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Chained to the Rhythm — Rhetorical Analysis

Katy Perry and Skip Marley's 2017 single, *Chained to the Rhythm*, is a chart-topping pop song with a significant underlying message in regards to political and social awareness. Directed by Matthew Cullen, the track's viral music video was nominated for various awards and has garnered over 700 million views on YouTube. Throughout the video, *Chained to the Rhythm*'s clever lyrics are further elaborated upon in a visually compelling manner.

The music video takes place in "Oblivia", a fictional amusement park, whose name serves as a metaphor to the distractions of an oblivious modern society. The lyrics open with, "Are we crazy, living our lives through a lens? Trapped in our white picket fence, like ornaments. So comfortable, we're living in a bubble, bubble. So comfortable, we cannot see the trouble, trouble" (Perry 0:04-0:24). As Perry's character, Rose, enters Oblivia with an elated smile on her face, the other theme park guests are glued to their phone screens and exhibit an unawareness of their surroundings. The beginning of the video represents the common belief that we have become too comfortable with the ongoing issues that our country deals with on a regular basis. As a society, we obsess over the unimportant aspects of life. For instance, more people focus on their self-oriented social media presence than those who participate in humanitarian efforts. Instead of living in the moment, we would rather live in our bubbles.

Written and recorded in early 2017, *Chained to the Rhythm* consists of countless details that symbolize politically and socially relevant topics. When people set foot in Oblivia, they are drawn to "The American Dream Drop", a towering attraction that lifts miniature houses into the

air. As these compact homes dangle from above, they rapidly spin and drop (1:05-1:09). The American Dream Drop implies that achieving the “American Dream” isn’t a simple goal to accomplish, especially due to the unpredictability of real estate market inflation.

Located at “Validation Station”, the first attraction that Rose rides is a high-speed roller coaster whose seating arrangement is strictly determined by gender. The coaster reinforces a heteronormative lifestyle by separating men and women—two men or two women aren’t allowed to be seated together (0:47-1:04). While riding the attraction, digital emoticons are plastered throughout the roller coaster’s tracks, which represents our obsession with social media gratification and approval from other people (1:19-1:22). Relying on the amount of “likes” we receive from our online “followers” shouldn’t be how we seek validation. As the coaster comes to an end, a classic amusement park photo is captured of Katy’s character and Simon, the man that she sits next to on the ride. Under their picture, Rose and Simon acquire different scores from the Validation Station. Even though the two characters completed the same task, the man collects 9,478 likes, but Perry, a woman, only obtains 17 likes (1:34-1:37). This particular frame of the music video demonstrates the gender wage gap that working women often experience.

The most popular attraction in Oblivia is a human-sized hamster wheel. Each theme park guest is so intrigued by the wheel that they are willing to wait in a line that is 1,984 hours long (1:28-1:33). The wait time is a subtle reference to the well-known George Orwell novel, *1984*; a narrative that similarly takes place in a dystopian society. While on the spinning hamster wheel, few people are able to successfully navigate the attraction; for some guests, the action appears abundantly strenuous (2:34-2:39). The hamster wheel signifies the idea that equal opportunity is presented, but not evenly distributed.

The next location Rose stops at is “Inferno H2O”, an area for refreshments that resembles a typical gas station. Although the rest stop seems safe, the water is set on fire when served. As the other patrons’ mouths are burned, Rose partially breaks out of her oblivious trance and chooses to reject the drink (2:07-2:29). Inferno H2O references another massive problem that we face: clean drinking water. Specifically in Flint, Michigan, the cleanliness of water systems in populated cities are persistently neglected by the federal government. Access to sanitary water is an essential aspect of survival, one that can’t be ignored by elected political officials.

At the end of the day, Rose attends an outdoor film screening for nighttime entertainment. The projected motion picture is titled, “The Nuclear Family”, which portrays an old-fashioned American couple and child in their stereotypical roles. While in their house, the husband reads the newspaper, the housewife irons his work clothes, and their daughter plays with her toys (2:30-2:49). As Rose skeptically watches the movie, she is the only audience member to notice the presence of Skip Marley. He raps, “Time is ticking for the empire... They woke up the lions” (Marley 2:50-3:11). Throughout his verse, Marley encourages Rose to break free and connect with fellow Americans. This meaningful interaction inspires her to navigate the spinning hamster wheel (3:32-3:56). After Rose beats the challenging attraction, she stares into the camera with an awe-struck demeanor to indicate that there is hope in our future.

In the single’s chorus, Katy sings, “Turn it up, it’s your favorite song. Dance, dance, dance to the distortion. Turn it up, keep it on repeat. Stumbling around like a wasted zombie. We think we’re free? Drink, this one’s on me. We’re all chained to the rhythm, to the rhythm, to the rhythm” (Perry 3:12-3:31). As co-writers of the song, Katy Perry, Skip Marley, Sia, Ali Payami, and Max Martin feel Americans are figuratively tethered to a beat that we can’t free ourselves from. The courage to achieve political and social change starts from within, but when the sound in our lives

becomes distorted, we tend to lose our perseverance. Even though *Chained to the Rhythm* and its accompanying video was initially viewed as controversial, the track became a major success. Released in February of 2017, *Chained to the Rhythm* debuted at No. 4 on the Billboard Hot 100 Chart with over 15 million digital downloads in the United States during its first week of sales. The influential single was released to put a spotlight on American politics and express concern over the issues that our society deals with in order to evolve as a nation.

Work Cited

Perry, Katy, and Skip Marley. *Chained to the Rhythm*. YouTube. February 21, 2017.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=Um7pMggPnug. Accessed on October 22, 2021.