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The Monkey is *Amused to Death*: Roger Waters' Masterpiece and its Commercial Failure

- Navid Bargrizan_

Abstract

Despite the compelling concept, music, and the scope of Roger Waters' 1992 solo album *Amused to Death*, the critics and the public received it negatively. In fact, Waters' polemical approach to the cultural and social consequences of the technological developments demonstrated a poor commercial performance, compared with Pink Floyd's projects such as *Dark Side of the Moon*, or *The Wall*. Disputing the opinions of the pundits and the fans, in this paper I argue that the foremost reason for the negative reception of *Amused to Death* was Waters' unprecedented socio-political criticism of the mass media and warfare, where he articulates that the broadcasting of war has become a form of entertainment in the television news. Following his path in writing Pink Floyd's seminal concept albums, in *Amused to Death* Waters declares his harshest and gloomiest pacifistic and socialistic messages, which have evoked the adverse reactions to it. He not only denounces the superficial entertainment industry, but also tears apart the idea of war. Exploring Waters' conceptual, lyrical, and compositional genius, as well as album's Grammy-winning mix and sound-effects, I assert that *Amused to Death* stands out as Waters' highest achievement both in the musical content and its extra-musical manifesto.

Keywords

Roger Waters *Amused to Death* Concept Album Pink Floyd Socio-political Criticism Rock

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Support

The Monkey is *Amused to Death*: Roger Waters' Masterpiece and its Commercial Failure

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Despite the compelling concept, music, and the scope of Roger Waters' 1992 solo album *Amused to Death*, the critics and the public received it negatively. In fact, Waters' polemical approach to the cultural and social consequences of the technological developments demonstrated a poor commercial performance, compared with Pink Floyd's projects such as *Dark Side of the Moon*, or *The Wall*. Disputing the opinions of the pundits and the fans, in this paper I argue that the foremost reason for the negative reception of *Amused to Death* was Waters' unprecedented socio-political criticism of the mass media and warfare, where he articulates that the broadcasting of war has become a form of entertainment in the television news. Following his path in writing Pink Floyd's seminal concept albums, in *Amused to Death* Waters declares his harshest and gloomiest pacifistic and socialistic messages, which have evoked the adverse reactions to it. He not only denounces the superficial entertainment industry, but also tears apart the idea of war. Exploring Waters' conceptual, lyrical, and compositional genius, as well as album's Grammy-winning mix and sound-effects, I assert that *Amused to Death* stands out as Waters' highest achievement both in the musical content and its extra-musical manifesto.

Keywords: Roger Waters, *Amused to Death*, Concept Album, Pink Floyd, Socio-political Criticism, Rock

Introduction

Imagine an apocalyptic scenario, where, once upon a time in the future, an ultra-intelligent alien species examines the cause of the extinction of the human race. After much investigation, the extraterrestrial anthropologists infer that the logic

for the demise of the life on earth is the fact that the humans have amused themselves to the point of annihilation. Depicting homo sapiens doomed “last hurrah,” Roger Waters conceives such phantasmagoric synopsis in the closing song of his 1992 solo concept album *Amused to Death*, his polemical assessment of the cultural and social consequences of the technological developments.

Alluding to Aldous Huxley’s 1931 dystopian novel *Brave New World*, where he insinuates that “the Western democracies will likely come to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think,” in *Amused to Death* Waters declares his harshest pacifistic and socialistic messages to articulate that the broadcasting of war has become a form of entertainment in the television news. He criticizes the superficial entertainment industry, tele-evangelism, mass media, the greed of capitalistic market, and most importantly the idea of war; in particular, the First Gulf War: the sensational exposition of America’s eminent combat technologies, portrayed by George H. W. Bush as a holy war (Postman 2006: xix). According to communication scholar, Phil Rose: “Waters’ primary concern in the album is the potentialities that the confluence of advanced weapons systems, war, and television have for mass desensitization (Rose 2015: 192). Waters warns us of “aestheticized warfare through technological fetishism” and expresses his fear of war being normalized as television entertainment as follows:

A lot of the songs on this record developed from watching television and just checking out what’s been going on around the world in the last few years. I have this sense of a lot of human and political disasters being exacerbated if not caused by a need that we have in the western *civilized* countries to amuse our populations, in the exercise of dramatic foreign policy, i.e. one of the things that we find most amusing is to have wars, hopefully in distant lands, and it’s a concern to me to see war as entertainment on the television. (Rose 2015: 194-209)

Despite the compelling concept, music, and the scope of the record, however, several critics, such as Andy Gill, Charles Shaar Murray, or Tom Hibbert received it negatively and described Waters as holding “darkly cynical views of life and the human condition, projecting a ‘grim misanthropy’, and writing ‘rock’s most neurotic lyrics’” (Weinstein 2007: 81). Hibbert says:

Roger Waters is the one whose doomy sound ‘anthems’ about ‘alienation’ and how awful everything is have worried listeners all over the world for several years. He is thought by many to be the gloomiest man in rock. The wall was gloomy and his solo albums the *Pros and Cons of Hitchhiking* and *Radio K.A.O.S.* were gloomy, and his latest work, *Amused to Death*, is frightfully gloomy. Waters’ voice drones along to warn us that: [...] everything is horrible, especially television, war, the entire universe, and Andrew Lloyd Weber. (Hibbert 1997: 145)

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While *Amused to Death* performed poorly in commercial sales and charts, particularly compared with Pink Floyd's projects such as *Dark Side of the Moon*, or *The Wall*, some critics have gone so far to name Waters "mister glum," the "gloomiest man in rock," or even "the ranting crank" (Weinstein 2007: 81). Hibbert argues that "Waters, the Mr. Glum, who refuses to even sniff at his brimming beaker of beer, is the gloomiest man in rock, he is enough to depress a gadfly" (Hibbert 1997: 147).

Disputing the opinions of these pundits, I argue that the foremost reason for the negative reception of *Amused to Death* was Waters' unprecedented socio-political criticism of the mass media and warfare, where he highlights the absurdities of our existence in the age of technological progress. In the words of the sociologist, Deena Weinstein: "critics see Waters as a depressive pessimist mainly because his view of existence and his understanding of the function of rock run counter to theirs" (Weinstein 2007: 81-82). She maintains that since most rock critics favor the message of hope, they adore, for example, John Lennon's "Imagine" or "Give Peace a Hand," whereas, on the other hand, Waters is an existentialist; His words are not hopeful at all. As many existential philosophers, critics have misunderstood Waters labeling him as nihilist, when nothing could be further from the truth (Weinstein 2007: 82). Analyzing Waters' conceptual, lyrical, and compositional genius, as well as album's Grammy-winning mix and sound-effects, I assert that not only does *Amused to Death* stand out as Waters' highest achievement both in the musical content and its extra-musical manifesto, but it is also a milestone of the genre.

Waters' Pacifism and the Connotations of the Album

In this album Waters portrays an allegorical monkey as the principle role, implying Stanley Kubrick's 1968 depiction of tribal man-ape, in his groundbreaking science-fiction picture *2001: A Space Odyssey*, originally a short story by Arthur C. Clarke called *Sentinel* (1948). Being a predecessor of homo sapiens, the monkey encounters various cultural, political, and entertainment programs, while gazing at the television's screen and randomly switching the channels. Constructing an intricate fabric of various sound-effects, throughout the album Waters constantly refers to Kubrick's *Space Odyssey*. In the second track "What God Wants, Part I" for example, we here a growling wild cat attacking the man-ape, a feasible metaphor for the existential danger of the technologies. Not only does Kubrick present the same scenario in his *Odyssey*, but also Kurt Vonnegut in his 1985 novel *Galápagos*, another viable literary inspiration for the album. Waters lists Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, Ray Bradbury, Theodore Sturgeon, Aldous Huxley, Hermann Hesse, Thomas Mann, and Kurt Vonnegut as his favorite authors, which affirms

the assumption of *Galápagos* being a source of inspiration for *Amused to Death*. He mentions: "I still love Kurt Vonnegut. I've read all of his novels several times. He's one of my great heroes" (Rose 2015: 235).

Using parts of an old British Television documentary, the opening track, "The Ballad of Bill Hubbard," features the sober voice of Alf Razzaell, a First World War veteran, recounting the real story of him and his comrade Bill Hubbard meeting up on the front lines during the war. The wounded Bill, to whom Waters has dedicated *Amused to Death*, forces Alf to leave him behind and escape. This experience has clearly had such a profound influence on Alf's life that he condemns wars (Rose 2015: 201). Bill Hubbard also represents Waters' own grandfather, whom he lost in the First World War, and his Father, whom he lost in the second. His losses have also had such an extreme effect on his life, such that he has repeatedly invoked their memories in Pink Floyd's *The Wall*, *The Final Cut*, and clearly in *Amused to Death*. In fact, *The Final Cut* (1983), subtitled: *A Requiem for a Postwar-Dream*, is dedicated to Waters' father, an allies' army soldier, who was killed during the last months of the war in Italy.

Not only in *The Final Cut*, but also in *Amused to Death*, Waters ascribes the notion of loss the function of an *idée fixe*, which unifies multiple layers of his cultural discourse. In the song "Late Home Tonight" for example, Waters depicts the 1986 US bombing of city of Tripoli in Libya, an operation named El Dorado Canyon with forty casualties, in retaliation for Quaddafi's alleged role in Berlin discotheque bombing. As revealed later, however, there was not enough explicit evidence for his involvement. In Waters' words:

I think it was just an exercise of entertainment, and trying out a few weapon systems, and little bit of training for the guys...I found it deeply upsetting at the time, particularly because my country was involved in it, which I disapproved of enormously. (Rose 2015: 211)

The bombing raids started exactly at seven PM, the time of the nightly news on the American national networks. According to Noam Chomsky, this was the first bombing in the history staged for prime-time television (Rose 2015: 211). Waters illustrates the notion of loss also in the song "Watching TV," referring to the 1989 massacre of the protesting students in the Tiananmen Square in China, well-known as "June Fourth Incident." He articulates the notion of loss to contemplate the detrimental effect of politics, violence, and war as television entertainment, enunciating the devastating fact that according to Ronald Reagan: "Politics is just like show business" (Rose 2015: 207).

In the last and title track of *Amused to Death*, Waters reprises Alf's voice expressing his haunting nightmare of abandoning Bill. Alf's narrative, hence, frames the album as a leitmotiv, presenting Waters' avid and outspoken pacifism.

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Alf's last word points to the year 1984, the year that according to George Orwell's prophecies in his infamous novel of the same name, the Western democracies should have experienced an imposed oppression by a demagogue, who "would ban books and deprive them of information" (Postman 2006: xix). According to Neil Postman, the late media theorist and author of "*Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*," instead of an Orwellian catastrophe, however, a Huxleyan one has come true. In Postman's words:

Huxley believed that it is far more likely that the western democracies will dance and dream themselves into oblivion than march into it, single file and manacled. Huxley grasped, as Orwell did not, that it is not necessary to conceal anything from a public insensible to contradiction and narcotized by technological diversions. (Postman 2006: 111).

Waters wrote Pink Floyd's 1977 records *Animals* loosely based on Orwell's 1945 *Animal Farm*, transfiguring Orwell's socio-political examination of Stalinism to a critical satire about capitalism. In *Amused to Death*, however, Waters alludes to Orwell's metaphorical *1984*, although his cultural criticism takes on a vivid Huxleyan course.

While Waters intertwines his other literary interests in his polemical discourse, Postman's acclaimed 1985 book "*Amusing Ourselves to Death*" underpins Waters' whole conceptual structure. Postman claims that his book is about "how our own tribe is undergoing a vast and trembling shift from the magic of writing to the magic of electronics" (Postman 2006: 13). He argues that "a great media metaphor shift has taken place in America, with the result that the content of much of our public discourse has become dangerous nonsense" (Postman 2006: 13). He further argues that "a television-based epistemology pollutes public communication and its surrounding landscape" (Postman 2006: 13). Postman discusses the concept of "pseudo-context," a fragmentary informational structure, which impose a "culture overwhelmed by irrelevance, incoherence, and impotence," and which amuses us immensely (Postman 2006: 76). Waters signifies the pseudo-contextual format of the television in different ways: Not only the allegorical monkey switches the television channels stumbling upon seemingly unrelated programs, but Waters' scattered use of metaphorical sound-effects from real historical events also implies Postman's concept of pseudo-context. At the turn of the second track, right after Alf Razaell's voice, the monkey abruptly switches to an interview with a teenager, expressing in the aftermath of the First Gulf War that "I don't mind about the war. That's one of the things I like to watch...if it's a war going on...cause then I know if my side's winnin'... if our side is loosin'" (Rose 2015: 202). Juxtaposing the fragment of teenager's remark experiencing the First Gulf War as entertainment

on the television, and Alf Razaell's caustic testimony of his direct dismal experience of First World War, is striking and cathartic.

About the innovative and dazzling broadcasting of the 1990's Gulf War, the first war that we have experienced live on Television, Waters says:

Nobody was being blown apart and yet here...was America at war. [...] And 'There goes another Patriot [missile],' and 'Isn't this terrific? Aren't we all having a whale of time?' And we did have a whale of time... and they showed...interminably...computer imagery of laser targeting this and that and other and we could all get involved in the sexiness of the hardware. [...] CNN has been selling itself upon the basis of those few days...saying 'hey look, this is better than game show,' [...] and they make very little attempt to actually disseminate news...their whole thing is 'Here we are, a global news service!' And they're not, it's an entertainment channel... it's pure entertainment. (Rose 2015: 206)

Waters draws a clear lineage between commerce, war technologies, and our perception of them as entertainment in the television news, what Phil Rose calls "the financial-military-industrial-media complex" (Rose 2015: 207).

Musical Representation of the Interrelationships of Commerce, Technology, war, and Entertainment

The notion of "financial-military-industrial-media complex" is, in fact, the crux of "Perfect Sense," a thought-provoking and conceptually-compelling song in the record, which comprises two parts. The beginning of "Perfect Sense I" returns to Kubrick's *Odysssey*, where the astronaut attempts to shot down the tyrant artificial intelligent. This hyper-computer, which has taken the control of the space craft, soberly expresses: "my mind is going...I can feel it..." The machine's ironic expression of its feelings epitomizes human's doomed destiny amused by the machines to death. As another implication to Kubrick's film, the lyrics portray the monkey having a bone in his hand, a primal weapon which in "Perfect Sense II" is replaced by the ravishing nuclear weapon, a juxtaposition of the technological state of the past and the future. While the monkey hears the sounds of a Viennese string quartet, a cultural product of the elite-art associated with certain social class, we understand that in the age of television, for the monkey the time is linear: meaning that the history does not repeat itself; that he believes the history is for fools; and that he is estranged from the memory.

The monkey becomes, hence, a nihilist; he does not seek education; he does not learn from the history; he is mesmerized by the mass media; he is captivated by watching an unequal battle between a nuclear submarine and an oil rig, metaphorically casted as an enchanting basketball game commentated by the legendary American sportscaster Marv Albert. The monkey stands for the humans, who, as

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passionate spectators of the basketball game, commence the battle and joyfully sing "our global anthem:" "It all makes perfect sense. It's expressed in Dollars and Cents, Pounds, Shillings, and Pence. Can't you see that it all makes perfect sense."

The cynical "global anthem" highlights the interrelationship between commerce, technology, and entertainment. The meticulous metaphorical presentation of these connotations in a basketball stadium exemplify Waters' obsession with juxtaposing diverse, yet meaningful, soundscapes in the album: the pre-historic environment of the man-apes, the peaceful country-side neighborhood where the amused monkey lives, the sport stadium, the nuclear submarine, and church are merely a few examples of Waters' allegorical use of soundscapes and sound-effects. Subsequently, his soundscapes and sound effects have brought the re-mixed and re-mastered version of the record a Grammy Award in 2015.

Waters grants a recurring role to the soundscape of church throughout the album. He does so to address the tool of religion as propaganda for war, entertainment, and market greed. In the song "What God Wants, Part II," for example, Waters tears apart the concept of tele-evangelism and the phony for-profit business of tele-evangelists. Expanding his use of church-soundscape in the song "It's a Miracle," the droning and meditative organ, choir, and electronic sounds embody, in Phil Rose's words, a "culture saturated by consumerism, self-interest economics, and technological theology" (Rose 2015: 223). In his analysis, Rose observes that a tone of world-weariness pervades "It's a Miracle;" it is Waters' satirical celebration of the wonders of production (Rose 2015: 224). While Waters conceptualizes the song around the theme of "the pressure of the marketplace" as the unethical core of the entertainment industry, he brutally criticizes Andrew Lloyd Weber's musicals as instances of superficial art which undermines any cultural discourse. Regarding *Phantom of the Opera*, Waters says: "I could not believe how mediocre the stuff was. I knew it was going to be because I have seen him being interviewed on TV, and you can tell just by looking at him" (Rose 2015: 225).

Conclusion

Having gone a full-circle through analysis of Waters' postdramatic narrative, we return to the last and title track of the album, where, prior to the fictional scenario of the alien anthropologists examining the reasons for the demise of the human race, Waters re-iterates the essence of his polemic by asking: "Doctor, Doctor, what is Wrong with me? Why Am I so Out of Breath? This Supermarket is Getting Long... What is the heart life of the Color TV? What is the Shelf Life of a Teenage Queen?" In this song, while lamenting the possible destiny of the amused human species, Waters demonstrates empathy toward the treatment of women in the

Western culture. Ironically, Waters has been described by critics as a “mere misogynist,” which based on his discourse seems highly unlikely (Weinstein 2007: 81). Yet there is no doubt that the dark and cynical image that Waters has illustrated of the world, plus his long-lasting feud with Pink Floyd’s other members, boosted the unfavorable reception of *Amused to Death*.

As I have argued in this paper, despite these adverse reactions, however, Waters sheds light on the personal and social irrationalities of our existence and actions, reinforced by the mega-powers which control and manipulate our lives. Jeff Beck’s virtuosic guitar, a web of complicated sound-effects, and catchy, yet cynical, lyrics play a major role in the success of Waters’ concept. As one of the fewest positive reaction to *Amused to Death*, Mason Munoz, Columbia’s east coast marketing director states that:

it’s the best stuff that Waters has ever written, and he’s written some great stuff. If we could call this a Pink Floyd instead of Roger Waters, I’d be willing to bet—and I’m not a betting man—that it would sell ten million in this country alone. It’s really incredible. You’ll understand when you hear the first 30 seconds of the first track. [...] All I can say is, for anybody who was ever struck by anything that pink Floyd did, this will really blow their mind. (MacDonalds 1997: 142)

Neil Postman supports this argument by mentioning:

Roger Waters, once the lead singer of Pink Floyd, was sufficiently inspired by a book of mine to produce a CD called *Amused to Death*. This fact so elevated my prestige among undergraduates that I am hardly in a position to repudiate him or his kind of music. (Postman 1996: 167)

Waters, in fact, exploited his intellectual and artistic power, furthering Postman’s discourse, even if meant poor reception and financial loss.

To summarize my analysis of Waters’ existential concerns in *Amused to Death*, I end this paper in Postman’s words:

Television is the command center of the new epistemology. There is no audience so young that it is barred from television. There is no poverty so abject that it must forgo television. There is no education so exalted that it is not modified by television. And most important of all, there is no subject of public interest—politics, news, education, religion, science, sports—that does not find its way to television. Which means that all public understanding of these subjects is shaped by the biases of television. [...] Embedded in the surrealistic frame of a television news show is a theory of anti-communication, featuring a type of discourse that abandons logic, reason, sequence and rules of contradiction. In aesthetics, I believe the name given to this theory is Dadaism; in philosophy, nihilism; in psychiatry, schizophrenia. In the parlance of the theater, it is known as vaudeville. (Postman 2006: 105-111)

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Transferring Postman's thesis to the twenty-first century, we could, however, argue that in the last twenty years the meta-medium of Internet has overtaken television and has become the new "command center of the new epistemology."

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