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Song Review

Little Simz, “Introvert”

Inflo, UK 2021

There’s a war, there’s a war
The kingdom’s on fire, the blood of a young messiah
I see sinners in a church, I see sinners in a church¹

These are the opening lines on the track “Introvert” by the British rapper Little Simz², the first song on her newest album, *Sometimes I Might Be Introvert* (2021). This intro points immediately to the significance of religion in the song. The lyrics are accompanied by a imposing music video. Both are analysed in this review.

In particular in comparison with her previous album *Grey Area* (2019), distinct changes in terms of music style are evident in the more recent work. Where the former is rather sparse and minimalistic, the latter is far more opulent in sound: it employs fanfares, stirring drums as well as strings and choirs. It combines Rap, Hip-hop, Grime, Soul and Disco with influences from the African diaspora and Afrobeat, Soul and Jazz, Jamaican Reggae and Dub.³

The lines from the beginning of the song describe the dramatic state of the “kingdom”, or Great Britain. Little Simz reports the “death of a young messiah”, suggesting dying for a higher purpose, and speaks of “sinners in a church”, implying the existence of aberrant behaviour. She denounces corrupt states using explicitly religious language, thus creating a dramatic,

1 The lyrics are available at <https://tinyurl.com/2zh3v8nf> [accessed 24 November 2022].

2 Born in 1994 in Islington, north London, to Nigerian parents. Her full name is Simbiatu Ajikawo.

3 Gromann 2022; Fromm 2021; Pritchard 2021; Schubert 2021.

even apocalyptic, initial mood. The song is about both an outer war and an inner war. The artist constantly switches between observations of the outer world and, by diving into her inner world, her introversion. Her opening words, “There’s a war”, immediately indicate the problematic condition of both these worlds, which are at the same time separate and also deeply interlinked. The intermingling of these two settings is shown a few lines later, when Little Simz declares:

Sometimes I might be introvert
There’s a war inside, I hear battle cries
Mothers burying sons, young boys playing with guns
The devil’s a liar, fulfil your wildest desires

Inner observations turn into outer ones. The devil here represents something clearly evil, a supernatural power, which emphasizes the disastrous conditions even more. The involvement of this religious figure introduces an evil agent acting in this world. This ongoing war between good and evil is also reflected in the line “The fight between the Yin and Yang’s a fight you’ll never win”. Here Little Simz uses a popular trope from Chinese philosophy. Employing these established references to different religious traditions, the artist stages a fight between opposing supernatural powers. The conflicts thus gain greater meaning, but they also then appear as destiny.

While suggesting a hyperbolic fight between good and evil, Little Simz neither loses sight of the everyday consequences of these conflicts nor denies the agency of humans. The lyrics reflect upon pain, illness and death, noting concrete grievances in society such as poverty and racism as well as a sense of being trapped, both in oneself and in unresolvable political circumstances. This provides the song with an explicit political dimension. In fact, it becomes accusatory when the artist critiques, with detail, the political condition of the world:

I’m not into politics but I know it’s dark times
Parts of the world still living in Apartheid (there’s a war, there’s a war)
[...]
All we see is broken homes here and poverty
Corrupt government officials, lies and atrocities
How they talking on what’s threatening the economy
Knocking down communities to re-up on properties

These descriptions of conflicts in the outer world merge with reflections about Little Simz's inner state, distinguishing and intermingling these two dimensions of the "war". The artist starts the second verse with the following proclamation:

I need a license to feel (can't feel)
Internal wounds and I'm not tryna be healed (no I don't, no I don't, no)
[...]
Simz the artist or Simbi the person?
To you I'm smiling but really I'm hurting

These words suggest a numbness and a pain deep inside. One can observe a rift between Little Simz's identity as an artist and the "true person", who smiles on the outside but is deeply hurt. These lines deal with suppressed feelings and the failure to heal. Later, the artist describes this inner disruption more concretely, with the outer fight between good and evil mirrored in herself:

At night I wonder if my tears will dry on their own
Hoping I will fulfil Amy's purpose
Angel said, "Don't let your ego be a disturbance"
Inner demon said, "Motherfucker, you earned this"
Like they strip you of everything you're deserving
Realize there is a prison in us, we are conditioned as fuck

A feeling of being stuck or trapped is evident here. An angel and an inner demon argue, highlighting once more through religious references the fight between good and evil that is staged throughout the track.

However, the song is also about hope, trust and mutual support, about empowerment and the self. We see this aspect in these lines:

I'm a black woman and I'm a proud one
We walk in blind faith not knowing the outcome
But as long as we're unified, then we've already won

This ending of the second verse also seems to be the climax of the song, as if what has gone before has led up to this proud and hopeful exclamation. It is followed by the refrain, which clearly displays hope:

Find a way, I'll find a way
The worlds not over
I will make it, don't you cry
In God we trust
'Cause we're not alone

With an explicit reference to God, a trust is expressed that in the end good will prevail over evil. The contrast between the verses and this chorus is especially interesting. Unlike the verses, which consist of spoken words, the chorus is sung in a light, lovely melody. Performed twice in the song – in between the two verses and at the end – it disrupts the dark and dramatic picture provided by the rest of the piece. Therefore, in contrast to the apocalyptic initial mood, the listener is left with a hopeful spirit at the end.

The music video⁴ combines several “storylines”, between which it changes quickly. Scenes that include the artist and a single dancer or groups of dancers in different settings are swapped for historical black-and-white news footage of civil rights protests. Close shots of several historical paintings are woven through the video, as well as scenes of young men fighting the police and old family footage. The fast moving between pictures from different storylines and between black-and-white (historical) footage and scenes in colour provides a sense of an entanglement of past and present and of dramatic events following close together, and it provides a multi-layered account of the life of a community. It hints at a fight that has already lasted a long time.

Three of these storylines are particularly interesting for this review. The first one shows Little Simz and a group of dancers in similar dress in the entry hall of the Natural History Museum in London. The impressive building, which resembles a cathedral (fig. 1), gives the impression that Little Simz is talking about something bigger than herself and will tell a great story. Especially interesting are several scenes in which the artist is shown in a position that resembles a Muslim prayer posture (fig. 2), with the suggestion that Little Simz is begging for something or even invoking a higher power. This reference to a religious practice on the visual level reiterates the inclusion of supernatural beings on the textual level, proposing their involvement in

4 LITTLE SIMZ – INTROVERT (OFFICIAL VIDEO, Salomon Lighthelm, UK 2021), <https://tinyurl.com/yav9kjxc> [accessed 9 November 2022]; 6:01 minutes, 3,072,226 views as of 23 November 2022.

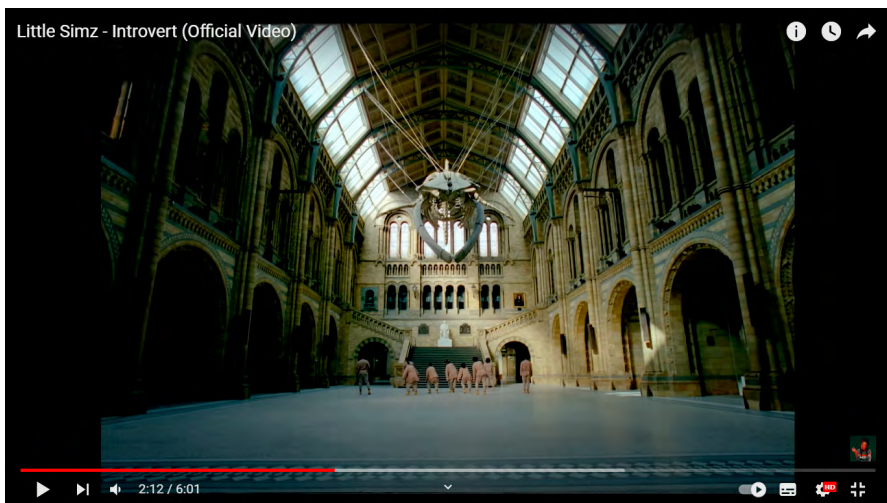


Fig. 1: Little Simz with dancers in the entry hall of Natural History Museum in London, film still, LITTLE SIMZ – INTROVERT (OFFICIAL VIDEO, Salomon Lighthelm, GB 2021), 00:02:12.

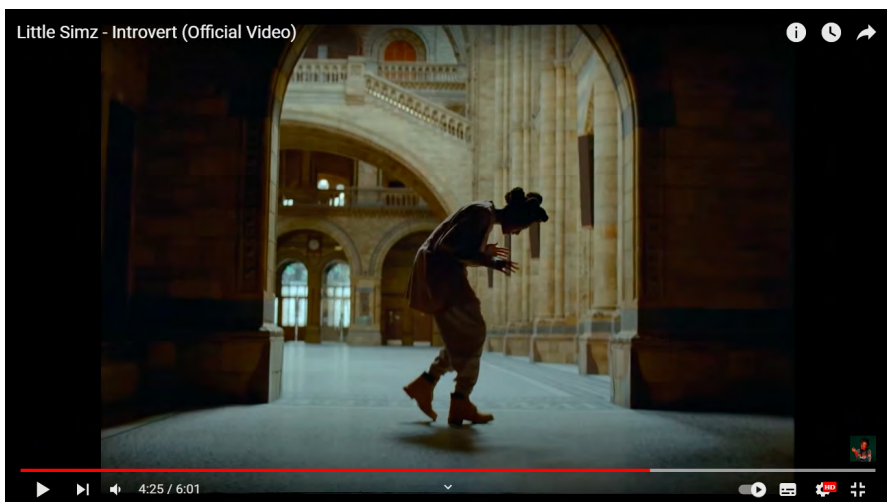


Fig. 2: Muslim prayer posture, film still, LITTLE SIMZ – INTROVERT (OFFICIAL VIDEO, Salomon Lighthelm, GB 2021), 00:04:25.

both the initiation and the resolution of conflicts. At the same time, however, only human action can be seen in the video. Throughout the song, a tension between human agency and supernatural agency is highlighted and maintained.

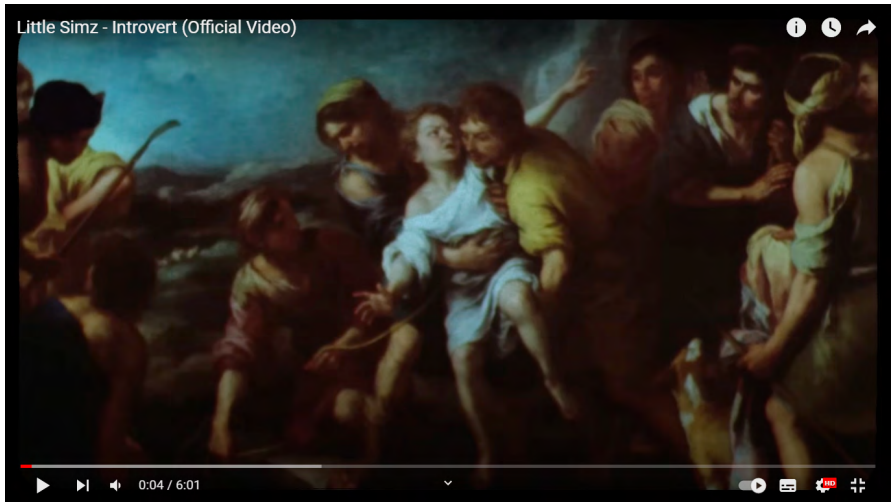


Fig. 3: Detail of the painting “Joseph and his brothers” by Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, film still, LITTLE SIMZ – INTROVERT (OFFICIAL VIDEO, Salomon Lighthelm, GB 2021), 00:00:04.



Fig. 4: Detail of a baroque still life with dead animals, film still, LITTLE SIMZ – INTROVERT (OFFICIAL VIDEO, Salomon Lighthelm, GB 2021), 00:00:19.

Also revealing is the inclusion of sections of historical paintings, from ca. 17th–19th centuries. They show scenes from ancient mythology and the Bible, some are still-life paintings with dead animals, colonial scenes or scenes from the Napoleonic Wars; overall they thematise sacrifice and death, war

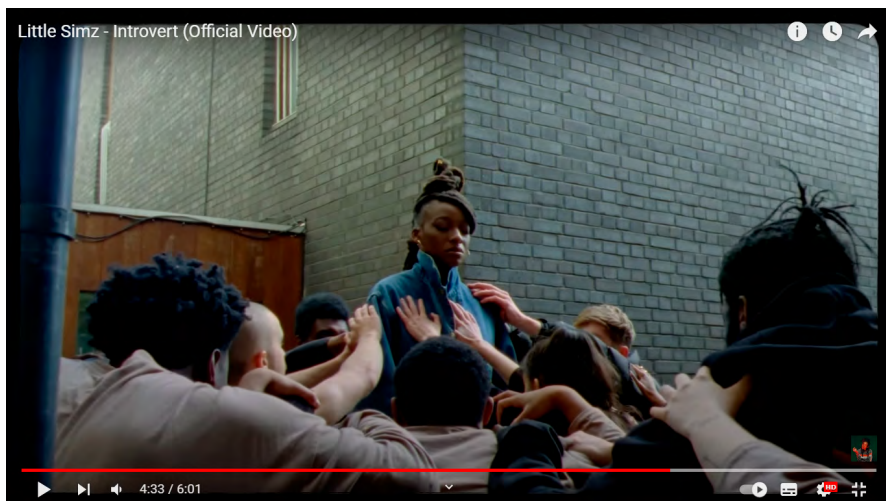


Fig. 5: Little Simz in the human circle, film still, LITTLE SIMZ – INTROVERT (OFFICIAL VIDEO, Salomon Lighthelm, GB 2021), 00:04:33.

and defeat, colonialism and slavery (fig. 3 and 4). Providing glimpses into another time and setting, sometimes with explicit reference to a supernatural sphere, these paintings disrupt the other storylines of the video, thereby transcending them. This embeds the story told by the video into a greater framework of historical events and emphasizes the continuity of grief and conflict throughout history. It opens up the song and video to interpretation in relation to both transcendence and issues related to race, which is highlighted in the video.

A third set of scenes shows either a Black man or Little Simz herself with closed eyes encircled by other people holding onto them, apparently giving them strength (fig. 5). These images depict cohesion and mutual support and correspond to the lines of the chorus. They contrast with the rest of the video in implicating unity in the solution to the problems discussed throughout the song. Although they do not form an explicit reference to a religious tradition, a spiritual dimension can certainly be detected here, as this strong (and also concluding) image points to the ideal of unity as a means of empowerment and identity.

Throughout the video, the switching between the threatening and the hopeful reiterates the contrast between the verses and the chorus of the song. This once more emphasizes the struggle between good and evil, which is explicitly sustained by religious references.

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Filmography

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