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MUS_TECH 335 – Spring 2005

Pink Floyd's *The Wall*

I. Introduction

In 1977 Pink Floyd was a band without a direction. Their 1973 masterpiece *Dark Side of the Moon* had catapulted them into the very upper echelons of stardom. But far from bringing happiness, this success left them feeling disconnected and uncertain. Bassist and increasingly dominant songwriter Roger Waters was particularly hard-hit. "I became very conscious of a wall between us and our audience...it was a situation we'd created ourselves through our own greed" (Vance). His feelings of antagonism toward the audience culminated in a now-famous incident: "I found myself spitting on one particular guy who wouldn't stop yelling...there was a real war going on between the musicians on stage and the audience" (Huck from MacDonald 123). Bitter and unsatisfied, Waters retreated to the English countryside to write. When he emerged, he had all the basic elements of his magnum opus.

Often deeply autobiographical, *The Wall* is about isolation: from society, lovers, parents, roots. Ostensibly, the story centers on "Pink," a rock star whose fame cannot bring him fulfillment (subtlety is not the point here). A father who died in WWII when he was a child, an overprotective mother, and a failing marriage all lead him to withdraw. Ultimately, he becomes so removed that he descends into madness, misdirecting his

audience's devotion towards a new Fascism. Hesitating on the brink of destruction, he puts himself on trial by reviewing his choices and their outcomes. The verdict: "Tear down the wall!" forcing him to once again confront reality and reveal himself to others.

Reaction to the double album was wide-ranging. Clearly the work was ambitious and provocative. Some rejected the dark and (seemingly) hopeless worldview. Others called it "confusing [and] overlong" (Mulligan from MacDonald 177). Certainly the focus is narcissistic and the work is sprawling. But many found both a rare example of a successful long-form rock piece, and a deeply moving expression of basic human needs. Personally, although I find *The Wall* flawed and ultimately inferior to *Dark Side*, it is nonetheless a tremendous achievement and often an enthralling experience.

II. The Album

Released in 1979, *The Wall* is a double album, running approximately 81 minutes. Roughly speaking, the first disc concerns Pink's construction of the Wall that surrounds him; the second disc is his response and struggle to escape. Disc I outlines the following large structure:

Intro – X(M) – X(F) – Y – X' – Outro

The work opens *in media res*, with Pink addressing an audience at his show ("In the Flesh?"). We then move back in time, to his childhood. First we encounter the male influences on his life: his father's absence and the cruelty of his schoolteachers. Next of course are the female influences, his overbearing mother and his increasingly distant wife. The Y section indicates a departure; but since this is a story of dysfunction, there is

no true departure but a series of failed attempts (groupies, drugs, regression to childhood, etc.). X', the return, shows Pink completing the Wall; after the final brick is placed there is a brief outro.

This structure mirrors the typical organization of a generic rock song; X represents a strophe (verse-chorus pair) and Y represents a solo, break, or other departure/contrast. This congruence between local and global organization gives the work a sense of cohesiveness and direction. It is important to recognize that these are not just formal features; they carry meaning. The X-X-Y-X' progression instantiates the universal pattern of home-departure/growth-return. Campbell has famously and convincingly demonstrated the innate psychological impact of this archetype (Campbell 30, 245). Water's intuitive use of this form goes a long way toward explaining the power of *The Wall*. Along similar lines, verse contexts typically correspond to an individual perspective; choruses (as the name suggests) express the communal response. Waters plays with this in various ways: omitting verses, reversing the canonical order, removing vocals from chorus sections, etc., all to convey aspects of Pink's unhealthy mental state (Berkhout 74).

Disc II, while less clearly organized, still exhibits an overall trajectory. Pink has built the Wall and now slips into psychosis. After seemingly uniting his past and present, at least in his own head, we reach the album's true (i.e., not undermined) departure section: "Comfortably Numb." Pink leaves his body and embraces his pathology, passing through his isolation and emerging as a fascist dictator. At his next concert ("In the Flesh") he leads his audience into a state of mob hatred, a new Third Reich. It is unclear how much of this is actually happening and how much is Pink's fantasy; perhaps it does

not matter. At any rate, he somehow comes to question his state and conducts a trial in his head. He is convicted and sentenced to leave his self-made prison, forced once again to participate in communal society. The last, quiet song describes those who must live in the wake of Pink's destruction, much like Pink's childhood in the wake of WWII—closing the cycle.

On this album, the band brought in an outside producer for the first time: Bob Ezrin, known for his work with Kiss. Ezrin was a relentless editor, forcing Waters to tighten his material considerably, clarifying many aspects of the storyline (as well as suggesting many great musical moments, such as the famous disco beat of “Another Brick in the Wall (Part II)”). Nonetheless, the plot was often hard to follow, and many fans only vaguely understood it. Waters had intended the narrative to be “strong enough to make into a good movie” (Huck from MacDonald 123); perhaps the album seems incomplete because this was always part of the plan. Whatever the case, the success of the album and tour did indeed allow Waters to finance such a film.

III. The Movie

To complete his vision, Waters enlisted the help of director Alan Parker, animator Gerald Scarfe, and actor/musician Bob Geldof for the role of Pink. The movie utilizes virtually no dialog other than the lyrics themselves; the soundtrack is in fact quite similar to the album. Many songs were re-recorded, extended or shortened; one song (“When the Tigers Broke Free”) was added and another (“Hey You”) was cut. A few songs were

reordered. Some diegetic sound effects were added, but many more were already present on the album.

The visual additions serve three basic purposes. First, they clarify many aspects of the narrative that were previously obscure or confusing. Foremost among these is the simple fact that the main character is a rock star named Pink. Lyrical support for this is always indirect. Knowing this instantly reveals the meaning of many songs, but numerous listeners did not infer this from the album alone, since it is never stated explicitly. Second, themes which were present but secondary on the album are now given much more prominence. The original story focuses primarily on Pink's personal descent; the events of WWII are largely a backdrop. The movie takes a broader perspective, emphasizing the interaction between individuals and large-scale forces. For example, in "Goodbye Blue Sky" we see a German eagle swoop down, grasp an entire city in its claws, and fly off. So the visuals can shift the focus of attention, sometimes reversing the roles of background and foreground. The final and perhaps most dramatic function of the visuals is to heighten the visceral impact of the experience. The movie is filled with violent, grotesque, or disturbing images that move the viewer on a very physical level. Images of schoolchildren being processed into sausage ("Another Brick in the Wall (Part II)"); Pink shaving his whole body including his nipples (after "Is There Anybody Out There?"); or the opening scenes of WWII combat spliced with teenagers rioting ("In the Flesh?") all intensify the sensory shock of the story itself.

IV. Analysis

Although there are any number of interesting scenes to analyze, I have chosen to closely examine and compare the two versions of “In the Flesh(?)” (the brilliant animation sequences will have to wait). These songs offer an opportunity to discuss many of the central techniques of this work: the semantics of formal structures; the impact of the violent visuals; and the interplay of multiple times and perspectives. In addition, it is quite revealing to examine what elements of the song are changed, and what remains common across the two versions.

My analytical technique is a hybrid of several models. First, I rely heavily on Chion’s masking and synchronization techniques, and particularly his notion of value-added multimedia. In this case, however, it is not (primarily) sound that is creating meaning in visuals, but vice-versa. How the visuals draw out various threads of the lyrical narrative is of prime importance. I am making lesser use of Cook’s conformance/complementation/contest hierarchy, but have adopted (and adapted) his visual notation for analysis. Finally, I am investigating the compatibility of the visuals with my previous music-theoretic analysis (based heavily on Berkhout).

V. “In the Flesh?” (5:52-9:09)

Although this is the opening track of the album, in the movie it is preceded by almost six minutes of footage. The additional material (including the song “When the Tigers Broke Free (Part I)”) shows a maid cleaning a hotel hallway, then cuts to a man at night; we find

out later that he is Pink's father. From his pistol and map, the lyrics, and sparse plane sound effects, we deduce that he is a WWII soldier, preparing for a coming battle. We then cut to a child running across a field; this is young Pink. The next scene shows the adult Pink in a near-catatonic state in his hotel room, staring blankly at the TV (showing an old WWII movie). The maid, wanting to clean his room, inserts her key and tries to open the door (which is chained). It is at this point that the music starts.

Appendix I shows a graphic analysis of the song. First we see the hotel door interspersed with shots of teenagers bursting through a chained gate; the images are cut so as to indicate equivalence (both are doors chained shut; we cut to the gate bursting open just as the hotel door would have; etc.). Then, as the teenagers begin running through the streets (we can soon infer that they are there for Pink's show), we begin seeing WWII soldiers on the battlefield, often being shot. Again, equivalence between the two settings is postulated: after a shot of kids' legs running right, we hard-cut to a similarly-framed shot of soldiers' legs running right. All cuts are made this way, although not always as literally. The level of violence escalates as the kids engage in a confrontation with the police. Throughout, the rapid pace of editing mirrors the action and confusion of the two environments. As the verse begins, we fade to a new scene: Pink steps out onto a balcony, dressed in a black uniform and surrounded by paraphernalia clearly reminiscent of a Nazi or hate rally. As he sings the verse, the audience stares with rapt attention. This is certainly not the concert we were expecting. A much longer shot length and slow, steady pans reflect the atmosphere. After the verse, we again cut to WWII footage, this time without intermingled shots of the teenagers. The soldiers suffer heavy air fire; in the outro we see Pink's father calling for help as an

enemy bomber lands a direct hit. His hand slips off the phone and we see his dead body, eyes open and staring.

The association of verse with individual and chorus with communal is clearly supported by the visuals. The intro/chorus feature two groups: the teenage concert-goers and the soldiers, both engaged in group activity (fighting or rioting). We get a brief shot or two of Pink staring blankly, as if he is observing both scenes. When the verse begins, it is now Pink who is the active agent, speaking theatrically from the balcony. The crowd is passive and unmoving. The last chorus again focuses on the soldiers. However, the choruses do not contain any lyrics; the “voice” of the group is violence.

A major difference between the album and the movie is that the opening of the album is purely nonrepresentational. Until the lyrics in the verse, we have absolutely no sense of time, place, or character. The most concrete thing we can say is that the music is strong, possibly violent, with a sense of anticipation. The movie, by contrast, has already given us two specific settings: WWII and Pink’s hotel room. The stampeding crowd of young people is a bit more ambiguous, but quickly becomes clarified once the verse brings us to the rally. This context completely alters the experience of the music; the visuals are “adding value” to the music by creating a completely compatible but formerly absent scenario. This work is particularly interesting because Roger Waters very likely had some inkling of these images in mind when composing the music (unlike, for example, *Fantasia*). There is a complex interaction here; the music was inspired by the story, and the visuals were created to elucidate and elaborate the story underlying the music.

A similar issue concerns the diegesis. At first it is natural to assume that the music is nondiegetic; most film score music is. When the verse begins and Pink steps onto the balcony, the music suddenly becomes diegetic: we are at a concert, and the music is that of the (off-screen) band. A reasonable conclusion is that there was a transition from nondiegetic to diegetic music, as a “special effect.” However a number of factors point to a more nuanced view. First, the narrative is such that it is often unclear what is real and what is happening in Pink’s delusions. The two versions of “In the Flesh(?)” are a prime example; it is at least reasonable to conclude that they are fantasy. “The Trial” and the animation sequences are a clear instance of fantasy; Pink is actually hearing the music. Second, the primacy given to the music (discussed above) suggests that the visuals are an extension of the sonic world, not vice versa. Third, since all action and dialog takes place through the lyrics, the music must be part of the actors’ world. Finally, at least one synch point (examined below) strongly indicates that the music is causing an action in the visuals. Given all this, it is possible to conclude that *all* music is diegetic; in a very real way, it is part of the world of the characters in the movie.

Although both the album and the movie versions of this song use sound effects, they are deployed quite differently. The album does not use any until the final chorus and outro, when Pink begins shouting: “Lights. / Roll the sound effects. / Action. / Drop it on 'em!!! / DROP IT ON 'EM!!!” (this spoken dialog is omitted in the movie). At this point we hear the low rumbling of the plane, building until its final flyby in the outro. Rather than an explosion, however, we hear a baby crying: an abrupt transition to Pink’s childhood. The movie, by contrast, contains diegetic sound effects throughout. The screaming of the crowd, the gunfire and explosions of WWII, and the impact of the final

bomb all accompany the music. This difference stems again from the representational nature of the film. Rather than an abstract musical space, “out of place” as it were, we are located quite clearly in the three settings. It is only appropriate that we hear the sounds of those locations along with the music (since, as argued above, the music is also a part of that world).

There are three key synch points. The first is the initial guitar chord, lined up with the first shots of the rioters forcing open the gates. The crucial fact is that, while there are a few shots of the gate/door prior to the entrance of the music, it is only on the arrival of the guitar that the rioters are able to actually break through. It is as if the music itself provided them the energy to burst forth. This is abstract but also completely logical: they are there to hear Pink, so it makes sense that “his” music would immediately agitate them. This is the clearest instance (in this song) of the sound impacting the visuals.

The second and third synch point both denote structural breaks. The second comes at the start of measure five, the first statement of the album’s Primary Theme (Berkhout 77). There is a hard cut precisely at this point, from the flash of an explosion on the battlefield to the glare of police sirens. Besides further equating the two periods, the quick, bright lights create a visual accent to emphasize the Theme. The third synch point occurs at measure 27, as Pink is ending his verse. He literally throws his arms, and there is a hard cut to another WWII explosion. This allows the energy of the rally to be released without requiring a narrative continuation (achieved instead in the reprise).

After this scene, there is an abrupt transition to a quiet English country home; the infant Pink and his mother are sleeping peacefully. Although we do soon return to scenes of war and devastation, this striking change alerts the viewer that we will now retrace the

steps that led Pink to his present condition. At the end of this lengthy excursion, we return once again to the present and Pink's radical transformation.

VI. "In the Flesh" (1:12:45-1:16:27)

Much later, after the discorporation and transcendence of "Comfortably Numb," we see Pink emerge from a fleshy cocoon as his new self: Pink the Dictator. After making his way to the venue, there is another show, mirroring the first. The second show is less complex in terms of multimedia interaction (hence I have omitted a graphic analysis), but it is quite complex thematically. We first see Pink backstage, in full Fascist garb, accompanied by equally serious lackeys. He emerges to first walk among the crowd, kissing babies and shaking hands. Rather than waiting for the verse to enter, the entire chorus is devoted to Pink's arrival. The crowd is filled with (actual) skinheads; the hall is far more elaborate; there is a full backing brass band and chorus (which replaces the guitar as the primary timbre). When Pink does begin to speak, he quickly moves into pointing out a litany of "undesirables" in the audience: "Are there any queers in the theatre tonight? / Get 'em up against the wall." After his triumphant announcement: "If I had my way I'd have all of them shot," Pink basks in the adulation of the crowd, who act in unison making a crossed-arm gesture reminiscent of the crossed-hammer symbol of Pink's nameless party.

The substitution of the military band for the guitar has obvious symbolic meaning, but also a tremendous impact on the perceptual qualities of the scene. The band's placement on-screen and its obvious subservience to Pink signify that he has fully

embraced his power. No longer filled with struggle and conflict, the music is a glorious exaltation of everything that is happening. The violence is not toward the crowd but from it. This has the disconcerting effect of causing the viewer, however subconsciously, to approve of or identify with the rally. Though at every rational level we can condemn it, the music has a direct emotional impact that is difficult to escape.

The thematic progression is reversed and modified from “In the Flesh(?)” Appendix II shows a graphical comparison. Pink has now become both his father and the very thing that led to his father’s death. Whereas “In the Flesh?” closed with his father’s death, “In the Flesh” opens with Pink’s rebirth as the dictator. Scenes from WWII are replaced with scenes from the fascist rallies that provoked it. The violent cops become Pink’s minions, and the rioting kids are now for the violence, rather than its victims. This is entirely consistent with the theme of cyclical history; since the opening shots equating the teenagers and soldiers, we have been shown the correspondence of the two. Now, finally, they are not symbolically but literally joined. The reverse order reflects the fact that, rather than considering past forces in his life, Pink is moving forward in his new role. It also reflects the dysfunctional nature of the life-cycle paradigm that is at work. The death of the heroic father is the birth of the tyrannical son (cf. Campbell).

VII. Conclusion

The actualization of these scenes shows a deep understanding of the emotional, thematic and structural content of *The Wall*. Whether this understanding was intuitive or overt is hard to say. Certainly Waters and Parker were working very closely with this material,

and must have performed substantial analysis, but it was probably framed in much more practical terms. But there is no denying their effectiveness, both in presenting a powerful and immersive experience for the viewer, and in creating a story and visual presence that integrates with the internal logic of the music while adding new layers of complexity.

The Wall is indeed dark and often uncomfortable. This is certainly not light entertainment. Roger Waters has said that “fascist feelings develop from isolation” (Vance). Pink’s evolution and the differences between the two songs also show how easy it is to become that which we hate. But perhaps by exploring the darkness of *The Wall*, we will be better able to tear it down.

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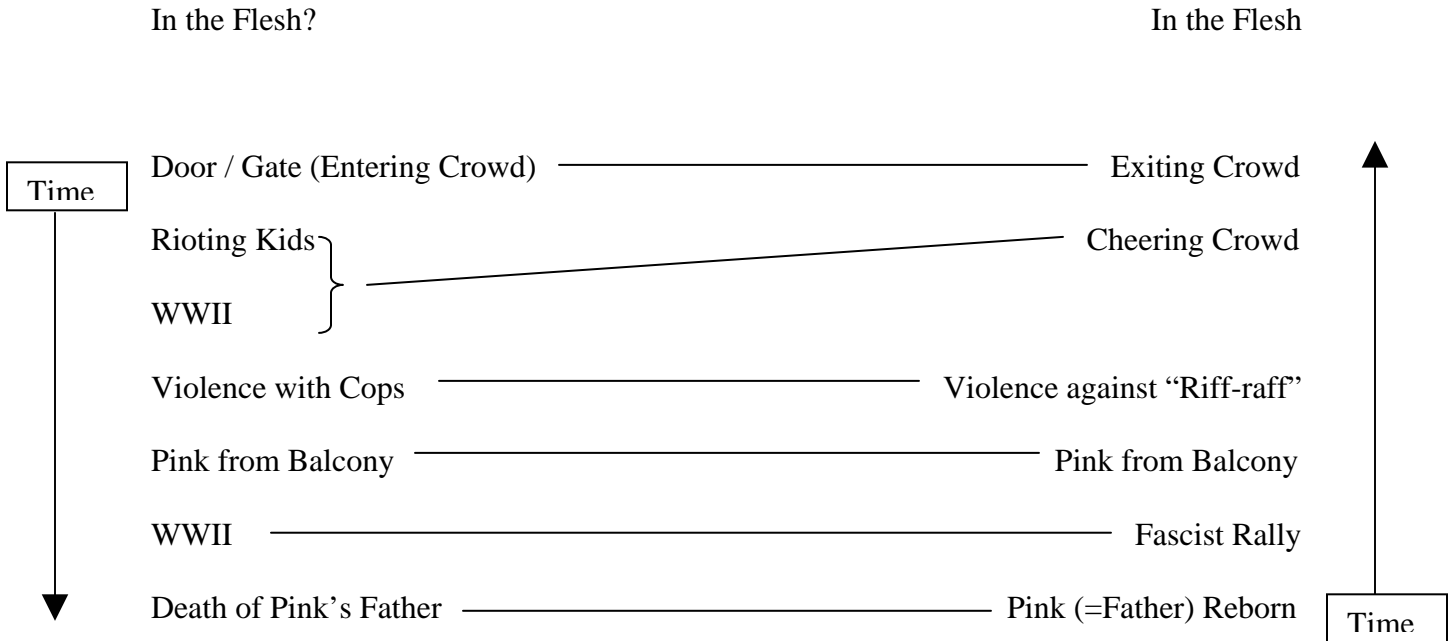
Discography/Videography

- Pink Floyd. *The Wall*. CD. Capitol Records: 1994, 1979.
- Pink Floyd. *The Wall*. DVD. Columbia Music Video: 1999, 1982.

¹ Check out the “Trivia” link – very interesting!

Appendix I: Graphical Analysis of “In the Flesh?” (See accompanying Excel file)

Appendix II: Comparison of “In the Flesh?” and “In the Flesh”



Appendix III – Lyrics

In the Flesh?

So ya, thought ya
Might like to go to the show
To feel the warm thrill of confusion,
That space cadet glow.
Tell me is something eluding you, sunshine?
Is this not what you expected to see?
If you wanna find out what's behind these cold eyes
You'll just have to claw your way through this disguise.

In the Flesh

So ya, thought ya
Might like to go to the show.
To feel that warm thrill of confusion,
That space cadet glow.
I've got some bad news for you sunshine,
Pink isn't well, he stayed back at the hotel
And they sent us along as a surrogate band
We're gonna find out where you fans really stand.
Are there any queers in the theater tonight?
Get them up against the wall!
(Against the wall!)
There's one in the spotlight, he don't look right to me,
Get him up against the wall!
(Against the wall!)
That one looks Jewish!
And that one's a coon!
Who let all of this riff-raff into the room?
There's one smoking a joint,
And another with spots!
If I had my way,
I'd have all of you shot!