

Towards a Philosophy of Music

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Stefano Marino and Eleonora Guzzi, *The Philosophy of Radiohead: Music, Technology, Soul*, Mimesis International, Milano-Udine, 2024, 172 p.

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This review examines *The Philosophy of Radiohead: Music, Technology, Soul* by Stefano Marino and Eleonora Guzzi, a work that explores the intersection between philosophy and the music of Radiohead. Rather than offering a biography or lyrical analysis, the book investigates the band's aesthetics through three key concepts: music, technology, and soul. The authors identify three phases in Radiohead's career, each marked by a distinct relationship with technology – first as an alienating force (The Bends, OK Computer), then as a medium for creative expression (Kid A, Amnesiac), and finally as a more integrated and nuanced element (Hail to the Thief, In Rainbows, A Moon Shaped Pool). Drawing on Adorno's critical theory and Heidegger's philosophy of technology, Marino and Guzzi argue that Radiohead's music transcends conventional categories of popular music, blending technological experimentation with emotional and artistic depth. Ultimately, their study suggests that philosophy is not a distant, abstract discipline but something that quietly permeates the cultural artifacts we engage with every day – even the music playing in our headphones.

Speaking of ‘the philosophy of Radiohead’ might sound unusual. After all, the members of Radiohead are musicians playing in a pop-rock band, not philosophers – it is not like they have ever written a philosophy compendium. But the idea that philosophy is just a distant, abstract system, disconnected from everyday life, needs to be challenged. This is exactly what Marino and Guzzi have done in their book. Their work is not some theoretical exercise – it is about making sense of it all, putting “Everything in its right place”, as the title of a Radiohead song suggests.

The Philosophy of Radiohead: Music, Technology, Soul, authored by Stefano Marino and Eleonora Guzzi, was published in its English translation in 2024, following the original Italian edition, *La filosofia dei Radiohead*. The title already clarifies the specific authors’ approach. The book does not simply narrate the history of the band or the biographies of its five members, nor is it an analysis of their lyrics. In fact, Marino and Guzzi’s study is original precisely because of the aim it sets from the outset: to reconstruct and interpret what could be called ‘the aesthetics of Radiohead’. Obviously, the authors do not confine Radiohead to a ‘philosophical system’ but explore insights that bridge philosophy and pop-rock.

The analysis unfolds around three key concepts: *music*, *technology*, and *soul*. According to the authors, Radiohead’s uniqueness manifests itself in their ability to constantly articulate and redefine the role of technology. The latter is not merely a recurring theme in the lyrics of the songs and albums of the band, but it is rather a structural element that shapes their musical experimentation, to the point of becoming its very soul. To articulate the relationship between these three concepts, the authors identify three main phases in Radiohead’s career, each marked by a distinct relationship with *technology* – and therefore also with *music* and *soul*.

In the early phase, with works such as *The Bends* and *OK Computer*, technology is portrayed by Radiohead as an alienating and oppressive force, while the band’s musical style remains traditional, with minimal electronic integration. This

is the starting point of a creative journey that established the presupposition for the subsequent development of the band's distinctive style (p. 31). In many tracks on *The Bends*, such as "Fake Plastic Trees", Radiohead explore profound and topical issues, including society's obsessive drive toward consumerism facilitated by advancements in new technology. In fact, as the authors highlight, the plastic becomes a metaphor here for materialistic emptiness and commodification, which oppress the human being in present age. A few years later, in "No Surprises", a track from *OK Computer*, the bright, linear harmonies serve as the backdrop for lyrics that are anything but soothing. The verses portray the tormented mindset of a man who has passively resigned himself to an ordinary life defined by the refrain "no alarm no surprises".

However, according to the authors, the sense of alienation permeating Radiohead's lyrics gradually evolves, transforming from a purely negative state into a driving force for creativity. In this light, the sense of alienation that may derive from the overwhelming power of technology today becomes a means to potentially build an entirely new world – a liberating escape from the confines of contemporary society, inviting listeners to reimagine their existence. In this regard, Marino and Guzzi suggest that Radiohead's philosophy echoes Adorno's critical theory. Indeed, the Adornian conception of self-reflective and critical knowledge favours the development of the capacity to consider the existing social order not only as it currently is, but also "in light of what could be" (p. 44). According to Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, philosophy needs to preserve the possibility of seeing through the existing situation, recognizing it as a context of guilt that is cancelled through blinding, and thus of breaking through it. Through the aesthetics of Radiohead, music can bring our focus back to our lives and regain contact with what we can call the natural rhythm of human experience.

In this regard, the second phase of Radiohead's career and 'philosophy', inaugurated by *Kid A*, can be considered a sort of act of rebellion driven by the goal of freeing itself from the mindset of a homogenizing, standardized culture. In this phase, technology deeply penetrated the band's music in a way that is

challenging compared to their earlier albums. Marino and Guzzi, indeed, refer to this album as a “turning point”, as the negative perception of technology is here processed in a much more complex manner (p. 64). The tracks on *Kid A* aim to communicate the truth not by distancing themselves from technology but, in fact, precisely through it – they are imbued with sounds created by the electronic devices themselves. Beyond the avant-garde sounds created by technological means like samplers and digital software, on *Kid A* the band also manifested its interest in the first electronic instruments from the beginning of the 20th century, like the Theremin and the Ondes Martenot. *Amnesiac*, the band’s fifth album, stands near *Kid A* both thematically and stylistically – unsurprisingly so, given that it was conceived in tandem with its predecessor. So, this album is also filled with technological sounds resulting from the band’s search for a new style.

In this regard, works like *Kid A* and *Amnesiac* can also be drawn close to a philosophical perspective such as Heidegger’s: indeed, the idea is that it is only and through technology that certain hunts signals can be intuited and perceived. So, in this phase, Radiohead’s music attempts to find an aesthetic form that critically challenges the reality through technological innovations and artificially sounds. As the authors suggest, it is undeniable how the music of Radiohead, especially in this phase, has taken on the character of works of art that adopt a critical position on the existing reality, pierce the veil that masks the social contradictions in which ideologies lie and, in this way, reveal the prospect of a possible utopian reconciliation in the future, “in the Adornian way, so to speak” (p. 95).

In the later albums, such as *Hail to thief*, *In Rainbows* and *A Moon Shaped Pool*, the band has reached a balance, blending electronic elements with traditional instrumentation. The relationship with technology is more nuanced now, exploring themes of crisis and digital society with greater emotional depth and introspection. In this third phase, the topics discussed in the lyrics find their counterpart on a formal

level in the music, where disparate genres and styles come together in a meaningful synthesis (p. 97). In particular, *In Rainbows* puts greater emphasis on the expressive and purely human component of the songs: the technological dimension sometimes appears stimulatingly in contrast with a greater singability, connected to Thom York's unique use of the falsetto technique. To be precise, in general, in the third stage of Radiohead's evolution the presence of sinuous melodies in an imposingly technological sound texture has the task of bring the band's energy back to a psychological dimension, glorifying the poetic language of humans rather than technology itself (p. 114).

Certainly, as the authors highlight in each chapter, technology can be observed from a dialectical point of view, inasmuch as it seems to exhibit positive and fruitful qualities counterbalanced by negative and adverse one. As evidenced by the band's trajectory, outlined by the authors, Radiohead have not been overwhelmed by technology but have instead learned to engage with it, seeking what Adorno called "the flight from the banal" in his essays on the culture industry and mass culture (p. 160). For this reason, according to the authors' final thesis, Radiohead's aesthetics cannot be simplistically classified – following Adorno in an orthodox way – as part of *popular music*, which is traditionally characterized by its adherence to the principles of standardization. Undoubtedly, Radiohead avant-garde style – although remaining in the field of pop-rock music – is based primarily on the band's extremely original attempt at fusing technology and expression; secondly, this development rests on the fact that the group never suffocated a legitimate dimension of aesthetic gratification.

In conclusion, *The Philosophy of Radiohead* is not just a book about a band: it is a journey through the intersections of music, technology, and soul, offering a new critical perspective on the world. In their analysis, Marino and Guzzi take us beyond the surface of Radiohead's sound, revealing how their art serves both as a reflection of contemporary anxieties and to reimagine reality. Like in "Reckoner", where Yorke sings "because we separate, like ripples on a blank shore", the band's music thrives on tensions between human and machine, emotion and abstraction, oppression and escape. Marino and

Guzzi's work capture this complexity, demonstrating how Radiohead have never settled for the predictable. Their music, like this book, has managed to remain in the search for a place where art still has the power to transcend, disrupt, and transform, without claiming to find it forever.

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