

“No Shelter” in Popular Music: Irony and Appropriation in the Lyrical Criticism of Rage Against the Machine

In the summer of 1998, the soundtrack for the blockbuster *Godzilla* featured “No Shelter” by rap-metal band, Rage Against the Machine, a thunderous performance amid the listless surrounding tracks. On their self-titled debut album and *Evil Empire*, Rage had established a reputation for vitriolic lyrical politics accompanied by funk-laden guitar licks and a heavy metal sound. “No Shelter” proudly followed in this tradition. Lead vocalist Zack de la Rocha attacks the entertainment industry and Hollywood films like *Rambo* and *Amistad*, yet the most potent lyric clearly addresses the motion picture *Godzilla*, the film the soundtrack was to promote. Amidst the pounding lead guitar of Tom Morello, de la Rocha cries out, “And Godzilla pure muthafuckin filler/ To keep ya eyes off the real killer” (29-30). Clearly not a typical motion picture promotion. Textual analysis of the raw and rapid-fire lyrics of “No Shelter” reveals a leftist political attack, consistent with positions RATM advanced in concerts, lyrics, and their well maintained website. A careful reading of the lyrics will reveal potent political attacks on the entertainment industry, but the entirety of their rhetorical strategy is realized in the presence of this song on

the soundtrack of *Godzilla*. Rage lyrically appropriates the soundtrack and utilizes the streamlined functioning of corporate promotion to advance a criticism of *Godzilla* and Hollywood's consumption of audiences and their cultural identity.

As a band and as a political entity, Rage Against the Machine challenges traditional thinking regarding protest music and the function of heavy metal/hard rock music. The fusion of rock and rap, commonplace in popular music by the late 'Nineties, began with Morello's screeching guitar effects, de la Rocha's incendiary lyrical barrage, and the backing energy of drummer Brad Wilk and bassist Tim Commerford. As music historian David Dunaway notes, however, analysis of protest music typically focuses upon lyrics, rightly noticing that the impact usually lies within the text (37). With typically young, male listeners and their general lack of interest in political content, critic Will Straw maintains that heavy metal music is often chided for its loud, angry, and masculine sound (108). Rage borrows the sound of heavy metal and infuses it with the lyrical charge of rap and protest rock. The function of protest music, to address a social harm or political cause, is often antithetical to the corporate aim of album sales. The presence of Burkean irony and refraction, in "No Shelter" demonstrates that the band acknowledges its role in enabling the entertainment industry and engages listener and critic alike in the struggle to resist the forces of commodification. Burkean irony, described by Kenneth Burke in *Grammar of Motives*, exists in the circular relationship between the text and its commercial context: the song is set forth as a promotion of the film and its soundtrack, and yet it returns as an assault on that very context. Their politically and commercially savvy attack on *Godzilla* creates the possibility of the very mechanisms that could stifle the impact of their leftist stance to be used to magnify and refract Rage's message throughout the chain of commercial promotion.

Although contemporary politically-minded mainstream bands, such as the Clash and U2, existed prior to Rage Against the Machine's fusion of rap and heavy metal, Rage's singular focus is unique. In

Rocha whispers, “American eyes, American eyes, see the world from American eyes./ Bury the past,/ Rob us blind,/ And leave nothing behind” (31-4). Aggressively, the music then rolls in and the drives the listener into submission with de la Rocha screaming “Just stare!/ Re-live the nightmare!” (35).

Lyricaly, the song asks the listener to adopt a new perspective and “view the world from American eyes” (32). Whether one watches movies, attends to advertising, or listens to music, the ubiquitous presence of commercialism becomes a “chain” that binds the consumer to the American dream—to buy, to consume, and to become imprisoned. The message is clearly articulated by de la Rocha in his interview with Hendrickson of *Rolling Stone*: “One of capitalism’s secret weapons is to equate freedom with the buying of products” (36). The song decries the entertainment industry and their misrepresentation of history, claiming the industry pillages and destroys the heritage of those who are entertained. “Americana” is presented as a “Fourth Reich culture” (14) that distracts the viewer in order to “fix the need, develop the taste” (25) that will lead you to “empty your pockets” (3) and essentially become addicted to the products they are selling, like Coca-Cola “in the veins of Saigon” (27). The film industry is not interested in a truthful presentation of the past; profit is their only motive. “The thin line between entertainment and war” (7) is found “everywhere” (18), “From the theaters [to] malls on every shore” (6). Rage asks their audience to “view the world from American eyes” (32) three times in their lyrics. American eyes see the past as a commodity to be consumed and sold back those who possess history: “Trade in ya history for a VCR” (12). Rage is asking their audience to recognize their own role in the commodification and abuse of history and culture.

It seems, however, that the band overlooks an important factor that may taint their rhetorical credence. Throughout their assertions about the nature of entertainment and commercialism, Rage does not indicate that they are contributing to the consumer’s addiction to com-

David Fricke's *Rolling Stone* interview, de la Rocha articulates the band's purpose: "to give space and volume to various struggles throughout the country and the world" (44). Lead guitarist Morello, in an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, states that RATM demanded "100 percent control over every aspect of our careers," as a necessary prerequisite to signing with Sony Record's Epic label (Hilburn F1). Eschewing typical songs of lost love or lyrically challenged heavy metal aggression, de la Rocha's lyrics address various political topics, such as the struggles of the Zapista rebels, American oil dependency, the imprisonment of Muhammad Abu-Jamal, and numbing effects of media indoctrination. As Morello discusses in his interview with the *Washington Post*, "Resistance and struggle and solidarity are a crucial part of human experience that have been, for the most part, left out of the pop continuum" (Harrington G1). Outside the studio, RATM members were equally politically minded. De la Rocha has testified for the International Commission on Human Rights of the United Nations and spent time with Zapista rebels in Mexico, and the band has performed for various causes including the Free Tibet Concerts and outside of the 2000 Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles.

"No Shelter" was written during a creative period that led to *The Battle of Los Angeles*, arguably their best album lyrically and musically. Given their consistent political sensibilities, the presence of "No Shelter" on *Godzilla*'s promotional soundtrack is ostensibly inconsistent with their musical mission and deserves scrutiny to sort out this apparent contradiction. "No Shelter" begins with an intoxicating guitar pattern, and then music explodes onto an anxious listener. De la Rocha's edgy, ominous lyrics then pound in synchrony with the bass, guitar, and drums. Aside from some phrases caught here and there, what he is saying would be practically indecipherable to the listener. The chorus is a gripping moment where de la Rocha shouts, "There be no shelter here" (17), and a backing vocal warns, "The front line is everywhere" (18). After the second, equally unclear verse, the song breaks down into a powerful moment when the music fades and de la

mercialism. The song and its position on a motion picture soundtrack place their voice within the entertainment industry itself, and they appear to be criticizing their own role as a cog in the wheel of promoting *Godzilla* and Sony industries. This critique is destructive to the mission of the band and opens them to accusations of hypocrisy. When considering Kenneth Burke's conception of irony, however, it becomes more apparent how Rage's ostensibly hypocritical position may be viewed as ironic and liberating.

In "Four Master Tropes," Kenneth Burke examines the "role" of the critic "in the discovery and description of 'the truth'" (503). The trope of synecdoche combines metaphor with metonym by asserting that objects that have been reduced (metonym) are now represented by something else (metaphor). By taking the perspective of synecdoche, the critic asserts that her perspective is true, and that all other perspectives are incorrect or inaccurate. Burke identifies this as a relativistic stance: "[I]f you isolate any one agent in a drama, or any one advocate in a dialogue, and see the whole in terms of this position alone, you have the purely relativistic. And in relativism there is no irony" (514). Instead of asserting a relativistic stance, Burke argues that an ironic position is more liberating because the critic does not explain reality, but allows all perspectives of reality to exist. The critic must seek to gain a dialectic relationship with the world in that s/he must understand that a critic is part of this relationship between artifacts; the critic's participation in reality makes reality what it is.

Burke's sense of irony is quite different than what he calls "romantic" irony (514). Romantic irony allows the critic to assume a position of superiority to the drama s/he is observing. Burke suggests that the critic must recognize that in observing s/he is only one participant in the drama that is unfolding: "True irony, humble irony, is based upon a sense of fundamental kinship with the enemy, as one needs him, is indebted to him, is not merely outside him as an observer but contains him within, being consubstantial with him" (514). To participate in true irony, the critic must be one in substance with that which s/

he is criticizing. In describing the inevitable nature of true irony, Burke delineates two features of the most representative character of irony, the adjectival and the substantial portions. The adjectival portion embodies “one of the qualifications necessary for total definition,” but the substantial portion embodies the “conclusions of the development as the whole” (516). Both the substantial and adjectival character of irony must be acknowledged in order to exhibit true irony. The ironic critic recognizes that the act of criticism creates the drama that s/he is observing, and in assuming a position of criticism s/he *is* the object that s/he criticizes. Burke offers the following overall ironic formula: irony is “what goes forth as A returns as non-A” (517). The ironic rhetorical message goes forth as a particular criticism, but the act of criticizing is at odds with the initial message, and hence becomes the substantial part of the irony.

One of the primary points that Burke advances is that as critics we have no choice but to become part of the drama. We can either acknowledge it (be ironic) or not (be relativistic). True irony occurs when there is complete identification or sympathy between critic and the artifact that s/he seeks to criticize or observe. Burke’s concept of irony may be problematic for the critic when the rhetorical message embodies the adjectival sense of irony and the rhetorical presentation embodies the substantial sense of irony. In the case of “No Shelter,” the lyrical message articulates a political attack upon commercialism, but in order for the audience to hear or understand that message the band members must substantially participate in that which they criticize. Rage appears to be part of the problem, and both the critic and receptive audience participate in and subsequently benefit the commercial enterprise that Rage assails. From the relativistic position, Rage is hypocritical and the battle they wage against commercialism is indefensible.

Music critics have dismissed RATM for espousing leftist views and revolutionary ideas while making money for Sony and for themselves. Music critic Richard Harrington cynically notes that selling

millions of albums and generating wide commercial appeal makes Rage “Sony’s best-selling anti-capitalist act” (G2). Critic Les Mixer attacks Rage’s politics, arguing “there must be at least some irony, if not downright contradiction” for the band to encourage their youthful audience to spend money on albums and paraphernalia (G3). Mixer continues by arguing that Rage is “enabled by the same industrial machine [Sony, in RATM’s case] that both pimps the world’s musical clowns and enslaves the people who buy and make its products” (G3). The “romantic” sense of irony that these critics address fails to examine the band in relation to the scene and other agents. Identifying Rage as romantically ironic musicians implies that the music can be analyzed independently of the band’s rhetorical circumstances.

The position that RATM occupies is the Gordian knot of popular appeal. If an artist is commercially—and to some extent critically—successful, then the ubiquitous threat of “selling out” has taken over the artist’s sensibilities, or so goes the argument. If an artist is unsuccessful, s/he is never accused of selling out; it is impossible, for s/he has *sold* nothing. When an artist’s message is a key element of his/her music, then a wider reach is valuable. Any artist who intends to reach a broad audience for political reasons is at the greatest risk of accusations of selling out. For Morello, de la Rocha, and the other members of the band, the only response is that the message is getting out to their listeners. As Morello says in his interview with the *Washington Post*, the fans “come to it for different reasons—whether it’s the aggression or the funk or the guitar—and they leave with something to think about” (Harrington G1). The band takes additional steps to grant audiences access to their messages, by printing their lyrics in liner notes and consistently maintaining their positions in interviews and in political life. Under the pressure of promoting *Godzilla*, the importance of lyrical content in their music becomes the central feature in examining irony.

Late in the song, de la Rocha clearly and poignantly criticizes the soundtrack and movie they are promoting: “And Godzilla pure

mothafuckin filler/ To keep ya eyes off the real killer” (29-30). Although their criticism of the movie industry and commercialism is enough to create a rhetorical stance in opposition to those institutions, to attack the method of presentation (the soundtrack) within the presentation (the song) is truly ironic, in a Burkean sense. If listeners were to adopt Rage’s suggested viewpoint, they would find that Rage promotes the stance it criticizes. In listening to the song or buying the soundtrack, the listener promotes the very commercialism that Rage is protesting, and, thereby, the listener is brought into the drama that Rage describes. Moreover, once the listener understands the viewpoint of Rage, the listener then becomes a critic who can attack Rage for promoting commercialism, which, again, is crucial to maintaining the sympathetic relationship Burke calls for. Furthermore, if listeners adopt the position Rage advocates, the audience may be encouraged to buy the soundtrack or other RATM albums, which is directly opposed to the position that the listener had adopted. All of these dynamics allow for the ironic interplay that Burke promotes.

Although Burke discusses the position of the critic in regard to literature and artifact alike, he does not consider context-text relationships. The text that he speaks of is an embodiment of a way of thought espoused by a critic who is one voice amidst other competing voices. Burke is not commenting on the commercial relationship between artist and production agency, and the conceptualization of irony he speaks of is not a discussion about the relationship between the consumed and the consumer. Rhetorical critic Helene Shugart incorporates the contextual and societal awareness that is necessary to examine how appropriation reflects the context that it criticizes. For Shugart “appropriation refers to any instance in which means commonly associated with and/or perceived as belonging to another are used to further one’s own ends” (210-11). Rage appropriates the motion picture soundtrack for *Godzilla* in a manner that can be interpreted as a counter-hegemonic strategy. The soundtrack belongs to the movie that it promotes, and legally belongs to Sony, and yet in a

defiant act of criticism, RATM occupies album space and uses four minutes and three seconds of time to protest *Godzilla* and the entertainment industry. In the method of appropriation Shugart identifies as “refraction,” a marginalized view becomes the dominant way of thinking about an object (211). This strategy assumes that power relationships will always exist between objects, or in this case between band and record label, but refraction offers a “critical awareness within the confines established by the original artifact” (213). As Shugart explains, refraction creates a “rupture” in the original discourse, in that the expected continuity between motion picture soundtrack and the supporting musical tracks is disrupted (212). Rage uses the album as a vehicle for protesting that which the album intends to promote. Because “No Shelter” received heavy airplay and received a Grammy nomination, the band could be seen as appropriating the entire content of the album: it became the focal point of the soundtrack. Thereby, “No Shelter” becomes a rhetorical space occupied by a dissonant voice, criticizing the commercial promotion of the movie from within the lyrics.

True irony is achieved, according to Burke, when a critic recognizes that s/he “needs” and is “indebted” to the opposing position (514). Rage needs the soundtrack to advance their song and its message in the same way that the album needs Rage to advance the corporation’s commercial interests and profits. According to critic Cynthia Lont, music groups have no other option than to participate in the commercial music market (10). Even by creating independent labels, or encouraging audiences—as some artists have—to steal the album from record stores, artists still rely upon some aspect of musical promotion, creation, and distribution. According to Shugart, the “space for critical awareness” that is created by refraction is achieved in part by offering the audience and critics alike a possibility of observing a conventional ideology from an alternative perspective (227). De la Rocha asks the audience to “view the world from American eyes” (32) and recognize that, like the band, commercialism, has

“Chained [you] to the dream they got ya searchin’ for” (15). Part of the band’s political prerogative is for audiences to place themselves within the music, where the band and the listener are unified in occupying a space between hypocrisy and protest on the “thin line between entertainment and war” (7).

One may interpret Rage’s position as similar to Theodor Adorno’s comment that, “the more the machinery functions only for the sake of profit, the more [the individual] must be convinced that it is functioning for him and for his sake only, as it is put as a public service” (198). When *Godzilla* makes money, it does so for parent company Sony. Therefore, the members of Rage do not just make money for themselves; they make money for *Godzilla*’s owners. As Adorno suggests, Rage is able to recognize the workings of the system and use it for its own benefit. We must not forget that Rage Against the Machine is promoting Rage Against the Machine—politics and music included. For every soundtrack sold, and even the sale of more movie tickets, Rage’s message is put into the ears of more audiences. If Sony makes money from Rage, then they will promote Rage’s music. If audiences like “No Shelter” they may expose themselves to the band’s studio albums or concerts. Regardless, Rage’s message, found on every album, banner, song, and T-shirt, is now exposed to many more receptive listeners. Adhering to the importance of their message, Rage qualifies their participation in “the machine” by recognizing the inevitability of capitalism’s reach.

In the case of “No Shelter,” that message is difficult to access. Like much of their music, the backing guitar, bass, and drums are aggressive enough to drown out the already machine-gun pace lyrics of de la Rocha. If the average radio listener confronted this song in the summer of 1998, s/he would probably never understand the rhetorical position that Rage advocates. The band’s political stances are known by many of their fans, but their specific stance on any individual song is often unclear. On their studio albums, the lyrics are printed for the crucial purpose of conveying the rhetorical message

contained in the words. Even if it is arguable whether the average Rage fan will read the lyrics, in the case of “No Shelter” there are no lyrics to consult. Moreover, aside from bootlegs, imports, or the ubiquitous MP3 file, the only way to access this song is to purchase the soundtrack. The rhetorical critic is left with a song with unclear lyrics, on an album that is devoid of usual political messages, and that received significant radio play primarily to promote a motion picture. RATM is indebted to their audience to listen to the lyrics and to make sense of them, or their message remains within the artificial bounds of the jewel case and digital code. Unfortunately, it has become conventional wisdom in academic work on popular music—by critics including Emily Edwards and Michael Singletary (149), Roger Desmond (278), and Paul Willis (48)—that listeners pay no attention to song lyrics and that even fewer actually decipher any song’s particular objective meaning. However, the aggression and anger viscerally present in the band’s performance may, even so, evoke a desire to resist—something. As Susan McClary and Robert Walser argue, “Music appears to create its effects directly, without mediation whatsoever. Listeners are not aware of any interpretation on their part” (278). The band’s listeners seek to resist and RATM channels that emotional energy toward its brand of leftist politics.

Dunaway argues that political music must be situated within its time and context, for protest music is a reflection of the contemporary political culture and youth ideology (37). Both the political rock and rap genres function best when listeners attend to lyrics. Rage took the demographic reach and negatively charged energy of heavy metal music, and implanted a politically and lyrically rich tradition of rap music. Regardless, it is impossible to discern how many fans attempt to interpret the lyrics of Rage, or whether they recognize the contingent relationship between lyrics and context. From a critical perspective, these questions are not central to this discussion, and yet, as a critic I must acknowledge my role in the creation of irony. Again, Burke’s sense of irony allows for a sympathetic response to an initial

action: Rage offers a negative critique of the world which it is enabling. In the case of "No Shelter," the band's positive action of making the consumer aware is directly contradictory of the manner by which the band criticizes. In fact, their criticism is so apropos to the context that they recognize there is "no shelter" offered in the world of consumerism. Therefore, there is no shelter even for the band; hence "there be no shelter *here*" takes on new meaning (17).

Likewise, as a critic, I cannot ignore my participation in this ironic dance. As a consumer and an aficionado of the music of Rage Against the Machine, I create the possibility of interpreting their rhetorical stance in the manner I propose. By doing so, I yet again extend the bounds of irony by taking an essentially relativistic stance in assessing this relationship. I acknowledge that without my participation as a critic the potential for irony does not exist for me. By choosing to participate, I enact the drama surrounding my criticism. Moreover, by purchasing or listening to the song, I participate in a contingent relationship with the text as a commercializing agent. I put into motion the wheels of irony inherent in the rhetorical position of Rage's lyrics, but I also promote the agency that Rage protests. By consuming the song I create the contingent effects within the message of the song. Ironically, what I critique is what I have placed into motion.

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