

Which which and who is who: Roger Waters up against Media

Behzad Ghaderi Sohi

E-mail: bghaderi@ut.ac.ir

Mohammad Hayati

E-mail: mammad_1232003@yahoo.com

Azad University of Karaj

Abstract

Pink Floyd was a British band whose work began in the late 60s. Roger Waters, the main contributor of the band, wrote almost all the lyrics and was also a main figure behind producing the motion picture of the album. He deliberately attacks Western media in both the lyrics he has written for the band and his solo projects. The present study finds this tendency of assaulting the media deeply rooted in the works of Western philosophers who are known as postmodern and have skeptically scrutinized the power relations underlying such apparatuses. This study sets to approach Roger Waters' oeuvre with regard to the speculations of such theorists as Benjamin, Baudrillard and McLuhan.

Keywords: *Pink Floyd, Roger Waters, media, hyperreality, simulation*

1. Introduction

Rock music has been connected with literature since its emergence. Bob Dylan's friendship with the Beat generation poets and writers, especially Allen Ginsberg, and taking up Dylan Thomas' first name for his last name, are famous examples indicating the relation between literature and rock music. The names of the bands are also interesting in portraying this association. For instance, The Doors, based on *The Doors of Perception* by Aldous Huxley (which itself is based on a line by William Blake), and The Beatles, borrowing the name of their band from the Beats who were popular in the fifties and sixties, are two of the most celebrated bands ever known. The long engagements of rock with literature, on the one hand, and its use of words (the raw material of literary achievement) in matters of expression and representation, on the other, prove the fact that these two spheres are intertwined and inseparable, influencing each other permanently.

Pink Floyd, a British Rock band, was founded by Syd Barrett in 1966. Other members were Roger Waters, Richard Wright and Nick Mason. Later on when "Barrett's behaviour became increasingly erratic and the other members of the band decided to part company with him" (Hardy & Laing 1977, p. 269), David Gilmour was brought in as a lead guitarist and vocalist. The band's most important and influential albums include *The Dark Side of the Moon* (1973), *Wish You Were Here* (1975), *Animals* (1977), *The Wall* (1979) and *The Final Cut* (1983). The lyrics are written by Roger Waters who left the band after *The Final Cut*. Waters' lyrics and the ones co-written with David Gilmour have had the opportunity of gaining international fame and popularity for both artists.

After the universal success of the album, Waters decided to create a motion picture out of *The Wall*. Therefore, he provided a script and started searching for a director. He was introduced to Alan Parker, and finally they agreed to go to an animator. They hired Gerald Scarfe to work out the exotic and surrealistic cartoons for the film. The film received international attention and it cast a huge shadow over each and every move of the band members, especially Waters. The Nazi imagery, the hammers, and the bricks came to represent a rebellious universal subversion of conformity.

The study selects Roger Waters from amongst the huge community of rock artists because of his direct oppositional attitude toward cruelty, injustice and war. Of course, other rock artists such as Bob Dylan and John Lennon have been concerned with the same issues years before Waters ever started his musical career. But the fact is that Waters has involved himself with the main subject of the present study (Media) more than other artists working in the same field.

Waters is famous for his political critiques and actions. He harshly criticizes Margaret Thatcher's conservative policies in *The Final Cut*. In "The Post War Dream" from that album he disparages Thatcher by calling her "Maggie". She is held responsible for not fulfilling the "the post war dream". The refrain "Maggie, what have we done?" is spread throughout the lyrics. Waters has always tried to show his political side whenever he has had a chance. Various allusions to political figures started before *The Wall*. In many Pink Floyd performances, pictures and scenes from the lives of political leaders used to be shown on the screen while the band was performing. Many songs from *Dark Side of the Moon* received political interpretations because of the lyrics and also the political figures shown on the background. A great political issue such as the fall of the Berlin Wall was not an exception in Waters' artistic life. He once claimed that he would not "perform *The Wall* unless the Berlin Wall came down" (Manning 2006, p. 139). Surprisingly, when the Berlin Wall was torn down in 1989, he went

there without his former band mates in order to perform one of the greatest live performances in rock history. Many fans from around the world attended the concert to see how Pink suffered in order to "tear down" the wall surrounding him. Waters said he was not in any sense "going to Berlin to celebrate what [he] consider[ed] to be the victory of capitalism over socialism" (Manning 2006, p. 139). He said he was going there "to celebrate the victory of the individual" (Ibid).

Roger Waters, like many other prominent and authentic figures of rock, has sporadically clung to various literary texts in order to create an intertextual impression. His lyrics show his connection with certain poems and novels. At times he uses the titles of some famous novels in various lines of his lyrics, and these references do not stand simply as ornaments to show off a kind of intellectualism. They have a thoroughly inseparable association with regard to that specific lyric and even the whole album. Waters alludes to other texts in order to maintain historical relationships with different texts. For instance, "The Gunners Dream" from *The Final Cut* reverberates the war poet Rupert Brooke's "The Soldier" (Manning 2006, p. 217). Brooke's poem reads:

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is forever England.

These patriotic lines acquire a diverse dimension when used in a different historical era. Waters adapts this line from Brooke and employs it in a different context which is also a war situation:

Floating down through the clouds
Memories come rushing up to meet me now.
In the space between the heavens
And in the corner of some foreign field
I had a dream.
I had a dream.

Waters borrows "the corner of some foreign field" but does not mention England at all. Anyone aware of Brooke's line will be immediately reminded of him when listening to this track. However Waters has made use of a line from another poet, the two Englands are not the same. The tone of Waters' lyrics is ironically parodying the ever-lasting England pronounced by Brooke. Brooke dedicates his death to the continuation of the Kingdom (England), but Waters finds the Government (again England) guilty and responsible for the death of an innocent individual. Waters' tone gets even

more parodic in the final lines where he makes use of the same borrowed line again:

In the corner of some foreign field
The gunner sleeps tonight.
What's done is done.
We cannot just write off his final scene.
Take heed of his dream.
Take heed.

The poet here is unable to finish up what he has started, to represent the unrepresentable, that is, the "final scene" of the soldier. Therefore, he addresses the audience directly, and tells them of his incapability in exerting this task. But he is to some extent successful in showing the final scene by not showing it, by impeding the narrativity of the lyric and giving a shock to the reader/listener. That shock experienced by the audience is the same thing felt by the gunner in his final scene. By using a linguistic/rhetorical device Waters wins a difficult accomplishment.

In the last few decades rock and popular music found so significant a socio-cultural function that such literary critics as Sinfield (1997), Frith (1978), Bennett (1993), and Hall (1964) ([not in the references?](#)) have made efforts in order to shed light on, and simultaneously, make sense of the literary as well as cultural values of these types of music. Adorno (1941) asserts that popular music, based on pre-given definitions, is understood by the masses as a sphere of music which is opposed to serious music (p. 256). Popular or hit music, according to Adorno, serves as a hostile force toward "the ideal of individuality in a free, liberal society" (p. 259). The essence of his critique of hit music can be perceived with reference to his idea of culture industry which is reworded as "standardization" in this context. Other characteristics of popular music as said by Adorno are: the "economic organization" of this kind of music; its grounding on the imitation of a hit that has become generally accepted; its reliance on "consumer demand"; and the pre-digestion process. The pre-digestion process is closely related to Adorno's notion of pseudo-individualization. This latter term is defined in terms of "endowing cultural mass production with the halo of free choice or open market on the basis of standardization itself. Standardization of song hits keeps the customers in line by doing their listening for them, as it were. Pseudoindividualization, for its part, keeps them in line by making them forget that what they listen to is already listened to for them, or 'pre-digested'" (p. 261).

Sinfield (1997), a cultural materialist interested in cultural and subcultural relations refers to rock as a sort of culture, and sometimes as a

subculture. Subculture, in his view, serves as a reaction toward "class, gender and racial pressures, not an alternative to them" (p. 194). He also elaborates on jazz and folk music with an attitude similar to [Adorno \(1941\)](#), concluding that popularity and commerciality "spoil" the artistic value of these types of music. "Pop", he says, "has to be standardized for a mass market" (p. 179). These lines, stressing on commerciality, mass market, and standardization, are truly reminiscent of Adorno whose viewpoints on popular music will be discussed in the next few paragraphs.

2. Postmodern Media

When writing about postmodernism one has to keep in mind the associations as well as the contradictions among the thinkers of this theoretical battlefield. Each one of these figures has exposed one dimension of the postmodern world, and each has added new terminologies to the postmodern jargon.

One of the first thinkers who contemplated about mass reproduction in the twentieth century was Walter Benjamin. In his famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936), he claims that the "aura" of a work, which represents the rituality as well as the originality of that work, undergoes a deep destruction when it is distributed or reproduced mechanically. In this case, one is not able to find the original version. "The presence of the original", he says, "is the prerequisite of the concept of authenticity" (p. 1097). For that reason, Benjamin ponders on the notion of reproducibility which is nowadays perceptible in the mass media.

In the second half of the twentieth century, some other thinkers such as Williams (1974), Baudrillard (1983), and McLuhan (1967) added a great bulk of literature to the issue of media as a postmodern phenomenon. Jean Baudrillard, a French theoretician, coined the terms "hyperreality" and "simulation" with regard to media. He announces the beginning of a new age in which the medium "itself is no longer identifiable as such, and the merging of the medium and the message (McLuhan7) is the first great formula of this new age. There is no longer any medium in the literal sense: it is now intangible, diffuse and diffracted in the real, and it can no longer even be said that the latter is distorted by it" (p. 54). Therefore, the medium itself is believed to be the real. The medium seems to have been injected within the veins of the universe in such a way that the masses can't tell its difference from blood. It might seem vitalizing, and for many it is, but at the same time, it has a numbing effect. It is blood with added ingredients. Baudrillard (1983) argues that "the distinction between cause and effect, between active and passive, between subject and object, between ends and means" (p. 55) is no longer a plausible one. According to the distortion of these traditional distinctions "TV watches us, TV alienates us, TV manipulates us, TV

informs us . . . Throughout all this one is dependent on the analytical conception whose vanishing point is the horizon between reality and meaning." (p. 56).

McLuhan's (1967) argument is based on the premise that media itself has had greater effect on our lives than its content which he believes to be communication (p. 8). That is why his slogan "the medium is the message" has become so universally famous. McLuhan believes that everything that is considered as media has been created, and is operated according to the human sensorium. He then moves on to say that "Television completes the cycle of the human sensorium. "With the omnipresent ear and the moving eye, we have abolished writing, the specialized acoustic-visual metaphor that established the dynamics of Western civilization." (p. 125). Later in the same discussion, he adopts a tone similar to Baudrillard's and concludes that "Television demands participation and involvement in depth of the whole being. It will not work as a background. It engages you. Perhaps this is why so many people feel that their identity has been threatened. This charge of the light brigade has heightened our general awareness of the shape and meaning of lives and events to a level of extreme sensitivity" (Ibid). This matter of participation which is an important issue in both Baudrillard's and McLuhan's discussion can make "the television child more earnest, more dedicated" (p. 126), or it may also have damaging effects on the television child if s/he takes the medium as the message.

3. Waters vs. Media

Waters' solo concept album *Amused to Death* (1992) is based on a book by Neil Postman called *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (1985) which is "about television's impact on American society" (Felix 2000, p. 380). Manning (2006) quotes Waters as saying that the idea of the album had grown by watching TV and meditating on the things happening in the world (p. 140). The similarity between the two does not merely lie in the surface, i.e. the titles, but even the themes underlying both works are, to some extent, identical. As clearly depicted in Postman's title, his theoretical work is concerned with show business and media. Waters, according to Manning, deals with "war, religion and government repression via the filter of mass media" (p. 252).

Postman ([not in the references?](#)) divides American discourses into two main eras. He asserts that "under the governance of the printing press, discourse in America was different from what it is now—generally coherent, serious, and rational", but "under the governance of television, it has become shriveled and absurd" (in Felix 2000, p. 380). The TV discourse which has captured and dominated the American society, on the one hand, attacks any

sense of individual, social and ritual identity, and on the other, has a conditioning effect. Postman argues that "[t]he average length of a shot on network television is only 3.5 seconds so that the eye never rests, always has something new to see" (in Felix 2000, p. 383). Therefore, the chimerical (or to use Baudrillard's (1983) terminology, hyperreal) appearance of media, and especially TV, in society fills some thinkers with an urge to hold a pessimistic view about the phenomenon.

Waters has dealt with the same issues proposed by postmodern thinkers in his solo albums as well. The identity crisis which Pink undergoes can be studied with regard to his obsession with the TV. The media, together with Pink's familial breakdowns are envisaged in the chaotomic scene of the film where he is ironically shown in a desert, all alone with his TV set. The desert sequence shows the grown up Pink sitting in front of a TV while the young Pink comes around and pays a visit to his own future. The misty atmosphere with hammers in the bushes all over the wilderness makes this strange encounter even more grotesque. TV stands as an omnipresent device which tries harder and harder to cast its hegemony over Pink throughout the film. Pink seems to be aware of its deadening effect but cannot find a reasonable way to get rid of it. When, for the first time, Pink is introduced to the audience, he is sitting on his chair in front of the TV with a joint between his fingers thinking of the past. Later on in the film, the TV is showing *Tom and Jerry*, which also depicts a permanent struggle. The following lyrics are heard as Pink floats outside in the pool:

If you should go skating
On the thin ice of modern life
Dragging behind you the silent reproach
Of a million tear-stained eyes
Don't be surprised when a crack in the ice
Appears under your feet.
You slip out of your depth and out of your mind
With your fear flowing out behind you
As you claw the thin ice.

There are some motifs intermittently used in Water's lyrics. They can be thematically referred to as the motifs of dialogue or communication motifs. These include devices such as TV, radio and telephone as means of communication which are really means of miscommunication.

The radio is a key image for Waters to point at human communication at large. In "The Post War Dream" from *The Final Cut*, one can hear the car radio being switched on and after which the news of the day is heard:

"announced plans to build a nuclear fallout shelter at Peterborough in Cambridgeshire", "three high court judges have cleared the way", "It was announced today, that the replacement for the Atlantic Conveyor the container ship lost in the Falklands conflict would be built in Japan", "They say the third world countries, like Bolivia, which produce the drug are suffering from rising violence". In "Me or Him" from the album *Radio KAOS*, Waters straightforwardly addresses communication:

Benny turned the dial on his Short Wave radio
Oh how he wanted to talk to the people,
he wanted his own show
Tune in Moscow. Tune in New York
Listen to the Welsh kid talk
Communicating like in the good old days

These lines sound as if communication has been lost in our world and Benny is trying to find it through radio waves. But who knows if this is a decent decision?

There's the sound of many TV's in "Another Brick in the Wall Part 3" and the click of the TV being turned on in "Hey You" both from *The Wall*. And in "Nobody Home" also from *The Wall*, Pink says that he has "got thirteen channels of shit on the TV to choose from".

"The Powers that Be" from *Radio KAOS* announces rodeos, game shows, star wars and TV as "market forces" with "no rules" which have an undeniable effect on our lives:

Game shows, rodeos, star wars, TV
They're the powers that be
If you see them come,
You better run -run
You better run on home.

Just like Rabbit who ran away from his wife, and just like Pink who ran away from his teacher, from his "exquisite wife and mother", now the persona in *Radio KAOS* must also run away from TV and media. It seems as if all of these elements have the same effect in a person's life.

Waters uses TV as a device which projects deplorable scenes like death, blood, war and murder. In "The Bravery of Being out of Range" from *Amused to Death*, Waters mingles the notion of TV with war:

Hey bartender over here
Two more shots
And two more beers
Sir turn up the TV sound
The war has started on the ground.

In "Late Home Tonight, Part I" from the same album, he ironically questions the function of TV and media:

But that's okay see the children bleed
It'll look great on the TV.

"Watching TV" also from *Amused to Death* makes use of the refrain "we were watching TV, watching TV" and tells the symbolic story of a girl:

She's everybody's sister
She's symbolic of our failure
She's the one in fifty million
Who can help us to be free
Because she died on TV
And I grieve for my sister.

Therefore, television acts as an image which drives us toward lamenting for our losses. It looks like a person always ready with bad news and "dark forebodings too". Fricke (1992) deems the album "a wide-screen mind movie about the continuing death throes of Western society and the spiritual numbness of a world raised on television and dog-eat-dog capitalism" (p. 28). "What God Wants, Part II" from the same has a tone of an elegy when deploring the unity of an audience with television as their central object of worship:

Do you believe in a better day
Do you have faith in a golden way
If you do then we must come together this day
Come together as one united
Television audience
Brought together by the sound of my voice
United united financially united socially
United spiritually and all possible ways
Through the power of money
And the power of prayers

Other causes of human descent, according to Waters, are money and Capitalism based on a religious pretext. "It's a Miracle" reads:

By the grace of God Almighty
And the pressures of the marketplace
The human race has civilized itself
It's a miracle

Another issue regarding TV is the notion of sheer consumption. Human beings have turned into mere consumers of products distributed by Capitalist governors of the world. Waters creates the apocalyptic image of an ended world where aliens find human beings dead in front of their TV sets. Finally, "the alien anthropologists" admit that this species has "amused itself to death":

The little ones sit by their TV screens
No thoughts to think
No tears to cry
All sucked dry
Down to the very last breath.

The telephone is another motif which foregrounds such issues as the lack or the impossibility of communication. The ironical paradox is that the telephone is supposed to be a device made for the convenience of communication, but it has turned out to be an obstacle in the way of communication. Of course, there are some autobiographical backgrounds in Waters' life which show that his father died on the phone in the war. These may connect the telephone with matters such as death and infertility. In "Nobody Home" from *The Wall*, Pink sings:

And that is how I know
When I try to get through
On the telephone to you
There'll be nobody home.

In "Hey You" again from *The Wall*, Pink calls out for help from the ones outside the wall:

Hey you, out there on your own
Sitting naked by the phone
Would you touch me?

Touch and contact are things that Pink is searching for. And symbolically, he is asking a person sitting by the phone (a symbol for connection) for guidance.

In "The Final Cut" from the album with the same title, Waters leaves us with a shaky feeling of optimism in the end:

Thought I oughta bare my naked feelings,
Thought I oughta tear the curtain down .
I held the blade in trembling hands
Prepared to make it but just then the phone rang
I never had the nerve to make the final cut.

We will never know what will happen if the persona picks up the phone. But this makes the situation even worse. It adds a kind of confusion to the pessimistic view we had before. There is hope for communication, however blurred.

4. Conclusion

Rock music and rock culture are closely related to socio-political issues. Media as a socially and politically significant concern of our age is criticized by various rock artists whose own work is distributed via media itself. Therefore, a contradiction lies in the depth of rock music. Roger Waters has marauded the media, i. e., radio, TV, and telephone in many of his lyrics. Theorists like Benjamin, McLuhan, and Baudrillard have pondered on the philosophical and political aims and effects of the media. Each of the aforementioned devices is made in order to make communication possible, but as Waters, Baudrillard and McLuhan show, they have led to misunderstanding and miscommunication.

References

- Adorno, T. W. (1990????). On popular music. In S. Frith & A. Goodwin (Eds.), *On record: Rock, pop, and the written word* (pp. 256-262). London and New York: Routledge.
- Baudrillard, J. (1983). *Simulations*. Trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman. USA: Semiotext[e].

- [Benjamin](#), W. (2005). The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. In [Lawrence Rainey](#) (Ed.), *Modernism: An Anthology* (pp. 1095-1113). [City?](#): Blackwell Publishing.
- [Berkhout](#), B. (2002). *An analysis of Pink Floyd's The Wall*. Dissertation. Northwestern University. [City??](#)
- Felix, J. (2000). That space cadet glow: Science fiction narratives in Roger Waters' "Radio K.A.O.S. and Amused to Death". *Extrapolation*, 41(4), 375-384.
- Fricke, D. (1992). The dark side of amused. *Rolling Stone*. Sept. 17.
- Hardy, P., & Laing, D. (1977). *The encyclopedia of rock: From Liverpool to San Francisco*. Vol. II. Ayuryles: Aquaris Books.
- [Macan](#), E. (2007). Theodor Adorno, Pink Floyd, and the psychedelics of alienation". In George A. Reisch (Ed.), *Pink Floyd and philosophy: Careful with that axiom, Eugene!* USA: Carus Publishing Company.
- Manning, T. (2006). *The rough guide to Pink Floyd*. London: Rough Guides Ltd.
- McLuhan, M. (1967). *The medium is the message*. [City???](#): Ginko Press Inc.
- Sinfield, A. (1997). *Literature, politics and culture in postwar Britain*. London: Continuum.
-

Dr. Behzad Ghaderi Sohi, an associate professor of English Language and Literature at Tehran University, has published various articles in national and international journals. He has also written and translated many books on literature and drama.

Mohammad Hayati has received an MA in English Literature from Azad University of Karaj. He has published several translations and articles in Iranian journals and magazines.