

## Final Paper: Environmental Politics and Rhetoric

### *Wasteland, Baby!* Album by Hozier and Themes of Climate Change in Popular Music

Andrew Hozier-Byrne is a 29-year old Irish musician who rose to fame in 2013 and 2014 with the release of his hit song “Take Me To Church.” He had not released music since then until he came out with his most recent album in March of 2019 called *Wasteland, Baby!*, which he describes as a collection of “Love songs for the apocalypse.” He shifted gears between his first and second albums, showing on his latest work that his focus is on climate change and other global political issues. On *Wasteland, Baby!*, he uses discursive and non-discursive methods to convey his message about the horrors of climate change and political inaction on the issue. His lyrics are one of the more obvious elements of the album that show his passion for the beauty of nature and what the future will hold for the natural world if we continue down this path. He draws parallels between the tumultuousness of a human’s romantic relationship and a human’s relationship with a crumbling world. While most of the stories he tells on this album are anthropocentric, he manages to maintain a great respect for nature throughout, ensuring that it plays an equal part in the narrative. He also utilizes ecoacoustics and environmental aesthetics in the instrumental aspects of the album to add another facet to the inclusion of nature throughout the songs. His album art is another aspect of the piece that relates to nature and climate justice. The cover features a painting of Hozier with scenes of environmental destruction and protest integrated into it subtly. He uses all the different layers of his album to convey his messaging about the Earth turning into a wasteland, and his folksy inspirations make for a beautiful soundtrack for the end of the world.

The first portion of this analysis will cover the discursive elements of the *Wasteland, Baby!* album, namely the lyrics of the three selected songs that either directly address or allude to

elements of climate change or environmentalism. These three songs are “Nina Cried Power,” “Be,” and the title track, “Wasteland, Baby!”

The opening track on the album is called “Nina Cried Power,” a powerful protest song that chronicles the history of artists using music as a backbone to their respective social movements. The verses of this song include phrases like “It’s not the song, it is the singing,” and “It’s not the waking, it’s the rising.” These lines express Hozier’s pragmatic intentions with this song, it is a call to action. If one wishes to make change, awareness is not enough. He sings “It’s the heat that drives the light, it’s the fire it ignites” to express how the power of anger and action drives change. These calls to action in the verses are complemented by the repetitive chorus, which is essentially a list of all the people throughout history that have successfully “cried power” in their time. Many of these social justice heroes like Mavis Staples, who is featured on the track, were fighting for issues like gender equality, racial equality, and LGBTQ+ rights. Moreover, the track includes shout outs to artists that used nature as the subject of some of their music: Joni Mitchell, Woody Guthrie, and Marvin Gaye. Each of these artists wrote songs about what environmentalism meant to them in their time, paralleling the timelines of the five primary antagonisms in environmental rhetoric. Woody Guthrie wrote one of the most iconic songs about nature in United States history, “This Land Is Your Land” in 1944. While iconic to the point of being taught in elementary school music classes, “This Land Is Your Land” is considered rather controversial as well. The theme of the song is conquering and owning nature, which is the ultimate anthropocentric view. The song aligns with Gifford Pinchot’s conservationist perspective that land should be appreciated but prioritized for human use. Joni Mitchell released the song “Big Yellow Taxi” in 1970, during the time that public health was the primary antagonism. She sings “Put away the DDT, I don’t care about the spots on my apples, leave me

the birds and the bees.” Around the same time, Marvin Gaye released “Mercy, Mercy Me” about pollution, singing “Oil wasted on the oceans and upon our seas, fish full of mercury.” Both of these songs chronicle the public’s primary antagonisms relating to environmentalism: concern about public health, which famously came to a height with the Love Canal case in upstate New York. In Love Canal, a young mother named Lois Gibbs called for a cleanup of the toxic waste in her town, for it was polluting the environment and causing children to get sick (Pezzullo, 43). While Guthrie’s song adhered more to the dominant social paradigm, for it was about conquering land for the sake of being a free American, Mitchell and Gaye edged more towards the new environmental paradigm with their songs calling out the government for their lack of responsibility. Hozier deliberately calls out artists he believes made significant change during their time, and his own album incorporates elements of the new environmental paradigm. He appreciates these artists for creating the soundtrack to environmentalism in their era, and Hozier himself seems to create the next edition of this soundtrack with his album *Wasteland, Baby!* A lot of the album references refugees, inequality, and racism, which aligns with the newest iteration of antagonism: Climate Justice. This supports the idea that music relating to the environment and nature runs parallel to mainstream antagonisms within the subjects

The next song that relates directly to climate change on this album is “Be.” This is a powerful and passionate song that includes all the essential ingredients in a Hozier song: a backing gospel-inspired chorus, allusions to religious figures, and a commanding message. The chorus of this song says “Be! Be as you’ve always been,” mocking listeners who are resistant to drastic change. The verses list all the tragedy that will happen: “When St. Peter loses cool and bars the gates, when Atlas acts the maggot makes his arms shake,” Followed by “Be as you’ve always been.” This is an example of the religious and mythological creatures wreaking havoc on

humanity, personifying the issues climate change will bring (Atlas, the Greek titan who is tasked with holding up the sky, shaking his arms is in reference to earthquakes and storms). This format of the song is consistent throughout; the verses list all the tragedies that will occur and the chorus continues to scoff, implying that no one is actually willing to change. Another powerful verse proposes, “When the man who gives the order is born next time around on the boat sent back, When the bodies starving at the border are on TV giving people the sack. When the sea rises to meet us, when there’s nothing left for you and I to do. When there’s nobody upstairs to receive us.” This section blatantly references President Trump and his refusal of refugees from various humanitarian crises, asking what would happen if those roles were reversed. Hozier again brings in his religious roots in this passage, that there may be no real Heaven, and we have destroyed the only other place we could live. The sea is rising to meet us, yet everyone will still “Be as we’ve always been.” This song has a strong constitutive function because it has religious references that allow for an impactful interpretation (Pezzullo, 14). It uses apocalyptic narratives that parallel the apocalypse outlined in the Book of Revelation in the New Testament but utilizes it to push for action on climate issues. By using this religious imagery, Hozier finds a creative way to connect with audiences about climate change through a shared context, similar to the example of the support for the gray wolves being reintroduced to Yellowstone National Park. Bruce Babbitt, Secretary of the Interior in 1995, used religious stories to convince members of Congress to support the Endangered Species Act (Pezzullo, 39). This type of rhetoric is brilliantly executed by Hozier in efforts to connect his message with listeners who may have a similar religious background to him.

Finally, the last song on this album is the title track “Wasteland, Baby!” This is a soft yet melodramatic song that tells the juxtaposing story of falling in love while the world is quite

literally falling apart. The melodramatic narrative includes a dramatic moral opposition between the good and the bad (Fezzullo, 60). Hozier describes this track as a “Love song for the end of the world,” and the opening line perfectly sets up that narrative. He sings, “All the fear and the fire of the end of the world, happens each time a boy falls in love with a girl. Happens great, happens sweet. Happily, I’m unfazed here, too.” The tone is already depressing but it poetically describes how disconnected people can be from tragedy because they are caught up in their own lives. With his solemn words, he paints the picture of a city decimated by climate change and a young couple taking it in. He captures the feeling of being paralyzingly overwhelmed with the lines, “The day that we watch the death of the sun, that the clouds and the cold, and those jeans you have on, and you gaze unafraid as they sob from the city roofs.” He reflects on all that will be gone with the fall of the environment, missing things as simple as the clouds. While his partner stares into the horror, they seem numb to the screaming and sobbing of those around them. One more powerful line from this song comes unaccompanied by music near the end. He sings, “The stench of the sea and the absence of green, are the death of all things that are seen and unseen. Not an end, but the start of all things that are left to do.” This passage nears experiencing the sublime response, or the primitive feelings of “awe and exultation” that come with experiencing the power of the world (Pezzullo, 53). This song is full of bewilderment at the power of nature and by extension, the power of humans to destroy it. It is a powerful choice to use this moment in the album to not reference God as he had earlier, as it seems that at this point in the story of this music collection, God had abandoned him and his lover. This song has an interesting mix of anthropocentrism and biocentrism, for it focuses primarily on the human emotions experienced during this apocalypse. However, it was interesting to choose the wording, “The death of all things that are seen and unseen,” because it has a double meaning. The

“unseen” things Hozier is referencing could be a biocentric literal meaning of bacteria and other vital microscopic beings, or he could mean the unseen themes of love, religion, loss, and passion that are discussed on this album.

Overall, the discursive elements on this album, namely the lyrics of the songs, are relatively anthropocentric; they focus primarily on the human experience during climate tragedy. The album on the whole is a bit of an environmental melodrama with human characters at the center of it all. Each song discusses the human experience differently, yet always has the undertones of it being ripped away due to political fighting or environmental disaster.

Not only does Hozier communicate on climate change through the discursive elements of this album, but he is a genius in his implementation of non-discursive elements as well. The second part of this analysis will focus on these elements, specifically the utilization of ecoacoustics and other methods to convey elements of nature within the songs and the album art, the only still visual that accompanies the album.

The music that accompanies lyrics is perhaps just as important, and Hozier utilizes sounds inspired by various aspects of nature to complement his words. “Climate change music applies real-world environmental dynamics as musical methods,” says Matthew Burtner, an expert on using environmental systems as instruments in his own music (Burtner, 145). This sort of music is extremely impactful because it gives the listener a close listen to what the world around them sounds like. Moreover, a new movement within environmental music is conveying climate change. Listeners can experience and understand the complex effects of climate change through sound. While most music using ecoacoustics primarily focuses on recording and playing back sounds of waves, snow falling, wind and other naturally occurring sounds, Hozier’s music applies these same concepts in less obvious ways (Burtner, 149). One of the clearest examples of

using ecoacoustics in this album is on the song Shrike, a song named after a type of bird that builds its nest out of thorns and other sharp objects so it can impale prey on the pointy bits. The song is about a lost relationship and the devastation it caused the narrator, who likens himself to a bird throughout. There is one percussion element that is repeated during the song, a quick *tak-tak* sound that is eerily similar to the clicking and squeaking noises that shrikes make when defending itself. Using this imitation of a natural sound to work with the themes of the song is brilliant and adds another dimension to those willing to listen closely. Ancient Alaskan composers used similar tactics to demonstrate appreciation for the local wildlife. Specifically, they used karajjak, a throat singing technique to imitate seals and geese in song to celebrate hunting season (Burtner, 147). Another song on the album that uses musical interpretation of natural sounds to enhance the piece is “Movement,” a song that is sung to an unspecified “you” about the beauty of their movement. Lyrically, the song likens the person or thing moving to light dancing through water, a boat on the ocean, and the branches of a willow tree in the wind. The accompaniment in this piece perfectly pairs with these metaphors, it features smooth, short riffs of what sounds like a xylophone interpreting short, choppy waves during the verses. This is juxtaposed with rhythmic clapping at each peak of the xylophone riff. During the choruses, this pattern slows a bit. At the bridge of the song, these sounds grow much louder and more intense, they are paired with dynamic vocals and intensified drums. This accompaniment embodies the liveliness of a sea splashing and rising up into some huge waves, or the wind growing stronger as it blows through the branches of a tree. Therefore, using this as the track to the chosen lyrics was the perfect pairing. Though these songs do not depict climate change specifically, as Burtner’s recordings of glacial activity do, they help the listener to see nature in a different light. As climate change progresses, many will experience a sense of loss for the places and things they

once knew, so the purpose of conveying nature through music is twofold (Burtner, 159). Music about and including elements of nature will both preserve auditory elements that may eventually be lost like enjoying the small waves against a wall or a peaceful wind, but this music will also inspire people to appreciate their world in a new way. Hearing the sound of a bird in a song by their favorite artist will perhaps inspire people to care more about the preservation of species.

Finally, the album art of *Wasteland, Baby!* is a subtle, but very powerful non-discursive element of the piece on the whole. Hozier's mother, Raine Hozier-Byrne is a painter, and she hand painted the album artwork for both this album and Hozier's debut album, *To Be Alone*. She takes reference photographs of him for the art and then incorporates original paintings and landscapes into the photo of Hozier depicting some of the primary themes on the album. The cover of *Wasteland, Baby!* is a surreal scene of Hozier underwater with household objects floating around him and light dancing across him gently. She describes each element of the cover art as "very deliberate" ensuring that she was not just painting a beautiful picture, but rather one that complements the piece. On Hozier's hand is an image of "public dissent," a person standing with one fist in the air in a barren wasteland. He stands on a fence proudly yelling for his cause, but the ground is yellow, and there appears to be a smoggy sky in the background. On his chest, there is an image of refugees landing on a coast, shuffling out of inflatable rafts. Both of these elements are still anthropocentric, as climate activism and climate refugees are both issues focused on humans being impacted by climate change. They further the constitutive function of the entire album, by visually showing listeners what the effects of climate change are and will continue to be. Specifically, the refugees arriving is related to the antagonisms of environmental justice and climate justice. Smack in the middle of the album cover, Hozier is acknowledging

that the world has created refugees from its carelessness about climate issues, and that poor migrants are facing the worst end of these disasters.

In conclusion, Hozier is one of the few mainstream musicians to create a multifaceted album about climate change, nature, and its effect on humans. He beautifully and gently covers these topics through discursive and non-discursive elements. The lyrics of his songs describe nature so poetically that listeners can feel his passion, they feel emboldened to act. He uses a good mixture of protest music and sentimentally sublime hymns to capture the emotions that come with the end of the world as we know it. He utilizes non-discursive methods like ecoacoustics to convey more of his message, making for a deeper understanding to each song. Using accompaniments inspired by nature and its inhabitants, the music itself draws listener closer to elements they may rarely see for themselves. Hozier used his album art as another opportunity to convey the effects of climate change and the strained global political climate. His mother used her artistry to compose a surreal painting of her son with elements included that show the trouble the world is going through. At his concert in Chicago on November 6, 2019, Hozier expressed his passion for tackling global political tensions in his music, but he is getting increasingly frustrated at governments resisting change. He expressed that in his upcoming music, he is much more forthcoming about his anger and plans to create more obvious protest music. He said, "Forget about subtle art, what's not subtle is the murder of protesters, and what's not subtle is the jack boot coming down in Orwell's picture of the future [...] f\*ck it, it's not subtle, but let's do it." He then shared with the audience some unreleased music that he plans on finalizing next year. Hozier's first album was almost entirely love songs, *Wasteland, Baby!* was a mix of love and protest, and according to him, he will continue to lean more towards protest music in the future. Hozier's anger about climate change and other issues is seemingly shared by

many other celebrities, but he is one of the few that is putting that anger into his art and advocating using his platform. Hopefully, other artists will follow his lead towards real advocacy and action.

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