

The Enchanted Confusion of ‘Oral’

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‘Oh, I just don’t know. I just don’t know.’

Uncertainty and desire form the framework of Björk and Rosalía’s single about meeting someone new, feeling like you might be falling in love, and deciding between living in the fantasy of those feelings or taking action.

The single, playfully entitled ‘Oral,’ is a reggaeton pop track that Björk wrote in the late 90s between her albums *Homogenic* and *Vespertine*. The track didn’t fit in on either of the albums and was lost in the vault. She only unearthed it in 2023 after remembering the title while watching the news. The song then underwent renovations as she invited Rosalía and Segabodega as collaborators and producers. On Instagram, Björk announced that all royalties from the song would ‘go to the fight against sea agriculture in Iceland’ that has been harming a threatened species of salmon and the environment.

In ‘Oral,’ Björk matches the simple and the poetic, unites the ‘dream’ and the ‘real’, and weaves orchestral sounds and dancey beats to articulate her feelings about having desires you don’t know what to do with. Her signature childlike voice compliments the excitement and hesitancy that dilemma incites.

The opening lyrics liken a mouth to a moon, the comparison expressing the dreamy attraction she has for this person. She doesn’t shy away from demonstrating how tricky this feeling can be as she asks ‘Please, could I change that?’ but she’s held back by the question of ‘Is that the right thing to do?’ as if one’s emotions can be placed on a binary of right and wrong. Towards the end, in the most playful manner, she pleads, ‘Come on, please, can I kiss him?’

In many ways, this flirty song reflects the traps of navigating romantic love within our gender binary construct and heteronormative society. Women are socially conditioned and stereotyped as being emotional and nurturing. But they are told that displaying feelings too quickly will chase someone away. So, women are often placed in a passive position in heterosexual romantic contexts: they are encouraged to wait for men to make the first move, whether that’s communicating or taking action.

But men are told by society that showing emotion is weak. How can a man communicate first if he lacks the language to convey how he feels? How can he take action when he might be misunderstanding a signal? Then women who initiate are seen as promiscuous because their forwardness seems like experience. These old beliefs and preconceptions trap us; blocking us from accessing the connection we want.

Across all people, regardless of gender, there exists a failure to communicate. In the book *All About Love: New Visions*, bell hooks speaks on our collective failure at love and communication. The book, which gained a spike in popularity amongst Gen Z due to TikTok, argues that we don’t have a definition of what love is as a society, and confuse it for an emotion,

when actually it is a practice. According to hooks, love requires care, affection, trust, consistency, honesty, communication, and the investment in the spiritual growth of others.

Many of us approach love incorrectly because we were raised in spaces that lacked love; environments where our emotions weren't safe to exist. We crave intimacy but are scared of our emotions. We're taught to idealize love and chase it, but we lack the language to fully engage with love and nourish it properly. So this failure to communicate within love, a space that requires an open dialogue, results in pain and confusion. In other words, it's a mess.

The call and response lyrics in the chorus reflect that messiness. She wants to 'cross the line' by initiating a kiss or nibbling at his neck, but she doesn't know if crossing the line is worth it. Due to uncertainty (and shyness), she won't convey these feelings and stays in the fantasy. But staying in this limbo of uncertainty frustrates her, causing her to scream.

The song's creation distorts time and space in a revolutionary way, showing us the endless possibilities of music-making thanks to technology. A younger Björk sings alongside Rosalía—who is around the same age as Björk was when she made the song. At times, Rosalía's soft vocals are muddled and indistinct in comparison to Björk's unique singing and primal growls. Even so, their voices compliment each other and form a beautiful harmony. The song being lost in the 90s, found 25 years later, and remixed is quite magical. As if the puzzle of 'Oral' was meant to be solved two decades later.

For the new year, 'Oral' may be used as a compass to encourage you to embrace the fantasy when those unexpected desires do appear. Because those feelings, like all feelings, could be fleeting and mean nothing. But maybe the right thing to do is to communicate—or scream.

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