

## **A Deconstructive Reading of *In The Aeroplane Over The Sea* by Neutral Milk Hotel**

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### **Abstract**

Much fan speculation about the 1998 Neutral Milk Hotel album *In The Aeroplane Over the Sea* has culminated in the popular theory that the album is about Anne Frank and her family. Listeners cite song titles such as “Holland, 1945,” lyrics like “Anna’s ghost all around,” and public instances of Jeff Mangum, the band’s songwriter, alluding to being inspired by dreams of a European family from the 1940s. However, a deconstructive analysis of the album itself reveals that what seems like Mangum’s manifest dream-content about Anne Frank becomes ‘traces’ of meaning pursuant to Jacques Derrida, and listeners find themselves at the center of play between lyrical forces, as well as the album’s music and artwork, which give rise to various, perhaps contradictory, interpretations. In an alteration to the song ‘Engine,’ Mangum sings, “For I am an engine, and I’m rolling on/through endless revisions to state what I mean.” This self-referential adjustment to the lyrics suggests Mangum’s struggles to communicate the meanings of his works accurately. With this insight, and *Aeroplane*’s legacy marked by lyrical mysteriousness, the Anne Frank interpretation becomes troublesome and has less chance for stability as a meaning. While Mangum had before said that the songs were possibly about Anne Frank, he now gives reason not to trust his role as guarantor of his songs’ meanings, and attacks his own authority as author. If the album concerns a Jewish family, lyrics which shout out “I love you Jesus Christ” several times and state that a “world that you need is wrapped in gold silver sleeves left beneath Christmas trees” are of interest. Further, the instrumentation also stands in contrast to an easy interpretive experience. If the album concerns Anne Frank, it reflects on her death after she has passed, with a sense of longing. But the instrumentation is often wild, rowdy, and unconventional. These arrangements often amount to lively and inventive or bold horn movements, only to contrast with lyrics supposedly about saving a dead girl and her family. The popular interpretation fans cling to overlooks the peculiar, deliberate oppositions the album establishes, by which it destabilizes itself and evades a single interpretation, and rather invites multiple interpretations, and deviates from Anne Frank. A fixed meaning is elusive with regard to the present contradictions, and any meaning-possibility arises from a Derridean play of the album’s polar forces.

**Keywords:** Neutral Milk Hotel, Aeroplane, Deconstruction

### **1. Introduction**

Over the years, listenings of the 1998 Neutral Milk Hotel album *In The Aeroplane Over the Sea* (further referred to as *Aeroplane*) has lead to the popular theory that the album is about Anne Frank and her family.<sup>1</sup> Song titles and lyrics supposedly mentioning Anne Frank, her year of birth, and her home country seem to support this idea, as well as comments by Jeff Mangum, the bandleader, publicly stating that he was inspired by his dreams. In a 1997 interview, he simply said, “a lot of the songs are about Anne Frank.”<sup>2</sup> The surreal nature of Mangum’s songwriting and his statements about his dreams may indicate that those who believe the work to be about the Frank family are making claims grounded in a psychoanalytic interpretation. In this approach, the idea that meaning is based upon is

Jeff Mangum's unconscious, as the creative force and source of inspiration, more than upon the lyrical content of album, which carries the suggestive imagery and themes Mangum discusses. As Freud says, "it is from these dream-thoughts and not from a dream's manifest content that we disentangle its meaning."<sup>3</sup> Once the album is focused upon without reference to Mangum's dreams, a clear trajectory for the album's meaning is lost, and the elements within the album itself become elusive, and the 'Anne Frank theory' loses stability. When asked about a song from *Aeroplane* in the same 1997 interview cited above, Mangum stated, "I can't honestly say that I 100% know what that song means,"<sup>4</sup> and so it appears that the album's lyrics defy stable interpretation for even the songwriter himself. What once was Mangum's manifest dream-content for psychoanalysts becomes 'traces' of meaning for Jacques Derrida, a French philosopher who pioneered the work of Deconstruction, which attempts to undo basic assumptions and question the way texts are usually read. It does so by illustrating *différance*, the way meaning is not contained within a word or sign itself but is to be found in the relations and contrasts signifiers share among each other. In reading a text, what is comprehended is never absolute meaning, but 'traces' of meaning, only pointing towards possibilities of meaning. Thus, when listening to *Aeroplane* with this approach, the listener finds oneself at the center of play within a musical presentation of lyrical forces, which gives rise to various, conflicting, but equally valid textual interpretations.

## 2. Psychoanalytic Approach

The way the focus of *Aeroplane*'s lyrics suddenly switches without explanation represents a sort of lyrical collage, full of bizarre imagery. An example of surrealism – a 20<sup>th</sup> century artistic movement directly influenced by psychoanalytic method, in which artists focused upon exploring their unconscious mind and dreams – the album is readily suitable for a psychoanalytic interpretation. Such an approach takes Mangum's psyche as key to the otherwise inexplicable elements in the album, and so goes on to support the popular claim that the album is about Anne Frank. Critic David Rando notes that Mangum had read Anne's diary for the first time before recording *Aeroplane*, and "was struck by the human and historical force of her story."<sup>5</sup> Thus the album indicates an incredible desire to connect with Anne Frank, motivated by the impossibility of communication with her.

Additionally, on a live solo recording, in introducing the song 'Two-Headed Boy Part 2,' Mangum stated that the song is "about a family that lived in the 1940s, in Europe. And I have dreams about one certain member of that family, at times."<sup>6</sup> So *Aeroplane* can effectively be seen as the artistic realization of Mangum's dreams. The influence that reading the diary of Anne Frank had on him is easy to see in his songwriting, explaining the lyrics, "she was born in a bottle-rocket, 1929,"<sup>7</sup> which references her date of birth, and the song 'Holland, 1945' the title of which is Anne's country of residence and year of death. If the album is treated as Mangum's dream, as something connected to and arising out of his mind, then his personal influences come into play and work to help explain some of the otherwise confusing material on the album, in relation to his dream-thoughts.

The Freudian act of displacement occurs at several points in *Aeroplane*, in which it is supposed, "the ideas which are most important among the dream-thoughts will almost certainly be those which occur the most often in them."<sup>8</sup> And so the elements of Mangum's dream-thoughts bearing the most importance to him are manifested the most often in *Aeroplane*. Strong instances of this are the multiple mentions he makes to the act of writing some sort of message for someone else to hear. He sings of "catching signals that sound in the dark"<sup>9</sup> and "creating a radio, played just for two"<sup>10</sup> in attempts to "hear her voice as it's rolling and ringing through me,"<sup>11</sup> and in a possible perspective switch to Anne as the narrator, her saying "Daddy, please hear this song that I sing."<sup>12</sup> These recurrences, of someone's attempt to send a message to someone else, suggest that the act of communicating is a large part of the dream-content, and in this regard, reaffirms a longing for connection with Anne Frank.

Another notable recurrence for psychoanalysis is the theme of sexualization, and multiple mentions of semen. David Rando proposes a theory that the eroticism in the lyrics allow Anne Frank's story to be brought to the forefront of the listener's attention. Rando argues that, since only having likely heard of or read about Anne Frank in their grade school years, people tend to regard her only as a historical monument with which they do not feel an immediate human connection. The sexualized lyrics in the album add a new dimension to Anne Frank, making her more of a human being, one that fans can connect with, rather than as simply a historical figure. Rando says, "it argues the profound power of perverse sexuality to bring history into an uncomfortably personal space,"<sup>13</sup> and by placing Anne Frank into such a role, *Aeroplane* moves beyond the barriers of time and mortality to connect with her. This makes the listener's experience more urgent, sentimental, and compelling than any objective, historical reading of her ever could. These considerations reflect anxieties about human relationships, which are again apparent in 'King Of Carrot Flowers:'

And your mom would stick a fork right into daddy's shoulder, and dad would throw the garbage all across the floor ... and your mom would drink until she was no longer speaking, and dad would dream all the different ways to die, each one a little more than he could dare to try.<sup>14</sup>

The subject of those opening songs could be said to be Mangum. Addressing childhood and parents fighting, this is another instance in which the anxieties about human relationships are manifesting in different ways. The narrator's wails of love for a dead girl, the sexualization of that girl, and possible personal experiences as a child are all part of the same realm in his dream-thoughts. That part expresses the concern or anxiety for human connection, and it occupies various domains of the dream through displacement, taking on multiple forms as it appears in *Aeroplane*.

### 3. Deconstruction

But, without insight onto Mangum's own mindset, the listener allows interpretation to deviate from Anne Frank, and welcome other possibilities. When one embraces deconstruction and assumes the post-structural concept of the death of the author, wherein the author is denied the function of determining the sole meaning of their text, the text itself opens up to new possibilities.

Firstly, the inclusion of Christian elements is curious if one assumes *Aeroplane* to be about the Frank family. Mangum's repeated shouts of "I love you Jesus Christ,"<sup>15</sup> as well as the mention of Christmas, are here set against a meaning that supposedly surrounds a Jewish family, an odd juxtaposition. On the album's accompanying lyric sheet, the lyrics suddenly break from what is actually sung on 'King Of Carrot Flowers' to state:

A song for an old friend and a song for a new friend and now a song for Jesus Christ (sic) and since this seems to confuse people I'd like to simply say that I mean what I sing although the theme of endless endless (sic) on this album is not based on any religion but more on the belief that all things seem to contain a white light within them that I see as eternal<sup>16</sup>

The lyrics then resume as heard on the album, as if this whole message were actually the same as what Mangum had been singing alongside all the other lyrics. *Aeroplane* at once proposes that it is not inspired by any religion, but still deliberately places Christian figures into a space that many regard to be occupied by a family of a different religion. Here the album questions its own presumed thematic content, and the inclusion of Christian themes (despite the denial of religious influence) sets up an opposition in *Aeroplane* that makes this use of Christ illustrative of what Derrida calls *différance*, which, "can refer to the whole complex of its meanings at once."<sup>17</sup> The intentional references to Jesus Christ might appear to hold a meaning for the album, but only in that they are connections by which the differing elements of the album can converge and relate to one another. Any meaning to be found in these references here is also itself inclusive of all the other points of the album that do not include Christianity, including assumed references to Anne Frank. Whatever a listener interprets from these religious references are not genuine meanings in themselves, but are effects of potential for meaning, rising from the play among contrasting textual elements within the album.

In what might appear to be a reference to Anne Frank in the song 'In The Aeroplane Over The Sea,' Mangum sings, "Anna's ghost all around, hear her voice as it's rolling and ringing through me."<sup>18</sup> But, when he sings the lyric, it sounds as if he might be instead singing 'And his ghost all around, hear a voice as it's rolling and ringing through me.' Mangum could have made a direct reference to Anne Frank, but instead sang the name 'Anna' rather than 'Anne,' and created a linguistically homophonous lyric that can be heard, and thus interpreted, in more than one way. Here the name 'Anna' is another instance of what Derrida calls 'trace;' there is no meaning in the name 'Anna' itself. Rather, the name 'Anna' is here only suggesting Anne Frank. M.H. Abrams writes that such is an example of how "language may produce the 'effects' of decidable meanings in an utterance or text, but [Derrida] asserts that these are merely effects, and lack a ground that would justify certainty in interpretation."<sup>19</sup> Thus the connection made here between 'Anna' and Anne Frank is not due to an inherent meaning, but is instead an effect of the possibilities of meaning.

The first two tracks on the album comprise one song, 'King Of Carrot Flowers,' which is split into three parts. The first part of the song seems to be narrated by Anne looking down on Mangum in his childhood, and seeing his parents' fights and when Anne "sank into [Mangum's] soul, into that secret place where no one dares to go."<sup>20</sup> In this song, the album conflates differing perspectives and themes into one, perhaps moving between Mangum and

Anne and traversing from childhood to adulthood. In the first part of the song, Mangum's vocals are overdubbed, whereas the majority of the other songs on the album only feature one vocal track. Max Heath notes this as a narrative technique, "presumably mainly to achieve a connotation of otherness...the speaker undergoes a series of shifts in identity, emotion, and conscious state, and Mangum's voice is the guiding communicative force for the speaker's psyche."<sup>21</sup> On 'King Of Carrot Flowers Part 1,' these double-tracked vocals are used to indicate that it is someone else's (presumably Anne's) point of view being represented. The shift to Mangum's perspective occurs in the second and third parts of the song, when he uses a single vocal track rather than the overdubbed vocals that opened the album. David Rando writes, "The discontinuities of referent and addressee between and even within stanzas are means by which Mangum is able to hover suggestively around Anne Frank's story, while leaving himself room to fictionalize, depart from, or to contradict her well-trodden tale"<sup>22</sup> and in effect destabilize the singular 'self' or subject, and makes definitive characterization within the album unreliable.

This destabilization is furthered with the recurring character of the 'Two-Headed Boy,' who is the subject of two of the songs on the album. The two-headed boy might be regarded to be both Mangum and Anne in some respect, and can be interpreted in differing ways: a first possibility is that the two heads represent both Mangum and Anne, together at last and combined as one. Or the two-headed boy could be Mangum as a kind of grotesque character, both the man and the "freakishness of [his] desire for Anne Frank,"<sup>23</sup> given the album's erotically charged lyrics. But another differing interpretation might remove Anne entirely from the amalgamation, and hold the figure to be Mangum and an unnamed sibling, as suggested by the lyrics, "Love to be with a brother of mine...brother see we are one and the same."<sup>24</sup> With these ideas in mind, and amongst the deliberate change of Anne's name to 'Anna' and the shifting perspective of the narrator, the album makes efforts to undermine itself and elude a solid interpretation.

The music itself on the album also confuses the popular interpretation. An album about Anne Frank would likely be a lament, but the instrumentation is often frantic and boisterous. This shows a taste for rambunctiousness, and provides an appropriate atmosphere for the grotesque two-headed boy. And the cover art is worth mentioning here as well. It is unclear if the people depicted on the album are swimming, or if the heads bobbing in the water are people drowning among what appears might be wreckage, with a ship on the horizon. One might suppose the scene to be presenting a catastrophe. But the starred, colorful attire of the two most prominent figures confuses that claim, and perhaps rather, the clothing and the old-timey feel in the artwork provide imagery that might best correspond with the circus atmosphere the music tries to create. Once again, the album is itself undermining a single meaning, by including instrumentation and artwork that allows its interpretation to branch into various peculiar directions.

## 4. Conclusion

The central point of disagreement in these theoretical listenings is Jeff Mangum's role. To arrive at the Anne Frank interpretation his dreams are needed to explain *Aeroplane's* surrealism. But deconstruction allows the album to function on its own, without needing Mangum as the source that guarantees its meaning. Textual instances of the Anne Frank interpretation are only traces within *différance*, hinting towards meaning in a field of play, amongst infinite potentials for meaning. Clinging to the notion that the artist is required to explain their artwork limits the listener, since the album itself seems to resist the label of an Anne Frank interpretation, and encourages other possibilities once it steps away from its creator's mind as the framework for meaning.

Further, even though Jeff Mangum has stated Anne Frank's influence and that he was inspired by his dreams, he seems to discredit his own authority as a meaning-establishing force. In the opening lines of the song 'Engine,' which on a 1997 recording went, "For I am an engine and I'm holding on/the world is all bending and breaking from me,"<sup>25</sup> on a later version Mangum alters the lyrics and instead sings, "For I am an engine, and I'm rolling on/through endless revisions to state what I mean."<sup>26</sup> This deliberate, self-referential revision of the lyrics may be a statement of Mangum's struggles to impart the meanings of his works accurately. What's more, *Aeroplane* was never something unchanging. Journalist Kim Cooper writes, "the record itself was never thought by the players to be the final versions of those songs, which had evolved from when Jeff first shared them, and which continued to change."<sup>27</sup>

Whereas a psychoanalytic approach would welcome the interpretation that *In The Aeroplane Over The Sea* is about Anne Frank, a deconstructive approach points out that while the Anne Frank interpretation is possible, it is only one possibility. Such an interpretation, and any interpretations, can never be firmly established as the only meaning of the album. Given *Aeroplane's* deliberate ambiguities and oppositions, even if its concern is granted to be Anne Frank, what it says about Anne Frank is ultimately up to the listener. The popular understanding might not be inclusive of all the elements within the album, and may overlook the curious contradictions these elements create, wherein the album shows attempts to evade its own meaning, or a unified narrative or theme. And in doing so,

*Aeroplane* invites multiple interpretations, making possible new worlds for its strange characters, stories, and music to inhabit.

## 5. Acknowledgements

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## 6. References

1. This interpretation is entertained among Neutral Milk Hotel fans, and is considered within critical works as well. In-depth discussions of the album with regard to Anne Frank and her influence on Mangum can be found in the analyses of Rando (See note 5 below) and Heath (See note 21 below), among others.
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23. Ibid., 326.
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