ARTS & CULTURE

VOL. 1 | OCTOBER 2020

THIS MONTH AFFAIRS

DR. STRANGELOVE

The absurd politics of humanity´s imminent demise

OK COMPUTER (RADIOHEAD)

Tales od a technological dystopia

PARASITE

A tale of dirt and gold

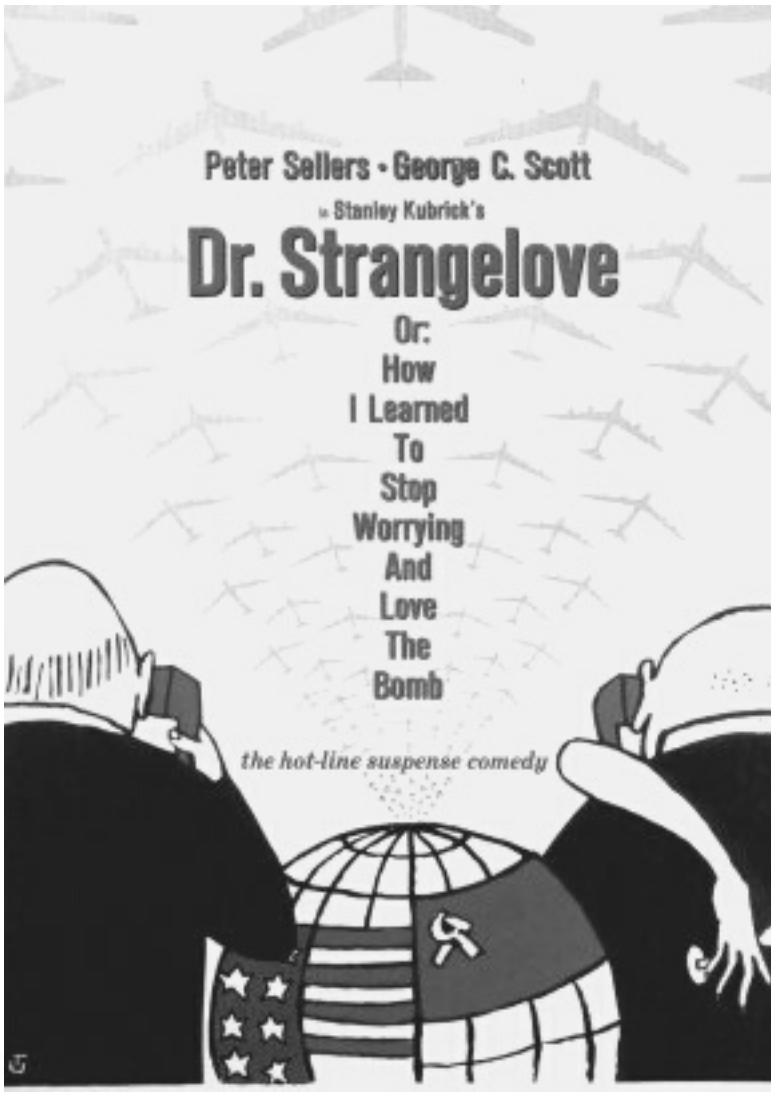
AWARENESS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DR STRANGE LOVE OR: HOW TO STOP WORRYING AND LOVE THE ~~BOMB~~ ABSURD

A PRETENTIOUS ESSAY BY
CLARA PEREIRA

When the legendary filmmaker Stanley Kubrick first released **Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb** in 1964, the world was arguably going through its period of most heightened existential dread: The Cold War. In the early 60s in particular, greatly due to the Berlin and Cuban Missile Crises, the threat of an until then largely invisible political and ideological conflict morphing into one of deadly mass destruction was extremely legitimate. Military technology had by then evolved to the point where hydrogen bombs, 1000 times more powerful than the atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki, were ready for deployment and under rather flimsy protection: in fact, as US President John F. Kennedy was to learn in a top-secret memo in his first weeks in office, "a subordinate commander faced with a substantial military action could start the thermonuclear holocaust on his own initiative if he could not reach [him]."



Dr. Strangelove plays with this very real possibility: what would happen if, by any chance, a doomsday device with the power of wiping off all life on the surface of the earth were to be set off? It is, however, not the question posed but the way in which is answered which grants the film its uniqueness and intelligence. There are no heroes and no epic resolutions, only a simultaneously hilarious and somber political satire on the implications of presenting humans – absurd beings of paradoxical interests and motivations – with substantive power.

PARADOX #1: SEX AS THE ROOT OF LIFE AND DEATH

In the first few minutes of the film, the viewer is introduced to the motive behind General Jack D. Ripper (Sterling Hayden), a mid-rank US Air Force Officer's decision to order an attack on the Soviet Union. During the "physical act of love" he was surprised to face the daunting obstacle of sexual impotence. As many of his compatriots in a post-McCarthyist era, he attributed his loss to the usual suspect: the Russians, under the presumption of the existence of an "international Communist conspiracy to sap and impurify all of our precious bodily fluids"3. Here is where Kubrick's first great criticism comes in: sex (and the protection thereof) is embedded in human nature as a survival mechanism. Consequently, if a threat, no matter how ridiculous, is made believable, the chance of a primeval reaction is far from unlikely. Jack D. Ripper is purposely portrayed as a standard military type – traditionally masculine and of great authority – to showcase the impending threat of giving destructive military power to those who are incapable of using it responsibly and morally. In an unfortunate occasion of life imitating art, this situation carries eerie similarities with the current debate around Donald Trump's competency to handle a nuclear launch button (which became particularly relevant during the conflict with Iran earlier this year), given his unpredictability and at times questionable thought processes.It is also important to mention the imagery that accompanies the portrayal of the military equipment and bombs. Any time they appear on screen, the imagery is strikingly sexual. Right in the opening shot, the viewer is shown a refueling operation, sound-tracked by Otis Redding's lustful soul tune Try a Little Tenderness, which suggests an act of copulation between the war planes. The absurdity is blatant: the devices mankind created for its supposed defense are now reproducing a new form of life – one in which destruction lives and mankind does not. Paradoxically, towards the end of the movie, as we witness the figurative birth of extinction represented by the drop of the H-Bomb, the bomb itself, carrying pilot Major Kong, is visually presented as an extension of his manhood, as if in fact Ripper had been right all along and it had been the right call towards the preservation of sexual integrity.

PARADOX #2: THE INDISPENSABLE DESPENSABILITY OF IDEOLOGY

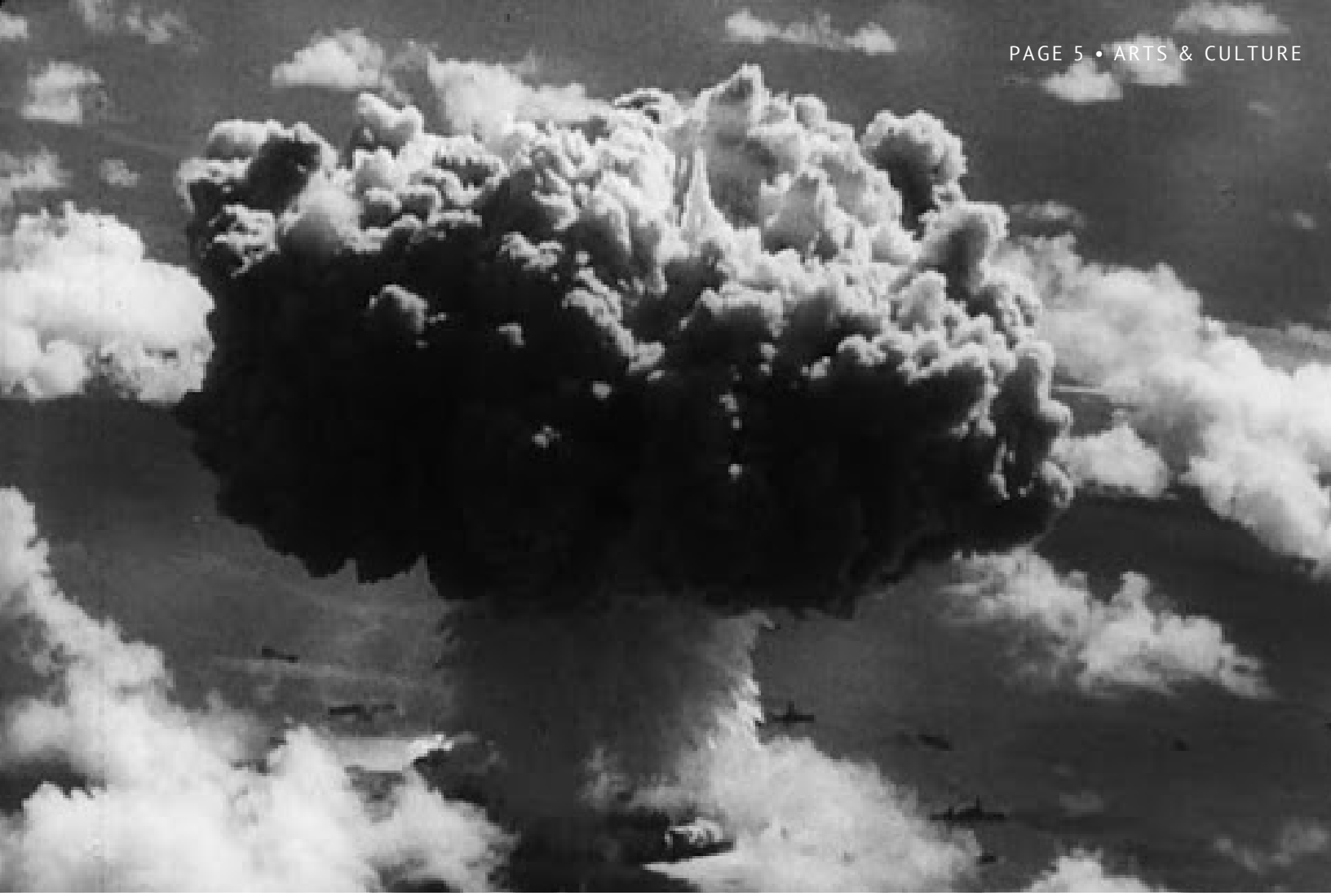
On the surface, the Cold War was ideological: a fight between capitalism and communism, and, in the American perspective (the one most closely explored in ***Dr. Strangelove***), a fight against oppression and authoritarianism where the principles of liberty must prevail, at all costs. Scratch the surface, ***Dr. Strangelove*** argues, and you will find gratuitous beliefs and inconsistently applied pragmatism.Evidence of the former is best illustrated by the somber and sinister figure of Dr. Strangelove (Peter Sellers), the wheelchair-bound German nuclear expert primarily sourced from the figure of Wernher von Braun, the former Nazi Party member and SS officer who had by the time become America's leading rocket scientist. The critique here is sharp: the United States saw itself as a defender against dictatorship and its goons, as long as it could not reap its benefits. This pragmatic permissibility does not, the film argues, come without consequence. Towards the end of its running time, when the reality of nuclear annihilation is finally accepted and Strangelove is given the perfect opportunity to, rather enthusiastically, discuss the technicalities of ethnic and social selection for a Noah's Arc-type bunker that would save humanity from extinction, his until then seriously impaired and restless right arm shoots up into a roman salute as he stands from his wheelchair and shouts: "Mein Fuhrer, I can walk!". Although Kubrick diverts our attention to nuclear warfare during most of the film, it is in these final minutes that he leaves an important warning: fascism is paralyzed but alive and well, a more probable threat that is being selectively ignored.The second aspect of this criticism of pragmatism comes from the fact that it is not consistently applied. At a particular point in the film, Group Captain Lionel Mandrake (Peter Sellers), a Royal Air Force officer in direct contact with Ripper, gains access to the recall codes that would put off the launching of the bombs and, in turn, save the world.

All he needed was to call the President of the United States using the phone booth at the military facility – but he had no coins. When he suggested obtaining them from the Coca-Cola vending machine, the colonel accompanying him adverted, in a stern tone: "I'm gonna get your money for you. But (...) you're going to have to answer to the Coca-Cola Company." The notion that the potential wrath of a corporation over an insignificant destruction of private property in such a critical situation is absurd, but again, not unfounded. In fact, the hold of corporate and economic interests in defense through the so-called military-industrial complex were seen as a risk in security even by President Dwight D. Eisenhower on his last speech in office in 1961: "we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist."In the politics of self-preservation, the film argues through these simultaneously comedic and uncomfortable scenes, it is ridiculously counterproductive to hail morals and ideology against the enemy without adhering to them ourselves. However, this statement is far from preachy – Kubrick's big warnings are, throughout the film, accompanied by the recognition that humankind is constantly juggling and balancing inconsistent moralities, wants and needs. Here, his comedy serves as an outlet for a final thesis that is generally hopeless, but never bleak.

PARADOX #3: THE ABSURD POLITICS OF A COLD CONFLICT

The sentiment of imminent nuclear fallout can best be described through one of the most elemental paradoxes: Schrödinger's cat. As politicians and military men dangled their fingers above an unobservable button of mass destruction, the earth's population carried about in the uncertainty of being both alive and dead, pawns of an absurd zero-sum game that could result in killing everyone for causes of motives thatwould be of little significance once there was no one left. Dr. Strangelove explores ridiculousness of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) by asking the question: what if it fails? In an essay where he asserts that claiming that "Everything there is to know about nuclear can be learned from Dr. Strangelove" is only a mild overstatement, specialist Dan Lindley explains why the film breaks down the concept so commendably. "MAD makes nuclear weapons so illogical that deterrence may actually suffer unless the credibility of suicide (or further damage) can be restored". In the film, however, suicide was not at its most credible point – options to destroy Soviet missile systems thus preventing their retaliation to the H- Bomb launched by General Ripper were still possible (but never acted upon for not fitting America's "avowed policy to never strike first with nuclear weapons", which had in fact already been compromised), resulting in only "acceptable casualties".

However, Lindley argues, "if it is possible to imagine fighting a nuclear war with acceptable casualties, then it is possible to imagine victory in a nuclear war. And if victory is possible, then MAD does not exist, and deterrence is much weaker."By placing MAD, and thus an essential part of a Cold War waged on weapons never used under such a nonsensical light, Kubrick makes a strong point about the men who wage it. The polititians and the military, whose credibility and respectability society finds comfort in clinging on to, are exposed as equally absurd as the product of their work. Thought processes, morals, foreign policy objectives, concessions and strongholds of all these men are never very clearly defined in Dr. Strangelove, and in that unpredictability lies the main point: it is the same men who go to war for peace that are the first ones to usher in an altercation and shout: "Gentlemen, you can't fight in here. This is the War Room!"



WE'LL MEET AGAIN, DON'T KNOW WHERE, DON´T KNOW WHEN

Following the chaotic but ultimately feeble attempts of deterring world annihilation throughout the film, the two- minute sequence of bomb detonations to the sound of Vera Lynn's warm and hopeful We'll Meet Again gives the viewer an unexpected catharsis. It treats the end of the species, at once a terrifying possibility, as just another product of humanabsurdity that, when the time comes, should be treated with the seriousness it deserves: absolutely none. This was, in my view, Kubrick's goal in treating this subject in the form of a dark comedy – taking the ridiculous idiosyncrasies of human nature gravely was what set off the events in the film, and in reality, in the first place. Dr. Strangelove's considerations about the paradoxical nature of humanity are, in fact, not only applicable to us in the concept of nuclear warfare, but generally as individual, social and political beings. Similarly to the film's characters, we too go through life actively and passively defending sides of multiple paradoxes with a serious composure, many times failing to step back and recognize our actions and principles for what they are: laughable. We should perhaps Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb, whatever it may be.

TALES OF TECHNOLOGICAL DYSTOPIA

HOW RADIOHEAD *OK COMPUTER* PROPHESIZED THE PSYCHOLOGICAL DANGERS OF A TECH-DRIVEN SOCIETY

BY JOÃO OLIVEIRA

Through the last thirty years, the advances and innovations in the way we work, communicate and create the layers in which we adapt our lives around have drastically shifted, to the point where the leverages they have provided and the drawbacks cemented in our imperfections have been exploited to saturation. Stink pieces, artistic statements, all sort of articles and papers about how technology is damaging our beings flow everywhere, TV shows such as “Black Mirror”, countless movies and books have pressed on this topic, often brushing the realm of shallowness, as these critiques frequently feel as abstract as empty. We know the harms, but we learned to live with them, as apathy and accommodation are recurrently victorious over the psychological detriments they cause. **Few artistic pieces** have actually addressed the problems of technology circumventing the pretentiousness and shallowness of the complete dismissal of evolution, while providing the actual feelings of emptiness inside. **The work I am about to address has accomplished those successes**, as far as I’m concerned.

In 1997, British alternative rock band, Radiohead, had just finished two intense years of touring, and while crafting what would be their third studio album, they felt completely disconnected from the world. It was as if they had been absent for some months, and returned to a place they had never knew, where people were so enthusiastic about the internet, the gimmicks of digital gadgets, the connectiveness of cellular phones, the abstractness of what was being shown and displayed on our TV's and computers, that nothing felt real. In a mix of lethargic inspiration and panic-filled though processes, Radiohead began writing songs that would **address this outsideness and profound isolation**, while simultaneously arranging instrumentals capable of conducting these same sentiments to the listeners, through determined sounds and artistic choice of aesthetics. Inspired by the grunge rock that preceded the then-current paradigm of rock music, but deeply invested in experimenting with new sounds, instruments, drum patterns and odd sound machines, Radiohead delivered an album whose themes would **resonate in the decades to come** in the ears of alienated western society, consumed by the surroundings of technology and as isolated as the world became globalised. *Ok Computer* was the name chosen for the project.

Through the cries of howling guitars, disturbing, attention-grabbing synths and the sense of paranoia in Thom Yorke's angelic scratched voice, Radiohead gave us a portrait of what it felt like to **be isolated in such a connected world**. The songs on this album transmit a haunting feeling, often still felt today: the feeling that everything is alright, everything is comfortable, we are so deeply encapsulated in the stillness and amenity which our daily lives provide us, that we fall in a loophole of apathy.

And from that apathy, we end up condemn to deep paranoia and anxiety. Our attachment to these 9 to 5 jobs, the dependence to our phones, our computers and TV's, the need to be connected to a 5-inch screen portrayal of what is going on outside of our houses; all these sentiments, they alienate us. We became so linked to each other, that our humanity has slipped away from within our bodies. What is often so overlooked about this project is **how Radiohead could convey these sensations to the listener in such a dark, vivid, human manner**. Listening to *Ok Computer* doesn't feel solely like music. It reaches the crude side of our brains, messing directly with how we feel about something, touching in the immediate of our nerves, creating asphyxiating spine-travelling sensations. It is all executed through a constant presence of robotic sounds, as the album is filled with industrial noisy textures, mechanized blares and unique, electronic-oriented production, with guitar-driven arrangements.

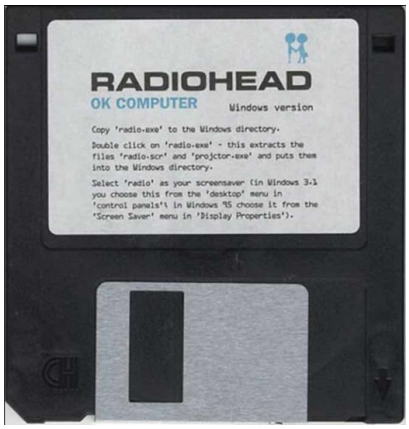
An unofficial artwork for the track "Fitter, Happier"

A full-blown analysis of *Ok Computer* would demand a track-by-track dissection and a thematic exploration of the motifs, allied with a musical breakdown. The purpose of this piece is not the latter, though. What is being sought here is a contextualization of how the matters that Radiohead approached are so relevant today. The essence of the album is perfectly described on the track "Fitter, Happier", a two-minute interlude consisting of an anxious monologue by a monotone robotic voice accompanied by an unsettling piano and nerve-twisting background industrial noises. This voice describes our life, good lives, "fitter/happier/more productive", as well as "regular exercise at the gym (3 days a week)/ getting on better with your associate employee contemporaries/ at ease,/ eating well (no more microwave dinners and saturated fats)". But amid this fortunate illustration, we are given **glimpses of how jailed we are**, trapped in this routine-driven regime that captured the essence out of us. "Concerned (but powerless)/ an empowered and informed member of society (pragmatism not idealism)/ will not cry in public/ less chance of illness,/ tires that grip in the wet (shot of baby strapped in back seat)". We are presented of how these innocents ideas of a comfortable life, where everything is in its right place, can darken up, as we are immediately described as "**pigs/in a cage/ on antibiotics**". What does this tell us about our lives, in 2020?



Technology has impacted our lives in so many positive ways, that often it is hard to look at the harm that our paced lives have on our mental health. However, there is no denying that we are an **anxious generation**. We are anxious because we live to work and work to live. We became the guinea-pigs of a handful of economic recessions, the prototypes of the internet-age humanoids. Social media has proven to be one of the most useful tools in existence, eliminating all physical distances at the will of a simple click. It has, however, created yet another chance to **distance ourselves from what we are really are**, diverging from what we would like to be. It has solidified our need of personas and facades, which further the feeling of isolation that Radiohead approached. Our careers and our social lives often end up building a foundation for someone we wished to be, ignoring the struggle of our existence, our natural viciousness, our primal impulses. The pace of the modern life and modern world has detached us from our core, and we end up alienated, swimming in circles in a sea of corporate apathy, spiralled routines, unpassionate drives and sloped expectations to the **nothingness of our decades of adulthood**.

Through anthems of hopelessness on tracks such as “Let Down” and “No Surprises”, cynical odes to scepticism on “Paranoid Android” and “Subterranean Homesick Alien”, the iconic hits “Karma Police” and “Exit Music (for a film)” and unsettling tunes such “Airbag” and “Electioneering”, *Ok Computer* flows through all the discussed themes, having listeners constantly charged with a calm anxiety which keeps us as entertained as attentive to the next piece of lyric on Thom Yorke’s potent song writing, delivered with the same panic we all feel in the realm of our still lives. A powerful asset of the cuts on this project is a beautiful oscillation between the robotic, technological atmosphere and sudden glimpses of clean, natured sounds, that sound overwhelmingly human and pure. These bounces through diametrically opposite sides, set so very well the differences of what it feels like to be aliveand to **feel alive**. It makes us jump from the feelings of numbness to raw ecstasy. This contrast is the whole empirical paradigm of the album. It is what truly sets it as an overall set of sound-transmitted sensations rather than a simple piece of music.



Unofficial floppy of the album

Radiohead not only found major commercial success with this album, having hit the top of the charts in many countries, but also incredible critical success, as to this day it is still considered one of the greatest albums of all time. Nonetheless, despite all the technical brilliances in the Radiohead musical process, what in my opinion makes this album truly special is the timeless significance of what was being prophesized in this project. And the question that strikes me the most is: are we ready to continue to face the unsettling feeling of our lives in this everchanging world?

Is my generation destined to these tales of technological dystopia, in the bottomless pits of routine, aliens at home, always comfortable, but never at ease? We have normalized this living at constant agitation, we are addicted to prescription pills, we seek dopamine in our small screens, we make a living with the hopes of a good life, but how often do we escape this process of the absurd? Or can we **even** escape this machine and seek the comfort we need to feel good about our existence and ourselves, to stop the isolation, the paranoia and to finally feel wholesome. Neither I, nor Radiohead ever **intended to bring an answe**r.

What the British group, however, brought, is a sad, vivid and frightening portrait of what we have become, a concrete collectivized group of lost individuals in a fish bowl; and perhaps, that reflection itself is enough to make us feel understood and a bit happier, which might as well be the whole point of the thing.

PARASITE, A TALE OF DIRT AND GOLD

BY LOURENÇO PARAMÉS

The spoon theory is a proposal created in 2015 that attributes individuals to a socioeconomical class according to the income level and assets owned by their parents, believing that one's success is dependent on whether one was born into a wealthy family. As such, it divides people into these spoon classes, ranging from 'dirt spoon' to 'gold spoon'. This premise of hereditary poverty is a widely held belief in South Korea, where citizens are increasingly sceptical about social mobility.

Parasite is where both ends of this spectrum meet. On the top of a hill in Seoul, in a mansion made of smooth rock and glass, lives the gold spoon Park family. The affluent family has all the resources to live a healthy and careless life, as well as to satisfy all their shallow needs and traumas. However, nobody seems particularly content to live in their spacious glass cage with a beautiful garden, nor are they especially affectionate towards one another. The father is always working, and the mother trusts the upbringing of her children to a housekeeper and private tutors – anything money can buy.

A few blocks away and many meters below, the Kims live in a subterranean basement (*calledbanjihain* Korean) among bedbugs and with little light. From the very beginning, the dirt spoon family makes it very clear that they are indeed parasites. They are grifters, forgers, imposters, taking advantage of all they can for their own subsistence.

Suddenly, the Kims are offered a rock, that is very metaphorical and is supposed to bring them wealth – or maybe it's just a rock. Nevertheless, their fate changes as they are able to lie and smuggle every member into the Parks' glass cage. Mrs. Park's naiveté combined with their modern capitalist mindset smooths this process, as her blind trust in the American schooling system and a couple of meaningless diagnosis open their doors to the dirt spoon family. One may overlook the mother's hysteria for private tutoring of her children or the fact that none of the Kim adolescents is actually pursuing higher education. However, high competitiveness in the South Korean job market has not only induced alarming rates of unemployment, but it also has made professional success an elitist privilege. In South Korea, 3 out of 4 children attend private schooling after their regular school day, meaning they are attending classes/studying from 8am to around 9pm.

Thus, the Kims are able to enter and go through the Parks' lives with surgical precision, **never crossing the line**. At last, their economic aspirations are met by leeching off the financial resources of the wealthy family that lives on top of the hills. However, though they share the same space, the two families never really share the same reality. The Kims don't belong there, and this invisible line that separates their current condition from a life of wealth and luxury is not as tenuous as they believe. There is a smell that leeches to them the same way they leech to the Park family, and although they are not aware of it, this burden grows inside of them as they become increasingly conscientious that they cannot escape their own reality.

Parasite perfectly portrays the symptoms of modern capitalism in this society of rapid economic growth, as the rich get very rich and the poor lag behind. In a country politically and economically monopolized by the elite that own industry-leader firms as nepotisms, called chaebol, meritocracy is put at stake and only few of those fortunate enough to afford to be outstanding are able to succeed in their own country. Parallelly, real estate prices in Seoul have soared by an astonishing average of 34% in the last three years. As such, the divide between upper and bottom social classes grows vertiginously and the spoon theory gains strength, as the gold spoons occupy Seoul's skyline and the dirt spoons move to underground dwellings.

One could argue that Parasite's brilliance relies on its perfectly balanced cinematography, with an astute use of colour palettes to emphasize the social divide of the protagonists and architectonically built frames that fill every moment preceding the climax with uttermost tension and dismay, always underlined by the amazing soundtrack, but that would be reducing Bong Joon-ho's masterpiece to something much smaller than its own motif. Bong Joon-ho created a new, unqualifiable, genre, depicting economic hysteria and the stagnation of the social ladder. None of the characters is intrinsically good, but none of them is an antihero either. Instead of establishing moral reasoning between the two families, Parasite focuses instead on the confrontation of the disparate realities that they live in.

There are houses on the top of the city's hills, high above the ground so that the Parks don't have to feel the smell from the houses underground, with big walls around it and tall trees, so as to distance themselves far enough from this parallel reality. There are cement boxes below the flood level, to the extent that they are washed away by the rain. They have bugs and little sunlight, and its bad conditions create a certain odour, but the Kims call it their home. There are some who are glad to serve, and others who are miserable to be served. There are economics systems that people are born into, and their barriers are much taller than the Parks' walls and trees, and they have been so deeply rooted into society, that people begin to think that they just belong where they are and turn a blind eye to what is it like down below. And those down below aspire to live up on the hills with plenty of sunlight, but there is a smell attached to them that reminds them that they don't belong there. There are economic and social relations that could be symbiotic, but ignorance and greed turn them parasitical, and there is always a line that must not be crossed.

AND SOMETIMES, JUST SOMETIMES, SOME DARE TO CROSS THE LINE. BUT IN THE END, NOTHING REALLY CHANGES, AND THEY ARE ALL REMINDED OF WHERE THEY BELONG...