Sonic Scope: New Approaches to Audiovisual Culture

DIONYSUS DIES: An Autoethnographic Exploration of Tensions in the Anthropocene, Rejoicing in the Abject and Embracing the Perpetual Post-Digital Mess

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ABSTRACT

DIONYSUS DIES: An Autoethnographic Exploration of Tensions in the Anthropocene, Rejoicing in the Abject and Embracing the Perpetual Post-Digital Mess

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This commentary discusses the themes, influences and the process of making Dionysus Dies, a 30 minute musical film created during the initial months of the pandemic. The film is broadly situated in the remit of autoethnographic audiovisual research, and existing discourse on post digital aesthetics, collage, found material and music video, as ways to engage with various contemporary themes. Experimenting with non-linear narrative building, different musical genres and scales of media, I explore three sites for grief: technology, temporality and nature. I intend to work much of the music of the film into a standalone album in 2021. The research process has led me to explore further creative intersections between fact and fiction, with my upcoming PhD in 2021 looking at methodologies for distributed authorship within the music of documentary film.

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DIONYSUS DIES

You don't know what you're doing sometimes. You just begin.¹

Heartache is a shape-shifting, non-linear monster. It manifests in the quiet resignation of mundane gestures, tasks performed with thespian heaviness. It sits at the helm of memory, flashing unwanted recollections like a malevolent zoetrope. It is the calling card of failure in a society pathologically preoccupied with success; an anthem for all at odds with itself. Heartache is a sentencing lived out in seconds. It follows lovers who left, ambitions that dwindled, the sound of the news at 1. With *Dionysus Dies* I wanted to engage with heartache on a structural level, cloning the intangible and painfully slow processes that constitute healing, sensemaking in the face of all that evades our understanding. The process, in my case, involved trawling through the digital barracks

of recorded life, untangling fact from fiction, sifting through the vaults of social sewage glowing like radioactive gibberish. The work is an audiovisual collage that attempts to map a coherent narrative across seemingly incoherent events, trying on tone, style and seriousness like items in a cramped cinematic wardrobe. The film seeks to find a moment of pause for the ephemeral and disposable, slowing down time so that we may take a closer look at moments before they invariably disappear. It stages a kind of curatorial improvisation that mirrors the improvisatory nature of life, departing but never arriving and squeezing out a tune every now and then along the way - we must after all, whistle while we work.

The following commentary will discuss the process of making the film, the themes explored and cultural resonances touched on in both its visuals and its music, and the broader multimedia context the work finds itself in. I start by discussing my initial ideas at the time of making the work at the outset of the pandemic. I touch on some of the theorists who informed my approach, and outline the film's three sites for grief: *Temporality*, *Technology*, and *Nature*. I go on to discuss the greater contexts of post-digital aesthetics, experimentalism in popular music, DIY aesthetics, and non-exceptionalism to which the film responds. I address its ambiguous authorial voice and the connection it forges between collagistic sensibility and narrative therapy. I look in more detail at some of the cultural and tonal shifts of our time, summarised in the sentiment "It is what it is." I conclude by revisiting some of the lyrics in the film and touch on the connection between digital culture and abjection.

The Only Way Out is Through: The Parameters of a Pandemic, Making Music and Making Meaning

It probably doesn't need stating that this film was made at a strange time. In February there were a few signs afloat. In March the world stopped resembling anything we recognised, as we were hurled face first into our own 21st-century custom-made apocalypse. We digested it on phone screens, through supermarket announcements and text scribbled on walls, all at once and yet in some ways not at all. Celebrities began to shed deity-like status, their 'we're all in this together' shtick sounding more like a Top 40 lyric than an earnest sentiment. We went through all seven stages of grief, perhaps without even realising it. Then the advertising companies got hold of it, and grief was fed back to us on the very same screens in shades of pastel, and

reassuring voice overs. The movie trailer intro of “In these strange times” was followed by a tepid domestic lockdown comedy of parents rolling their eyes at their tyrant children and regurgitating the new rhetoric of “You’re not the only one who’s not coping well.” Our own uncertainty and grief was explained back to us as a soothing nudge towards purchases we were less able to afford.

This was not a new phenomenon. The external mediation of incoherent internal states has always left a dissonant byproduct, a feeling that where we are is somewhere in between what is inside of us and what is being reflected back. The locatability of grief moves into far denser philosophical territory than the remit of this musical research. Some observations from the initial stage of the pandemic did, however, lay the foundation for what was to follow. These were:

1. While it was happening, there was nothing subtle I could say about it. In fact I couldn’t say anything at all.
2. I became aware of the way in which objects, landscapes, animals, scraps of media seemed to take on the character of whatever I was experiencing.
3. In the most seemingly unrelated events that presented themselves without rhyme or reason, I felt myself searching for connections and causality.
4. Grief did not feel limited to a quadrant of life. It was a space one unwillingly visited, prompted by the personal and political, the big and the small; there was a relationship between them all.

At this early stage, the research project started to assume the role of a site for processing what was happening around me, and the methodology became a reflection of this attempt at a non-linear storytelling process. Confronted with a barrage of imagery - memorialised, fabricated, transient - I started to experience this surplus of post-digital aesthetics as a terrain of sensemaking through which to traverse. This sensemaking was in no way limited to the geopolitical events of the time. It was more specifically about the mediation and construction of self within uncertainty, within grief that had existed long before and a causality which would become increasingly apparent.

For this collagistic and non-linear sensibility to be felt both materially and structurally, my research led me to a working practice that mirrored this kind of curatorial chaos. I revisited old phone recordings, discarded footage and jams I had recorded with friends. I started filming everything around me almost without discretion. The sense I wished to create was of rearranging *what was already there*, rather than assuming the calculating remove of the ‘composer’ or ‘filmmaker,’ who

meticulously crafts the fully formed vision of their mind's eye. My reasoning was that the broken-hearted have none of the confidence of those who would call themselves 'creator.' The content spewed out of this state is a passive bi-product of survival. Melancholy means that rather than living their lives, they are *lived by their lives*, caught in the clutches of memory and unwanted thought. Grief usurps a sense of autonomy, robs meaning, and leaves in its place the mundane fabric of the everyday; the unremarkable material in life that belongs to every person with enough battery life on their smartphone to capture the moment. Herein, though, lies the obfuscated hope. Within the non-exceptional, within the shared, lies the possibility of redemption: community, and the mundanity that unites us.

Lost in Cellular Memory: Failure, Heartache, and the Ephemeral

I draw on Jack Halberstam's scholarship on failure as a site for expression of alternative modes of being which challenge notions of success too often construed, within a heteronormative capitalist society, as a product of reproductive maturity and wealth accumulation. "Under certain circumstances," writes Halberstam, "failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world."²

This was an affirming point of departure for an earnest and unspecialised exploration of the in-between. Using the materials of the shared and unexceptional, 'failure' became a perfectly proportioned container for what the work sought to address above all else: heartache. Halberstam is able to illuminate, in her critique of various artworks, the shape of that imprint of failure that heartache carves out: "the failure of love to last, the mortality of all connection, the fleeting nature of desire."³ In turn she reminds us how "possibility and disappointment often live side by side."⁴

Dionysus Dies embeds its central theme of grief in a canvas of the natural world - the ultimate symbol of vulnerability. The film's events unfold against the backdrop of our new era: the anthropocene, in which our earth's climate is driven not by the geological rhythms of nature, but as Mark Carney puts it "by the frenzied activity of humans."⁵ The ever tense and tangled relationship between the protagonist's inner and outer worlds is mirrored in this ecological unease.

The film's containing narrative of a therapy session is a site for a literal expression of the act of processing. What is said in therapy is not necessarily rational, nor is it well-articulated. These conversations are not canonised, but discarded, so that the patient might move on. Healing therefore finds its home in this state of disposability and ephemerality.

Figure 1. Still from *Dionysus Dies*, 08:28: "I'm an antibody, I'm just not in favour of having a body."

Just as therapy allows us a space without answers, the structural possibilities of post-modernism allow us to temporarily inhabit the in-between, to try on feelings and positions not located within a specific person or place. "I'm an antibody," professes the character in the patient's chair, "I'm just not in favour of having a body." But grief is felt in the material fabric of reality, in the gravity which not even postmodernism can overcome, the clock which ticks with relentless precision. For my research I needed to find places to explore the materiality of grief.

Seven Stages of Grief *Dionysus Dies*' Three Sites For Grief: Temporality, Technology, Nature

Temporality: Processing Here, Now, Then, and When

Figure 2. Still from *Dionysus Dies*, 14:37: Time is examined on different levels: as an unwanted byproduct of personal loss, and as an incomprehensible future on a google calendar

Time is a commodity that we lose with exacting precision, laboured and punishing, and dealt to us in droves when we don't want it. It is the axis upon which we separate then and now - two states which feel like they never belonged together. Grafton Tanner writes: "With unprecedented access to the Internet, the flattened desert where past, present and future co-mingle, we find ourselves living in a state of atemporality, yearning for a time before the present."⁶ Vaporwave aesthetics certainly assist in sonifying this nostalgia - a time specific sadness - for things that may or may not have happened and represent the stasis of not being able to move forward or backwards with ease or consent. Capturing the static and non-linear within time-based media is in a sense a paradoxical pursuit: one is working against chronology.

Figure 3. Jennifer Walshe, (whose music often captures the state of searching, rather than stating), touches on a nostalgia for the Olden Days in the face of technological advances.

Jennifer Walshe (@JenniferWalshe), "The Olden Days were very different to life now," Twitter post, August 9, 2020, <https://twitter.com/jenniferwalshe/status/1292478430404108288>.

Elizabeth Freeman makes poignant correlations between sadness and temporality: "As with melancholia compared to mourning, the 'pathological' form of incorporation seems eminently queerer; it preserves the past as past, in a crypt imperfectly sealed off from the present, in a psyche with unpredictable leakages, in a body semiotically and sensually at odds with itself."⁷ The "leakage" of memory was an apt structural model to follow, the idea of images and sounds escaping almost by accident into the body of the film - slipping out of history's clutches. I attempted within the edit of the film to dismantle the sense of chronology and causality. I wanted to zoom in and out of the scales of time perceptible to the mourning subject: from the metered out mundane gestures to the grandiosity of ancient mythology, planetary collapse

and the moments which get stuck on a loop in between and cannot move forward or backwards.

Time split at the seams of your departure

Everything is now before and after⁸

Figure 4. Stills from *Dionysus Dies*, 26:54 (L); 27:01 (R): touch on scale and time.

The final section's layering of a scribbled earth in space, and space as reflected through a puddle, exploit this diversity of scale and time as mediated by our limited capacity to conceptualise it. "In the dialectic between linear-national history and cyclical domestic time," writes Freeman, "history appears as damaged time; time appears as the plenitude that heals the historical subject. Time, then, not only 'binds' flesh into bodies and bodies into social but also appears to bind history's wounds."⁹ On the level of the audiovisual work, temporality also "must ground our conception of physically embodied cognition" and take us between processes that occur in time and those that exist over time.¹⁰ Grief in *Dionysus Dies* is musically gestured to this end with succinct musical motifs, as in the slow imperceptible frequency shifts in drones over consecutive minutes. Blinks of eyelids, signifying a momentary return from memory to the present, and abstract combinations of colour and space, defy any classification of time.

Technology as a Site For Grief: Big Brother is watching you

Figure 5. Still from *Dionysus Dies*, 09:30: Surveillance.

In Banksy's *Exit Through the Gift Shop* (2010) an endearingly eccentric French shopkeeper-turned-documentary-maker has the compulsion to continuously film his life. Left with the maddening task of editing the thousands of hours of footage, the focus of his original film, *Life Remote Control*, becomes increasingly lost. I was impacted by this idea of recording ad nauseum, as a kind of pathological practice, until one has forgotten why you are recording whom or what you are recording for. His video camera has made manifest his longing to capture something, but his enthusiasm is not matched by talent. Thus the ubiquitousness of his material itself takes on a kind of sadness. I became interested in the idea of surveillance, the volume of meaningless recorded history sitting in the vaults of supermarket security cameras and customer service quality control reels, comprising an exponentially smaller fraction of digital space in a vast digital graveyard of immortal data. Within this data exists a material which we can sculpt into whatever shape we choose. Nicolas Bourriaud remarks on how from the late 20th-century, society has become a vast catalogue of narrative frameworks, with artists such as Gillian Wearing and Pierre Huyghe each producing videos based on surveillance camera systems:

What we usually call reality is a montage. But is the one we live in the only possible one? From the same material (the everyday), we can produce different versions of reality. Contemporary art thus presents itself as an alternate editing table that shakes up social forms, re-organises them, and inserts them into original scenarios. The artist deprograms in order to reprogram, suggesting that there are other possible uses for the techniques and tools at our disposal.¹¹

Reproduction, Manipulation & Sampling

Visually *Dionysus Dies* found identity in this reconstitution of pointless material, turning itself into an audiovisual orphanage for everything which might otherwise be discarded. That quality in digital media that can be reproduced with exactitude became another motif that I could exploit to melancholic ends. In the home video scene (14:48), the characters dance around in the living room, but one of them repeats the same gestures on a loop. Attention is drawn to her image subject to the repetition of an explicit edit, the sad materiality of her reconstituted image. I approached a kind of diegetic sampling in this section, repurposing the songs as heard in the background and bringing them into the imaginary of the music film world.¹² I attempted to create the sense of sampling not *from* life, but sampling life itself. Paul Miller has pertinent insights on how we might think of sampling: “to paraphrase John Cage, sound is just information in a different form. Think of DJ culture as a kind of archival impulse applied to a kind of hunter-gatherer milieu.”¹³ This idea certainly resonated with the way I collected material, foraging life for mundane moments, and trapping them in the melancholy of the film.

... [Most] people think that technology is cold because it has no mystery, and it's very calculated ... So when you take technology and use the areas where it breaks, where it's faulty, you're entering a mystery zone where you can't control it. It's reacting more like an animal or a person to you, and you have to react with it.¹⁴

Within the work I wanted to draw attention to the vulnerability of humans in the face of agentic technology - this willful “animal” which Björk describes. It is worth noting the change in authorial voice that occurs when a vocal line is sampled. The human voice, as one of the most visceral bodily expressions, contains within it instant signifiers not just of the ‘natural’ but of inherent subjectivity, as if the person singing is captaining the emotion of the musical ship. When the voice becomes sampled one is made aware of that which is ‘natural’ being tampered with, and that the pitch, rhythm, and frequencies of the singer or speaker are no longer within their possession. The manipulated vocals occur periodically throughout *Dionysus Dies* as if to remind us of the inextricable link between human and this unnatural environment. If architecture is, as Goethe and Schelling proclaimed, nothing but frozen music, Paul Miller suggests sound might be reverse engineered as “thawed architecture” - the inanimate living

within the moving musical gesture.¹⁵ One might think of the robotic voice which professes the protagonists earlier sentences on repeat at the end of the film (29:12) as some kind of ‘thawed robot,’ somewhere between dead and alive.

Nature as a Site For Grief: The Anthropocene as a Spoiled Stage

Figure 7. Still from *Dionysus Dies*, 22:01: depicting the sea as interpreted through the grieving subject.

When one gazes upon the world through the lens of its vulnerability and imminent collapse, it can quickly absorb this melancholy, and direct us to our own shameful complicity. Donna Haraway writes:

Grief is a path to understanding shared living and dying; human beings must grieve with, because we are in and of this fabric of undoing. Without shared remembrance, we cannot learn to live with ghosts and so cannot think. Like the crows and with the crows, living and dead ‘we are at stake in each other’s company.’¹⁶

Figure 8. Still from *Dionysus Dies* depicting the sea as interpreted through the grieving subject, 05:13.

The most frequently revisited theme was not so much the sea itself, but the line, and limitation formed by the horizon. In Halberstam's discussion of the vast and unexpected expressions of failure, he makes reference to Judie Bamber's seascapes, in which water does not feature in the calming, reverent sense that one might expect. He describes the flat almost lifeless oil on canvas board:

In the paintings of the ocean, set in Malibu, Bamber orchestrates the drama of the relationship between sky and sea but without ever succumbing to a romanticism of nature. In fact the series constitutes a kind of critique of nature; by archiving the shifting contrasts between air and water, she actually remarks on the limits of nature, its finitude rather than its infinite sublimity ... What Barber paints then, is the limit: the limit of vision, the limit of nature, the limit of color itself, the circumscribed imagination, the lack of futurist, or, in other words, the expansion and contraction of all horizons.¹⁷

What Bamber does with the flatness of paint, I attempt with repetition: waves that are caught in a gestural loop (22:01), or by layering (05:10), as if to emphasise the image of the sea reconstituted through human desire to improve upon it, to saturate it to the level of fakeness to which we are accustomed. The unease at the heart of our human relationship to nature is something I wanted to be felt throughout the film. In a piece which lives within confusion, there are some geopolitical truths that stare us flatly in the face. The persistent juxtaposition of imagery of the natural and the man made throughout the film's duration was therefore intended to represent a transition from the seemingly comical non-sequitur to the gravely interdependent.¹⁸

Animals As Reluctant Actors

Was it not the case, said Aris - the boy who the previous day had mentioned the putrefying dog - that we use animals as pure reflections of human consciousness, while at the same time their existence exerts a sort of moral force by which human beings feel objectified and therefore safely contained? Like slaves, he said, or servants, in whose absence their masters would feel vulnerable. They watch us living; they prove that we are real; through them, we access the story of ourselves.¹⁹

Animals feature frequently throughout *Dionysus Dies*, at times as comedic protagonists, as angry captives, as characters played by humans, as reanimated toys; both chasing and chased, but never quite at ease they slip in and out of their own agency. Their simultaneous familiarity and unknowableness have led them to be revisited by artists, writers and musicians for as long as we have roamed beside each other. Björk dances joyfully with her reticent and disapproving cat husband in *The Triumph Of The Heart* (directed by Spike Jonze); in Richard Dawson's *Dead Dog in an Alleyway*, a dead dog spells out in grave terms society's disregard for the song's rough-sleeping protagonist as he reaches a musical cadence at the lyric: "Disgusting Animal! AAAAAAaaaa!"²⁰

Figure 9. Still from *Dionysus Dies* depicting a "drunk horse" encountered on the tube, 14:15.

Onno Oerlmans writes: “In the representation of animals, animal-oriented criticism decries the various ways in which animals have been used and subjected, including the ways in which we have supplied them with cultural and social meaning. Projecting meaning diminishes our sense of their distinctness, makes them merely subjects of our power, and co-opts their presence.”²¹ This is a reminder of how, while animals provide us with endless allegoric potential, their co-opting into our human stories is just another example of our ultimate dominance and, indeed, our danger. They represent a level of vulnerability beyond even our own in the face of the imminent destruction of our shared habitat. How we treat them is, as ever, telling of how we treat ourselves.

Animals mirror within us all that is abject - they walk alongside us on the other side of the line that we call ‘civilised.’²² Within *Dionysus Dies* the character in the red dress swiftly descends from civilisation in a performance of identity that seeks somehow to resolve abjection by embracing it. She chases something, without making clear who or what it is. (17:27)

Come back

Too tired to keep up with you

Slow down

I’m tired of keeping up with you

I intended for her position to have some resonance with the animals we encounter; the cat who emphatically chases the viewer, oblivious to the NHS dedicated rainbows beneath him (11:25), the seagull (12:50) who first runs from the intruding human viewer and is then caught tearing at a discarded garbage bag, shamefully unable to survive without the waste of his human tormentors as if caught in a kind of avian Stockholm syndrome.²³ In each instance we run toward something, we mourn something, we tire of something. We live within and without. ‘Searching’ itself is felt in the shaky *mise-en-scène* of much of the DIY footage, the *searching* of a camera to find its subject, to find meaning.

Having discussed the primary sites and subject matter within *Dionysus Dies*, here follows a discussion of the broader context and inspirations for the film as well as the tonal and cultural resonances I hoped might be echoed within it.

Post-Digital Aesthetics and Creative Possibility: A Vast Place to Roam

Carol Vernallis's scholarship on the growing influence of YouTube and music video on contemporary audiovisual aesthetics gives context to a work that draws structurally and materially from the Internet, that voluminous mass of seemingly unrelated content. The way we consume and create digital media - particularly via phone apps - points to, as Anahid Kassabian writes, "a major shift in the uses of music and sound in audiovisual forms of art and entertainment."²⁴ She suggests that the changes heralded by iPhone apps demand "an intensive rethinking of the terminology and conceptual frameworks in our field, based as they are on a technology (i.e., film) from another age."²⁵

In exploring the cultural and tonal shifts synonymous with technological advancements, it is perhaps more useful to consider the dichotomies of corporate media and DIY media rather than that of "old" and "new," writes Florian Cramer:

When hacker-style and community-centric working methods are no longer specific to 'digital' culture (since they are now just as likely to be found at an 'analog' zine fair as in a 'digital' computer lab), then the established dichotomy of 'old' and 'new' media — as synonymous in practice with 'analog' and 'digital' — becomes obsolete, making way for a new differentiation: one between shrink-wrapped culture and do-it-yourself culture.²⁶

In this work, I explore post-digital aesthetics through the lens of our feeling, and our fear, of what "old" and "new" might represent. The tensions between our notions of 'organic' and 'digital' are symbolic junctures at which we examine our human interference with the anthropocene, our mistrust of, but dependence on, technology: its powers of surveillance, and its explicit force on the musical motif - a voice put through the paces of digital maneuvering. As Dave Tompkins asks in *How to Wreck a Nice Beach*, "Never mind the robots: what's more human than wanting to be something else, altogether?"²⁷

Dionysus Dies touches on this messy dance with the natural world. What does the 'real' world look like, what 'sound' is truly human and what are we endeavoring to protect? Where do animals end and we begin, and similarly, where do we end and where does technology begin? We see ourselves reflected back on security cameras

(09:08); in in-app camera effects (21:29); in the windows of impersonal underground vessels of transportation (13:42). Do we like what we see?²⁸ If technology is, as Charlie Brooker articulates in his series *Black Mirror* (2011-present), just that - a mirror to our darkness and light in equal part - can we give it all the blame?

While acknowledging that technology, as an extension of our inner and outer worlds, has the capacity for geopolitical harm, we must also acknowledge its power in the opposite direction. "There's a pervasive narrative of technology as dehumanizing," suggests composer Holly Herndon, "We stand in contrast to that. It's not like we want to run away; we're very much running towards it, but on our terms ... I don't want to live in a world in which humans are automated off stage. I want an A.I. to be raised to appreciate and interact with that beauty."²⁹ Exploring this interaction was key to my research; not resolving the moral position between nature and technology, but inhabiting the dissonances and humour within its tangled relationship. Where better to explore this than in the lawless fjords of popular music?

Popular Music, The Ever Weirdening Gyre: A Place to Explore Paradox

A work such as *Dionysus Dies* exists within the context defined by artists who have not only uncoupled popular from commercial, but have brought both popular and commercial so far within the realm of what might traditionally be called 'experimental music' that the distinction seems futile. Björk, FKA Twigs, Klein, Claire Rousay, Lucy Liyou, Hannah Catherine Jones and Ana Roxanne - artists who change register quite sporadically and make no apology for any move toward experimentation or relatability - have certainly emboldened me to experiment with less hesitation in both directions. These artists use field recordings, downgraded audio, diaristic intimacy and jolts of ferocious noise - bringing to life a sound world irrational as the one we live in. They explore abjection and vulnerability through noise and grain, challenging the "fundamental parameters of pitch, timbre and amplitude as sound's dominant laws, norms and conventions."³⁰ Projects like Her Noise and Tara Roger's Pink Noises project have sought to explore the ways in which "noisiness has been understood as characteristic of certain 'bad' femininities," as Marie Thompson discusses in detail in her work on "Feminised Noise."³¹

Personally I was inspired by works which managed to express a vulnerability and an omniscient distance almost in the same breath. Videos like FKA Twigs's "Water Me" sees her head shaking ferociously like a malfunctioning machine, while her eyes grow cartoonishly large with tears, to the point of contorting her face to the shape of her sentiment.³² Lucy Liyou's "I'm Going To Therapy" balances a painful confessional intimacy with an unsettling robotic voice, changing register from tenderness to outrage, moving between ambient piano accompaniment to distressed electronic chaos.³³ Artists have found many ways to explore the "monstrous feminine" both without and within the snug tonality of popular music.³⁴

As Jason Toynbee reminds us, popular music can be a site for innovation and experimentation without departing from regular metre, tonality and the ubiquitous recycling of familiar material: "The key concept here is the space of possibilities ... Constraint and possibility are produced together in that while habitus and field are relatively stable, the fit between them is never a tight one."³⁵ In the musical score to *Dionysus Dies* I have drawn inspiration from a host of organically textural electronic music that moves deftly between pop and abstract collagistic sensibilities. In my sound worlds I aim to evoke an alien-like manipulation of earthy reality, breathy and guttural mechanics of the body, the reverberant sound of the walls that enclose a space, and the ability to eternally escape them.

As with any work which might be described as postmodern, *Dionysus Dies* embraces and celebrates the notion that there are no singular answers, and problematises the notion of progress. It attempts to maintain a healthy blood-count of skepticism and irony, and to approach topics with humour and earnestness in equal measure. In doing so the film draws on models from the unpredictable post-digital world: Thundercat's "Them Changes" video, where deflated samurais watch informercials for swords over the irresistible bass groove accompaniment, or Bill Wurtz's nine minute long "History of Japan" video, which combines a swift summarisation of historical events over noodling elevator jazz and simplistic but informative animated inserts.³⁶ In this vein *Dionysus Dies* borrows liberally from 'low' and 'high' culture: Greek mythology and badly played synths, reappropriated space footage and Android in-app image camera effects. Irving Lavin chronicles the persistence of man's "unartistic heritage":

'High' and 'low,' the sophisticated and the naive, are always present as cultural alternatives ... exerting equal and opposite thrusts in the history of human awareness and self-revelation. They may appear to exist, develop and function

independently, but in fact they are perennial alter egos, which at times interact directly. High and low art, like Beauty and the Beast, go hand in hand.³⁷

For this research, all material was sifted through democratically, no narrative too grand or camp, no footage too grainy or obsolete. I attempted to lead the viewer through these inconsistent worlds with music, searching for sense and story as the world around me seemed to do the same.

DIY Aesthetics, Stolen Footage and the Rising Popularity of Non-Exceptionalism

What I sought to capture in this research was the aesthetic of the shared. Found footage contains within the entire *mise-en-scène* that which belongs to everyone, engendering a kind of in-built community. The circumstances of lockdown and restricted personal interaction formed a unique set of creative parameters. DIY footage seemed not only to materially contain the feeling of searching, the unpolished veneer of grief, but also contained something anarchic, political, and very much of this time. While being globally adopted with zeal, the everyday was becoming more interesting. Amanda Hess writes on 30th March 2020:

Among the social impacts of the coronavirus is its swift dismantling of the cult of celebrity. The famous are ambassadors of the meritocracy; they represent the American pursuit of wealth through talent, charm and hard work. But the dream of class mobility dissipates when society locks down, the economy stalls, the death count mounts and everyone's future is frozen inside their own crowded apartment or palatial mansion. The difference between the two has never been more obvious.³⁸

This dismantling of the cult of celebrity might have been somewhat short lived, as newfound cultural valorisation of resilience started creeping exhaustingly into everyday discourse. Still, the DIY aesthetic itself was beginning to signify something beyond itself, something bewildered and simultaneously protesting - an opportunity for a further flattening of media hierarchies.

Historically, the aesthetics of consumable digital media and unspecialised approaches, have gained prominence in tandem with mainstream engagement with digital culture. Platforms such as YouTube and increasingly accessible video and sound

editing software have democratised the creative process and birthed visual trends now so enmeshed in our global cultural eye that it is hard to remember a time when everything looked expensive. The notion of fictionalising reality, cementing transitory and unplanned events into musical time, has become a feature of collective and collected culture. The curatorial randomness and intimacy of YouTube videos has led us to unexpected junctures of celebration for the mundane, the untrained and almost forgotten. In the vast online world we can go as small as we go large - the home video and the feature film doing delicate dances around one another for our attention.

The DIY artist's liberation from a world of costly studio recording has given rise to an array of delicate and unpredictable works. Capitalising on this haphazard aesthetic, it is possible to communicate something unique and specific about the intangibility of emotional states. In as much as polished production can transport a listener to an imaginary place, one might argue how an inbuilt kind of vagueness captures what is already there, the space that exists in between inarticulable feelings.

Bands such as Still House Plants, who blend fragments of audio from rehearsals with voice notes and cleaner studio takes are an example of this. Their DIY approach is epitomised in a video like "Shy Song," as the screen wanders through a studenty room, the vocals fall in and out of time with a faintly perceptible double and staggering drums patter in a Jon Bap-like lopsided ostinato.³⁹ Manchester based duo Land Trance demonstrate the simplicity with which one can make a highly sophisticated audiovisual argument. The video for "Transcript" from the album *First Seance* flashes blurry, reconstituted images of unknown people, plants, and rooms, with no apparent pattern or consistency or narrative.⁴⁰ The result is eerily affecting and somehow timeless. Their music is to me, what moss and earth would sound like if they could sing about sadness; meditative cycles of fidgety electronic lichen.

Rebecca Collins and Johanna Linsey's work *Stolen Voices* sees them treat found material in a different way. In developing an "eavesdropping practice," they can be effective "sonic detectives," asking:

What kinds of knowledge might be produced through eavesdropping: illicit, contingent, straddling public and private, troubling boundaries and borders, wrapped up with state and corporate surveillance, yes, but also with the minor, the domestic, the fleeting. Not easily categorised but not ineffable. Situated. Implicated.⁴¹

If found footage was a fleeting illicit resource that *Dionysus Dies* could utilise, the internet had opened up countless new ways to navigate it. Carol Vernallis, in her book *Unruly Media*, explores the emergent audiovisual aesthetics of Youtube, a “polysemic, heterogeneous phenomenon,” music video and the new digital (or post-classical) cinema, and the ways that they have paved the ways for new artistic languages and provided a new lens through which to interpret other media.⁴² She identifies nine features that tend to structure popular YouTube clips:

1. Pulse and Reiteration
2. Irreality and weightlessness (tied to Low-Resolution and the digital)
3. Graphic values
4. Sense of scale that matches the medium
5. Unusual causal relations
6. Intermediality and intertextuality
7. Sardonic humour and parody
8. Condensation
9. Formal replication of the web⁴³

These features present the most relevant way of engaging with *Dionysus Dies* from a formal perspective, and why the work finds better context within the internet than the gallery or concert hall. Here are some examples of these in action throughout the film:

Pulse and Reiteration: The musicalised edits within “Things I know to be True” (05:49), bodily gestures within the therapy session visually demarcating choppy musical phrases (06:59).

Sense of Scale that matches the medium: The return to household objects, things within the fabric of the everyday (14:59), contrasted by generic space footage, a downgraded repurposing of a human rendering of the cosmos (26:19).

Sardonic Humour and Parody: The personification of Grizzly the bear, the second patient (23:56); a melodramatic portrayal of drunken belligerence (20:48).

Condensation: The therapy scene never plays out in full segments, instead being truncated into soundbites and gestures (06:04).

Intermediality and intertextuality: Diegetic background music is resampled into the foreground (14:48), graffiti written on a wall is glanced over (05:00), references to

Greek Gods occur in speech and their repurposed YouTube images move across the screen (04:08), Michael Jackson plays on the cassette (24:27).

Bad Acting: The Literal Performance of Self

Dionysus Dies constantly moves between the real and imagined. Using found home video footage presented a potential challenge when juxtaposed with acted out scenes given the differences in register. In documentary footage events ‘performers’ and ‘protagonists’ tend to be untrained and are captured in a state of free improvisation. Bill Nichols remarks: “One parallel between documentary characters and traditional actors is that filmmakers often favor those individuals whose unschooled behaviour before a camera allows them to convey a sense of complexity and depth similar to what we value in a trained actor’s performance.”⁴⁴ In my case the actor (myself) was shamefully untrained. The change of mode between the realism of home video footage and the dramatised segments could potentially be unsettling. Rather than attempt to blend the two modes I opted rather to exaggerate the fictional scenes, hamming up the acted sections, leaving no room for the earnest sentiment that the actor seemed to be inadvertently slipping in and out of.

Dionysus Dies at times exploited the shared murky space between reality and fiction, often relying on the humour of improbable occurrences that took place while trying to film a fictionalised scene in the real world (with no cordoned off part of the street or paid extras). I embraced the chance to tell a cinematically exaggerated story about real life, to (quite literally) run with a version of hyper-reality, aided by fast edits and tongue-in-cheek montage inspired by the conventions of music video.

Here too, I drew on a history of performance practices in which artists have consciously walked the line between ‘art’ and ‘real’ life (though admittedly not close to the extremes that many have). Lee Lozano with her elusively defined large-scale *Dropout Piece*, saw her self-imposed “transformation from [art world] insider to outsider.”⁴⁵ Marcus Werner Hed and Nathaniel Mellors’ 2015 film *The R&B Feeling* sees eccentric artist Bob Parks alienating himself from the art world, and processing real-life tragedy through increasingly provocative and disturbing performative practices. Living one’s art is not without risk. The blurring of performance and reality may serve as either cathartic or a potentially personally damaging exercise, which the

artist must take upon themselves to navigate. Running disheveled and dejected down the streets of Hastings, I wondered how far this character really was from myself and, furthermore, did I want to encourage her?

Who's Talking Here?: The Elusive Authorial Voice

In this research, stretching between inner and outer worlds presented ambiguity around the authorial voice, which shifts between one of a subjective individual and one which expands to inhabit a kind of collective point. Considering that the research was concerned with making materially and emotionally tangible the incoherence of loss and processing as subjective experience, would it be a conceptual diversion to step into this different role of trying “to say something”? Does grief afford us authority? What can we claim to know?

Music provides us with the ability to show rather than tell. But it also lives in a world of its own. Popular music can inhabit the space that exists *before an understanding has been reached*. Songs can present themselves fully formed with beginnings, middles and ends, while offering positions which cannot be reconciled or resolved by tidy moralistic arguments. Robin James explores this matter with her critique of “resilience discourse”: the prevailing expectation of women, and particularly black women, to “turn a negative into a positive,” materially capitalising on their pain while offering a digestible story of overcoming.⁴⁶ Speaking of Rihanna’s release *Unapologetic* at the time of her controversial relationship to Chris Brown, James writes:

Even if Rihanna’s isn’t resilient, [*Pitchfork* music reviewer, Jessica] Hopper suggests that we still expect *Unapologetic*’s music to be so. The album would be a success if its music overcame the damage Rihanna expressed in the lyrics. But because the music fails to be resilient, the album exudes a deep melancholy. Melancholy is the practice, and melancholia is the effect, of failing to successfully accomplish the resilient labor MRWaSP expects of you.⁴⁷

I wanted *Dionysus Dies* to live within its sadness. Several artists have carved out a space within popular audiovisual work, to sit within melancholy and explore its creative possibilities rather than pretend to overcome it. Audrey Wollen elaborates on her “sad girl theory”:

Sad Girl Theory is the proposal that the sadness of girls should be witnessed and re-historicized as an act of resistance, of political protest. Basically, girls being sad has been categorized as this act of passivity, and therefore, discounted from the history of activism. I'm trying to open up the idea that protest doesn't have to be external to the body; it doesn't have to be a huge march in the streets, noise, violence, or rupture. There's a long history of girls who have used their own anguish, their own suffering, as tools for resistance and political agency. Girls' sadness isn't quiet, weak, shameful, or dumb: It is active, autonomous, and articulate. It's a way of fighting back.⁴⁸

So, in the case of *Dionysus Dies*, who was this sad girl in the therapist's chair, and was she the same sad girl overseeing the assemblage of the piece's meaning and intention? The piece's lyrics and narration could certainly hide behind none of the subterfuge of instrumental vagueness. What to do with this voice, and why should anyone listen? We encounter at various points murmured lines, sung sentiments, inner thoughts, typed words, and illegibly scribbled words. Is there one author at play?

The 'author-icidal' argument of theorists such as Roland Barthes attack the idea of an all-powerful "Author-God," in whose personality and intentions the meaning of works should be found.⁴⁹ Toynbee argues for an autonomy of text over self-expression of the author. This emphasises the centrality of author as organiser, proposing that popular musicians "are first and foremost, engaged in exchanging sounds, styles, musical ideas and forms. They are designers and assemblers who take pieces of what is already heard and recombine them. As such, they are not expressive, that is they do not generate music from within. Instead, their materials are located outside in the field of the social."⁵⁰ This reaches beyond just the use of musical idioms and words.

In *Dionysus Dies*, as with any audiovisual work, the location of authorship is further complicated by virtue of its interdisciplinary nature. As any artist seeks ways to forge contracts between mediums, with every passing instant that a relationship is fused between the seen and the heard, an ever-expanding semantic potential is ushered in one direction or another. Julia Kristeva coined the term "intertextuality" to describe this network of relationships which reinstates intersubjectivity.⁵¹ A film like this relies on many simultaneous levels of meaning working together. P. Prayer Elmo Raj summarises this process succinctly:

Texts are not isolated personage but culturally fashioned discourses, ways of systemic/institutionally speaking and saying ... Interpretation can no more be done

within the postulates of academia but should take into account the relation between text to society and culture. Therefore, interpretation becomes a process similar to the process of compiling a text. There is no independent meaning, no independent text and no independent interpretation. Singularity is illusory.⁵²

Without this reliance on the intertextual networks of signification, the conceptual aspects of the work would certainly be lost. It is through this return to socially-located signification that the film can assert some point, *even if it is one that the protagonist herself may be oblivious to*. Nicolas Bourriaud writes, “in appropriating extracts from films and music, we could say actually, that we are making readymades, no longer out of daily objects, but out of objects that are part of our culture.”⁵³ We are now perhaps more fluid with the idea of the authorial voice to the extent that artists will often operate under different names: “The musician-programmer realizes the ideal of the collective intellectual by switching names for each of his or her projects, as most DJs have multiple names. More than a physical person, a name now designates a mode of appearance of production, a line, a fiction.”⁵⁴

Within this intertextuality, systems of knowledge and signification can be alluded to without a character or persona possessing any specialised relationship to that knowledge. Take, for example, the references to Greek mythology that are made explicit at the outset of the piece (04:08). The protagonist does not necessarily have any real understanding of Dionysus or Medusa or their context within classical Greek culture, nor does she need to. They are misremembered tropes to do with hedonism and abjection that her mind can repurpose to its own ends. The images of these gods that swirl around the screen in the titles make explicit the superficiality of the layers of theft and misinterpretation that exist between the time they were worshiped, the time their images were captured on the internet, and the time those images were thrown on top of each other with a “linear burn” Adobe preset.

Grafton Tanner elaborates the way in which the vaporwave sensibility can offer a critique of “modern culture and its sickness ... turning our fascinations and fantasies into more disquieting forms, to suggest that not all is perfectly well, to remind us that maybe we have not been liberated in the Internet Age.”⁵⁵ While creating the work I found myself at various points stopping and questioning whether I was falling prey to clichés (the paid-for visual synthesiser presets, the pretentious barrage of unrelated imagery), only to realise that my ‘authentic’ position did not live outside cliché nor pretense. These were very legitimate parts of the world I was trying to portray.

Narrative Therapy and Collage: The Ultimate Non-Linear Storytelling Exercise

Returning to one of the frequently revisited themes in the film, this concept of social authorship relates in particular to the process of narrative therapy: our need not only to tell a story about our lives but also to relate that story to the society in which we exist. The basic theory of narrative therapy, Donald Polkinghorne writes, “draws on Foucault’s notion of societies’ dominant stories and holds that people normally incorporate for their identities the dominant story of the culture. In the dominant story, people are passive and under control of the problematic parts of themselves. The purpose of the therapeutic work is to assist people in forming a more agentic identity story in which they assume control over their own lives.”⁵⁶

But there is another stage at which this story operates - we need to embrace everything which is generic about it, everything which follows well-documented patterns - we need to *embrace what is non-exceptional about ourselves*. On one end, the patient divulges accounts of her life that to all intents and purposes are completely unique, an act of self expression at its most visceral and vulnerable level. During the process of therapy, however, this expression is broken down into more universal themes and patterns of behaviour that are in fact shared by millions of people across the world. The pursuit of common language for things which describe in a literal sense the generic ‘story’ of one’s life becomes an essential part of the process and ultimately assists in healing. Hanne De Jaegher’s theory of participatory sense-making is premised on the benefit of shared experience in the therapeutic process. It is an enactive approach to intersubjectivity which “investigates how we move together while we interact with each other ... and how this influences how we understand each other and the world, together.”⁵⁷

Collagistic sensibilities (whether gathered in pieces of audio, pieces of footage or pieces of paper) seem particularly well suited to this disjointed brand of sensemaking. Many visual artists have used collage as a commentary on authorship, reassemblage of meaning and violence, the central act of ‘cutting’ lending itself elegantly to feminist discourse. Halberstam equates cutting to a feminist aesthetic “proper to the project of female unbecoming ... Collage, a cut and paste genre ... precisely references the spaces in between and refuses to respect the boundaries that usually delineate self from other, art object from museum, and the copy from the original.”⁵⁸ Halberstam

references work such as Yoko Ono's "Cut Piece" and J. A. Nicholls oil paintings depicting "gender-ambiguous figures all suspended in time, space, water or paint ... glued together, the sum of their parts, and they twist and turn in and out of wholeness, legibility and sense."⁵⁹

From a filmic perspective, Charlie Kaufman's recent *I'm Thinking of Ending Things* (2020) depicts in confounding and uncomfortable ways the sense of a person precariously 'constructed' from misremembered events, expressed by an exhaustive regurgitation of texts (poems, film critic reviews, Oscar acceptance speeches, art work analyses), thoroughly assembled but somehow not digested. The viewer is taken on a giddy flight through ever expanding cultural material, opening a widening portal into the universe of everything that could be thought, felt, said, painted, danced, yet the one thing we are left wondering is who this person really is, and whether they exist at all, or if they are just some algorithmic registry of contemporary cultural references?

Michaela Coel's series *I May Destroy You* (2020) captures the collagistic quality of the main character's dissociated recollections of trauma. In a thrilling scene in the final episode she frantically thrusts paper squares of her memories and fictional plot lines to the wall, rearranging them into increasing coherence to the sound of Rev. Milton Brunson's jubilant "It's Gonna Rain."⁶⁰ The story marks her not only finding a narrative for her book but also being able to tell the story of her experience of assault with a beginning, middle and end. This moving scene communicated simultaneously the collage as the very act of processing fragmented memories and, as signalled in the music, the paradoxical joy one finds through finding fleeting coherence and causality, albeit about the story of painful processes.

Understanding the Sound of Now: Nothing is Quite as It Seems

There exists a particular tonal shift that has emerged within the millennial's cultural processing of society, one which can easily be misinterpreted as flippant, unmoved, sarcastic and overly inward-gazing. Adam Curtis, in his film *HyperNormalisation* (2016), blames what he perceives as this culture of antipathy on an overemphasis on the individual, the hashtag warrior who falls prey to "oh dearism" in place of real action. In an interview with Yancey Strickler he describes the act of self expression in less than flattering terms:

We may look back at self-expression as the terrible deadening conformity of our time. It doesn't mean it's bad and it doesn't mean it's a fake thing. It's gotten so that everyone does it—so what's the point? Everyone expresses themselves every day. We're all self-expressing. It's the conformity of our time.⁶¹

Yet, if self-expression isn't a bad thing, does there need to be a point to it? Is it possible that we can hold these things simultaneously, that the existence of ubiquitous content and expression does not preclude an acknowledgement that we are not necessarily as unique, nor as special as we'd like to think? What artistic possibility exists within this non-exceptionalism, within this memorialising of the mundane? Perhaps Curtis begrudges the fact that our self-expression is not serving a radical political purpose, but I would argue that it is not for want or lack of trying. It is perhaps a moment of pause, a fundamental activity of self-soothing and sensemaking in the knowledge that change happens both personally and politically, incrementally, and often imperceptibly slowly. It is something that we observe in dislocated gestures, non-sequiturs that make greater sense in retrospect. It is cumulative, it is both big and small - and sometimes, yes, in weak moments, we do wonder: is there a point to it all?

“It Is What It Is”: The Anthem of Our Times

There is something I always loved about the way Samantha Urbani and Devonté Hynes, aka Blood Orange, deliver the title line of the song “It Is What It Is.”⁶² There is a resignation to the phrase which seems at odds with its cheerful and glossy exterior. Almost every element of the music is mechanically automated: the synthesized glockenspiel, the robotic delay, the symmetrical block phrases placed like lego blocks beside each other, as if the composer is in almost pathological control of each moment. And yet what is more despairing than that phrase “It is what it is,” so ubiquitous in popular culture? The phrase seems to encapsulate a kind of ambivalence, a resounding chorus of “meh” that belongs to a generation saddled with fake news, an economic system on the verge of collapse and a planet plummeting into inevitable destruction. It is the title of the latest offering of Thundercat, himself a poster child for self-effacing humour and defeat, qualities which soften his musical wizardry so that it never feels out of the layman's reach.⁶³ He embodies perfectly the coating of vulnerability in comedic pathos. The melodic, sardonic crooning in the face of heartache, belly laughing at the cosmic joke. It is not that we don't care. Perhaps it is that we care too

much. Contemporary music offers us a glorious array of references to how much there is of everything and the difficulty of finding ourselves within it all. Flying Ibex's song "Truth is An Addiction" beautifully layers swathes of rhythm and out of time riffs on top of each other, stacking more and more as the song progresses into deepening confessions of *not knowing*.⁶⁴ Ammoncontact's album is aptly titled *Sounds Like Everything*; Jerry Paper's single "Everything is Shitty."⁶⁵ Perhaps the post-digital barrage of references produce a power surge within our brains and hearts that causes them to short circuit. We spit out jokes, we swap our faces on free apps, eat our avocados and cry ourselves to sleep. It is what it is.

"Things I Know To Be True I Keep Close To Me"

So in this maelstrom of competing truths, what can be more comforting than commonplace wisdom? We cannot agree that the self really exists, whether consciousness is contained within the brain's matter, whether technological progress is in step with moral progress ... but we can damn sure agree that washing our hands is a good idea. It was with this in mind that I wrote the piece that, of all the music that features in the film, most closely resembles a song. Flying in the face of the spirit that in both contemporary art and academia seeks to problematise and complexify, I wanted to milk naïve sentiments for all they were worth.

Things I know to be true I keep close to me

Those are good shoes and that's a bad recipe

He will do to you what he did to others

I am all but one mistake behind my mother

Things I know to be true I keep close to me

He won't come 'cos I will him towards me

Wash your hands either way for society

Things I know to be true I keep close to me

I'm not good in the morning, be patient with me

You should know I have tiger like loyalty

Arrogance is overt insecurity

This scene also allowed me to move between planes of voices, as the diegetic offhand comments from the therapy session form a counterpart to the song's lyrics. This device hints at the kind of irreverent running commentary that a YouTuber might employ: the foreground of the video is not 'safe' from the subversive chatter in the background.

The Moralistic Underbelly of Digital Culture: Rejoicing in the Abject

Figure 10. Still from *Dionysus Dies*, 21:22: A fall from grace.

Speed and succinctness are not everything. Synonymous with the digital age and its ability to democratise voices and mobilise action is the potential for moral arguments to be whittled down to retweetable platitudes, with virtue signalling and cancel culture some of the most widely acknowledged byproducts of well-intentioned speedy

expression. In my own research into digital culture, I wanted to engage with the aspects of it that I myself found uncomfortable. The scene with Michael Jackson playing on the cassette tape (24:27) was a moment to put various symbolic objects in the same room: technology that speaks to a generational truth from which there is no escape and a pop icon who was part of the childhood of that generation, now fallen from grace. Michael Jackson assumes the form of so many things: he is both victim and perpetrator; he is human and superhuman - the grand fictional character that loomed so large in cultural memory and whose musical contribution cannot be overstated. Where do we put him? What do we do with him? Perhaps because the artifice of his image, the mythology surrounding him is so deeply constructed that we can sever it from the person underneath it and split the two into poles of good and evil. Is this function of modern day culture so different from the ancient myths of Dionysus and Medusa? And is the dichotomy of ugliness and beauty, good and evil, which it forces us to confront not dissimilar to that which we find in ourselves? The Medusas and Minotaurs roam within all of us. 4Chan forum warriors unleash their lewdest and crudest in a troll-race to the bottom. The internet forgets nothing. Our errors hang online like a bad smell outliving even the gods.

In a world where we constantly mediate these public and private selves, fantasies of nihilistic rebellion may become ever more enticing. In my research I discovered the almost dangerous catharsis one experiences when enacting a descent from civilisation and acceptability, dressing your monster up in a red dress and taking it to the beach. There is an undoubted joy in falling off the wagon. As Quentin Crisp reminds us: "If at first you don't succeed, failure may be your style."[66](#)

The final section of the film (25:40) offers, in a sense, an escape, or perhaps an absconding from sensemaking, from abjection, from the constraints of human flesh, and the shape and colour it comes in. It departs from the tongue-in-cheek aesthetics or controlled sentiments that preceded it and opens a window both visually and sonically into perhaps the only moment of earnest abandon, and in abandon: respite.

Trying not to try too hard not to die

- let it be a mystery.

Take me to the edge of eternity.

Take me to the furnace.

Leave me and my maker to be.

If this is the end then let's sing about it,

dance and shout it,

- let it be all that it can be.

There was never a good time for this:

I hate goodbyes.

You hate goodbyes.

Let's exit unceremoniously

There is an opposite angle to what a shared aesthetic might encompass: not the lo-fi unpolished intimacy of the phone camera footage, but the droves of glossy, impersonal and played-out stock footage forever just one click away. The repurposed renderings of space (26:19) which I used for the end sequence encapsulate so much that is shared in this sense. Space embodies the ultimate cliché, the go-to generic symbol for wonder and wistfulness, a fascination that our species have had since the beginning of time. It belongs to us, in that we are part of it, and yet it can never truly be ours, in that it extends beyond the physical possibilities of our intellect and imagination. Unlike the earth, it is too big for us to destroy or to hold dominion over. Yet, in its impossible vastness, it provides all the spiritual containment and comfort that an atheist could ask for. It is perhaps the one thing big enough to put the broken heart into perspective.

If This Is The End, Then Let's Sing About It - Dance And Shout It!

The most resonant reflection that came about during the making of this work was how we process complex events in miniature, seemingly unrelated pieces, never at once, and mostly in retrospect. Our experiences find their way into misremembered vignettes, some in sharp focus, others more fuzzy. We string them up side by side, we rearrange them and colour grade them with our emotions. This is not merely a process of making art, but of making meaning.

The context of a global pandemic certainly led me to see practice-based artistic enquiry as a valuable mode of investigation in the face of extreme uncertainty. The art film medium allows one to place unresolved positions alongside ‘commonplace’ wisdom, to lead with emotional authority where the facts are not yet clear. One can pose an artistic position that embraces uncertainty rather than seeking to override it. As the film evolved, its meaning continually shifted and so too did my understanding of what was being reflected back at me. *Dionysus Dies* was a disjointed audiovisual playground in which to explore paradox, comb through uncomfortable personal truths and process geopolitical ominousness as a camp musical tragicomedy. It allowed for a confessional immediacy and a wry distance, an ambiguity in authorial voice and an escape into the bland anonymity of stock footage. In a sense, this film world felt like the safest place to be in 2020.

In organising the disparate footage I learnt about structuring ideas over time and what is involved in building a filmic arc, which in turn influenced my existing practice of musical film scoring in a more traditional sense. I started to understand the music in ‘scenes’ rather than as standalone songs, and how each one played a part in a larger structure. I feel that in a standalone album context, structuring music in this filmic way might help an album to be more aesthetically diverse, to tell a more layered and well-structured story and operate on a more integrated conceptual level. The inclusion of diegetic sound from the film’s action can also lend the music itself more grit and ‘aliveness.’

As a result of this research I would approach any future audiovisual work with an openness to all forms of seemingly unrelated media. The powers of intertextuality go far in making a work that can operate on many levels. The research led me to see the strange creative possibilities in combining the expanse of 21st-century media that is so readily available to us. It changed my perspective on how we can build lasting and cohesive artistic statements around disposable material. Nothing need be wasted if one is willing to look longer and harder. The process of combining this media allowed me to make connections between themes that I might have otherwise explored in a more literal (and less interesting) way. I could relate the broken heart to the grieving planet, the abject protagonist to her animal counterparts. I could use ‘lockdown living room’ footage to speak to the dissonance of the 21st-century online private life lived out in public. I could borrow the crooning laments of lost love without resolving my position on whether Michael Jackson was the best messenger. I could zoom in and out of scales of time, from the tedium of calendar-scrolling in captivity to the generic expanses of stock space footage. Making this film allowed me to put journal entries

into stop motion, to take my own monster out the closet and run her down the pier. I gained a greater understanding of the therapeutic potential of collage as narrative therapy in times of uncertainty.

It was also confirmed for me that in any exercise of self-mythologisation - an ostensibly narcissistic pursuit - the redeeming feature must be vulnerability. This was illustrated to me clearly in the fundamental differences I experienced between creating *Dionysus Dies* (a semi-fictional autoethnographic work) and my previous experience of producing a documentary *Not Without Incident*.⁶⁷ The two presented opposing challenges. Within documentary one runs the risk, as Nichols claims, of “using people as accomplices in one’s argument.”⁶⁸ Conversely, one must battle one’s own ego when moulding oneself into something palatable for the consumption of others, working against the ingrained impulse to present oneself well in favour of revealing oneself truthfully and hoping that this subjective truth will resonate in some way with the truths of others.

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Biography

Galina Juritz is a composer, producer, violinist and more recently filmmaker, having completed her MMus in Creative Practice at Goldsmiths University. Since studying violin performance at the University of Cape Town under Prof. Farida Bacharova in 2007, she has been working across diverse genres, in collaboration with multiple disciplines. Her composing credits include short films, commercials, dance pieces, scored works for ensembles, animations, audiovisual compositions and extensive studio work. In 2017 she premiered her first full-length cantata, *Madness: Songs of Hope and Despair*, in collaboration with psychiatrist Dr Sean Baumann and Professor of African Music Performance and cultural historian, Dizu Plaatjies. The cantata ran at the Baxter Theatre in Cape Town and subsequently featured as part of the MOOC course 'Medicine and the Arts: Humanising Healthcare.' Her recent releases include *NX14X* (NX Records), *Like the Grass* and *Triple Bluff* (both Kit Records). Musically, she finds inspiration in both humans and machines, the majority of her work blending synthetic electronic textures with live instruments and voices. In the past year she has turned her attention to ethnographic film making, and her current focus is on navigating the creative intersections between fact and fiction. She is busy working on

a second cantata for release in late 2021, and her upcoming PhD will explore musical compositional practices that democratise soundtracks of documentary films.

Footnotes

1. Rachel Cooke, "Joan Jonas: 'You Don't Know What You're Doing Sometimes. You Just Begin,'" *The Observer*, March 4, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/mar/04/joan-jonas-video-art-pioneer-tate-modern-exhibition-interview>. [↵](#)
2. Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, Illustrated Edition (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2011), 2-3. [↵](#)
3. *Ibid.*, 105. [↵](#)
4. *Ibid.* [↵](#)
5. Mark Carney, "The Reith Lectures - 2020: Mark Carney - How We Get What We Value - From Climate Crisis to Real Prosperity - BBC Sounds," December 23, 2020, accessed December 26, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m000gkms>. [↵](#)
6. Grafton Tanner, *Babbling Corpse: Vaporwave and the Commodification of Ghosts* (Winchester, UK ; Washington, USA: Zero Books, 2016), 9. [↵](#)
7. Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, Illustrated Edition (Durham NC: Duke University Press Books, 2011). 119. [↵](#)
8. *Dionysus Dies*, 22:05. [↵](#)
9. *Ibid.*, 7. [↵](#)
10. Vijay Iyer, "Improvisation, Temporality and Embodied Experience," in *Sound Unbound: Sampling Digital Music and Culture*, ed. Paul D. Miller (London; Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2004), 265. [↵](#)
11. Nicolas Bourriaud and Caroline Schneider, *Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay; How Art Reprograms the World* (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2010), 72. [↵](#)

12. The songs *Automatic* by the Pointer Sisters and *Raincurl* by Yaeji are heard playing in the room. [↵](#)
13. Paul D. Miller, *Sound Unbound: Sampling Digital Music and Culture*, Illustrated Edition (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2008), 13. [↵](#)
14. 2001 interview with Björk, quoted in Nicola Dibben, *Björk* (London: Equinox, 2009), 83. [↵](#)
15. Miller, *Sound Unbound*, 17. [↵](#)
16. Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2016), 39. [↵](#)
17. Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 116. [↵](#)
18. Coincidentally, one of the byproducts of the pandemic was that I stayed in Hastings for a large part of the summer, and was able to shoot some key scenes against the backdrop of this historic seaside town, of somewhat muted beauty. The location may have added to the film's melancholia, with its associations of old battles and 'faded glory.' Hasting's tourism suffered as seaside resorts went out of fashion in the 1930s and its harbour was never completed. [↵](#)
19. Rachel Cusk, *Outline* (Faber & Faber, 2018), 224-225. [↵](#)
20. Björk, "Björk : Triumph of a Heart," September 19, 2019, accessed December 27, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0z-rhM-dcO8>;
- Domino Recording Co., "Richard Dawson - Dead Dog in an Alleyway (Official Video)," January 9, 2020, accessed December 27, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TgpgtU-Y2dE&ab_channel=DominoRecordingCo. [↵](#)
21. Onno Oerlmans, *Poetry and Animals: Blurring the Boundaries with the Human* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 27. [↵](#)
22. This notion of co-opting of animals into human narrative relates to the current topic of interspecies theory, which would make a relevant point of future inquiry. [↵](#)
23. These NHS Rainbows have essentially become badges for the strangeness of 2020: unwittingly symbolic of our strained relationship to the anthropocene. [↵](#)

24. Anahid Kassabian, "The End of Diegesis as We Know It?," in *The Oxford Handbook of New Audiovisual Aesthetics*, ed. John Richardson, Claudia Gorbman and Carol Vernallis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 98. [↵](#)
25. *Ibid.* [↵](#)
26. Florian Cramer, "What Is 'Post-digital'?" in *Postdigital Aesthetics: Art Computational and Design*, ed. David M. Barry and Michael Dieter (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 21. [↵](#)
27. Dave Tompkins, quoted in Tobias C. van Veen, "Review: How to Wreck a Nice Beach: The Vocoder From World War II to Hip-Hop - The Machine Speaks," *Dancecult* (November 2012): 67. [↵](#)
28.
Much of Holly Herndon and Matt Dryhurst's work explores the potential for more collaborative relationships with technology. In their conversation with Kate Crawford, a delicate and precarious phenomenon at the seat of our technological fear, Artificial Intelligence, is aptly described by the interviewer: 'Neither artificial nor intelligent, Artificial Intelligence is both embodied and material. It is made from natural resources, it's made from fuel, from human labour, infrastructure, logistics and from classifications... (AI is) at its most fundamental level...a registry of power.'
- Holly Herndon and Matt Dryhurst, "Interdependence 9: Kate Crawford (AI Now) | Interdependence," July 14, 2020, accessed December 26, 2020, <https://interdependence.fm/episodes/interdependence-9-kate-crawford-ai-now>. [↵](#)
29. "Proto," Holly Herndon, accessed August 3, 2020, <http://www.hollyherndon.com/proto>. [↵](#)
30. Holly Ingleton, "Composing Paradoxes: Feminist Process in Sound Arts and Experimental Musics" (PhD diss., City, University of London, 2015), 11. [↵](#)
31. Marie Thompson, "Feminised Noise and the 'Dotted Line' of Sonic Experimentalism," *Contemporary Music Review* 35, no. 1 (January 2016): 86. [↵](#)
32. FKA twigs, "FKA Twigs - Water Me," August 1, 2013, accessed December 27, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kFtMl-uipA8&ab_channel=FKAtwigs. [↵](#)
33. Lucy Liyou - Topic, "I'm Going to Therapy," March 12, 2020, accessed December 27, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PSaWKzfugtA&ab_channel=LucyLiyou-

Topic. ☰

34. Barbara Creed, "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection," *Screen* 27, no. 1 (January 1986): 44-71. ☰

35. Jason Toynbee, *Making Popular Music: Musicians, Creativity and Institutions* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2000), 40. ☰

36.

Brainfeeder, "Thundercat - 'Them Changes' (Official Video)," July 21, 2015, accessed December 27, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GNCd_ERZvZM&ab_channel=Brainfeeder;

Bill Wurtz, "Bill Wurtz - History of Japan," February 2, 2016, accessed December 27, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mh5LY4Mz15o&ab_channel=billwurtz.

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37. Quoted in Kirk Varnedoe, *High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture* (New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art, 1990). ☰

38. Amanda Hess, "Celebrity Culture Is Burning," *The New York Times*, March 30, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/30/arts/virus-celebrities.html>. ☰

39.

Still Houseplants, "Still House Plants - Shy Song," July 20, 2020, accessed December 27, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8CaIEtQLV3o&ab_channel=stillhouseplants;

The band in their interview with Hawthorne describe how the song's layered sound came about as a result of forgetting how to play it before a show, and electing to play the phone recording through the mic. They enjoyed how their live rendition fell in and out of time with the original recording and used this version on the album. ☰

40. Dense Truth, "Land Trance - Transcript (Official Video)," May 1, 2020, accessed December 27, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0fjigrB6v7I&ab_channel=DenseTruth. ☰

41. Rebecca Collins and Johanna Linsley, "Stolen Voices / Rebecca Collins and Johanna Linsley," *ASAP/J* (blog), October 3, 2019, accessed August 31, 2020, <http://asapjournal.com/stolen-voices-rebecca-collins-and-johanna-linsley/>. ☰

42. Carol Vernallis, *Unruly Media: Youtube, Music Video, And The New Digital Cinema*, Illustrated Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 149. [↵](#)
43. *Ibid.*, 10. [↵](#)
44. Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington, Ind: Indiana University Press, 2002), 5-6. [↵](#)
45. Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer, *Lee Lozano: Dropout Piece* (London: Afterall Books, 2014), 7. [↵](#)
46. Resilience Discourse is a recurring theme throughout James' work. See Robin James, *Resilience & Melancholy: Pop Music, Feminism, Neoliberalism* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2015). [↵](#)
47. MRWaSP, or Multi-Racial White Supremacist Patriarchy is James's term for early 21st-Century globalised Western race/gender/sexuality/capitalist hegemony; James, *Resilience & Melancholy*, 162-163. [↵](#)
48. Ava Tunnicliffe, "Audrey Wollen On The Power of Sadness," *Nylon*, July 20, 2015, accessed September 17, 2020, <https://www.nylon.com/articles/audrey-wollen-sad-girl-theory>. [↵](#)
49. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image, Music, Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), 142-148. [↵](#)
50. Toynbee, *Making Popular Music*, xiv. [↵](#)
51. Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, First Edition (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1980). [↵](#)
52. P. Prayer Elmo Raj, "Text/Texts: Julia Kristeva's Concept of Intertextuality," *Ars Artium* 3 (January 2015): 78. [↵](#)
53. Bourriaud and Schneider, *Postproduction*, 86. [↵](#)
54. *Ibid.*, 87. [↵](#)
55. Tanner, *Babbling Corpse*, 9. [↵](#)

56. Donald E. Polkinghorne, "Explorations of Narrative Identity," *Psychological Inquiry* 7, no. 4 (October 1996): 366. [↵](#)
57. "Participatory Sense-Making," Hanne De Jaegher, accessed September 20, 2020, <https://hannedejaegher.net/>. [↵](#)
58. Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 135-136. [↵](#)
59. *Ibid.*, 141. [↵](#)
60.
ka1abrown, "It's Gonna Rain - Rev. Milton Brunson Thompson Community Singers," July 21, 2010, accessed December 27, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=blioSM1Rc6A&ab_channel=ka1abrown.
[↵](#)
61. "Adam Curtis on the Dangers of Self-Expression," Adam Curtis, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://thecreativeindependent.com/people/adam-curtis-on-the-dangers-of-self-expression/>. [↵](#)
62. Devonté Hynes, "Devonté Hynes - It Is What It Is," December 5, 2014, accessed December 27, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_JzBrCfqhE4&ab_channel=BloodOrange-Topic. [↵](#)
63. Thundercat, "It Is What It Is," April 2, 2020, accessed December 27, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lqDs_quhy0I&ab_channel=Thundercat-Topic. [↵](#)
64. Flying Ibex - Topic, "Truth's an Addiction," December 2, 2014, accessed December 27, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KHbnDOenwac&ab_channel=FlyingIbex-Topic. [↵](#)
65.
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66. Quentin Crisp, quoted in Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 96. [↵](#)

67. Goldsmiths Music, "Galina Juritz - Not Without Incident | PureGold 2020," June 11, 2020, accessed December 27, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MnkL9LZwVG4&ab_channel=GoldsmithsMusic. ↵
68. Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 41. ↵