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Talking Heads, *Fear of Music*, and the “Different Thinking” of David Byrne

John Bruni

How we listen to a record depends on a continually changing and complex cultural context. In the era of social media, it seems that context can change even more rapidly and unpredictably. In 2006, David Byrne, the vocalist/guitarist of Talking Heads posted on his website, “I was a peculiar young man. Borderline Asperger’s, I guess” (as cited in Lethem, 2012, p. 96). Byrne’s post invites a reappraisal of the Talking Heads discography, especially *Fear of Music* (1979), which foregrounds his lyrical approach.

In his 2012 book-length study of *Fear of Music*, Jonathan Lethem (2012) devotes a chapter to the issue of Byrne’s autism. Although the chapter, titled “Is *Fear of Music* an Asperger’s Record?” purports to take an objective approach, the analysis draws upon received knowledge about autistic persons. Notably, an obsession with order, a particular behavior over-represented in autism stories, emerges in Lethem’s claim that “this collection of songs might have special capacities for sorting the stuff of the world into manageable boxes, like a child’s dinner plate with barriers to keep the peas from the potatoes” (p. 95). For Lethem, such a claim serves as the principle argument for considering *Fear of Music* as a reflection of Byrne’s thinking as an autistic person, which Lethem attempts to refute by asserting that “the album’s coping devices keep falling apart individually, while discrediting one another collectively” (p. 98). But Lethem seems unaware that the failure of coping mechanisms, rather than supporting his assertion that *Fear of Music* is not an autistic record, is indeed central to the autistic experience.

For Byrne and the listener, autism becomes a critical part of the strategies of misdirection that shape *Fear of Music*. These strategies of misdirection can be interpreted as a move away from traditional definitions of humanism as they have applied to rock music. In this essay, I propose that Byrne’s being an autistic person is a crucial aspect of the Talking Heads collective project, *Fear of Music*, that portrays the world as anything but simply received images from an individual human perception. The album, then, questions the belief

that perception is transparent, that the world comes to each of us (as the all-seeing “I”) without any mediation.

To explore how the album shifts to a systemic, autistic worldview requires a focus on communication, which is the linchpin of systems theory, more popularly known as cybernetics. In 2015, Byrne stated, “I remember that around the time of early Talking Heads I was reading a lot of books about cybernetics, how systems are organized, how they flow and self-regulate” (as cited in Marsden, 2015). During the band’s tour of London in Spring 1977, drummer Chris Frantz recalls a meeting among Byrne, keyboardist/guitarist Jerry Harrison, and Brian Eno, who would produce the band’s second album, *More Songs About Buildings and Food* (1978), and who would become the producer and a significant collaborator on *Fear of Music*. When this meeting was described to Frantz (most likely by Harrison), he notes that “evidently the discussion turned to one of David’s favorite topics, cybernetics” (Frantz, 2020, p. 163). Eno would have had much to contribute to the discussion. Having taken up this topic in an essay published a year earlier in *Studio International*, Eno was interested in the creative artistic potential of cybernetics, “linking its powerful toolkit of concepts to the studio environment, and to music composition” (Dayal, 2009, pp. 22-23).

From a conceptual viewpoint, cybernetics/systems theory proposes that any communication system must deal with an environment (designated, technically, or operationally, as social, yet is specific to only that system) that is always already more complex than the system itself. A system thus builds up its complexity by reproducing the distinction between system/environment—but only on one side, the side of the system. We now, however, have a paradox that exceeds a traditional humanist model of the self: systems are defined by the difference from what they are not. Systems theory further destabilizes a humanist model of the self by insisting, first, that any distinction between self/other must come after the distinction between system/environment and, second, that any self-expression must be routed through the system/environment distinction that crucially transforms the concept of identity into non-identity (Wolfe, 2010).

Systems theory allows us to unpack the dense layers of communication that comprise *Fear of Music* as post-humanist collective art—a record that, moreover, can only turn out the way it does because of Byrne’s provocative

questioning of the social norms to which autistic persons are supposed to conform. In the past, such questioning of social conformism has been regarded as characteristic of rock, punk (as a reaction against rock), and post-punk (as a redefinition of rock) music (Marcus, 2015; Savage, 1992; Reynolds, 2006). Regarded as a groundbreaking post-punk record (David Byrne, *60 Minutes*, 2023), *Fear of Music* connects Byrne's redefining of rock performance (shaped by a nonconformist artistic/autistic stance) to a collaborative ethos that produces a volatile dynamic through the band members' improvisational approach to creating the songs in the recording studio. Guided by this creative musical process known as jamming, disparate concepts brush up against each other, including a particularly interesting clash between the artistic possibilities of autism and paranoia. Throughout the record, there are uncanny allusions to systems-theoretical concepts, such as how the role of the observer complicates communication. Jayson Greene comments: "The album plays out like a series of mini-stand up routines about the absurdity, or the pointlessness, of human observation" (Greene, 2020. We will get to these matters shortly. First, we will look briefly at what led up to the making of *Fear of Music*).

In the early songs of Talking Heads, the social commentary on the mundanities of everyday life appears to fit the template fashioned by Ray Davies, whose idiosyncratic songwriting set the Kinks, the group he co-led, apart from their more popular peers, the Beatles and Rolling Stones. But, upon a closer look, something seems a bit off with this comparison. Davies wrote the memorable, first-person narrative, "Waterloo Sunset" (1967), a melancholy song about someone vicariously experiencing the emotions of the people he sees as he looks down from his window at a London train station. When Byrne exclaims, "My building has every convenience/ It's gonna make life easy for me," in "Don't Worry About the Government" (1977), the perspective seems rather more detached. The trope of alienation in "Waterloo Sunset" becomes even more alien in "Don't Worry About the Government."

Alluding to Oliver Sacks' metaphor for understanding autism, Byrne's reference to his own "slightly removed 'anthropologist from Mars' view of human relationships" connects his understanding of his lyrics to popular representations of autism (Byrne, 2012, p. 45; Sacks, 1995). While Byrne and Frantz acknowledge the influence of the proto-garage-rock riffs of the Kinks

(Byrne 2012, 32; Frantz, 2020, 68), the agitated sound of Talking Heads applies further pressure on traditional views of creating music.

Byrne, in *How Music Works* (2012), writes about his having an “extremely slow-dawning” challenge to the “conventional wisdom” that music is created out of an individualistic act of self-expression; for example, according to this belief, “[T]he rock-and-roll singer is driven by desire and demons, and out bursts this amazing, perfectly shaped song” (Byrne, 2012, p. 13). Frantz, in his memoir, *Remain in Love* (2020), states, “The great majority of our songs, particularly the early ones, were always a collaborative effort” (Frantz, 2020, p. 81). But Frantz also alleges that when Byrne learned about music publishing before Talking Heads signed to a major label, he tended to take undue songwriting credits. Now, it is certainly not unusual for band members to argue about these credits, especially when the band goes on to achieve massive success. Frantz does recall, “At the time, though, I thought about how off the wall some of his lyrical ideas were and how surprising his word choices were” (Frantz, 2020, p. 124). If we thus focus on the artistic, rather than the legalistic, sense of musical production, it seems that Byrne brought something important to Talking Heads, something that exceeded the foundational-realist parameters of Davies and the Kinks.

Note here that I am not suggesting that something could be considered as wholly unique. Frantz goes on to connect Byrne’s lyrical skill to what, by the early-21st century—as both Frantz and Byrne concur—would identify Byrne as an autistic person: “I also thought about how different his thought process was from my own. He was not able to look me in the eye for more than a very quick glance, but I told him to keep those lyrics coming” (Frantz, 2020, p. 124).

While Frantz, in a critical move that has become increasingly popular, retroactively applies his understanding of autism to his observations of Byrne, on and off stage, Byrne relates his “very mild (I think) form of Asperger’s syndrome” to the performance style that was helping to establish Talking Heads as a formidable live act: “Leaping up in public to do something wildly expressive and then quickly retreating back into my shell seemed, well, sort of normal to me. Maybe *normal* is the wrong word, but it worked” (Byrne, 2012, p. 33, emphasis in original). That is, even with the extreme personas he crafted for early songs, such as “Psycho Killer” (1977), Byrne says

that he was not so much as injecting theatricality into his performances, as “projecting a sense of heartfelt sincerity” (as cited in Howell, 1992, p. 18).

Byrne’s intense mode of self-expression on stage became an asset for the band. Frantz remembers that “when he got into the song and lost himself in it, you couldn’t take your eyes off him” (Frantz, 2020, p. 69). Byrne and Frantz, however, view Byrne’s self-diagnosis differently. Byrne points out, “This, of course, plays right into the myth of the fucked-up artist driven by demons, and I would hope very much that the converse of this myth isn’t true—that one doesn’t *have* to be nuts to be creative” (Byrne, 2012, p. 33, emphasis in original). Frantz sees the off-stage Byrne as socially awkward to the degree that it contributes to pushing the already unstable band to the breaking point. Using another classic line about autistic sense of self, Frantz remarks that “Byrne couldn’t acknowledge where he stopped and other people began.” While the band would break up in 1991, it was a slow-motion collapse: Byrne announced his intentions of leaving as early as the last show in December 1979 on the tour promoting *Fear of Music* (Frantz, 2020, pp. 85, 249, 260).

Thus, to explore how Talking Heads epitomizes the collaborative production of music through creative tension(s) warrants looking at the ways that what Frantz calls the “different thinking” of Byrne informs this production. Certainly Byrne—and, again, I want to emphasize from an artistic, rather than legalistic, perspective of musical production—is not a bandleader and/or frontperson in the classic sense of these terms. To focus on Byrne’s thinking does not overlook the contributions of the other band members; rather, we might be able to shed light on departure of *Fear of Music* from traditional humanist norms, such as art reinforcing the status of the individual male (and white) “genius artist.” Granted, the band eschewed overtly masculinist musical tropes—for example, not featuring Tina Weymouth, the bass guitarist, as a background vocalist, which would risk her being seen “as just another decorative female” (Howell, 1993, p.20). And the band members’ collaborative ethos is articulated through their collective identity (and vice-versa), an ethos/identity substantiated through the addition of Harrison, who played on the first record, *Talking Heads: 77* (1977), and then Eno.

In what follows, I track how Byrne’s different thinking about his body, mind, communicative (in)ability, and relationship to physical spaces informs *Fear of Music*. As a point of clarification, Byrne wrote the lyrics while listening to

a cassette tape recording of the early-instrumental versions of the songs (Byrne, 2012, p. 147; Frantz, 2020, pp. 48-49). In their finished form, the songs tend to reflect on how psychic systems operate alongside social systems, starting with the second song, “Mind.” But, rather than adhere more strictly to the song sequence as Lethem does, we will, at times, take a nonlinear route, which allows us to avoid the dead ends that we can be (mis)directed into, and observe more sharply Byrne’s grappling with the difficulties of communication. Such difficulties emerge, for example, through the question of what to name, what to call, “writer’s block.” We then hear the difference in Byrne’s thinking through the intense soundscapes of urban living in “Cities” and “Life During Wartime.” To conclude, we will address Byrne’s thinking through the loss of authority projected by the final songs on the album.

I. “I need something to change your [autistic] mind”

“Mind” is an apt mission statement for the record. The song’s chorus rethinks “change your mind,” a phrase often heard during a romantic argument, as an untrustworthy mode of observation (the problematic position of the concept of mind observing itself), thus leading Lethem to ask, “Could ‘Mind’ be a self-addressed stamped envelope?” (Lethem, 2012, p. 17). To further this line of questioning is to contemplate what, for Byrne, might, or might not, change his mind. The possibilities listed in the song are time, money, drugs, religion, and science. When it comes to the issue of autism, especially, drugs and science loom rather large indeed. The message inside the envelope possibly constitutes a response to the social pressures to change Byrne’s “different thinking.” The feeling of paranoia becomes more intense through being expressed in a more critical register that moves beyond the perspective of the narrator voiced by Byrne. Such a move signifies that, rather than reflecting on his own autistic mind’s rigidity, Byrne might be forging an empathetic connection from autistic to neurotypical and vice versa. Why should you (as an autistic or neurotypical) feel compelled to change your mind—and at what cost? The song’s insistent rhythmic groove tugs at your sleeve, as if awaiting an answer.

Perhaps, however, to change your mind, you have to consider that there is, really, no place for it. Challenging a traditional humanist mind-body dualism, systems theory regards the mind as not merely one system. The mind “has no specific seat in the body,” Hans-Georg Moeller explains, not “in the

heart, the brain, or anywhere else in the body.” Communication, as a social system, pluralizes a traditional mind-body dualism: “Our minds operate within both a bodily and a social environment” (Moeller, 2012, pp. 63-64). At the end of “Mind,” Byrne’s shape-shifting into a romantic crooner on the line, “And it comes directly from my heart to you,” may sound like a way out of this predicament, but it is a misdirection—playing on the familiar poetic resolution of choosing heart over mind. The abrasive, scratchy guitar solo on the song’s fadeout, from this point of view, is a way of communicating what cannot be said.

The record is full of such misdirection, which catalyzes a sustained inquiry into what is the “self” that can be expressed. In “Mind,” Byrne’s multiple-tracked vocals stage a dialogue/conversation that spins into tedium, resulting in the complaint (as if delivered from the fractured layers of the narrator’s self) that “you’re not even listening to me.” If we recall Frantz’s judgment that Byrne “couldn’t acknowledge where he stopped and other people began” (Frantz, 2020, p. 249), then the song might boil down to a one-sided conversation. Yet, when it comes to observing the song (listening, of course, rather than merely reading the lyrics), we are reminded that, according to systems theory, communication is one-sided (because a system builds up its complexity on only one side, the side of the system).

We can therefore observe that the (in -) jokey, art-school mindset of Byrne (who was an art-school drop-out), Frantz, Weymouth, and Eno may indeed relate to the ambivalent positions of systems theory (Byrne, 2012, pp. 33-36; Frantz, 2020, pp. 35-71; Dayal, 2009, pp. 13-27). In “Mind,” the playful round-and-round-we-go attitude encapsulated in the repeated line, “Everything seems to be up in the air at this point,” has the same feeling of dizziness that is the (non/anti-) foundation of systems theory. But noticeably, the album takes the system-theoretical principle of contingency (things could be otherwise) and pushes, twists it into a rather worrisome articulation. The noise produced by complex social environments, as “Mind” warns us, makes communicating difficult, especially when we are unable to forget the uncomfortable reality of the non-identity of systems: no one is communicating; no one is listening.

To return to Byrne, the credited lyricist of “Everything seems to be up in the air at this point,” such “equivocal and tenuous ‘coping’ statements” fit

on the cooler side of the emotional range of rock, punk, and post-punk performance (Lethem, 2012, p. 19). Perhaps Byrne is exploring where these cooler emotions, socially entangled with his autistic personhood, might lead him as a performer. Note, I did not claim that it “will” lead him, because, after all, not only do I not want to assume the validity of typically reductive claims about autism and affect; I would instead propose that Byrne’s different thinking generates possibilities for the music of Talking Heads, by closing the traditional routes of settling down into a fixed identity as a post-punk band. Predictably, a post-punk band would put out a record that checks all the boxes, such as too-easily categorizing *Fear of Music* as a protest statement against the cold mo(ur)ning in America instigated by Reagan.

If “Mind” shows Byrne building a bridge between autistic and neurotypical, then the next song, “Paper,” specifically expresses the difficulty of communication, another characteristic of the autistic experience. Allusions to writer’s block in the chorus, “fit it on the paper/get it on the paper,” collide with an image of radioactive fallout in the verses: “[Some] rays pass [right] through” (Lethem 2012, pp.29-30). Lassoing Byrne’s lyrical mash-ups is a twangy guitar riff, sounding like a 60s hybrid of country and surf music; yet rather than the wide-open spaces of the frontier traditionally depicted in country music (and its oceanic counterpart in surf music), “Paper” evokes the claustrophobic bomb shelters of the atomic frontier. On an apocalyptic note the scene is set for the chorus, and here, Byrne’s line deliveries hit especially hard, because one cannot communicate any thoughts without substantial friction. There is thus a disjuncture between “Mind” (the failure to receive information, and to change one’s mind) and “Paper” (the failure to express what needs to be said). For psychic and social systems, the latter, which is any communication system, must remain separate, as systems-theorist Niklas Luhmann explains. Otherwise, there would be the constant anxiety that one’s most private thoughts could be overheard. To prevent unwanted telepathy, there is a cost, which is that any communication is beyond psychic control. Put in a way that a hyper-aware artist like Byrne would likely appreciate, Luhmann says, “Humans cannot communicate. . . . Only communication can communicate” (as cited in Wolfe, 2010, p. 19).

This particular couplet in “Paper,” “Even though it was never, it was never written down/Still might be a chance that it might work out,” is a rather uncanny response to the systems-theoretical statement about the inability

of humans to communicate. Whether it works out or not does sound to me like a commentary on the contingencies that influence all psychic and social systems. As Lethem notes, it is another “tenuous coping’ statement,” which, in this register, would connect “Mind” to “Paper” (and successive songs on the record as well), and leads us, self-referentially, to Byrne’s thinking on display in the studio; Lethem imagines the band’s creative struggles: “We sounded pretty good in that jam a while ago. If only the tape had been running” (Lethem, 2010, 19, 31, emphasis in original). After all, any professional musician (myself included) would expound on the riskiness of constructing songs out of jam sessions in the studio.

At the same time, musicians often have, at times, felt some kind of telepathy at work during performances; Luhmann would say one of the crucial effects of contingency is that it can create glitches, moments of connection, what he calls “interpenetration,” between systems, signaling a lack of absolute closure. Systems, Luhmann would assert, can really be regarded as separate only from an “operational” perspective. Perhaps the simplest example of the lack of absolute closure between psychic and social systems is that we must “pay attention” to communicate effectively (Luhmann, 2013, pp. 193–96). And this example, possibly, discloses something important about the collective creative drive of Talking Heads.

We can fine-tune our exploration of Byrne’s thinking on *Fear of Music* by stating, however defined, that it is a form of “paying attention” (regardless of where/to whom/what this attention is directed). As Melanie Yergeau would contend, it cannot be used to exclude autistic persons from having “a theory of mind,” Simon Baron-Cohen’s problematic hypothesis on autism; lacking this theory “is not simply to lack a theory of others’ minds—it is also to lack an awareness of one’s own mind” (Yergeau, 2018, p. 12). Not to put too fine a point on it, being unable to “change your mind,” as scripted by Byrne, testifies, at the very least, to an “awareness of one’s own mind.” Furthermore, Byrne’s plea for communication between autistic and neurotypical and vice-versa exemplifies Damian Milton’s theory of the double empathy problem, which refutes Baron-Cohen (Milton, 2012).

Following this line of thinking (that supports Yergeau and Milton), we can return to Byrne’s earlier self-reflection about his oscillating between private quietude and public performativity; he says that it felt “sort of normal to

me. Maybe *normal* is the wrong word, but it worked” (Byrne, 2012, p. 33, emphasis in original). “Normal” derives from “norm,” and *Fear of Music* heavily interrogates social norms, often by challenging if/how they work. Foregrounding contingency is one way of testing the social norms of communication by/through a deconstructive voicing, such as: what I am saying/what am I saying? Byrne does just that at the end of “Paper:” “Go ahead and rip up, rip up the paper/Go ahead and tear up, tear up the paper.”

Perhaps the difficulty of communication is further normalized by the name it is commonly called: “writer’s block.” But systems theory would refuse such a simple name to call such a complex concept, one based on the contingencies that affect the self-steering of communication systems (with glitchy moments of psychic mediation). As we have observed, Byrne appears to have rehearsed some of the questions systems theory raises about communication, such as, how do you talk about thinking? One of the rhetorical moves Byrne accordingly makes is evident in “Heaven,” co-written with Harrison, which pressures further the distinction between naming and calling in the first lines:

Everyone is trying
To get into the bar
The name of the bar
The bar is called Heaven

Lethem, picking up on the rhetorical provocation, says, “So, now we know what the name of the bar is called. But what is the name of the bar?” (Lethem, 2012, p. 90). Even as we travel into the metaphysical realm, we face the difficulties of communicating our thoughts, of fitting/getting them “on the paper.” “Heaven” extends both the thematic and musical structure of “Paper,” venturing further into the country-music genre. Drawing on a straightforward country-chord progression, the verses in “Heaven” use so-called “cowboy chords,” played on the lower end of the guitar neck, that feature the sound of open strings. Here, country-music’s open frontier approaches infinity, cueing these lines in “Heaven”:

They play my favorite song
Play it once again
Play it all night long

While the words and music, as Lethem remarks, do feel repetitive – for instance, the “kiss” mentioned in the last verse is also on infinite loop (Lethem, 2012, pp. 90-91), they do not elide the contingency of communication, which suddenly emerges in the (in)famous chorus:

Heaven is a place
A place where nothing
Nothing ever happens

Although the chorus deconstructs, arguably, the norm from which all norms derive, Byrne does not sing the lyrics in any way that could be interpreted as a conventionally post-punk assault on religion. Instead, Byrne’s vocals have the ambivalent tone that is used in “Paper” to reflect on a busted relationship: “Had a lot of fun, could’ve been a lot better.” Byrne once more uses misdirection: asking what is expected from heaven to get to the more down-to-earth question of what is expected from him. Here, however, the misdirection becomes doubled, for the literal interpretation of the chorus also compels us to rethink “Heaven” as a kind of autistic safe space where “nothing ever happens.”

“Memories Can’t Wait” further slows the pace. Compared with the home-on-the-range moseying of the rhythm section on “Heaven,” the bass/drums on “Memories Can’t Wait” sound absolutely leaden. Drenched in echo, Byrne’s tape-manipulated vocals speed up and slow down, a portent of collapse. What appears to collapse is the narrator’s perception of reality, memories crossing over and back from psychic to social systems. Telepathy turns inside out as memories manifest as mysterious party guests that first evade attention: “Do you remember anyone here? No, you don’t remember anything at all.” The guests crash the narrator’s psychic processes, mixing up pleasure and pain: “There’s a party in my mind/And I hope it never stops.”

In “Memories Can’t Wait,” we observe the interpenetration of psychic and social systems: the party never stops, because communication, as a social system, never begins or ends. Regarded as a systems-theoretical allegory, then, “Memories Can’t Wait” might be Byrne’s trying to figure out simply how to make the best of it – and, at the same time, to try to live with his different thinking.

II. “Heard about Houston? Heard about Detroit? Heard about Pittsburgh PA?”

Byrne also tries to make listeners hear his different thinking. Following “Paper,” “Cities” fades in with a panicked velocity: a wailing siren warns of a collapse that is imminent, already happening, or having happened. Right before Byrne sings the first verse, the mood of panic, conveyed by a restless minor-chord progression, seems to be attenuated by a shift to a single, unchanging major chord for the duration of the verse. This major chord appears to signal “you are here” or “start here.” Thus, the tonality of the verse sounds like a safe haven, a shelter from whatever chaos the siren is indicating. Like Gary Numan’s hit song, “Cars,” released in the same year as *Fear of Music*, “Cities” anticipates Temple Grandin’s observation that autistic children seek the solace of more closed spaces, and such an observation would relate to the search of the song’s narrator, albeit another one of Byrne’s personas that play on/off of traditional humanist representations of adulthood—to fit in, to “find myself a city to live in” (Bruni, 2021; Wolfe, 2010).

Lethem spots an interesting omission: the list, albeit brief, of cities does not include New York, the city most associated with Talking Heads, although maybe Byrne, in the guise of the narrator, is playing with us, as he alludes to omitting other cities due to a memory lapse, “Did I forget to mention, forget to mention Memphis?” (Lethem, 2012). This allusion asks, who is paying attention? Byrne? The song’s narrator? The listener? But Wolfe, in his application of systems theory to evaluate Grandin’s argument, would insist on de-centering subjectivity, from “who,” to “what” is paying attention. Displacing “humanism’s trope of visibility-as-mastery,” Wolfe calls out the illusion “that the ‘invisible’ is only—indeed, merely, that which has not yet been seen by a subject who is, in principle, capable of seeing all” (Wolfe, 2010, pp. 131-32). As I have suggested previously, Wolfe’s systems-theoretical critique of seeing can extend to hearing (Bruni, 2020), which is epitomized in Lethem’s commentary on the alternate mix of “Cities” found on the 2005 CD reissue of *Fear of Music*. Lethem thinks that, because the sirens are far louder in this mix, New York City emerges into the audio field.

Drawing upon his childhood memories, Lethem explains,

New York City in the seventies was a routine sirenscape, a terrain lit by sonic flares. Those effects, to which a human being can only acclimate up to a certain limit . . . [testify] as to the time and place it was recorded, as though the walls of the studio were as porous as those of the typical tenement. (Lethem, 2012, pp. 50-51)

Another imaginative, multi-temporal instance of self-referentiality, the cranked-up sirens on the 2005 mix also testify to the physical limits of the ability of human hearing to manage sonic overload.

“Cities,” and the song that follows, “Life During Wartime,” traverse urban landscapes; “Life During Wartime,” about revolutionaries picking their way through a ruined city, raises the stakes to an apocalyptic auditory level: “Heard about Houston? Heard about Detroit? Heard about Pittsburgh PA?” It is as if, no longer being questioned if we are paying attention, we are being exhorted to; the implication, according to Lethem, is that these cities are “*all the same city now*”—a spatial disorientation that seems fueled by paranoia (Lethem, 2012, p. 55, emphasis in original).

Yet, as I have previously observed, both “Life During Wartime” and Numan’s “Cars” transform paranoia into a subject for artistic re-examination (Bruni, 2021). From an artistic standpoint, the question of whether paranoia should be trusted informs the communication breakdown sketched out in “Life During Wartime” (Why write a letter/send a postcard/keep a notebook?) and adds light and heat to the logical blockade in the chorus: “This ain’t no party, this ain’t no disco, this ain’t no fooling around.” Sung over a pummeling dance-floor groove, no less.

“Air” reprises the paranoid sirenscape of NYC: we can trust or distrust our perceptions, but the pollution from the tenement fires not only registers a psychic stress; the bad air could telegraph climate change, eco-systemic distress that registers on a sensitive body. In “Air,” this warning is repeatedly stated as a question, “What is happening to my skin?” We find ourselves back in the limited visual field of “Cities,” reminding us that we can never see everything—including, of course, that which threatens us—as Byrne sings, “Air can hurt you too.”

III. “It’ll be over in a minute or two”

The closing songs on *Fear of Music*, “Animals,” “Electric Guitar,” and “Drugs,” Lethem ponders, might resemble Zeno’s arrows, “therefore never to reach their goal” (Lethem, 2012, p. 74). But Zeno’s paradox, that is, if an arrow’s flight were “to be freeze-framed at any point in time, the arrow would appear to be at rest,” informs, for Yergeau, arguments about how “autistic people can never reach rhetoricity,” because they are seen as “forever suspended” on “an autism spectrum”:

[I]ndividuals deemed low functioning are disqualified from rhetorical subjectivity because of their disabilities. But individuals deemed high-functioning are likewise disqualified from rhetorical subjectivity. . . . because they are too far from the autism pole but not close enough to the normalcy pole. . . . (Yergeau, 2018, p. 43)

How *Fear of Music* interrogates social norms fits especially well with Brian Massumi’s challenge to Zeno: “A path is not comprised of positions. It is nondecomposable: a dynamic unity” (as cited in Yergeau, 2018, p. 72). For example, the circular lyrics in “Mind” and lyrical mashups in “Paper” refuse to be “suspended” or take “positions.” If normalcy is a zero-sum game, these songs’ narrators, scripted by Byrne, question where the mind is that makes the rules and then rip up, tear up the rules.

I trust that no one thinks I am claiming that Byrne, as an autistic person, does not have considerable rhetorical skills. Indeed, the opening lines of “Heaven” challenge the traditional claim that autistic art could be said to lack a certain crucial degree of stylistic complexity, the rhetorical “domains” of “[d]eception, pretense, and social connection” (Yergeau, 2018, p. 54). But Byrne’s mocking lyrics and vocal delivery in “Animals” remind us that any rhetorical domain belongs to verbal and written language, which animals (with few exceptions) do not use to communicate. The song’s human narrator projects a traditional, cliché attitude of superiority over animals. The joke, of course, is that, by any social standards, the narrator uses language rather clumsily: “Animals think they’re pretty smart/Shit on the ground, see in the dark.” The narrator’s awkwardness is set to musical backing tracks that sound as if a vinyl copy of a James Brown record had been left out in the sun, and warped. While it was customary for post-punk bands to use Brown’s

funk beats to create a minimalist backdrop for issuing social diatribes, the unreliable narrator and sputtering rhythmic pulse of “Animals” bring out, in full force, the creative exhaustion, earlier constituted as a paradox in “Life During Wartime” (“This ain’t no party, this ain’t no disco”), of the post-punk staging of politics on the dance floor.

Stating that “Animals,” “Electric Guitar,” and “Drugs” thematize “the album’s own dissolving authority and control,” Lethem suggests that the vocal delivery on “Animals” would be taken more seriously if it were “in a lower, more persuasive register” (Lethem, 2012, pp. 98, 100). Granted, Byrne tends to sing in higher registers, which becomes a musical component of the joke: he knows he cannot pull off, vocally, such a belligerent character. An additional irony, however, is that the humanist argument that language usage comprises a crucial distinction between human- and non-human animals is disputed by systems theory. From a distinctly post-humanist perspective, Luhmann declares that “language is not a system,” because language belongs to either a communication system or psychic (thinking) system (Luhmann, 2013, p. 204).

As I have written elsewhere, Grandin’s self-analysis as an autistic person highlights how, as Wolfe brings out, “her mental life is intensely visual, not verbal,” which de-centers verbal language as a traditional humanist signifier. Therefore, what the narrator in “Animals” claims is a drawback of the perception of non-human animals, that they “see in the dark,” is as misguided as everything else he says (Bruni, 2021; Wolfe, 2010, p. 129).

Interpreted along the lines of the heavy-handed (self-) satire of “Animals,” “Electric Guitar” appears deliberately composed to fail, attempting to tackle a massively ambitious theme—the government’s outlawing of rock music – in roughly three and a half minutes. The absurdly simplistic musical choice to convey this theme with a martial drumbeat is a significant part of the satire. By comparison, Frank Zappa’s conceptual treatment of a very similar theme, in *Joe’s Garage*, released in the same year, spans three full-length albums. Hence, the intentional incoherence of “Electric Guitar” structures how Byrne critically evaluates the claim that technical incompetence, often valued in punk and post-punk music, offers possibilities for social resistance: “Tune this electric guitar” (Lethem, 2012). The loss of authority, initiated in “Animals,” points to a systems-theoretical de-centering of language; in “Electric Guitar,” the lyrics matter less than whatever the overall song is

communicating, but only communication can steer itself, suggested by the vague, multiply repeated conclusion: “Someone controls electric guitar.”

The closing song, “Drugs,” was originally titled “Electricity.” Lethem reports that, when the song was performed in the later part of 1978, the last line was “Electricity – call it by name;” on the record it changes to “Electricity – that’s what I call it,” evoking the paradox of calling/naming in “Heaven” (Lethem, 2012, p. 131). The chorus connects the original and album song title by describing a drug experience as an electric surge:

I’m charged up, don’t put me down
Don’t feel like talking, don’t mess around
I feel mean, I feel okay
I’m charged up, electricity

Yet, according to systems theory, determining what a drug “causes” and its “(side) effects” becomes problematic. As Moeller elaborates, “Causes and effects that are observed are, like all other observations, dependent on the observing system and its means of observation” (Moeller, 2012, p. 66). In an uncanny response (similar to the one in “Paper”), the self-observation of the narrator, voiced by Byrne, is foregrounded in the song’s bridge:

I’m charged up, I’m kinda wooden
I’m barely moving, I study motion
I study myself, I fooled myself
I’m charged up, it’s pretty intense

For Lethem, the narrator’s self-observation supports the change in song title. After all, Lethem says, no one “gets high on electricity”; changing the title makes the song feel “more grounded,” because “despite drugs being a ‘head trip,’ you must first convey them through your body” (Lethem, 2012, p. 132). But the narrator never says anything about being “high,” nor are the “drugs,” as such, ever named. While any “head trip” on drugs happens through the body, it is possible that the drugs may themselves be manifested by the body, and these drugs may not get you high (consider, for instance, the opening line from Neko Case’s 2013 song, “Night Still Comes:” “My brain makes drugs to keep me slow”). The self-observation in the bridge of “Drugs (Electricity),” alluding to medications used to treat autism (and ADHD or anxiety, two

frequently co-morbid conditions) that make one feel “charged up” (focused) or “wooden” (sedated), connects with Yergeau’s self-observation as an autistic person: “When I enter a social space, the electricity of the other, intervening bodies recedes in my presence.” As the electricity is redirected away from her, she continues, “There is a certain awkwardness that inheres in rhetorical situations touched by the autistic” (Yergeau, 2018, p. 36). Electricity, it turns out, does not get one high, rather it focuses or slows communication (Byrne), or makes communication awkward (Yergeau).

In keeping with the previous two songs’ thematic of the erosion of authority, “Drugs (Electricity)” projects social disorder, especially in Byrne’s intentional lack of breath control (Byrne, 2012; Lethem, 2020), the first verse (“Feel like murder”), and the second verse (“The boys are making a big mess”). As the experience described in the song is anything but being high, its intensity seems unpleasant, and you feel with the narrator as a stand-in for Byrne, and possibly his being an autistic person, when, at the end of the first verse, he says, perhaps hopefully, “It’ll be over in a minute or two.” There is another level of self-reference here, for Lethem calculates that the vocals last for approximately two minutes and twenty seconds, not exactly a conclusive ending for the ambitious artistic statement *Fear of Music* has been widely regarded as (Lethem, 2012).

It turns out that “Drugs (Electricity)” is a microcosm of the record’s holding together while falling apart, created by a band whose identity is similarly in flux. Eno and Byrne stripped down completely the song’s preliminary mix, building it back up by creating new parts. As Byrne chronicles, they worked “on the parts simultaneously but without each other’s knowledge. Brian would play half a bass part and I would play half a bass part and we’d put them together as if it was one part” (as cited in Lethem, 2012, p. 133). Inspired by Dadaist methods for freeing communication from the constraints of humanist logic, this compositional strategy (which also shapes the opening song, “I Zimbra”) is channeled through Eno and Byrne’s interest in cybernetics. At the end of the record, the development of a systemic, autistic worldview culminates in an act of artistic negation – in the final mix of “Drugs (Electricity), Frantz, Weymouth, and Harrison vanish. For Lethem, it feels like a jolt of creative dis-tension: “To fall in love with ‘Drugs’ is to fall in love, a little, with the future death of this band” (Lethem, 2012, p. 133). Byrne did not leave Talking Heads after *Fear of Music*; conversely, the band

then adds more musicians, expanding, on the fourth record, *Remain in Light* (1980), beyond the identity constituted by the original quartet. The question is thus raised: when is the band Talking Heads, and when is it not? As Byrne might respond, however, there is no position to take: “Everything seems to be up in the air at this point.”

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