I have combined them with the use of the *MTV Blog*, because this melding of reader feedback and traditional rock articles encapsulates participatory culture, an important theme in the thesis.

Finally, I will analyze fan blogs based around the release of Radiohead's album *In Rainbows*. I will obtain these postings from the online versions of the periodicals I used as well as Radiohead's fan forum, www.ateaseweb.com. I am only including these postings, because the Radiohead site does not keep archives of the previous forum postings on the website. They re-vamp the site with each album release. It is important to note that the selection of these blogs, in particular, creates a somewhat self-selecting group. Not only does the selection of these materials limit the study to a younger demographic, but it also chooses a technologically savvy group. These listeners may be more prone to excitement over the downloaded album since they have the means and the knowledge to receive the music electronically.

It is important to note that, for the most part, I am leaving out an analysis of Radiohead's music or lyrics. These types of studies have already been conducted on several occasions. However, I will from time to time include an analysis of the way their sound quality adds to their image. It is important to recognize that Radiohead uses their music to explore new sonic

landscapes in the same way their image explores now divisions between art and commodity. In addition, the electronic mediation common in their music, as opposed to the analog instruments traditionally used in rock 'n' roll, is a sonic representation of the decision they made with *In Rainbows.*

All of the aforementioned mediums are important for creating a full picture of how the art versus commodity myth functions. First, as Evelyn McDonnell said, there is a difference between what the artist puts out (the performance) and what the audience interprets or receives (the image).[65] This justifies analyzing the fan forums and the material put out by the band or their business executives. Analysis of the music press is paramount because according to several popular music theorists, music journalists act as the cultural "gatekeepers" for popular music.[66] They simultaneously critique and report on popular music.[67] Shuker further explains that the music press both promotes popular music while simultaneously "investing it with cultural significance."[68] Therefore, it is important to explore how the music press covers the band's music as well as the meaning they endow on the album's release. Furthermore, by exploring the blogs associated with the current album it offers a unique opportunity to scrutinize the interaction between the critics and the fans.

The grounded theory method, which will be used to analyze the data, was originally developed circa 1967 by Barney Glaser and Anslem Strauss.[69] The grounded theory method "is currently the most widely used and popular qualitative research method."[70] The methodological assumption of grounded theory suggests that theory will emerge from the data. The data is

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65 Ibid.
66 Shuker, R. (2001), p. 97. Frith (1981) also says that music journalists are "cultural critics" (p. 10).
67 Ibid.
68 Shuker, R. (2001), p. 83.
69 Bryant, A. & Charmez, K. (2007) Introduction: Grounded Theory Research: Methods and Practices. In Bryant, A. & Charmez, K. (Eds.) *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory.* Los Angeles: Sage Publications, p.1.
70 Ibid.

analyzed and compared together until common themes inductively emerge.[71] One of the strongest reasons for using this method is that it allows for themes to emerge as narratives.[72] Thus, the intricacies and complications of the tensions between art and commodity can emerge as a story. According to the *Grounded Theory Handbook*, "The various elements of a story cohere in a way which encompasses chance events, unplanned encounters, unexpected incidents, and unanticipated consequences."[73] The narrative allows for the outcome of the research to reveal the end result instead of trying to predict the end result.

The storyline as conceived by Strauss and Corbin refers to "coding" for conditions, interaction, and consequences.[74] I will interpret the data using the themes of art and commerce as my guiding lens. So, I will look for the band, the press or fans' comments about the artwork or artistic quality of the music. I will look for comments about the market, the band and music as commodity, or about the industry in general. These comments will be the conditions and may be verbal or visual. In many instances Radiohead uses artwork that visually criticizes the industry rather than making verbal statements, therefore it is important to consider the visual.

The interaction of the conditions of art and commodity will hint at a tension or harmony between the conditions. For example, when Thom Yorke speaks about the tension between the band and the label regarding a particular song, this would be an interaction of the conditions of art and commodity. Finally, I will look for themes that would be considered consequences of the interaction categories. These consequences will define the ways in which Radiohead is redefining the boundaries between art and commodity.

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71 Ibid., p. 13-14
72 Bryant, A. & Charmez, K. (2007) *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory.* Los Angeles: Sage Publications, p. 184.
73 Ibid.
74 Strauss and Corbin in Bryant, A. & Charmez, K. (eds.) *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory*, p. 184

Using these strategies, I expected to find themes of commodification, a rejection of the American star system, a rejection of the dominant industry structure, and possibly of the authenticity of Radiohead's art. I expected similar themes between magazines, band propaganda, and the press. I thought that the press would be more skeptical of the tensions than the fans. Since the press is considered the cultural gatekeepers, I anticipated their skepticism of a true tension between the industry and the art. However, Radiohead's fans tend to see their music as rebellious; so, I thought they would believe the label proved to be difficult for the band to deal with while creating music.

Finally, I looked at the press and blogs to see if the press or fans change their critique of the band following the album release. I wanted to determine if there were differences pre-release and post-release. This inductive method allowed me to construct a narrative which determined which of the takes on art versus commerce, if any, applied to Radiohead. If none of these applied, the method showed that it is because Radiohead is redefining the border between art and commerce in a unique way.

Chapter Preview

As outlined in the methods section, I am analyzing materials put out by the band or their label, journalist accounts of the band before and after the new album release, and the fan blogs about the album release. Thus, the chapters will be organized in terms of the band's performance; the performance interpreted by the journalists and mediated to the fans; and then the way the fans interpret the tension and image. Therefore, my thesis will be organized into the following chapters.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The first chapter traces the history of the music industry to give context to the current industry moment. It will review the literature appropriate for discussing the ways Radiohead is using their image to respond to the current economic and industrial structure. The methodology explains the reasons for analyzing the documentary, press and blogs using grounded theory. It also provides an explanation for the narrative structure of the thesis.

Chapter 2: Performance

This chapter will analyze the relationship between art and commodity as expressed in Radiohead's documentary, *Meeting People Is Easy.* I will investigate Radiohead's performance for possible tensions between their art and label obligations. This portrayal may or may not be intended. I assume I will find more comments regarding their star status from personal interviews. From previous research I conducted on the band, I have found that Radiohead tends to foreground their commodification in album artwork and documentaries. These findings should produce important results about both the perception of the tension between art and commodity, and on what the performance communicates outside of author intention.

Chapter 3: Radiohead's Press Image

Section 1: Pre-album release

As previously stated, the music press is vital in understanding popular music. Therefore, I will look for themes of art and commerce in the press. I will critically examine the ways the press writes about Radiohead. Do they tend to emphasize their music, products, and influence on other artists. Or do they tend to discuss them as a commodity and their influence on the industry. Weinstein has argued that the music press knows that art and commerce are at odds.[75] However,

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75 Weinstein, D. (1999), p. 56

she claims that the press tends to write more about "personalities" than "art."[76] Therefore, I will use this chapter to illustrate how Radiohead and their work have been portrayed by the "gatekeepers." This critiqued performance of Radiohead becomes one image mediated to the fans.

Section 2: Press post-album release

Section two will analyze the press for the same themes and in the same manner as in section one; however, it will explain the press around and after the new album release. Furthermore, this chapter will investigate the differences in the press since Chapter 2. It will examine whether or not the band is portrayed in the same light. Furthermore, it will analyze the reaction to the album release. Is it an indication of art, or just a savvy business move? This chapter will be imperative for understanding how Radiohead's image was formed and changed during this moment in industry history.

Chapter 4: Phans (Fans)

This chapter will allow for a dialogue between the press, the performance, and the fans of Radiohead. This will add a dynamic to the tension between art and commodity not yet considered. How do the fans perceive the image of Radiohead? Do the fans' perceptions diverge from the mediated image put forth by the press? If there is a difference, how do we classify it, and what are the meanings?

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This chapter will conclude the thesis, and will allow for a full examination of consequences. How did Radiohead's image play a part in their unique approach the current economic state and structure of the industry? How has that image changed? How are they redefining the borders between art and commerce as a result?

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76 Ibid., p. 64

Conclusion

In conclusion, Radiohead makes a useful object of study for examining an artist's reaction to this particular moment in music industry history. By releasing an album that's worth was defined by their fans, they have used the image they created by foregrounding their commodification to redefine the boundaries between art and commodity. This thesis will combine the analysis of a star's image with that of the media surrounding the star and fan commentary in order to give a complete picture of Radiohead's image and how they appropriated it to create a new model for a struggling industry.

Chapter 2

PERFORMANCE—RADIOHEAD'S STAR IMAGE: "BODYSNATCHERS"

"I am trapped in this body and can't get out."—Radiohead[77]

"Yes of course it pissed me off that Oasis got loads of awards and we got none. But it was worse than that 'cos I realized for the first time what kind of business the music industry is. I was sitting there in a world of ugly men in suits, who were sitting with women who weren't their wives and who were wearing cocktail dresses that didn't fit properly. All bands were so far gone that they didn't have a clue what they were saying," said Thom Yorke to a music journalist following the 1996 Brit Awards.[78] The statement voices an artist's struggle between wanting his work to be recognized and having a moral distaste for the industry of which he is a part. In addition, Yorke's statement complicates the notion that fame means nothing to him. The quote reflects the competition for the notoriety given to bands by the music awards. Radiohead's image consistently negotiates this boundary between art and commodity, balancing Yorke's disgust with his desire to be recognized.

This give and take between art and commodity creates a star image for Radiohead. The chapter will analyze Radiohead's star persona to provide a map of Radiohead's rock star-image for the reader by analyzing the film, *Meeting People Is Easy.* This film, directed by Grant Gee, documents the *OK Computer* tour.[79] It was released post-tour and is the first and only rockumentary released by the band. The rockumentary was given significant attention in the

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77 Radiohead. (Performer). (2007). *In Rainbows.* TBD Records.
78 Clarke, M. (2000). *Hysterical and Useless,* p. 102.
79 Grant Gee filmed the video for the song "No Surprises," and he recently released a documentary about Joy Division.

press, and in 2000 it was nominated for a Grammy Award. The reviews both in print and online were mixed.[80] Despite the commentary, the film provides important insight into the fabrication of the group's image.

A rockumentary is a form that combines the film style of documentary and sets it to a musical soundtrack.[81] Examples of other rockumentaries include *Gimmie Shelter* about the Rolling Stones and *Rattle and Hum* depicting U2. The fact that the rockumentary format is based on the documentary-tradition is significant because according to film theorist Bill Nichols, "The documentary tradition relies heavily on being able to convey to us the impression of authenticity.[82] When we believe that what we see bears witness to the way the world is, it can form the basis for our orientation to or action within the world."[83] Thus, a rockumentary of a band would serve not only to "authenticate" the band, but may lend itself to a better analysis of the image received by the viewers.

Roy Shuker says that one of the most ignored areas of scholarship in the study of music videos is the link of the video to the construction of stardom and their connections to the music they document.[84] He states that previous studies have focused entirely on the visual images of the video and what they signify. However, such studies divorce the images from the music, which Shuker says is a failure of music-video scholarship because video images are meant to be linked to the music they represent. Analyzing a rockumentary ensures that both video and music are analyzed when looking at their link to the construction of music stardom.

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80 A popular music ezine, *PopMatters,* gave it an 8 out of 10. Zupko, S. Radiohead: Meeting people is easy. Accessed at http://www.popmatters.com/pm/review/25276/radiohead-meeting [2008 October 1]. Entertainment Weekly, on the other hand, called it a "sophomoric media critique." Patterson, T. (1999 May 21). Video Review: *Meeting People Is Easy*. *Entertainment Weekly.* Retrieved October 1, 2008, from http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,273499,00.html.

81 Beattie, K. It's Only Rock and Roll: 'Rockumentary,' Direct Cinema, and Performative Display. *Australasian Journal of American Studies.* p. 23.

82 Nichols, Bill. (2001). *Introduction to Documentaries.* Indiana University Press: Indianapolis, p. xiii.

83 Ibid.

84 Shuker, R. (2001). *Understanding Popular Music. 2nd ed.* London and New York: Routledge, p. 175.

The chapter argues that Radiohead was negotiating the boundaries between art and commodity long before the release of *In Rainbows*. This process created a brand that was strong enough to support the move to release an album and allow fans to determine a price. At the same time, it made the release of the album an obvious choice for this band, and a defining moment in solidifying the maturing image of Radiohead. It marked their place in music history. The chapter will set the stage for the analysis of the press and the fans, and will show Radiohead's image through products they produced instead of the outsider perspective.

In regard to the larger project, the chapter is significant because it is the only section that focuses on materials that Radiohead produced offering insight into how they redefined the border between art and commodity. The remaining chapters will focus on their image through the eyes of music critics and fans. These chapters will look at the ways they redefined the border between art and commodity, while this chapter focuses on how the band was already navigating this boundary.

Analyzing *Meeting People Is Easy*[85] provides insight into the way Radiohead plays with these boundaries because the film concentrates on the same divisions that the thesis focuses on. First, it shows how Radiohead conceives of the idea of stardom. The band is both wary of stardom and self-conscious about the need for their work to be recognized. Next, it portrays Radiohead's ideas about their relationship to the press. The film shows interaction with print, radio, and televised press, and most of these interactions are not shown in a positive light. The press is outed as being a part of the industry, not as a help or a friend to the artists

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85 Davis Schneiderman also analyzes this. Schneiderman, D. (2005). 'We Got Heads on Sticks/You Got Ventriloquists': Radiohead and the improbability of resistance in J Tate (Ed.). *The Music and Art of Radiohead* (pp. 15-37). Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Limited. However, his argument is different from this one. He argues resistance through these images is an improbability. He, in contrast, uses many of the scenes I use and claims the work is a postmodern film, which turns the "postmodern spectacle into some more essential 'reality' (Schneiderman 33)."

they write about. Furthermore, the press is not represented as being objective or knowledgeable about the band.

Finally, it shows how Radiohead views their relationship to their fans. They illustrate what appears to be a true devotion to their listeners. Part of this devotion comes in the form of attempting to foreground their roles as artists and, in turn, as commodities. Their relationship to the fans and to this system of outing their position comes across as strained. It appears the tension is due, in part, to the idea that the band appears to still be striving to discover a position in which they are comfortable. The film does not give the viewer the luxury of believing that Radiohead's position in the art and commodity spectrum is fixed, nor are they led to believe that the music group is ever quite comfortable with where they fall at any given moment.

***Meeting People Is Easy*: Notions of Stardom**

The first theme to emerge in the rockumentary is Radiohead's portrayal of their stardom. They seem to abhor the star culture, and the band portrays a sense of uneasiness and helplessness regarding their control over their image formation. Therefore, they work to deconstruct the fantasy needed to create a star image. The rockumentary's narrative unfolds in this order: Radiohead expresses their disgust at the star system. Then they acknowledge their lack of control over their image formation. Finally, they attempt to deconstruct their place in star culture. This thought process seems to align closely to the speeches heard about why an activist decided to fight for change.

The entire docudrama clearly shows the band's mistrust and disgust with the star culture. Thom Yorke and the other band members make comments about their fame. Yorke outwardly criticizes the star culture in the U.S. In fact, this is one of the first scenes in the documentary where we actually see Yorke's face when he's being interviewed. Throughout most of the video,

the viewer hears his voice, but it becomes the soundtrack to other scenes. In this particular interview, the journalists asks, "Are you guys the saviors of Rock and Roll?"[86]

Yorke answers, "Clueless. Every move you make is [sic] already been done, and taken the piss out of."

The journalist responds, "A lot's being made right now about all these celebs and actors that are coming out of these gigs. Does that have any impact on you at all?"

Yorke responds, "We're from England, and English people are not impressed. There's this thing that any amount of success brings with it the automatic assumption that you've cheated or you're full of shit. So we have an inherent distrust of it. It is a fascination to us that celebrities in America just live on a higher plane."

Visually, the rockumentary shows that the band thinks the idea of being a celebrity is ridiculous by showing shots of a *Village Voice* article that calls them "Punk Floyd," and a caption below their picture reads, "Yorke and Greenwood Entering the Rock Elite." The scene pans to a newspaper article about "Serious New Setbacks for MIR, Oxygen Sources Breaking Down."[87] The images suggest that there are more important things happening in the world than the rise of a band or a celebrity into fame, yet an entire sector of the press, the entertainment press, focuses its attention on superstars. It is also peculiar that the band would make this statement since they seem acutely aware of the fact that people are fetishizing them as they watch the docudrama.

There are a few important points to make about these statements. The obvious is that the band feels the role of the celebrity in U.S. culture is absurd. However, at this point, they are not acknowledging they have a place in this system nor do they seem to show that they are flattered in any way by their position. Furthermore, they play on the sense that they are the tortured

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86 Gee, G. (Director). (1998). *Meeting People is Easy*. EMI Records, LTD.
87 The Mir was a ship in orbit. NASA had fears that the astronauts on board might not have enough oxygen to make it home. Gordon, M. (1997 Aug. 26). *New York Times* [Electronic Version].

British artist, foiled by the American system of fantasy. There is no mention of the number of star magazines which exist in England.

One of the reasons they may, in these scenes, ignore their role in this star-system is that they think their stardom is largely out of their control. For example, Radiohead appeared at the Glastonbury Festival in June 1997. Yorke says, "Can you turn up the lights so we can see the people? 'Cause we can't see them yet." Suddenly, the entire crowd is engulfed in light.[88] With "Creep," the song that was their first hit, still playing, the crowd cheers at themselves illuminated while singing the song. The scene shows that the band is not needed at the concert, only the music and the people are needed. The band becomes disembodied, instantly turned into the commodity. The crowd roars when they are lit. They are celebrating themselves and the fantasies that their interaction with the commodity represents, not the members of Radiohead. It is the perfect example of the "phantasmagoria."

The idea of the commodity as phantasmagoria derives from the writings of Walter Benjamin on the commodity culture of 19th century Paris. Benjamin uses the phantasmagoria, a device that creates illusions, to show that the commodity hides the labor that goes into creating the commodity. Instead, the commodity takes on a life of its own, standing in for the consumers' hopes, dreams and fantasies.[89]

Schneiderman echoes this idea that the labor of the commodity is hidden when he correctly argues that Director Gee focuses on this part of the performance because it shows the band has traveled through this pop song to the unconventionality of *OK Computer* via "the

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88 Davis Schneiderman also uses this scene in his essay to say that this shows that the band is not self-conscious. I am arguing that this is not a proper reading of the scene.

89 Margaret Cohen's analysis of Benjamin's work states, "Using a moveable magic lantern called a phantoscope, it projected for it's spectators a parade of ghosts." Cohen, M. (1989 Autumn). Walter Benjamin's Phantasmagoria. *New German Critique.* No. 48, p. 90.

corporate machine."[90] They are merely the cogs of the wheel, a part of the mechanism or the factory. It was the pop song that allowed them to get to the place where they had the freedom to create an album like *OK Computer.* And, still, it is the music-industry hit pop-song that created so much excitement at the concert. The scene illustrates the factory relations of the pop artist by showing that the crowd sings a majority of the song. The band has created a song that once the factory, the industry, has put it out there in mass-quantity, the consumers do not even need the band to sing it anymore. They have taken the work for themselves. While the appropriation of "Creep" by the audience disembodies the band and reveals the commodity system of which Radiohead is a part, the crowd uses the song to form a bond. The concert, or live performance, according to Deena Weinstein is "ruled by a sense of community…and an emotional experience."[91] The audience forms a communal bond by living out and sharing their fantasies through the commodity.

Several images in *Meeting People is Easy* make similar statements about the fetishization of the commodity. The film opens with instructions like, "Eating well. Better driver. Sleeping well. Keep in control. Work hard at the gym. Frequently check your credit." These statements play along sides of clips of the city, trains, and houses. Together these images and words are revealing the fantasy of living a better, more productive life. The words coincide with the lyrics from a song on the album called "Fitter Happier."

Pictures of technology and mobility from an album named *OK Computer* coupled with signifiers of domesticity, religion, and success reveal the fetish-like characteristics of the popular culture. Gyorgy Markus says cultural experiences have a "fetishistic character" because they

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90 Schneiderman, D., p. 33.
91 Weinstein, D. (1991) qtd. in Shuker, R. *Understanding Popular Music.* London and New York: Rutledge, p. 108.

conceal the way "meanings are made and can be re-made."[92] Taken together, the combined images of domesticity, religion, and success seek to reveal fetishized everyday experience. And, furthermore, they reveal the ways in which the band and their music become a part of living out this fantasy.

The uneasiness regarding the lack of control the band has over their image in the commodity system is as prevalent as their apparent disgust. When asked what it feels like to be back in the spotlight, one of the members of Radiohead, whom the viewer cannot see, says, "It's terrifying. The wheels start turning again, the industry starts moving again. Only this time, it's bigger, more terrifying. It just keeps going, basically out of our control." In addition to making these statements, they visually represent this on several occasions.

The first way they show this is through scenes of the band being photographed. In this way the band never engages with the camera filming them, but instead, they are posing for other cameras which are placed at every angle around them. This becomes significant for several reasons. First, the images again communicate the idea that the members of Radiohead are not in complete control of their star image. Some pieces of their image Radiohead can control, like what material, such as the rockumentary, they release. Radiohead, though, cannot predict how the materials will be received.

The band does not have control over other parts of their image, however. Managers, studio engineers, fans, journalists and others all have a part in constructing the meaning of a band's persona. In other ways, however, this message seems to deny that the artists could choose not to tour. It also does not admit that the band has partial control over the image they put out via choosing what type of music to make; whether or not they should make a video to promote it; and whether or not to listen to the industry and critics. Furthermore, the music group has control

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92 Markus, G. (2001). Walter Benjamin or the Commodity as Phantasmagoria. *The New German Critique,* 83, p. 20.

over what interviews they choose to do. However, Radiohead's lack of recognition of these issues may come from the fact that they had just come off of a major tour, and given that these aspects are the only pieces they get a say in, they probably felt helpless about their part in the huge machine that is the music industry.

Another way that the rockumentary communicates that Radiohead is not in control of their image is by using shots of the band as pictures. In other words, we see the band through cameras or television. Several of these images are shown through a television set placed in the top left corner of a lounge. It is being watched by a person reclining over a chair. Another shot shows the television in the same position but located in what appears to be a dressing room. This imagery coincides with Anna McCarthy's analysis of the television's placement in public spaces.

McCarthy's work studies the way that televisions in public areas construct space and communicate access and power in the public sphere. She contends that this placement of the television in the upper corner of the room "prevents the users of a space from accessing its controls. Its inaccessibility communicates to the users of the space that the right to make a decision about what channel the screen is tuned to is reserved for its proprietor only."[93] In other words, the viewer does not own the image or the instrument that projects the image. The dominant party concedes none of his or her control over to the subordinate.

McCarthy's theories suggest that these film images communicate the idea that neither the band nor the people watching them are proprietors of Radiohead's image. The band poses for the pictures, and this modeling constitutes their labor. They are reconnecting the labor and revealing their value. However, the record company, the photographers, the make-up and hair people on set, and the band members are all laborers who own a piece of these images. Thus, there is not

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93 McCarthy, A. (2001). *Ambient Television: Visual culture and public space*. Raleigh: Duke University Press, p. 122.

one clear shot of the band but shots of the band from every angle, never directly confronting the camera. The band is trying to show that they are caught up in the industry's entire plan. Radiohead, in turn, is denying access to their "individual personalities," and are instead, selling an image.

Even through the selling of these images, though, they are making a statement. They are calling indexicality into question. In visual culture, indexicality means that a photograph is supposed to be linked to something real and concrete. The band themselves are inaccessible as "the real self," and are only accessible as images of themselves. They insist that there is not an index; they are not real people. In essence, they are not really there. The pictures of pictures of Radiohead make visible the social relations bound up in the concept of celebrity.

They reiterate the idea that they are not really present throughout the film in scenes in which Yorke writes "I'm not here, this isn't happening" on a napkin, sticking it to the hotel room window, facing the Empire State Building. A song by Scott Walker, a 1950s-era teen idol who had a successful solo career in the '60s, called "You're on Your Own Again" plays in the background. The song is about not feeling like yourself and feeling isolated by your fame. During other scenes of the band being hailed by the press in interviews, they play their song, "How to Disappear Completely," which says "I'm not here. This isn't happening."[94]

Even the sound quality of "How to Disappear Completely" emphasizes the nonexistence of the band. The synthesized washes of one single note held for a long period gives the song an ethereal quality. The consistent fading in and out of the music gives it an unnatural feeling, a feeling of a lived fantasy world. It's almost as though the listener is in a dream state. The tone of the music is reflective of the lyrics. Radiohead's sound quality and lyrics often compliment one another in this manner.

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[94] Radiohead. (Performer). (2000). *Kid A*. United States: Parlophone Records.

This sense of the loss of control may explain why Radiohead works so hard to dismantle the fantasy behind their image. One of the most significant scenes in the documentary happens as the video for "No Surprises" plays. The documentary shows a newscast from Sky TV commenting on the video. In the video, Yorke is wearing a diver's helmet, which fills with water until he is completely immersed for what appears to be close to two minutes. The newscaster comments on his super-human ability.

However, the documentary quickly exposes the taping of the video, in which, Yorke must shoot the scene over and over again to appear calm as he is immersed. He becomes quite hysterical and irate through several of the takes. Then, the editing must extend the amount of time he appears to be immersed. He is exposing the nature of the superhuman quality the commodity appears to give him. The shot is not about Yorke's control over the taping of the video. Instead, it is pertinent in unmasking the fantastical abilities of the fetishized commodity.

Both the cameras taking photographs and the televisions in the documentary, act as screens between the viewer and the band. The screen is revealing a truth. The truth value of an image relies on its transparency, and Radiohead raises its truth value by exposing their labor, and showing the viewer that this is how the image was made. Though they have the likeness of people, they are icons of people, like statues, but they are objects that are sold and exchanged.

In terms of popular music theory, these images are complicating authenticity. Normally, one of the ways a band is seen as "authentic" is by appearing to have an intimate connection to their fans. However, Radiohead is revealing society's fascination with the star, illuminating the idolatry behind star culture. They are showing their audience the work and labor that goes into being a band. However, instead of destroying their "authenticity," the revelation makes them

more "authentic." They have created a more honest relationship with their fans. This will become one of the most important parts of Radiohead's image in later chapters.

Radiohead and the Music Press

The second theme the video portrays is the relationship of the band to the press. The music press has a long history of sleeping with the industry. They get their interviews from the record companies, and act not only as promotional tools but as "opinion leaders."[95] Though the music press does not directly effect consumption, music journalists do serve to help write music history and reflect cultural taste. Given the press' dual citizenship in the world of the industry and the world of the audience, one of the most effective ways to highlight the tension between being an artist and being a commodity is to show an oppositional stance with the press. *Meeting People Is Easy* clearly portrays this skittish relationship with the print, broadcast, and radio press.

Many scenes have interviews scrolling over the concert footage and shots of the magazine and newspaper articles about the band and *OK Computer*. During these printed interviews and in the audio interviews, the questions are shown or heard but rarely do viewers discover the answers. The film shows questions such as, "What is music to you? Is "Lucky" [a song on the album] at odds with the rest of the album? How did you find rock?" This is significant, because the visual representation puts the focus on the journalists not on the band. In other scenes, the journalists are filmed asking their questions. However, the band is not shown giving their answers. Or, the band is shown giving their answers, but only the journalists are shown reading from cue cards. It is unclear whether or not the band rehearsed any of their answers, but the film makes it clear the journalists scripted their questions. It is necessary to point out that given the number of interviews the band gave, and the repetition of the questions

[95] Frith, S. (1981). *Sound Effects,* pp. 175-177.

asked by the music press, it is likely that the band easily concocted answers to the questions. Viewers, though, are prompted to think more about the nature of the journalist's role than of the band's role.

The documentary gives the impression the press knows little about the band or their music. While talking about *OK Computer,* whose songs focus on a range of issues from feeling lost to fear of technology, one interviewer asked, "So, are you into science fiction," in response to songs which use metaphors of alien abduction and technology taking over the world. For Radiohead fans who listened closely to the lyrics, this would be inherently ridiculous. It would be ridiculous because it is common for Radiohead to use fantasy to depict their separation from the rest of society. It is also common for Radiohead to make statements regarding "everyday life" and technology. In fact, even the name of the band is a statement regarding their wariness of technology. Jonny Greenwood said he came up with that name because he could not stand the thought of radio waves passing through your head all the time. It freaked him out. The question shows a lack of knowledge of the themes in Radiohead's music. Instead of showing us knowledgeable opinion leaders, they make music journalists seem as though they play a scripted role.[96]

The questions they ask are not specific to Radiohead. Instead, they ask questions like, "What is music to you?" They also ask questions like, "Are you related in some way to the Brit-pop scene?" One journalist even ponders what the stupidest question they've ever been asked in an interview. This string of mundane, reading-from-a-script questions communicates a few things.

First, they question the press' ability to provide educated criticism of their work and to shape their image. This will become important in the next chapter. The rockumentary is

96 Clarke, p. 32.

showing that the questions journalists ask do not provide a unique look into the band. The journalists are incapable of uncovering anything about Radiohead that they would not push to discover with any other band they interview. It is possible that Radiohead's image gains ethos with fans by this portrayal. If the press is incapable of pursuing a "unique" representation of the band, then only the fans can truly understand the band and their work.

Second, the portrayal of the press in this manner also shows that music journalists' place in the industry is just as much of a performance as that of the band on stage. The film shows that the journalists are not researching the band nor or they truly paying attention to the band's answers. In one scene they press issues about being a celebrity, even after Yorke states that he is not impressed by celebrities. In most of the scenes the journalists are reading their questions from cue cards.

Finally, the band shows how difficult it is to get through all the interviews, consistently answering the same questions. At one point in the film Colin Greenwood tells a radio disc jockey that the band is doing three interviews a day, apologizing for his apparent lack of interest. On several occasions the film shows the band having to go through several takes of an interview or the taping of a television spot. The band becomes more and more disgusted with the scripted question and answer games as the film progresses.

Granted, journalists have a job to do. However, in the cultural-sphere, music critics are gatekeepers. This depiction of journalists' knowledge of the band they are interviewing questions their cultural authority. Writers who could be trusted to provide a worthwhile critique of Radiohead's music would ideally exhibit an understanding of the band's music, background, and their ability to engage the band. Instead of reading from cue cards, these critics would build their interview questions based on the band's answers to other questions.

All of these images with the press, and the conversations that follow, show a band uneasy with yet another part of the industry. Yet, they are fully participating within the system, and Yorke makes a statement regarding the way the industry sucks you in by giving you enough money to grow accustomed to a certain lifestyle to solidify your place in the game. If the press game and the star culture is one that the band is uneasy with, then certainly they will view their relationship to their fans in a more positive light. After all, rock music is nothing at all without an audience.

Radiohead and Their Fans

According to Simon Frith all bands are "distanced from the lives of their listeners.[97] However, the popular music fan searches for an intimate connection to their favorite band. And, in turn, the rock star must affirm his or her connection to their audience in order to be successful as a star. The final theme to emerge from the documentary is the view the band portrays of the relationship to their fans.

Radiohead shows in this film that they take their relationship with their fans very seriously. The rockumentary shows their interaction with fans, then it plays clips of what the band says about their fans, and finally the images make clear that the video is doing something specific for their fans. First, the documentary shows scene after scene of Radiohead interacting with their fans. While the band members are always friendly, there is an occasion where "fans" who are waiting outside a theatre for the band do not recognize the members when they approach. Yorke and Jonny Greenwood speak to them briefly and as they walk away members of the crowd shout "creep" and "dickhead" at them. The band members do not react. Instead, they laugh it off. This scene appears to affirm the band is more committed to their fans than the fans are to them. The film clip makes it seem that it is strictly the music the fans are committed

97 Frith, S. (1996). *Performing Rights*, p. 77.

to. There is a similar scene where a security guard does not want to allow the members backstage. He has to be told that they are members of the band.

In addition to showing that the fans are committed to their music, the clip illustrates that part of Radiohead's persona is that the members are part of the crowd. They are not dressed like flashy rockstars. Rather, they are dressed in jeans and t-shirts. Instead of being larger than life personalities, they could easily be Radiohead fans waiting to enter the show.

Next, they play an interview clip of what Yorke says about fans,

> The freakiest thing about all of this is the idea that you would be one of those bands [a band that influenced someone] to somebody. Like for me the *Strange Way*, the Smiths. I knew this girl and she bought the album when it came out and stuff. REM's the Dead Letter Office. It being imprinted on your heart. Every time someone comes to our shows that's around that age, it's a big deal to me because I can remember that it was a big deal to me. I know how much of a big deal it is because I felt that.

It is a statement about how Yorke feels about having this type of influence on people, and he seems truly honored. He is saying that his relationship to his fans is very important to him. At the same time, he is defining for the viewer what music means. It is an acknowledgement not only of what it means to be part of the youth that historically makes up the audiences of rock music, but it is also showing that he understands how personal music becomes.

The documentary also uses these statements to reaffirm Radiohead's commodity status. The audio for the interview quoted above coincides with shots of money. The camera shows the taxi fare, then Yorke, a Wall Street ticker, then Yorke, and a 24-Hour Banking machine, then Yorke. These images reinforce the idea that the fans are being sold something, even if it is something that is intimately touching their lives.

The cover to the documentary sends the same message. It states, "You are a target market." The photos that coincide with the statement are pictures of crash test dummies and a

market demographics chart. Stanley Donwood, the artist for most of the bands album and film covers, created the cover for the rockumentary.[98] The outward recognition of the audience as a market deserves reflection. On one hand, it would be easy to write the entire film off as a promotional tool used by the label to lengthen the selling life of the album. However, it also reaffirms the complicated notions of authenticity discussed previously. Encapsulated in this moment is the tension between art and commodity, fighting it out on screen and in a picture. The audience is important to the art; the art is important in the lives of the fan/consumer. While it is important to acknowledge that the fan is being sold an image, and the image could be a marketing ploy, the image also gives cause for a pause. It makes the viewer stop, think and contemplate. This is what makes it so artistically provocative.

Conclusion

Meeting People Is Easy further develops Radiohead's image. It is just as important in monetary terms for their image to be successful as it is for their music to be successful. As Frith puts it, "the commercial object is to get people to buy their records because they are stars."[99] In turn, on an artistic level this image is important because the viability of the star's image is what allows the artist greater control in the production of their art and music.

Meeting People Is Easy documented the metamorphosis of five band members into rock stars. Their image as Radiohead is depicted as being self-conscious of their place within the commodity system. Their image wrestles with negotiating their place in the commodity and star system. This image complicates the traditional models of authenticity. It creates an image that attempts honesty with their fans. Instead of allowing themselves to be worshiped or identified

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98 According to Lisa Leblanc Stanley Donwood had worked with the band since 1995. Leblanc, L. (2005). 'Ice Age Coming': Apocalypse, the Sublime, and the Paintings of Stanley Donwood.," in *The Music and Art of Radiohead.* (85). Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Limited.
99 Frith, S. (1981). *Sound Effects*, p. 134.

with, they attempt to say we are a band, and a commodity. This is not to say they are not worshiped like idols nor identified as tortured musicians. But, it is not possible to idealize the band without contemplation.

In understanding their commodity status, they realize that this is the system that allows their art to exist. They seem to believe that their art does matter. Therefore, they are trying to find where they fit, while fighting the inevitability of being swallowed by the very system they seem to detest.

Their relationship to their image, to the press, and to their fans becomes very important in their ability to release *In Rainbows*. When the band released the album, they chose to forgo the typical press avenues. The rockumentary showed that the band did not trust music critics. Therefore, it is not surprising that Radiohead chose not to release the album to them before the fans. The fact that we will see the same themes articulated in the press and the fans chapter both means that Radiohead has built itself as a brand, but also that they are continuously renegotiating their position in the industry and the division between art and commodity. The next chapter will analyze the music press before and during *In Rainbows* to determine if Radiohead's image is similar through the critic's eyes, and to see if the image changes once the pay-what-you-want album is released.

Chapter 3

THE PRESS AND RADIOHEAD: "RECKONER"

"You are not to blame for bittersweet distractor [sic]. Dare not speak its name, dedicated to human beings."
—Radiohead[100]

According to Thom Yorke, Radiohead did not intend to make a statement with the release of *In Rainbows.*[101] In an article in *Rolling Stone,* Yorke verbalized his shock at how much media coverage the album received. He said the release of the pay-what-you-want album was more about taking control of Radiohead's art. The journalist made the point that every album since *Kid A* had leaked on the Internet. Yorke responds:

> There's a compliment there, the fact that people want to get ahold of what you've done. But if it's not the definitive version, if the ends are chopped off, if you haven't made the choice to do it for yourself, it's a bit unfair. Bad karma. So it felt very liberating to take complete control.[102]

Radiohead did not only take control of the version of the artwork people received when they released *In Rainbows,* they altered the media surrounding the artwork. By releasing it to everyone at the same time via download, the band bypassed the normal media channels. The press could not review the album, nor could they rank the initial release of the album since the band refused to release the sales figures.

As we will see later in the chapter, the initial press surrounding the release focused much more on the way the band delivered the music than on the actual quality of the music they produced. Even after the album was available, many journalists speculated on the amount of

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100 Radiohead. (Performer). (2007). *In Rainbows*. TBD Records.
101 Binelli, M. (2008 February 7)The Future According to Radiohead: How Radiohead ditched the record business and still topped the charts. *Rolling Stone*. Retrieved August 22, 2008, from http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/18064095/cover_story_the_future_according_to_radiohead.
102 Ibid.

money the album may have made; the effects on the industry; and the cultural significance of the release, not the musical substance of the album. In this moment, Radiohead redefined not only the art/commerce binary, but they momentarily redefined the press/artist relationship.

Chapter 3 will focus on how redefining the relationship between artist and music journalist impacted the shifting boundaries between art and commodity. As the previous chapter showed, Radiohead already had a questionable relationship with the press. *Meeting People Is Easy* depicted the media as simply another part of an industry which did not understand the band or their music. This theme continues with the new album release.

The music press plays a fundamental role in the ways the public perceives the image created by Radiohead. The music press acts as mediators of the image, which in turn means they intercede in the art versus commerce story. They help to determine the meaning of a particular band to their genre, what impact an album has on the industry as a whole, or what moment in popular music history means. Roy Shuker asserts that music journalists not only help to create buzz for the albums they review, somewhat influencing consumption, but they also help the listener buy into the fantasy the commodity represents by emphasizing the albums' "cultural significance."[103] In other words, the music press serves to reinforce the idea that music is not merely a product by separating fans from the labor that it took to produce the album. These are the very reasons that Adorno believed that consumers are passive, and that popular culture artifacts are incapable of being art.

This chapter analyzes the significance of the new art versus commerce boundary created by the release of *In Rainbows*. This section of the thesis will illustrate how the press began describing Radiohead differently, thus adding nuance to the existing art/commerce story. In turn, the reader will get a clearer understand of the changing role of the press through their new

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103 Shuker, R. (2001). Understanding *Popular Music, 2nd Edition.* p. 99.

understanding of the changing role of the press through their new narratives. The press must find narratives. The media must find new ways to talk about the band, and new topics to discuss once they are not given the opportunity to critique their music. Furthermore, the journalists speculate on industry numbers rather than focusing on the artistic motives behind Radiohead's decision to allow fans to decide what the album is worth. The chapter provides a close analysis of the scramble to decide what to write about when the template is removed.

The chapter will first analyze the image of Radiohead created in the press before the release of *In Rainbows* to give the reader an idea of how the journalists portrayed the band. It is imperative the chapter begins here because the power of Radiohead's image or brand is part of the reason they could release *In Rainbows* in a pay-what-you-want distribution model. In turn, the original image must be understood to determine whether or not the image or the artist versus journalist relationship changed. The original image created by the press followed typical notions of the music star. Music journalists often pitted the band against the industry; created comparisons between Radiohead and other bands; and they tried to forefront the personalities of the individual members over other themes.

Finally, the chapter will look at the press surrounding the release of the album. It is in this section that the shifting relationship between the press and the music group will become apparent. The section will compare and contrast the ways Radiohead is portrayed, and it will conclude with highlighting the significance of this shift to the project as a whole. The chapter will provide more information into how the image already built by Radiohead is mediated to the public, providing enough information to move into the fan chapter.

Pre-album Radiohead

Before *In Rainbows* Radiohead was already using their music industry status to create music that attempted to step outside of commercial norms. Their status depended, though, on breaking into the industry with a hit, "Creep." Though the initial release of the song was less than successful, by the time that *Pablo Honey* was released in 1993, the song had made the *Billboard* Top 40.[104]

However, by 1997 and the release of *OK Computer,* their first venture away from a traditional rock album, they were refusing to play the Top 40 song. When asked why, they responded that they did not want a 'one-song career.'[105] They are recognizing the tendency of the music industry to produce pop standards. Furthermore, the fear of becoming a one-hit-wonder can create a couple of different scenarios. While some bands respond to this danger by sticking to a definable sound, Radiohead realized they needed to do something to show listeners the breadth of their musical capabilities. Thus, they released *OK Computer.*

Analyzing the press coverage of Radiohead will begin with the release of *OK Computer.* I am choosing this date because the release of this album gave the band a great deal of attention. *OK Computer* was different from their previous two albums in that they mixed in electronic or computerized tracks with the rock music characteristic of the *Pablo Honey* and *The Bends*. It was with *OK Computer* that the industry realized Radiohead was a band that would not have a mere "one-song career."

For the most part, the press coverage of Radiohead after *OK Computer* but before *In Rainbows* follows the standard themes presented by popular music studies. First, they highlight a tension between art and commodity. Second, they write about the band's personality more than

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104 Clarke, M. (2000). *Hysterical and Useless.* London: Plexus, p. 3.
105 Radiohead Wows Chicago. (1997 August 09). *Rolling Stone.* Retreived February 1, 2008, from http://www.rollingstone.com/news/ story/5930173/radiohead_wows_chicago.

their music, building their star persona, and finally, they use references to other influential artists to confirm the place of Radiohead in the industry-sphere. All of these themes create an image of Radiohead as not only music superstars but as a mainstay in the music industry.

The first of these themes is a tension between art and commodity.[106] The struggling artist is generally pitted against the industry, which tries to regulate his or her creativity. This theme plays out for Radiohead in a feature story in *Rolling Stone*. This familiar narrative of creative frustration usually goes one of two ways. In the first version, the artist blames a new album's failure to meet the fans' expectation on the pressure, put on them by the label, to release a new album under tight time constraints. In the second version, the label hampers or censors the artist, who would otherwise be brilliant, due to the questionable commercial viability of the new tracks.

In the case of Radiohead, however, they overcome these narratives with the release of an album that did not fall within the expectations of the audience. And, instead, a third narrative emerges. In 1998, with the release of *OK Computer, Rolling Stone* labeled Radiohead, "The Great Rock Hope."[107] The album, they said, was a "stubborn masterpiece that makes no commercial concessions."[108] The journalist is using version two of the artists/label opposition. The quotation invokes the idea that the artist fought, thus the use of the word "stubborn," for their art despite its seemingly "uncommercial" nature. Since the band stood up to the industry-monster, they created an artistic masterpiece.

Almost in the same breath, the writer of that article said that the reason they are the "great rock hope" is that they are the only band whose sales go against the notion that 'rock is dead.' Radiohead became one of the only rock/pop artists to sell a million or more copies that year.

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106 Weinstein, D. (1999). Art Versus Commerce: Deconstructing a (useful) romantic illusion in K. Kelley & E. McDonnell (Eds.). Stars Don't Stand Still in the Sky: Music and Myth (pp. 57-69). New York: New York University Press, p. 58.
107 Rabid, J. (1998, February 23). The Great Rock Hope. *Rolling Stone* [Electronic Version.], p. 1.
108 Ibid.

According to the RIAA's yearly speech, Pearl Jam and Marilyn Manson's albums failed to sell a million copies.[109] L.A. Times Reporter, Steve Hochman reported that rock album sales were down from 42.6 percent of total album sales to 32.5 percent.[110] The *Rolling Stone* article narrates the art and commerce binary playing out simultaneously with sales numbers and inventive music determining the musical worth of the artist. The magazine echoed this in 2001 when David Fricke wrote a cover story about Radiohead called, "Making Music That Matters." He said that they were a "band that mattered with sales to match."[111]

The narrative which emerges from the release of *OK Computer* shows both the value of the art and the value of commerce. The album is "music that matters" because it is artistically inventive, is commercially viable, and it has reached a vast audience. The value of commerce, as the narrative paints it, lies in the fact that it allows the music to reach a large populous.

When *Kid A* is released in 2000, it is as radio unfriendly as is *OK Computer*. However, *Rolling Stone* again states that they keep their fan base instead of alienating them like most albums of this sort can.[112] The band asserts they were able to experiment with *Kid A* because they did not have the industry restrictions on them that were present on the previous albums.[113] The following year Radiohead released *Amnesiac*. In an interview with *Rolling Stone*, Phil Selway said the difference between the two albums was that *Kid A* was manufactured music in a

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109 Tillekens, G. (1998, December). Trends and Shifts in U.S. Music Sales: Analysis of the RIAA Speech. *Soundscapes. org.* Retrieved October 30, 2008, from http://www.ice.rug.nl/~soundcapes/volume2.
110 Hochman, S. (1998, December 27). Year in Music Sales. *LA Times.* Retrieved October 30, 2008, from http://www.articles.latimes.com/1998/dec/27/ent/ca-57839.
111 Fricke, D. (2001, August 2). Cover Story: Making Music That Matters. *Rolling Stone.* Retreived February 11, 2008, from http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/5939919/cover_story_making_music_that_matters.
112 Lash, J. (2000, September 5). Radiohead Make Logical Noise in Wales. *Rolling Stone.* Retreived February 11, 2008 from http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/5922951/radiohead_make_logical_noise_in_wales, p.2.
113 They are experimenting with digital sound in this album as well as *Amnesiac*, which they recorded at the same time as *Kid A*. They released the former one year later. Vineyard, J. (2000, July 5). Radiohead Reveal New Album Info. *Rolling Stone.* Retreived February 11, 2008, from http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/5925423/ radiohead_reveal_new_album_info.

studio, while this album was more of the band arrangement type of music.[114] They seem to be using the albums not only as a way to show different types of arrangements, but also to show they are "true artists." They can produce art while locked in a studio or while playing together as a band.

In this article on *Kid A,* the writer also reiterated that the band is fighting star culture. They are under "intensified pressure of becoming a big commodity."[115] The article goes on to point out that they are still in a stage where people don't recognize them when they walk down the street. This is probably due to the fact that while the press was attempting to write about the band members' personal lives, the band itself continued to stay out of celebrity magazines. At this stage, Yorke continues to be outwardly critical of Western star culture. He says it is nonsense that people become famous for appearing in advertisements and are famous for being famous.[116] The writer responds to Yorke's comments by writing, Yorke "fends off commodification, vicarious worship, and media pursuit."[117] The singer replies that fending off media pursuit does not feel like pressure. Instead, he follows the comments with a story of cows being incinerated near where the band recorded the album. The cows, he explains, felt real pressure. In fact, the band moved their recording location because the idea of the cows being incinerated bothered them too much. Yorke's story serves a dual purpose. It creates a moment that seems to put the star culture into perspective. At the same time the story softens the blow of their perception of their relationship with the industry, star culture, and the media.

This point brings in the second theme that comes out in the music press. Though the members of Radiohead attempt to keep the press from writing about them like typical music

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114 Fricke, D. (2001, May 4). Radiohead Talk "Amnesiac." *Rolling Stone.* Retreived February 11, 2008, from http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/5919396/radiohead_talk_amnesiac, p.1.
115 Ibid, p. 2.
116 Rabid, J. (1998, February), p. 2.
117 Ibid.

stars, the media continues to reflect on their personalities.[118] They call Yorke an "elder statesman" of music.[119] They are eerily prophetic when they say that Radiohead is a band that can make sense of "cacophony."[120] Yorke is called "uncompromising" and "not cautious."[121] They are attempting to give the readers a look into the "real person" behind the band, even if Yorke does not want to let them in. Radiohead counteracts the idea that the journalists and the readers can get to know the members by making statements like, "It is still a band,"[122] when Yorke is asked questions about his creative process. While the music journalists insist on singling out Yorke and Jonny Greenwood as the creative front-men, Yorke and Greenwood confirm that all of the writing and producing is done collectively by the band. This attempt to keep the front-men, Yorke and Greenwood, out of the spotlight, also reinforces the fact that they are not individual superstars. As with many bands during their rise to fame, their collective image is more important than the perception of each individual member, this is in sharp contrast to the film star images studied by Dyer and other star studies scholars. Furthermore, since it is the collective image that matters most, there is a consistent struggle with the cultural gatekeepers to keep the image cohesive, to keep them from splitting the band into sections.

The third theme that surfaces in the press coverage is the comparison of the band to other influential acts. This common practice in the music press is used to subtly underscore the importance of an artist to fans by invoking images of other artists. As stated earlier in the chapter, one of the roles of the music journalist is the construction of music history. They mark the significance of a given moment, album or artist in the music history narrative. The

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118 Weinstein argues that rock writers have an easier time writing about personalities than art. (p.66)
119 Kranepool, E. (1999, June 18). Tibetan Freedom Concert: Amsterdam. *Rolling Stone.* Retreived February 11, 2007, from http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/5921898/tibetan_freedom_concert_amsterdam.
120 Lash, J. (2000, Sept. 5), p.1.
121 Ibid.
122 Fricke, D. (2001, Aug. 2), p. 5.

journalists communicate a band's place in the artist spectrum by comparing them to other influential artists. So, if the journalist says Radiohead shows characteristics of the Rolling Stones for instance, this should communicate to the reader that this music group has an important place in music history. In the realm of painters, it would be like comparing a painter to Degas or comparing a pianist to Mozart. In the realm of the music press these comparisons work to establish the artists' credibility. In this case, the three artists that Radiohead is most compared to Neil Young, the Beatles and U2.

In *Wired*, Beatles references begin before the press surrounding the *In Rainbows* album release because the Beatles, like Radiohead, refused to sell their music on iTunes.[123] Radiohead's reasoning for not selling the songs appears to be an artistic decision based on the fact that iTunes sells individual songs. It appears that Radiohead believes the full album is the work of art. It should be together. In the same way that a concerto must be arranged in a certain way, artists and producers spend a great deal of time on the arrangement of the tracks on an album to create a listening experience.

Throughout *Rolling Stone* The Beatles references start as early as 2000. The evoking of the Beatles insinuates that not only is Radiohead doing something inventive musically,[124] but also, that Radiohead's fans are dedicated to them in the same way that the Beatles fans were. David Marshall, a star studies scholar, says the Beatles had fans "whose emotional commitment was undeniable."[125] In the same way, the second section of the chapter will make clear that it is apparent that music journalists and fans alike are committed to Radiohead. Radiohead fans

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123 Van Buskirk, E. (2007, September 17). Radiohead Blows Off iTunes, Sells Full Album in MP3 Format. *Wired*. Retreived February 11, 2008, from http://blog.wired.com/music/2007/09/radiohead-blows.html, p.1.
124 Dettmier and Richey claim that the Beatles defined postmodern. Dettmar, K. & Richey, W. (Eds.). (1999). *Reading Rock and Roll: Authenticity, appropriation, aesthetics*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 4.
125 Marshall, D.P. (2006). The Celebrity Legacy of the Beatles in D.P. Marshall (ed.), *The Celebrity Culture Reader*. New Yorke & London: Routledge, p. 503.

follow them even when the artists experiment with their music. The fans support the band when they refuse to tour due, in part, to environmental concerns, and followers still buy out concerts when the band does appear. It is important to note that the Radiohead fan base would more likely be a reader of *Wired* than part of a teenage-girl mob.

The Neil Young reference works in a similar way. However, instead of focusing on fan response, he is used to conjure the image of Radiohead as folk artist. Radiohead's music creates an emotional connection to the listener based solely on its artistic value, negating the fans' emotional connection to the band members' personalities. Shuker says that the singer/songwriter image connotes notions of "authenticity" and "creativity."[126] The press uses the Young reference to show readers that Radiohead truly feels the songs they write, and that they are creative and innovative artists with a folk-art-like connection to their music. Simultaneously, they are showing that this band has as much industry staying power as artists like the Beatles, or Neil Young or U2.

In conclusion, the music press surrounding Radiohead pre-*In Rainbows* follows typical themes. The art/commerce binary works perfectly in the press for this band, as time after time they are portrayed as a contradiction. "Songs is a relative term when you're dealing with this band," writes one journalist.[127] The music critic meant that Radiohead plays with arrangements, and that they often stray from the traditional structure of other rock songs. The same article says that Radiohead "destroys and redeems" rock.[128] They "blur lines between old and new."[129] The piece says they prove rock is art, dead, and new all at once. In other articles they are artists and business men, stars and unknown. The writer presents the band as a mass of contradictions that

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126 Shuker, R. p. 101.
127 Vineyard, J. (2000, October 12). Radiohead Reappear Completely. *Rolling Stone*. Retreived February 11, 2008, from http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/5923646/radiohead_reappear_completely.
128 Ibid.
129 Ibid.

somehow charter new frontiers both in their music and in their approach to the music industry. The next section will show that Radiohead attempts to create new borders between art and commodity both in their music and in their approach to the music industry as a whole.

***In Rainbows* Press**

The contractions of business men/artists, redeeming/destroying rock, and traditional rock music/new soundscapes present in the music and persona of Radiohead have been established at this point. Thus, their response to the music industry financial crisis presented in the first chapter is not that surprising. Crisis literally means a breakdown of meaning. Radiohead's newest album responded to a moment where the music industry, as illustrated in the first chapter, was once again in crisis. Thus, the music press must scramble to make sense of not only the industry but their place within it. The old meaning is in jeopardy; they must either re-authenticate it or define the new one. This makes Radiohead's release of *In Rainbows* especially important. The press is putting together pieces, waiting to imbue meaning upon the release as it relates to a changing business. Several themes emerge from the print coverage of the new album.

The most striking theme to emerge in the media surrounding the album is that Radiohead changed the press' role in this album release. James Montgomery, a writer for *MTV,* explains that Radiohead did not follow the normal publicity avenues when releasing this album; they did not follow normal industry structure. Usually, he explains, music journalists get the album about three months in advance. By the time the album is released, music critics have heard it so often they are tired of it when it is made public.[130]

However, in the case of *In Rainbows*, the journalists gained access to the music at the same time as other listeners. Montgomery says, "A bunch of unflappable pros suddenly

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130 Montgomery, J. (2007 October 3). Radiohead's *In Rainbows* Makes Everything Right With the World, In Bigger Than the Sound. *MTV*. Retreived February 11, 2008, from http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1571043/20071002/radiohead.jhtml.

becoming, well, flappable superfans."[131] The journalist's statement highlights a few things. First, Radiohead has seemingly flipped the media on its head. The music journalists are no longer the cultural gatekeepers in the same ways they were before. They still serve to impart meaning, but not because they are writing about something the fans have not heard yet and are anxiously awaiting, thus giving them some preconceived notion about how they should feel or appreciate a work. But, this time, they are gatekeepers in the sense that if their readers trust what the writers say about the meaning of this album, it would be based strictly on the idea that these journalists have an expertise that fans do not or that the press and the fans agree about the album. In other words, if readers and fans are going to trust music critics' opinions, it will have to be soley based on the notion that they, as writers, have more cultural capital than the average listener.

The second reason this statement is important is that the music journalist recognizes that his role with this album is different. His position has been broken down, and the writer must find a way to regain authority. Thus, Montgomery deems himself a "superfan." He spends four paragraphs, before making the statement, explaining how he found out about the release and his reaction to the news. The story bolsters his excitement, that he immediately ordered the Discbox version.[132] It is an image meant to show the depths of his fandom.

The next theme to emerge from the press regarding the release of the album is that the album is a statement against the music industry. The press uses words and phrases such as, "turns the music biz on its ear,"[133] "snubs,"[134] and "rejects."[135] The wording pits the industry not only against the creative artist, but also against the fans. The articles assert that by not following

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131 ibid., p. 3
132 Ibid., pp. 2-4.
133 Brown, L. (2007, December 5). Radohead, Inc. *Spin.* Retreived February 11, 2008, from http://www.spin.com/features/magazine/2007/12/0712_radioheadinc/, p. 5.
134 Russell, T. (2007, October 9). NIN Joins Radiohead in Shunning the Record Industry. *Wired*. Retreived February 11, 2008, from http://blog.wired.com/business/2007/10/nine-inch-nails.html, p. 1.
135 This word is used in several articles.

the industry model and letting their fans decide, Radiohead has given power back to their listeners. In the *Billboard* coverage of the album release, the writer quotes Yorke who says the band really wanted a more direct relationship with their fans.[136]

While the music press is certainly painting a picture of a band who empowers their fans, they also portray the download of *In Rainbows* as a marketing scheme. This is the third theme to emerge from the media coverage. When speaking of the marketing ploy, they call Radiohead a "brand name," like that of Neil Young or U2.[137] Also, one article in *Spin* used a desk with a name plate that said, "Thom Yorke, CEO" on it.[138] And, within the statements about this merely being a marketing ploy, the journalists acknowledge the changing music industry structure was what allowed Radiohead to make this move.

The other way the press highlights the marketing aspects of the album is by speculating how many people downloaded the album (1.2 million)[139] and how much money they might have made on it.[140] The magazines focused on this the most the week that Radiohead shut down the download option, a mere three months after they released the album.[141] They attempted to show that the band could not have made much money on the album, and that this model was not a viable one. It was an attempt to quell the notion that this new structure of releasing albums could not only threaten the viability of the music industry, shutting down the system, but would also allow artists to profit more on their album release. In the current structure, bands make very

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136 Turner, M. (2008, April 29). Yorke: Radiohead's "In Rainbows" stragegy was a "one-off." *Billboard.* Retrieved May 8, 2008, from http://www.billboard.com/ YorkeRadioheadStrategyWasaOneOff.html, p. 1.
137 Brown, L. (2007 December 5), p. 1.
138 Ibid.
139 Ibid.
140 Adding to the frustration of the media, Radiohead refused to release the official numbers. Some magazines report that polls show many downloaded the album for free. Sandoval, G. (2007 December 11). Radiohead Criticized as Band Shuts Down 'In Rainbows' Promotion. *MTV Blog*. Retrieved February 11, 2008, from http://www.news.com/8301-10784_3-9832659-7.html. Others said that polls indicated that most individuals paid close to a normal disc's cost. Van Buskirk, E. (2007 Oct. 2). Radiohead Spokesperson: Fans Paying Close to Retail.
141 Radiohead released the album on October 11, and shut down the promotion the week of December 11.

little off of the physical commodity, and make more money off merchandise and concert ticket sales. If the new model was a success, then artists would make more off the physical commodity, but the industry would lose money. Currently, the industry takes most of the profit from the physical commodity. The artists make most of their money off the merchandising and/or touring. The industry, therefore, would be very threatened if Radiohead's model worked. In addition, if the new distribution method succeeded, it would threaten the music press' role in the release of new albums. This makes it important for them to speculate on the financial worth of Radiohead's move.

The *MTV Blog* uses the sound quality of the download and statements by the band's management to prove that the album was a marketing ploy. The download was available at a mediocre 160 kilobits per second. The actual statement by the management was, "In November we have to start with the mass-marketing plans and get them underway," said Chris Hufford.[142] They quoted Bryce Edge, one of the band's managers, who stated, 'If we didn't believe that when people hear the music they will want to buy the CD, then we wouldn't do what we are doing.'[143]

Montgomery, and aforementioned "superfan," states the downloadable album's poor compression size was, "dishonest, distasteful, and well downright un-Radiohead."[144] It is worth noting that the reason Montgomery was disappointed in the album's compression size is that layers of the music are lost. For example, in the CD version of "15 Steps" there are additional percussion layers that make the song seem to explode out of the speakers. In addition, there are tom taps that add depth. There are also additional guitars and keyboard effects. These missing

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142 Montgomery, J. (2007 October 11). Radiohead Fans Feel Duped By *In Rainbows'* Poor Sound Quality, Possible Ulterior Motives. *MTV Blog*. Retreived February 11, 2008, from http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1571737/20071011/radiohead.jhtml, p. 3.
143 Ibid.
144 Ibid.

layers make the song more complex and dynamic. In contrast, the MP3 version of the song sounds flat.

Montgomery's statement regarding the band's dishonesty affirms that the image of Radiohead relayed in the press is the authentic model specified in the second chapter. Radiohead is seen as having a more honest relationship to their fans. They have flipped the notion of authenticity on its side, complicating it. Their version of "authenticity" is to be upfront with their fans about their status as commodity.

However, other articles paint a different picture of the download quality. Instead, they attempt to reaffirm the "authenticity" of the band's connection to their fans. This is the fourth theme. These writers interpret the move not as the management has portrayed it, but rather that Radioheads' "hardcore" following would be the ones to buy the album in CD and Discbox format anyway, while other listeners would still be able to hear the music.[145] Though the band's management made statements regarding the promotional aspect of the album, Jonny Greenwood, the guitarist, claimed their intention was to make it "a bit better than iTunes."[146] In other words, Greenwood is playing with the notion that fans pay $.99 a song for music that's sound quality is worse than the album they allowed the music listeners to download for free. In fact, an article in *Wired* viewed the download option as giving fans a choice, and said that Radiohead treated fans "with respect,"[147] still indicating that Radiohead has a different notion of what its relationship to fans is like.

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145 Van Buskirk, E. (2007, October 1). Fans Pay Whatever They Want for Radiohead's Upcoming Album. *Wired*. Retreived February 11, 2008, from http://blog.wired.com/underwire/2007/10/fans-to-determi.html, p. 1.
146 Montgomery, J. (2007, October 11), p. 2.
147 Van Buskirk, E. (2007, October 2). Radiohead Spokesperson: Fans Paying Close to Retail for Pricing-Optional Album. *Wired*. Retreived February 11, 2008, from http://blog.wired.com/music/2007/10/radiohead-spoke.html, p. 2.

Indeed, once the band starts to release physical formats and follow traditional methods of distribution, the press' attitude changes. This is when profit speculations, as stated above, overwhelm the media coverage, and a real sense of disappointment in the move start to take hold. *MTV Blog* up to that the moment that looked like it could "save the music industry" was over.[148] *Wired* reported that the band announced a "non-innovative CD single release."[149] They explain that the CD allows a wider audience and the less technologically savvy fans to access the music, but the singles do not make sense because the band is releasing different songs on the CD and vinyl version. The writer does not see the business side to this move, but is viewing the decision from the fans' point-of-view. Thus, the music critics are still scrambling to affirm the band's relationship to the fans. This is surprising given the fact that most of the press around the album tended towards discussion of the business-side of the album.

The album responded to a particular moment in the music industry, and the moment the album was unavailable to download and moved into traditional formats, that moment ended. The beginning press, which responded to the time period we are discussing, had the feel of fan writings. From James Montgomery's claim to "super-fan" status to Van Buskirk anxiously awaiting the moment the download was available, the press lacked the formalities associated with reviews, and instead, sounded more like someone waiting on a present. Montgomery discussed his anticipation of the new album, telling personal stories about his and his wife's reaction to the news of its release.[150] Van Buskirk wrote fan letters to Radiohead and released them as articles.[151] The journalists could not act as the normal gatekeepers. Then, in order to

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148 Sandoval, G. (2007, December 11), p. 1.
149 Van Buskirk, E. (2007, November 30). Radiohead Announces Non-Innovative CD Single Release. *Wired*. Retreived February 11, 2008, from http://blog.wired.com/music/2007/11/radiohead-annou.html, p.1.
150 Montgomery, J. (2007, October 3).
151 Van Buskirk, Dear Radiohead.

follow the developments of the album they had to put back on their industry hats. Most of them seemed honestly confused and unprepared for the transition.

Wired let David Byrne of the Talking Heads interview Thom Yorke days after the album download ended. It appeared as a move to re-establish Radiohead as artists. They say that Radiohead "didn't intend" for the album to "start a revolution."[152] It proves there is room for "innovation," which seems to be the measure of art. In these statements, Byrne depicts the band's move as an artistic decision, painting them as artists not entrepreneurs. Though we cannot go simply on the artist's words in a story, just as we have to look at what their image communicates without their commentary, it is important to realize these statements play a role in trying to justify the success or failure of the move on a financial level.

Yorke says that they intentionally bypassed the media reviews and normal media routes. However, his reasoning is what is most intriguing. In essence, Yorke states that while the reviewer may not understand their music, the fan does. Therefore, it should be their right to hear it before it gets reviewed. In other words, the people who appreciate their art do not need an interpreter. This further threatens the music journalists place as the cultural gatekeeper when it comes to established bands. [153]

Another thing that is reiterated in this interview is that the CD is put together because it is "artistically viable." [154] The songs should be heard together. Of course, this interview was held before Radiohead announced the album would be available on iTunes. The iTunes agreement slides the album right back into commodity mode. The iTunes contract allows the album to be unbundled, selling each individual song at the price of $.99. Cultural studies scholar Ted

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152 Byrne, D. (2007, December 18). David Byrne and Thom Yorke on the Real Value of Music. *Wired.* Retreived February 11, 2008, from http://www.wired.com/pring/entertainment/music/magazine/16-01/ff-yorke, p.1.
153 Ibid., p. 3.
154 Ibid.

Friedman asserts that iTunes and services like it help establish a type of listening he calls, "extensive listening".[155] The listener can afford to experiment with all types of music from many different albums rather than buying individual albums in physical form, limiting how much music he or she can afford. Therefore, the fact that Yorke made his statement before they agreed to sell the album on iTunes is significant, because the contract with the music service contradicts his message that he believes this album is art that should be listened to in its entirety.

Yorke also states that originally the album was only going to be available in digital format, counteracting the idea that the digital release was a marketing ploy. He says that they decided it was "snobbery" [156] to release the CD. Then he says "they're [the management] talking about putting it on the radio. I guess that's normal." [157] This re-enforces the idea that the album is a work of art. The artist denies the business side, whereas their management (who in this case represent the commodity), enforce the idea that this was a savvy business move. The art and commodity dynamic are again at play.

They or the editors, depending on how much control Byrne was given on the content of the article, end the interview with the binary. Yorke and Byrne discuss the value of music. In the end, they both agree that it is not about the business moves, the industry, or the promotional stunts, but rather, "It's about whether or not the music affects you are not. And why would you worry about an artist or a company going after people copying their music if the music itself is not valued?"[158] Once again, the article attempts to draw a definite division between art and commodity by downplaying the significance of the music industry and the commercial aspects of

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155 Friedman, T. (2007). *Electric Dreams: Computers in American culture*. New York University Press: New York, pp. 190; 193.
156 Ibid., p. 6.
157 Ibid.
158 Ibid., p. 7.

the music, focusing instead on the listener's connection to the music, not the ways in which they receive the music.

Conclusion

The chapter began by showing that the music press built an image of Radiohead as a band that resisted the industry standards long before they actually made a move that seemingly defied the industry. The line between art and commodity was clearly defined in their portrayal. However, because of the position the band puts the music press in with *In Rainbows* even they struggle to find the line between art and commerce. First, the move is innovative therefore members of the press are forced to write not based on a set of music journalistic standards, but in response to something they have not seen before. The journalists' construction of the binary becomes blurred, which reinforces the opposition. Do they continue to paint the band as industry rebels dedicated to their fans? Do they, on the other hand, create an image that suggests the band has somehow betrayed their fans and the authenticity of their artistic image by making a savvy business move, which in one writer's mind was very "un-Radiohead?" Just as Radiohead has redefined the border between art and commodity, artist and industry, the lines drawn by the journalist are just as blurry.

Second, Radiohead's move threatened the role of the music press as cultural gatekeepers. If this model succeeded it would change the nature of the role they had in the construction of an established band's image. They would still retain their gatekeeper role when it comes to new artists, meaning they still have a say into who makes it into the press, thereby determining who gets mass coverage. However, for established artists, like Radiohead, they would become much less important. This would change the conventions the journalists use for writing about artists, and would mean they have to pay closer attention to fan writings about an album. In essence, it

would threaten their cultural capital. When it comes to major bands, music journalists would turn into more transcribers of history rather than interpreters. It is important to add here that though they did not make the necessary moves to make it into the *Billboard* charts, *Billboard's* critics still rated the album #1 for the year. In addition, they ranked the move the top news story of the year.[159] Therefore, the journalists were forced to rank something based on its artistic worth, not on sales. Usually, the rankings are a mix of both.

For now, the moment where the press/artist relationship may have been changed permanently has seemingly passed. However, it opened up the possibility that for many artists the press may have a very different role in constructing their images in the future. It may mean that the seasoned music journalists become more apart of the industry than ever before, focusing on trying to make sense of the changes in the commodity structure of music, rather than focusing on a role of art critic. The next chapter will focus on what this shift meant for the fans.

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159 *Billboard:* 2007 Year in Music. (2007 December). *Billboard.* Retrieved October 4, 2008, from http://www.billboard.com/bbcom/yearend/2007.

Chapter 4

PHANS: "WEIRD FISHES"

"I'd be crazy not to follow, follow where you lead. Your eyes, they turn me."
—Radiohead[160]

"There has always been an integrity to the community of people on the Net, who follow what we do. But an 'Ethical choice'? I don't know about that." He smiles. "Maybe if they were buying a goat,"[161] says Thom Yorke in a follow-up interview to the *In Rainbows* release. Yorke uses this comment to acknowledge both that his fans can be trusted and that he does not view the decision of whether or not to pay for music as a choice of morality. This statement of trust seems to be typical of the band's attitude towards their fans. As Chapter 2 showed, Radiohead prides itself on its reputation of being upfront with listeners. From a business standpoint, this would simply be regarded as good customer service. If music is understood as art, however, this statement positions the band as having a more "authentic" relationship with their fans than other rock bands. Either way, Radiohead consistently treats their fans differently than other members of the music industry.

With this new album, part of the way that Radiohead acted differently towards their fans is that they changed the press' interaction with the music listeners. As I stated in the previous chapter, one of the most compelling transformations generated by *In Rainbows* was the repositioning of the relationship between the band and the press, as well as the press' role within the fan community. They forced journalists to experience the new album at the same time that the fans did. The worth of the album, both artistically and commercially, was left up to the fans.

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160 Radiohead. (Performer). (2007). *In Rainbows.* TBD Records.
161 Binelli, M. (2008 Feb. 7) The Future According to Radiohead [Electronic Version]. *Rolling Stone,* p. 3.

They decided what to pay for the album and they were not influenced by album reviews prior to hearing the music for themselves.

While the fans were contemplating the value of the album, journalists scrambled to regain their authority by analyzing what the move meant to the music industry. However, Radiohead refused to release their Internet sales figures. Therefore, they did not meet the requirements needed for the *Billboard* charts to rate the downloaded album, leaving the economic significance of the album up to speculation and debate. This allowed for journalists to speculate on the profit margin, reiterating that the financial viability of the download did not mark the cultural importance of the album. Its connection to the industry lied more in what it meant to music listeners not industry executives.

This chapter will focus on how the download was a significant cultural event by exploring the implications it had on Radiohead's relationship with their fans. Unlike early fan analyses, this chapter is not meant to be a uses and gratifications study. Rather, it looks at the differences between press coverage and fan reactions to ascertain the possibilities this moment opens up for fan participation with their favorite artists and the cultural assumptions of their music.

Radiohead acknowledged that the fans are an important part of the network that constructs their image. With *In Rainbows*, Radiohead both recognized their fans' role and incorporated their listeners into the way they dealt with this release. They allowed fans to write reviews without reading them in traditional media outlets first. The band also allowed their followers to create the videos for the album, giving the fans a unique opportunity to sculpt the visual images associated with the music group. Finally, they allowed listeners to mix a single

from the album, giving them some control over Radiohead's auditory representation. This embrace of participatory culture is significant to the development of this narrative.

This chapter provides a third element of analysis for scrutinizing the way in which the band redefined the line between art and commerce. Thus far, two key pieces to the art versus commerce story have been examined. Chapter 2 analyzed the image created by the band. Chapter 3 highlighted not only the ways that image was mediated, but also how *In Rainbows* redefined the band's relationship to the press. This chapter will provide an acute look at what the album meant for the band's connection to their fans.

First, the chapter will show how Radiohead's fans reacted in contrast to the press' reaction. The analysis found that the press focused more on negative fan reactions, while the fans on the fan boards and blogs were more positive about the download. This is important because it shows the press is not actually speaking for the fans and affirms that the press appears to be much more a part of the industry. Second, it will examine how the band's model fits into participatory culture, embracing fandom. The theory used for participatory culture stems from Henry Jenkins' writings on "convergence culture," which will be discussed along with fan studies in more detail in the theoretical background section. This section will provide an understanding of some of the theories regarding the fans' roles in popular culture.

Third, the analysis will show how Radiohead's move was in close alignment with the notions of "authenticity" already present in their star image. The album download made sense given the band's relationship to their fans. Finally, the chapter will show that Radiohead's move did not threaten traditional notions of music fandom but rather enriched it by giving popular music listeners a unique opportunity to interact differently with Radiohead's music. This chapter

will conclude by discussing the ways that this moment in music history may set the stage for a shift in the industry's attitude towards their fans.

Theoretical Background

Before moving into the analysis of Radiohead fans, some background on fan studies is needed to map the theoretical heuristic employed in this chapter. Fan studies focus on an active audience and look at how audiences negotiate meaning and use culture in their everyday lives. For this project, our audience or fan group is the listeners of Radiohead music who participate in online fan boards and blogs in the press. Two important theorists' views have already been used to investigate this fan group. Adorno would classify this group as passive cultural dupes, not engaged with the music. He contends that mass produced music is formulaic, meaning listeners do not give the repetitive structure any thought. Benjamin, conversely, asserted this group is active. He would argue the mass reproduction of music would open up new democratic possibilities for the art, allowing people to appropriate it for their own uses. Indeed, these two views outline a common binary in audience studies, the passive listener and the active one.

Many studies have focused on fans as an active group appropriating culture into their own lives. This thesis takes the stance that popular music and the function of music stars play an important role in the lives of fans in the cultural sphere. Therefore, my theoretical heuristic will start with the camp that viewed the audience as active, fan studies. This thesis is not a traditional fan study, meaning that it does not focus on fans taking material away from the text to appropriate it for their own uses. Rather, this study will show the ways in which the fans' uses of the text get looped back into the cultural product. However, it is important to recognize two of the influential works on fandom before taking a departure into the possibilities Radiohead's move opened up for fans.

Two of the most influential fan theorists are Henry Jenkins, who studied *Star Wars* fans, and Janice Radway, who studied small-town romance-novel readers. Both of these ethnographic studies were written during a time when fans were not taken seriously by many academics. Many people thought of fans as fanatical or strange. These theorists illustrated that the "fan" was an active consumer using the commodity for their own purposes.

We begin with Janice Radway's study of romance novel readers to mark the point when theorists began realizing that an artifact considered to be "low culture" (as some, like Adorno, first labeled popular music) could still be incorporated in useful ways into the lives of its consumers. Though Radway's view of the fan is similar to Jenkins, the text is different. Radway does not address the romance novel as art, which is what others, like Benjamin, argue popular music could become.

Radway's study is significant because it illustrates that a text with no seemingly dignified place in popular culture can still be used for worthwhile purposes.[162] Radway shows that these women used the novels for escape from their everyday existence.[163] And, that they built a tight-knit support system through their shared consumption. Furthermore, this community of romance novel readers was wary of outsiders, had a shared vocabulary of criticism about the books, and brought the women a sense of power over their lives. Popular music fans also share a vocabulary of criticism, and use their knowledge as a marker for their importance in the community.

Jenkins' study, in contrast, is focused on a text that he views as art, like our popular music fans.[164] Jenkins draws upon Howard Becker's theories of an Art World. The art world is similar

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162 If you doubt that there is a "low-culture" association with romance novels, attempt to let your most educated friends know that you read them.

163 Radway, J. (1984). *Reading the Romance: Women, patriarchy and popular literature.* Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

164 Jenkins, H. (2002). "Strangers No More, We Sing: 'Filking' and the social construction of the science fiction fan community." in P Marris & S. Thornham (Eds.), *Media Studies: A Reader,* 2nd. Edition. (pp. 547-556). New York: New York University Press, p. 550.

to Frith's notion that music is not a static piece of art produced by a single artist. Rather, it is a form of communication in which artist, producer, engineer, and industry all share a piece of the music form. Becker still calls the work "art," but the idea is the same. The notion of folk art says that an entire community owns a piece of the art. There is a network in which artwork is created. The artist draws on art from other artists, and the work's meaning is established and mediated through yet another network. Jenkins believes that the fan is part of the art world, and that they actually constitute their own art world.[165] Later in the chapter, it will become clear that fans who do not conceive of file sharing as illegal view music as folk art.

Jenkins' fans appropriate the text to make their own art by drawing on the premise and characters of the show they love. So, the *Star Trek* fan uses the characters to write his or her own stories, create music, videos, and more.[166] The fans differ from Radway's readers because though they form a community in the same sense that Radway's readers do, they also appropriate the show and its characters to express themselves through artistic forms. Radway's readers do not write their own romance novels, but rather use their community to escape their lives. The fans all mingle in the outside world, but this reality and the fantasy really matters to them.

Popular music theorist Lawerence Grossberg contends that rock and roll audiences, unlike the fan groups that Jenkins describes, never exist outside of the text.[167] Ultimately, the music constructs the audience, or the fan. The fan is constructed by the music and the network by which that music is produced. Therefore, their reaction to a moment in music history becomes quite relevant in light of what it has meant to the press. To the press, this download was a threat to not only their role as cultural gatekeepers and critics, but also threatened the structure

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165 Jenkins, H. "Strangers No More, We Sing," p. 550.
166 Ibid.
167 Grossberg, L. (1992). In Search of an Audience in Lull, J. (Ed.) *Popular Music and Communication.* London: Sage Publications, p. 154.

of the industry. The fans, however, were still concerned about the musical content of the new album, not the business threat it created.

Radiohead fan board members do not appear to act in ways that are unique to their board.[168] They, like the fans in Theberge's study, form a hierarchy based on the number of posts they had made; had a set of albums that were considered to be essential favorites; and formed relationships with other board members.[169] Therefore, the more relevant issues with Radiohead fans lie in what possibilities the move opened for them, and how they conceptualized the move.

Given that the importance of the Radiohead album lies in the possibilities created for fans, a better theoretical framing for the significance for Radiohead followers comes from a more recent book by Jenkins. Henry Jenkins writes about a phenomenon in television whereby viewers were empowered by a television network because they were given they ability to influence the news media by giviing input on the networks content. The network, Current, was proposed by Al Gore, who hoped the network would have an "influence on civil discourse."[170] The Internet allows fans to give feedback on the scripts of their favorite television shows, and the networks were taking notice. The media is attempting to re-vamp its business model to deal with what he called "convergence culture." Jenkins contends there is an interplay between a top-down corporate media model and a bottom-up participatory audience model.[171]

This interplay between the fans and the industry controlling their preferred show is what Jenkins labels "convergence culture." It is when old and new media meet, and ideas about

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168 For a through investigation of popular music fan boards, see Theberge, P. (2005). Everyday Fandom: Fan clubs, blogging, and the everyday quotidian rhythms of the Internet. *Canadian Journal of Communication.* Vol. 30, pp. 485-502.
169 Ibid, p. 499.
170 Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence Culture: Where old and new media collide.* New York: New York University Press, p. 242.
171 Ibid.

audiences' relationships to the media and business models are forced to change.[172] Though Jenkins' case studies largely focus on television, he makes it clear that it applies to all media sectors. It appears that the music industry would have done well to pay attention. This type of audience participation has created new revenue sources for television, think *American Idol*, but the music industry, as outlined earlier, has been suffering financially. And, incorporating listeners' input into new business models may have the potential of creating new revenue for the popular music executives as well.

This type of change has not happened in the realm of popular music. In fact, both Jenkins and Friedman show that the music industry has taken a hostile stance towards consumers who operate in this new culture.[173] They have sued consumers for "illegally" downloading music and participating in file swapping through software utilities such as Napster and Kaaza. Other bands, namely Metallica, have also taken an aggressive stance against fans who "illegally" download their music, labeling it "stealing," and openly admonishing people verbally and with legal action.[174]

However, it seems that Radiohead, with an innovative approach to their relationship to the audience, recognized that it was time for this interaction to change. Therefore, in addition to solidifying the band's relationship with the fans, Radiohead forced the media's relationship to their audience to change as well. Since the band relied on the feedback from the fans to critique the music, thereby showing they trusted them more than the journalists, the band forced the media to join their audience. In addition, the media could only claim they had more cultural

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172 Ibid., p. 243.
173 Jenkins, H. (2006), p. 134. Friedman, T. (2007). *Electrical Dreams: Computers in American culture*. New York: New York University Press, p. 193.
174 Friedman, T., p. 193.

capital than the fans in their knowledge of the media industry. According to the online blogs and fan boards used in the study, the industry realm, coincidentally, was one area Radiohead's fan base did not seem to have a lot of interest.

According to Friedman, the differences in these two views of file swapping indicate different views on the function of music in society. He explains that those who take a hostile stance towards people who do not pay to download music view it under traditional notions of intellectual property. The paid download services, like iTunes treat music as a "contract." Therefore, users who agree to this contract, still see music as commodity.[175] The bands and fans who do not think of file-swapping as stealing are openly embracing music as folk culture, in the sense that the songs are communally owned.[176] Friedman observes, "the institute of copyright as it is currently applied, strangles creativity and hampers the public's ability to interpret and engage the media."[177] The remainder of the chapter will focus on the ways in which Radiohead fans engage the media and the possibilities of Radiohead's momentary embrace of music as folk culture.

The Phans

The section title, phans, derives from an article by theorist Evan Eisenberg on the effect phonographic records had on jazz music. The phonographic record, according to Eisenberg, sustained jazz as a cultural form by expanding its audience.[178] Through the record and the music's inclusion on radio, the white audience began to listen to jazz. He contends that the phonograph also made intellectual discussions of the art form possible since it allowed listeners to listen to a piece over and over again. Though music is no longer disseminated by phonograph

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175 Ibid., pp. 193-194.
176 Ibid., p. 195.
177 Ibid., p. 196.
178 Eisenberg, E. (2000) On Phonography. In D. Scott (Ed.), *Music, Culture, and Society: A reader* (pp. 197-201). Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 198.

record, Eisenberg's idea that the physical form made intellectual discussion of the music possible inspired the label of "phans" to denote popular music fans.

Before the phan analysis begins, there is one important thing to mention in regards to the text used for the study. As stated in the introduction, the fan boards used for the thesis were the Radiohead site, and the top rated independent Radiohead forum, ATease. The fan site, ATease archives its fan discussions, but the Radiohead site does not. One cannot find a post more than a week old. They do not archive the posts or the official site content.

The lack of an archive may be due to server capacity. Regardless of the technical reasons for the problems, the effects on this study are two-fold. First, there is a sense of immediacy to visiting the site if a fan wants information, perhaps keeping the fan actively engaged with the band. Second, and possibly more important, is that the band does not allow for the creation of an actual virtual community on their site. On-line fans cannot form the personal relationships possible on other sites. Therefore, even the most committed fan must go to an alternative site to participate in ongoing discussions about the band and their music. However, in studying the unofficial fan site, it is apparent the fans form this community elsewhere.

It is also necessary to acknowledge the demographics of the Radiohead fan in this analysis. The download album seemed to address the demographics of the band's fan base. While most popular music studies claim that the audience demographic is youth between the ages of 14-18,[179] Radiohead recognized that this was not their demographic. From concert footage in *Meeting People Is Easy* and *Live at the Astoria*, it would seem that they were aware that the 14 to 18 year-old female girl or guy is not their fan. Their fan, according to this footage is typically older and usually male. Generally, both art and the commodity system favor the older, white male. It is apparent from the number of blog posts and fan board posts that a

179 Shuker, R., p. 194.

number of their fans also fall within a higher socio-economic range. This demographic would have made Radiohead's experiment more prone to success. Since the band's fan base had both the technological expertise and possibly the financial resources to not only download the album, but to pay for it or buy the box set, which sold for approximately $80, it gave the band a wider financial pool to insure the album's success.

Now whether or not this crowd is typical of the concert crowd rather than the typical fan, I have no way of knowing. However, the fan boards and blog posts still make the dominance of the male fan apparent. The screen names of the members generally seem to be male-dominated. For example, the boards show board aliases such as, "TomPiltoff," "ReCreeper," "Zykke," and "phantompeguin."[180] The members enhance these screen names with tiny pictures of themselves, or some other graphic, like a photo of the band or nude women.

Phan Reaction

After reading the press surrounding the release, one would have believed that the fan discussion would be fairly mixed, with some of the fans being upset that the digital download was not of the same sound quality as the packaged version, and others elated that they got the new album a mere 10 days after it was finished. Surprisingly, this was not the case. This section will first examine how the fan posts differ from the press' comments in regard to their satisfaction with the availability of the download. Furthermore, it will demonstrate that the fans did not focus on the economics surrounding the album unless prompted by the press. Finally, it will illustrate that the fans' reviews of the album follow a vernacular similar to that of the music journalists.

In large, the fans that posted to both Radiohead's website forum, www.radiohead.com and the other top rated Radiohead fan forum, www.ateaseweb.com, were pleased with the digital

[180] Online messages. (2007, October). Messages posted to http://www.ateaseweb.com.

download. According to the posts, most of the happy fans had plans to purchase the Discbox set, available only through the Radiohead website. The forum indicated that these plans had been made by the time they placed their pre-order for the downloadable version of the album. There were even threads asking other fans if they were going to bother with the download. This is especially important since those who pre-ordered the Discbox got the download on the October 10, before others. The fans still wanted to own the physical commodity. The Discbox contained an additional CD with music not available via download and the artwork of Stanley Donwood, the artist that has worked with the band since *The Bends*, created specifically for the limited edition. The thread on ATease said some of the fans wanted to wait on the Discbox and did not want to listen to the music in advance.[181] It seemed to be a marker of strong will to hold out for the special release and not listen to the download.

The next interesting theme in the fan boards is that there was not a great deal of talk concerning the business decision or the impact it would have on the industry. Most of the commentary from fans concerning this aspect of the release was found in the comments section on the *Spin* and *Wired* blogs attached to the articles about the event. Here, even if the fans thought that the download was a business move, they agreed that they would rather see the money going to straight to Radiohead rather than to the industry. One fan commented:

> It's fantastic to see Radiohead using this model of distribution. Majors are and always have been vampires feeding on both the musician and punter. I'm happy to pay full price to the band and their management…and know that it goes directly to them. More power to you boys! Congratulations![182]

Many fans felt that the industry "stole money" from the artists, and that this was just another way the band was artistically innovative and genius.

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[181] Discbox thread. (2007, October 5) Online transactions. Messages posted to thread at www.ateaseweb.com.
[182] Van Bushkirk, E. (2007, October 2). Radiohead Spokesperson. *Wired.*

This stark difference in what the media says and what the fans think persists throughout the fan blogs. The fans were not, on the whole, upset about the download quality of the album and many had already ordered the Discbox set. This stands in stark contrast to the media's report that the fans were complaining about the download quality. More fans were upset by the website problems that occurred when it received so much traffic. One fan posted:

> Even on broadband extreme, 30mbs and or over. I have not been able to get a download yet the traffic is pretty extreme, but based on samples, its Radiohead, and that has to be good.[183]

Other fan comments were similar, with some overly anxious to get the download and others posting how much time it took to get it.

Economics did come up, but only in that the fans were sharing how much they paid for the album. While many discussed that they had not paid a typical retail price for the album, the fans who said they paid nothing for the album were often admonished, unless they admitted to buying the Discbox already. Others felt guilty for not paying for the album, as expressed by a fan named Joy Blackheart, an Advanced Member.[184]

> Money-wise, it'd be the best option to download free, then buy the regular CD next year. I could wait for the second CD's songs for another couple months past the December 3rd release date, and I'd be saving like $60+.
>
> Problem is, it'd feel like stealing, and it would muddle the results of their experiment. If everyone did what I did, then in the long-run Radiohead would still make a ton of money, and they'd still have as great a fan-base as ever – but until the CD releases, it would look like their experiment was a total failure and that everyone is a greedy bastard.[185]

The only discussion about the economics behind what Radiohead's move meant for the band's

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183 Online transactions. (2007, October 10). Message posted to Van Bushkirk, E. Radiohead Hides Several Pots of Gold 'In Rainbows.' *Wired.*

184 Member ranks are based on number of posts to site. For a more thorough explanation of the ranking system, common in message boards, see Theirburgs' study.

185 Blackheart, J. In Rainbows *[sic]*. (2007, October 9). Message posted to http://www.ateaseweb.com.

income comes when prompted by the attempts of the journalists, the cultural gatekeepers, to regain authority in the situation. They are attempting to make sense of not only what is happening with the industry, but with their place in the structure.

Interestingly, the fans follow the role of music critic in a similar fashion to music journalists. In some cases, they too compare Radiohead to the Beatles, comparing *In Rainbows* to albums like *Sgt. Pepper*. And, other fans react to this comparison, either agreeing that this work is of the same historical magnitude as the Beatles' album, or arguing that the two are different types of bands, occupying different spaces in music history.[186]

Whether or not the music press had any influence on the way the fans critiqued the music, making references to the Beatles or other influential bands and the instrument techniques used in the songs there is no real way of knowing. According to Shuker, "serious" popular music fans often spend time reading the popular music press, and in this case, participating in fan sites.[187] It makes sense then, that Radiohead would have the confidence that their fans would have the know-how to review their album on their own and make historical connections like a music journalists. Radiohead's fans, in fact, follow the band so closely and are so perceptive that they even know when Radiohead references are made in other popular culture artifacts. In the thread, one fan reported that the band had been made fun of in a *Guitar World* ad, while another said that the Colbert Report had used OK Consumer instead of *OK Computer* as a tag line for a video clip.[188]

Participatory Culture

Radiohead seemed to recognize that their fans were inventive, and would react positively to an album which was released to the fans only a few weeks after the recording was finished.

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186 Radiohead Reviews. (2007, October). Messages posted to http://www.ateaseweb.com.
187 Shuker, R. p. 213.
188 Radiohead in Media. (2007, October 5). Messages posted to http://www.ateaseweb.com.

The three albums previous to *In Rainbows* leaked on the Internet long before they were released. Radiohead took control over this release and responded to a participatory culture.

As stated in the theoretical background for the chapter, media systems in "convergence culture" must find ways to negotiate between old and new technology. Television producers have begun to recognize the need to embrace this new participatory culture into their shows. Radiohead's model also did this, something that is not yet common in the music industry. And, their incorporation of fan input makes sense. Fans, as shown by Jenkins' *Star Wars* studies, already have a long history of using their favorite show to make their own art. Radiohead fans are no different. A simple YouTube search for Radiohead will result in a multitude of videos created by fans for their music. There are artists who create paintings of the band and even this thesis can even be seen as an attempt to delve deeper into a fan's favorite band. We fans take our fanatical obsessions seriously.

This fact makes the moves made by Radiohead even more important. First, as previously discussed, by tearing down the traditional role of music journalists, they asked their fans to write their reviews. Next, they allowed their followers to create the videos for their music. The band incorporated the reviews listeners already write via fan forums and the videos fans were already creating into the network which helps to build the band's image. The fan videos were especially significant for a few reasons.

According to popular music theorist Cathy Schwinchtenberg, visual images have always been a key component to popular music. Historically, the live performance helped to sell music.[189] Then, music served as the background to silent films, and eventually, as soundtracks to Hollywood blockbusters. Television shows, album covers, and magazine photos all worked in

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189 Schwichtenberg, C. (1992). Music Video: The popular pleasures of visual music. In J. Lull (Ed.). *Popular Music and Communication* (pp. 116-132). London: Sage Publications, p. 118.

tandem to sell music. Then, in 1981, the music video took center stage with the debut of MTV. Schwinchtenberg says, "Music today is always visualized on some level,"[190] and the music video is one of the most important tools used to both visualize and sell popular music today. Music videos not only serve to add depth to the music by telling a story through images, they also assist in creating a group identity for the band.[191] Cathy Schwinchtenberg posits that music videos are documentaries of stars. Music videos play on the fans' prior knowledge of both the star and the music. At the same time, the video itself becomes a popular music historical artifact.[192]

Therefore, Radiohead's move to allow fans to create the videos for the album gave the fans a unique opportunity to participate in not only the continuing creation of their image, but recognized that the people with the ability to most accurately draw up the prior knowledge of the them and their music were the fans. It was the ultimate embracing of fandom. It is important to note that Radiohead is not the first band to let their fans create videos. The Beastie Boys, among others, have taken the same liberties. When Radiohead's image and these moves are taken together: they allowed fans to determine a price; fans made the videos; fans remixed a single; and the group even tried to be responsible in touring, it seems that they were just the band to pull this off.

On an economic scale, it was also a smart business move. The videos were selected based on a contest Radiohead held for the best animated videos. The top five were chosen by the group. The band then hired an independent film company to produce the winning videos. Radiohead not only relieved themselves of the time it takes to create and shoot a video, but since the videos were animated, the cost had to be a great deal lower than shooting a live action video. Fan art turned into promotional tool and star image.

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190 Ibid.
191 Ibid.
192 Schwinchtenberg, C., p. 119.

In addition to allowing fans to create the videos, Radiohead also held a contest to re-mix one of the singles, "Nude." This became another move to allow their audience to have a part in creating their sound, which is also a big part of the way that bands create an identity for themselves. They did not view their audience as passive people, but as an active fan base capable of creating, writing, and determining the worth of their music.

This album and the business and artistic moves surrounding it, strengthened their relationship to their public. In empowering their fans, they seemed to strengthen the trust between the band and the audience. They affirmed they believed their listeners were smart enough to write reviews, that their art was good enough to become a piece of the band's history. Also, they believed that the fans were responsible enough to decide what the album, whether in physical or digital form, was worth.[193]

Conclusion

The analysis of what Radiohead's move meant in terms of their fans brings a few things to light on their redefinition of the line between art versus commodity. First, I refer back to an argument posited by Friedman on the two types of listening and the repercussions of new business models upon them. Friedman, as stated in a previous chapter, said that the two types of listening in popular music were "extensive listening" and "intensive listening."[194] Intensive listening was most supported with the model of music as physical commodity, since a person could really only invest in a limited number of albums. Extensive listening, on the other hand, is supported by the model of music as contract, as in iTunes, or in music as folk culture, as in file-swapping.

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193 Though they did not allow the fans to decide on the price for the physical release, the fans still deemed it worthy of purchasing enough copies that it made the #1 spot on the *Billboard* charts.
194 Friedman, T., p. 190.

According to Friedman, intensive listening led to musicians as star since their listeners created a sense of devotion to their favorite bands.[195] In turn, the listener's ability to embrace extensive listening would not only threaten devotion to particular artists, but extensive listening may not foster the making of concept albums and deeply-layered albums.[196] In most of his analysis as it applies to this moment, Friedman was correct. The poor download quality of *In Rainbows* did make it impossible to hear some of the intricacies of the album, so common to Radiohead's musical style. This may have greatly affected initial fan reviews of the album. However, it did not stop Radiohead from producing the layers; it just stopped the listener from hearing them, leading us to the old adage of, "If a tree falls in the woods…"

On the other hand, the presentation of the album as contract or folk culture, depending on whether you paid for it or not, did not seem to have a profound effect on whether or not the fans bought the physical commodity. In fact, some fans saw the Discbox as proof that they were the ultimate fan, saying:

> I hope they're not [going] to release a CD in stores, and I hope everyone who paid for the disc box doesn't upload them. We could have little listening parties and not invite those who didn't buy the disc box. I'd feel so exclusive! WOO![197]

Even though Radiohead was able to give their fans a new option to acquire the music,[198] the physical release of the album still meant a great deal to their followers. Simon Frith explains that the reason that the physical album is so important to fans is that we use it to fetishize the artist. He views popular music as the perfect illustration of what Marx meant by alienation. He says that the music made by the singer is a human creation, and that it is stolen and returned as a

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195 Ibid.
196 Friedman, T., p. 191.
197 hunting. Discbox thread. (2007, Oct. 5). Messages posted to http://www.ateaseweb.com.
198 *Kid A* and *Hail to the Thief* leaked on the Internet months before the release.

commodity.[199] Thus, the band becomes a magical object. It is through this commodity, the physical album, that we feel we own a piece of the artist.[200] According to Marx, and in turn Frith, this is how the fan takes back the music. Radiohead's star image is so powerful that the fan still wants a piece to hold onto.

In addition Radiohead's embracing of the fan culture, did not, as some would have expected, limit the success of the album, even if the only calculations are from the physical sale. The disc release of *In Rainbows* hit #1 on the *Billboard* chart, and the video contest and song contest helped not only to encourage the participation of their fans, but also strengthened their brand name.

It is uncertain what will happen to the business model that is the music industry; it is still in a state of flux. I believe Friedman is right, that if file swapping and the folk culture model is completely embraced, the music industry will crumble. However, for the time, the fans do not seem completely ready to give up their shinny round discs and a physical connection to the artist. However, Radiohead did make it clear that the fan should have more of a role in the division created between art and commodity.

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199 Frith, S. (1992). The Industrialization of Popular Music. In J. Lull (Ed.) *Popular Music and Communication* (pp. 49-74) London: Sage Publications, p. 53.
200 Ibid., p. 55.

CONCLUSIONS

"How come I end up where I started?"—Radiohead ("15 Steps")[201]

Before I began writing this thesis, I rarely contemplated the boundary between art and commodity in the realm of popular music. Not, that is, within the popular music I liked. I deemed musicians I was fond of "artists," while others, like boy bands, I labeled "pop commodities." Roy Shuker says this is one of the grave mistakes made by popular music fans and scholars alike. Many people, he says, get into dangerous territory by drawing lines in the sand labeling this group "artist" and others industry pawns.[202] Radiohead, thus, made a profound impact on my conceptualization of not only music, but of the theory surrounding the interplay between commodity and artwork. This is what I hope this thesis has achieved for others. I hope, at the least, its readers stop and think about the interaction between art and commodity as they label one group or the other. In the case of Radiohead, the interaction between art and commodity created a site of tension which momentarily altered the function of the music industry and empowered the artist and the fans. It paid off in profound ways.

Radiohead announced the results of its downloadable album in October of 2008, around a year after its release.[203] According to the band's publisher, the pay-what-you-want version of *In Rainbows* earned the band more during the three months it was available than they made off of

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201 Radiohead. (Performer). (2007). *In Rainbows.* TBD Records.
202 Shuker, R., p. 117.
203 Zahlaway, J. (2008 October 20). Radiohead's Camp Reveals 'In Rainbows' Sales Figures. *Live Daily*. Retrieved November 3, 2008, from http://www.livedaily.com/print/news-15083.html.

the release of their last physical album, *Hail to the Thief.*[204] In addition, *In Rainbows* was nominated for a Grammy in the "Album of the Year" category in 2008. The sales numbers prove that the pay-what-you-want business model was a successful one for Radiohead. And, the Grammy nomination shows that the album was declared significant in the popular-culture sphere. These are indicators of the success of embracing the participatory culture model during this defining moment in popular music history.

This thesis is perhaps most significant because it shows that the shifting boundaries of art and commodity offer new possibilities not only for businesses, but also for fans and artists. If the band's model continues, it is possible that an entire business model will be altered forever. In turn, fans and artists may have more control over the music they consume and possibly other popular art forms like videos. The control people are given or take for themselves is important in popular culture because it makes way for other artistic innovations and teaches them to take control in other spheres as well.

In order to wrap up and express a synthesized view of what this move by Radiohead meant in the moment, a synopsis of the previous chapters is necessary. First, Chapter 2 showed that Radiohead built its image by foregrounding their commodification and striving for the production of a relationship seen as fluid, with the fans playing an important role in the production of the band's image. This chapter analyzed Radiohead's star image as portrayed by the rockumentary, *Meeting People Is Easy.* The band's image was strong enough to support their decision to release *In Rainbows*, both because they had the financial wherewithal to support the distribution model, and because they already had large fan base anticipating and adding hype for the release. In addition, the chapter showed that the band appeared wary of the music critics' authority, which became important in trusting their fans to determine the musical worth of the

[204] Ibid.

album. Meanwhile, the spectacle created by releasing the album in this manner provided important public relations for the album.

Normally, the music press provides the public relations for an album release. The label or the artists' management supplies journalists with advanced copies, which the writers review. However, in the case of *In Rainbows,* the media and the fans received the music at the same time. Chapter 3 illustrated that the album's release changed the relationship between the band and the press and also between the fans and the press. By altering the typical function of the music media, they opened up the possibility for the listeners to make their own judgments. In addition, by making their apparent lack of trust in the media a firm foundation of their image, this changing relationship actually strengthened their star-image. In other words, since the distrust of the media was already a part of their image, side-stepping the normal media routes made this part of their branding stronger.

Finally, Chapter 4 showed that the phans were allowed the opportunity not only to have a part in adding to Radiohead's image, but also to make their own calls about the worth of the album. By incorporating artwork from the fans and allowing them to determine the worth of the album, the band not only built upon their definition of their relationship to their audience, but they also gave the fans a larger/more controlled role in shaping their image. If the band's image was like stock where everyone owned a few shares, Radiohead gave their fans a majority of the stockholder control.

The variable-price release of *In Rainbows* was culturally significant in many ways. Most importantly, it shifted the boundary between art and commodity. First, if Simon Frith is correct that the art and commerce binary are not opposed but are interwoven, I believe that Radiohead's move, for a moment, re-established the opposition. Frith believes that the industry and the art

are too interdependent on one another for the interplay to create a site of tension.[205] By breaking down the press' ability to act as cultural gatekeepers, and not allowing the industry to rank the album by reporting its earnings, Radiohead took it out of the realm of the music factory. They did not allow the industry to simply "manufacture" another big artist release. The band made the industry and the journalists come up with new ways to deal with the album. Instead, the band embraced the concept of music as belonging to many parts of a network, and the album truly became more democratic in nature, and a part of the emerging convergence culture. In other words, they created a site of tension, and used this to their advantage.

Up to this point, the music industry and artists alike had failed to change the way they were relating to fans. As Chapter 4 showed Jenkins and Friedman proved that the industry and many artists were hostile with fans who embraced file sharing. This was an example of a band who was innovate in coming up with a new way of communicating with not only their fan base but their consumer base. The music industry had not done what the television media had done years before. Radiohead took matters into their own hands. In April of 2007, the band said they would not make the decision to release an album that way again, "It wouldn't mean the same thing now."[206] However, for this moment it meant that the idealistic idea of music as part of a network, with each member having input into the dissemination of its meaning, was realized.

Radiohead succeeded in changing the way the of the music industry worked for a moment. Though they made significant economic gains from the album, they also empowered their fans in a different way, and they took control of their own art. Cultural theorist John Fiske says that ideology functions the same way in popular culture as it does in economics.[207] Namely, it reinforces the capitalist system in a way that makes it appear that it is the only system capable

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[205] Frith qtd in Weinstein, D. Art versus Commerce, p. 63.
206 Binelli, M. (2008, February 7). The Future According to Radiohead. *Billboard.*
207 Fiske, J. (1989). *Understanding Popular Culture*. Boston: Unwin Hyman, p. 11.

of surviving. Radiohead's pay-what-you-want album briefly thwarted the reification of the music industry structure.

The band showed that there was a way for the music artist to regain his or her mode of production. They proved that they didn't have to put it through the normal system of distribution. And, by allowing the fans to not only determine its worth, but serve as the critics, they removed the veil between the consumer and the social relations of the labor. In turn, though it is apparent that they made some money off of the product, they refused to release the numbers, once again shunning the normal mechanisms. This is not to downplay the fact that the band had to first be successful within the traditional structure to alter it. However, they used their image to empower fans and possibly other artists.

Once the album could no longer be downloaded, Radiohead allowed the physical commodity to go through the normal industry mechanisms. And, indeed, they took a step further into the industry's methods of reaping profit from an album release. Radiohead allowed *In Rainbows* to be released on iTunes, thereby, allowing the album to be unbundled. It was the first time the band had ever allowed this type of un-packaging. Though it can be argued they allowed this in order to make more money, this argument does not tell the entire story.

Instead, the boundary shift of art versus commodity, drawn by the pay-what-you-want album gives the reader a different perspective. *In Rainbows* was "work" in both senses of the word. The pay-what-you-want version of the album was the band's artistic release. It is the release that meant the most for artistic pursuits. In fact, this is the version they allowed fans to criticize, and the version that redefined their relationship to the industrial system. This moment defined the "artwork." Once it was over, the band was free to operate in the commodity system,

allowing their "work," their physical labor, to make money for them in whatever form would provide the best results.

I believe that this model of distribution will continue. And, in turn, the music industry will struggle to maintain its authority. Further advances in technology will continue to make it difficult to regulate music fans' control over the music they consume. It is becoming easier for people to download music for free, produce their own music, and appropriate the music of other artists for their own purposes. In other words, it is increasingly easier for people to transform aspects of the popular culture they consume. For example, when Apple announced that it would be changing iTunes pricing it also took the more important step of asserting that copy protections would be removed.[208] The decision reportedly came after the urging of record companies. The industry giants seem to be realizing they must find a new way to meet the desires of the consumers. Though for now, people are fascinated by rock stars and emotionally connected to their favorite artists, they continue to show that they conceive of music and art as communally owned. At the end of September, Michael Moore released the first major full-release film for free. The film release shows that Radiohead's model may eventually be embraced by other art forms.

This study showed that the art versus commerce binary is not a false one as Frith has suggested but rather, it is a site of tension. And, though the artwork may be economically viable for the artist, it does not mean the work is not culturally significant. The work is capable of empowering fans and giving them more control over the popular culture they consume. Until now, much of the control over popular music lied with the music industry. Radiohead used the power they gained in the industry to shift control. Their new album shifted more of the control

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[208] iTunes Lowering Prices, Dumping Copy-Protection. (2009, January 7). *USA Today*. Accessed January 9, 2009 at http://www.11alive.com/news/local/story.aspx?storyid=125359&provider=top.

to both artist and fan. The fans were given control not only over the price of the album but over Radiohead's image.

I would like to have expanded this study to follow some of the other albums released under this model, but there has not been enough of a time lapse to determine the full effect on the industry or for other artists. It is going to take time to determine whether or not this model will be completely embraced by others and break down the system. In addition, I would have like to have continued to follow Radiohead to see if they continued with their distribution innovations. It is possible they will come up with another model of shifting the balance of power. For the same reasons, I would like to have watched to see if they used technology in order to come up with different ways of dealing with their music, videos, or their fan base.

Further research should be done in order to chart this trend. Theorists should study other album releases under this model to see if the press deals with them in similar ways as in the *In Rainbows* release. It would be academically advantageous to compare the press reactions, fan reactions, and economic viability of similar moves. It will be interesting to see if the art and commodity boundary function in the same manner once this distribution model continues or if the industry finds a way to shift the balance once again. What is more certain than whether the trend will continue, is that Radiohead showed us that art could be communally owned and economically viable at the same time.

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