

2021

Music Video Review: "O Superman" - Laurie Anderson

Jacob Thomas (Kiko) F. Yago
University of the Pacific, k_yago@u.pacific.edu

Jacob Thomas (Kiko) F. Yago is a Music Management major, expecting to graduate in 2023, and a Stockton native. He is interested in working in the Performers' Rights area of ...[Read More](#)

This article was written as part of the curriculum for the Bachelor of Music in Music Management and the Bachelor of Science in Music Industry Studies at University of the Pacific. Each student conducted research based on his or her own areas of interest and study.

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Recommended Citation

Yago, Jacob Thomas (Kiko) F. (2021) "Music Video Review: "O Superman" - Laurie Anderson," *Backstage Pass*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 19.

Available at: <https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/backstage-pass/vol4/iss1/19>

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Music Video Review: "O Superman" - Laurie Anderson

Jacob Thomas (Kiko) F. Yago

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vkfpi2H8tOE>

In 1979-1980, the American Embassy in Iran was under siege by supporters of the Iranian Revolution. "O Superman" is a music video that offers social commentary about the technological failures that the United States military had faced and how the government had failed to serve the people during this time. The 8:27 video was released by Laurie Anderson in 1981. In it, the lines "Cause when love is gone /There's always justice /And when justice is gone /There's always force /And when force is gone /There's always Mom / Hi Mom!" can be interpreted as: *When peace is disturbed, those who disturb the peace will be held accountable -- and when they aren't held accountable, the people have the power to enforce beyond their government -- and when the people aren't listened to, there is no solution but to move on --* illustrating the harsh reality at that point of time in the foreign affairs of the United States.

As a song exercising minimalism, there are two alternating chords and a voice consistently on a pedal tone with the syllable "ha," plus spoken vocals which run through a vocoder. As a solo performance, this brings a sense of emptiness and reality to an individual's perception of the Iran hostage crisis. The piece includes elements from aria and opera, Anderson took these influences and made a contemporary piece combining the two in a way so that the work could be performed by a single person. Despite its minimalism, the song has clear development which keeps the listener's attention -- making the lyrics clearly heard, but the

cryptic lyricism forces the audience to stay engaged in order to find the true message of the piece.

The minimalist approach on the musical content is reflected in the video, with every frame having a purpose and no unnecessary cuts. Anderson speaks to the camera as if to communicate directly with the audience. The video is set in a dark area with just Anderson and a vocoder with a red spotlight shining just behind her. Hand signs and sign language are focal points of the video. Anderson makes a finger gun on the lines, “This is the hand, the hand that takes,” as well as an entire verse with an interpretation in American Sign Language. Although at this time Anderson was a relatively unknown artist, she was speaking to issues beyond what one person can fix; she is personable with the audience in order to speak and connect to those who are remaining silent.

The minimalism of the song is implemented in every possible aspect: music, video production, and technological choices. The technology used has allowed Anderson to perform this opera-inspired piece as a solo work. Although the composition is complex, it did not use any groundbreaking technology. Vocoder and synthesizers were not new technology by any means at the time of composition, but she used this existing technology in a new, groundbreaking way.

This unconventional piece is a prime example of goofy music with a purpose. The message is important and applicable to the situation in Iran in the 1980s, a real issue presented in an intriguing way which encourages listeners to look beyond their immediate lens.