The Rhetorical Search for Identity
A Cluster Analysis of RED’s “Feed the Machine”

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What does it take to become the people we were meant to be? Socially and culturally, life shows that around each corner, a new and improved version of who we are exists to be claimed, and that those who lead create the “correct self-image and qualities” that we know of today. To the forefront come the purposeless thoughts of many “followers” struggling to find identity, pushing individuality to the back seat in the ever changing, ever increasing battle for uniqueness. Themes of deceit and truth, shame and forgiveness, and of woundedness and wholeness all factor heavily into an effort that endlessly searches for a valid and true identity. Those who are struggling to find meaning for their existence at some level, oftentimes recognize their shallowness and desperately hold onto the hollowness of the life they have either inherited or created for themselves. That hollowness remains until the “faceless,” or those who believe they are insignificant nobodies, find their true identity.

The artifact I will analyze is RED’s song, “Feed the Machine.” The song appears on RED’s latest album, Until We Have Faces, released on February 1st, 2011. The band's lineup consists of singer Michael Barnes, guitarist Anthony Armstrong, bassist Randy Armstrong and drummer Joe Rickard, and are known for their Christian rock music while incorporating other alternative and hard rock sounds. To date, RED has released three studio albums: End of Silence (2006), Innocence & Instinct (2009), and Until We Have Faces (2011). The first two albums earned Grammy Award Nominations for Best Rock Gospel Album, and between the first two records combined, RED sold more than 600,000 copies. End of Silence’s first single, "Breathe Into Me," peaked at number 15 on
the U.S. Mainstream Rock chart and won the "Rock Recorded Song of the Year" award at the 38th annual GMA Dove Awards in 2007. RED was voted for the best rock recorded song, “Lost” at the 40th Annual GMA Dove Awards.

**Analysis of “Feed the Machine”**

RED’s song, “Feed the Machine” depicts fearful people who are struggling to keep up appearances (“You mustn't disappoint them/ You mustn't fall behind”) even as they succumb to violent, self-destructive vices (“You need the danger just to feel your heart beat/ You need to die just to find your identity/ You need the knife just to know that you can bleed/ You need the pain now just to feel anything”).

Three key terms characterize “Feed the Machine”: *we, need,* and *machine.* The first key term, *we,* will include the term, *you,* since they both point to the comprehensive audience and public in general. I will treat the terms *you* and *we* as one, clustering around these two words and treating them as if they were one and the same.

**We.** The terminology surrounding the key term of *we* are the key elements of *disappoint, feel, find, know, fall, live, choose, crawling, have, beg,* and *afraid.* *Disappoint* is a feeling of dissatisfaction that follows the failure of expectations. The thought of disappointment commonly is a negative notion that people often strive to avoid, hence the line in the text, “You mustn’t disappoint them.” In this context, it is referring to not only being a disappointment to the expectations of someone else, but also a disappointment to your own abilities. *Feel* occurs to produce a certain impressions; in this case, referring to *danger* and *heartbeat,* connecting that without some exaggerated, external stimulus, there is no feeling. *Find* represents something that is very deep and difficult to locate. It is dynamic, elusive, and not clearly defined, and claiming success
following the search adds to the risk (“Find your identity”). To know in this case is being aware of and testing the truth of something so that it can be regarded as true beyond any doubt. Fall (“In line”) identifies being classified or included, being just another part of the crowd, waiting in line, or to agree with the crowd mindlessly without challenging their thinking. Here, live is described as leading a certain kind of life or living in a certain style, and that if you don’t live according to the established standard, you are deficient or below standard. Choose simply refers to selecting or choosing from a number of alternatives, crawling reveals showing submission or fear toward a certain person or situation and implies a significant level of desperation. To have means to possess in an abstract sense, and in the text, it is implied that without meeting social expectations, you have no life (“Just to have a life to save”). Beg is an elemental term that relates to feel and is referring to asking powerlessly for help from some person or culture that is perceived to be in authority, while afraid is feeling worry, concern, or insecurity because of the feeling that you are lost or off the narrow path defined by the culture (“You need a light just because you’re so afraid”).

**Need.** The key term of need sparks the thought of a condition requiring relief and of what is necessary, but lacking according to the elemental terms grouped around it. These terms that compliment need are: danger, die, knife, pain, death, master, light, heartbeat, identity, bleed, anything, and life to save. It is very interesting the way the author has arranged these concepts so that these clusters can be grouped according to the manner in which they are portrayed in the text. In the first cluster, danger, die, knife, pain, death, master, and light all show what someone needs in order to have the ability to receive and claim the ideas introduced in the second cluster of heartbeat, identity, bleed,
anything, and life to save. The first set of terms is simply causes, and the latter are effects or results of the first. Danger is a risk taken without regard to possible loss, while die typically means to disappear, come to an end, or to fail, and in this case, indicates a dramatic change that initiates the beginning of a new stage or step. You have to die to, or sacrifice who you really are for the sake of being accepted and conforming. (“You need to die just to find your identity”). Knife is represented by being a tool designed for cutting and providing the stimulus for finding and experiencing valid feelings. It also could relate to a common practice of American teens who are struggling to either be noticed, intentionally hurt themselves as a punishment for their inadequacies, or to somehow find acceptance. Pain is hurt that is justified because of the state of numbness the person feels from being excluded from the social norm. It is related to the knife which provides the mechanism to initiate the hurt that in turn creates an over-stimulated awareness. In this case, pain is not simply an emotional distress or a negative feeling that people try to stay away from, it is much more serious in that survival depends on the existence of suffering. Death, is the final state of the process of dying, and refers to the time when the thing, person, event, or whatever the obsession is at the time, is put to rest and that process finally ends. Death also marks the time when it becomes possible to move onto the next phase in life when there can be a new focus. (“You need another death just to have a life to save”). Master in this case is symbolized by dominance, and has the power over the situation, light is not only the tool serving as a source of illumination on the circumstance, but it is also the crutch that is required to get through the situation. Finally, heartbeat is the illustration for the cadence that is the driving force sustaining and confirming life. Many have fallen into poor psychological states including
forms of depression resulting in thoughts such as, “I need do something extreme or dangerous.” Sadly, this is common place among several generations of the American public who are attempting to maintain a high level of excitement through a cycle of repeated adrenaline rushes. The term *identity* is the individual characteristics by which a person is recognized or known; it is the personality of an individual that separates them from the rest. Identity sets each person apart with distinct talents and gifts that they were created to possess. Without identity, we exist just to continue our existence. Here, identity is presented as a watershed point, determining one way or the other if you will be true to your own ethics and morals, or the demands imposed. *Bleed* means to prove life exists, it is the very substance that runs through a person to keep them alive, and *anything* is a complex thought referring to any object, act, state, event, or fact. In this case, *anything* is not an adamant object, but a buried emotion. It expresses an indefinite and very broad range of *needs, feelings, and pain*. (“You need the pain now just to feel anything”). The idea of *life to save* explains the activity of protecting someone from loss or danger, rescuing from or preserving.

**Machine.** The key term *machine* paints a picture of thoughtless and mindless robotic behavior performed in a systematic and precise way. It speaks of a sea of faces that, at their core, are driven to look like and conform their behavior to that which complies exclusively with the accepted and the expected. The terminology surrounding the key term of *machine* are the elements of *watching, see, them, it, feed, they, face, bow, slave,* and *kill.* *Watching involves* having that ongoing feeling of being observed and scrutinized; always on edge that someone or something might be critical of a feature or flaw that does not meet “the standard” of that which is acceptable. To *see* is to perceive
or detect as if by sight. In this case, it is the ability to get past the superficial facade and drill into one’s very soul. *Them* and *they* refers to the individuals *we* are attempting to impress and also the larger society of conformists that *we* are trying to please. *It* is not a desire, but instead an elusive, ever changing “brass ring” that can only be temporarily grasped. *It* refers to anything in that singular or plural category that is the *machine*. *Feed* is to give as food, to supply fodder to an insatiable, gluttonous appetite that is never satisfied and never appreciated or enjoyed. A *face* is an outward appearance that is a means of identification, but this face is more like a fake mask that can be changed depending on the whim of the moment, or the desired “look” for a given situation. To *bow* is to give in and submit. In this case it is not with reverence, but instead it is to apathetically withdraw from resistance. The *slave* is the one that is completely subservient to the dominating influence. *We* are the ones who have no rights and deserve no consideration. To *kill* is to destroy the vital or essential quality of something. Here it is to be different by acting, thinking, or looking differently than the established normal.

*Need* is what connects *we* with the *machine*. *Need* is what drives behavior and causes us to sacrifice our uniqueness for the reward of acceptance. The lyrics to “Feed the Machine” address a key issue in American culture today: the *need* for acceptance to discover true *identity*. Need is the bridge between us as individuals and the *machine* that culture and media have created.

The last lines of the song change from “Give up, give up and feed the machine” to “Wake up, wake up and kill the machine.” This usage of imagery is an attempt to shake the negative thoughts that come along with unacceptance and inadequacy. The text now shows that those who struggle with their identity do not after all have to conform to the
shallowness culture can wrap us in. We as living and breathing people instead each have a distinct purpose and value that society and media culture cannot have, unless of coarse, we hand it over to them.

With these things in mind, the true target meaning behind this song is that each and every individual has control over their who they become. Though circumstance and trial may overtake our past, it does not have to control our future. If we “wake up” and decide for ourselves that we want to become more than we have let ourselves become, we have the opportunity to make that change.
Works Cited

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