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Steven Wilson's Multimodal Metropolis: Isolation and Transcendence in the Concept Album *Hand. Cannot. Erase.*

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In 2015, British composer, producer, and multi-instrumentalist Steven Wilson released one of the most ambitious storytelling projects in 21st-century rock music. His concept album *Hand. Cannot. Erase.* adapts the real-life story of Joyce Carol Vincent, a 38-year-old woman who died in a north London apartment in December 2003 and was only discovered more than two years later. Even though Vincent had by all accounts been popular and an active part of the London music scene for much of her life, neither neighbors nor former friends or partners checked on her when she had suddenly disappeared.

Steven Wilson – whom *The Guardian* dubbed ‘the most successful British musician people have never heard of’¹ – first learned about Vincent from the 2011 documentary *Dreams of a Life*, in which filmmaker Carol Morley told her tragic story through a combination of interviews and dramatic re-enactments. In *Hand. Cannot. Erase.*, he consequently created his own fictionalized version of Vincent’s life, singing in a series of loosely connected scenes about the story of ‘a woman growing up, who goes to live in the city, very isolated, and ... disappears one day, and no one notices.’² These lyrical vignettes play out across eight tracks of progressive rock music that incorporate elements from jazz, electronica, pop, and heavy metal, as well as additional vocals by a children’s choir and the Israeli singer Ninet Tayeb.³ Moreover, Wilson’s storytelling project is remarkable because it extends far beyond the combination of lyrics and music. In addition to a variety of intradiegetic sound effects – such as recordings of rain, children playing in a schoolyard, or a

¹ Dave Simpson, ‘Steven Wilson: the prog rocker topping the charts without anyone noticing’, *Guardian*, 24 August 2017 <<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2017/aug/24/steven-wilson-the-prog-rocker-topping-the-charts-without-anyone-noticing>>.

² Steven Wilson, ‘Steven Wilson at Air Studios – Part 2: Concept and Inspiration’, online video, YouTube, 4 November 2014, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=49HxZ8yVpqq&t=104s>> [accessed 5 July 2023].

³ For a comprehensive definition of this genre, as well as a discussion of its ambiguities, see Kevin Holm-Hudson’s Introduction in *Progressive Rock Reconsidered*, ed. by Kevin Holm-Hudson (Routledge, 2001), pp. 1-18.

train chugging by – that underscore the listening experience’s cinematic dimensions, the album’s liner notes are adorned with numerous pieces of visual artwork, especially photographs that relate to the story. A limited collector’s edition coffee table book features well over 100 pages of additional material among which can be found facsimiles of school reports, postcards, cassette mixtapes belonging to the album’s protagonist, as well as posts from an internet blog Wilson wrote from her perspective in the leadup to the album’s release. These posts, in turn, include diary entries, childhood reminiscences, and reflections on modern society that lend concrete context to the album’s frequently abstract lyrics. Four of the album’s eight songs also received a filmic dimension through accompanying music videos. In short, *Hand. Cannot. Erase.* constitutes a prime example of what Henry Jenkins has termed ‘transmedial storytelling’, a mode in which ‘a story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole.’⁴

Given this transmedial complexity, most scholarship on Wilson’s album to date has focused on exactly that notion of a holistic, canonical narrative to which music, lyrics, visuals, and online blog posts all vitally contribute. Most notably, musicologist Lori Burns has mapped the album’s ‘transmedia storyworld’ and how individual songs or music videos relate to it in great detail, focusing especially on the immersive affordances of this plurality of media forms:

To interpret this intersecting network of artistic materials, the spectator-analyst is challenged to understand the dialogue between musical production and the media artefacts, to absorb the multimodal discourse of the recorded tracks and music videos, to discover the ways in which individual texts are connected in an intermedia relationship to other texts in the network, and to grasp the cohesive narrative that emerges in and through the transmedia platform.⁵

While this focus on connecting the various puzzle pieces and mutually implicated story elements across media contributes greatly to an understanding of the sheer complexity of Wilson’s work, it is not the only way in which *Hand. Cannot. Erase.* can be approached – nor is it, I would argue, the most common. Burns herself stresses that ‘the design of this

⁴ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York UP, 2006), 95–96.

⁵ Lori Burns and Laura McLaren, ‘Interpreting the Materials of a Transmedia Storyworld: Word-Music-Image in Steven Wilson’s *Hand. Cannot. Erase.* (2015)’, in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Music Production*, ed. by Andrew Bourbon and Simon Zagorski-Thomas (Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), pp. 393–404 (p. 395).

transmedia setting allows for multiple avenues to be explored, as the album, blog, scrapbook, music videos and live show each offer unique narrative commentaries.’⁶

In this article, I want to approach Wilson’s album from an alternative angle, and to treat its multimodal narrative commentaries not as fragments of one complete mosaic, but as narratives in their own right that can be understood as superimposed rather than complementary. In this palimpsestic rather than holistic reading, the lyrics tell one story, the music another, and the supplementary material yet another, all of which are in turn layered on the real-life story of Joyce Carol Vincent and its dramatization in *Dreams of a Life*. None of these stories, I argue, is necessarily more canonical than any of the others – in fact, many may deviate from the master-narrative Burns charted across different media. However, as many listeners will not encounter *Hand. Cannot. Erase.* as an immersive *gesamtkunstwerk* of music, video, blog, deluxe edition scrapbook, live concert, and historical background, but rather as a limited subset of these, an examination of the narratives some of them tell when considered individually will yield insights pertaining specifically to the album’s real-world effect.

I argue that the album’s different layers, if approached as distinct narratives, contrast and even contradict each other as often as they are supplementary. While the lyrics relay a story of urban isolation, the atomization of modern life and, ultimately, the erasure of the protagonist, the music creates a counter-narrative of solitude as sanctuary, liberation and eventual transcendence.⁷ Both, in turn, contrast Joyce Carol Vincent’s actual biography, which, unlike Wilson’s adaptation, is marked by gendered violence and systemic racism. I suggest that there is method to this narrative diversity. The very difference of these layers, paired with the simultaneity of their perception – a listener is able to hear the music, follow the lyrics, and think about Vincent’s biography all at the same time – results in an artistic engagement with life in the 21st century metropolis that foregrounds conflicting experiences, irresolvability, and multiplicity instead of being reducible to unanimously positive or

⁶ Ibid., p. 401.

⁷ In this, I follow Fred Everett Maus who argues that ‘musical events can be regarded as characters, or as gestures, assertions, responses, resolutions, goal-directed motions, references, and so on. Once they are so regarded, it is easy to regard successions of musical events as forming something like a story, in which these characters and actions go together to form something like a plot.’ Fred Everett Maus, ‘Music as Narrative’, *Indiana Theory Review*, 12 (1991), p. 6 (pp. 1-34).

negative aspects. The contradiction of narratives, in other words, is the narrative of *Hand. Cannot. Erase.*

In a first step, I examine Wilson's lyrics and the narrative that would be generated by them if they were experienced in isolation – as a sequence of poems rather than musical events. Subsequently, I discuss how this narrative contrasts with, on the one hand, that of the music and visual accompaniment of *Hand. Cannot. Erase.*, and, on the other, of Vincent's actual biography. I also address the ethical questions that are potentially raised by a White, male, internationally successful musician using the story of an impoverished woman of color as artistic raw material, but venture that by introducing 'multiple semiotic modes within one media text',⁸ Steven Wilson creates a space in which these questions can co-exist with creative work and historical fact and with tragedy and transcendence.

The Lyrical Narrative of *Hand. Cannot. Erase.*

Steven Wilson has called *Hand. Cannot. Erase.* 'the musical equivalent of watching a movie, an experience that gradually unfolds, and where each song is a scene that forms only a part of the whole story.'⁹ Consequently, it makes sense to begin by first analyzing the most explicit way in which his album tells a story: through sung, as well as spoken, words.

The narrative of Wilson's lyrics re-imagines the life of Joyce Carol Vincent, but only loosely so. His protagonist remains unnamed in the songs themselves – the accompanying blog posts sometimes call her 'H' –, the scenes conjured up are separate vignettes rather than chronological events of a story, and they are virtually devoid of temporal or geographical specificity. As the primary vocalist, Wilson, takes on various and not always clearly distinguishable roles: At times, he voices an omniscient narrator who addresses the album's protagonist in the second person; at others, he sings from her perspective. This means that – were it not for one song, in which actress Katherine Begley narrates a first-person flashback – even protagonist's gender would remain ambiguous.

The lyrics focus on the detachment between the protagonist and the world surrounding her, on feelings of inconsequentiality and discomfort with spaces outside her

⁸ Lori Burns, 'Interpreting Transmedia and Multimodal Narratives: Steven Wilson's "The Raven that Refused to Sing"', in *The Routledge Companion to Popular Music Analysis: Expanding Approaches*, ed. by Circo Scotto, Kenneth Smith, and John Brackett (Routledge, 2019), p. 96 (pp. 95-113).

⁹ Steven Wilson, '*To the Bone* is Officially Released Today', website post, StevenWilson.com, 18 August 2017, <<http://stevenwilsonhq.com/sw/to-the-bone-is-officially-released-today/>> [accessed 24 September 2023].

home. One recurring symbol for that discomfort is the sky, from which the protagonist is described as shrinking back from the beginning. The opening number, titled ‘First Regret / Three Years Older’, begins, as Burns and McLaren have noted, ‘*in medias res*’¹⁰: ‘You cross the schoolyard with your head held down | And walk the streets under the breaking cloud | With 100 futures cascading out.’¹¹ The very first image of the lyrical narrative, hence, is one that foregrounds discomfort, eager movement towards interior spaces, and the notion of time passing. At the same time, it sidelines individuality: The protagonist is only addressed as ‘you’ and not given any distinguishing features whatsoever aside from her discomfort. The reasons for the latter are at once physical and emotional: On the one hand, there is the rain, which is also present as a sound effect at the opening of the album. On the other, the outside world confronts her with missed potential and the relentless passage of time. Associating these existential concerns with unfriendly weather thus creates a parallel association of dry indoor spaces – especially domestic ones – with comfort. Her private home inoculates the protagonist both from the rain and the possible futures going to waste as years go by, running down the gutters like rain in city streets.

Over the course of its 65-minute runtime, *Hand. Cannot. Erase.* develops these themes – a profound discomfort experienced towards the outside world, the relentless passage of time, and the gradual retreat into isolation – into ever more oppressive forms. The opening track warns ‘you only have to say | And the world will slip away | From you’,¹² suggesting that she still has a choice and thus some agency over her relationship towards the world. In the penultimate track ‘Ancestral’, by contrast, that phrase has morphed into ‘the world doesn’t want you | it will never tell you why’,¹³ which stresses her having no control over nor understanding of her relationship to the outside. It transforms her choice of rejecting into being rejected. Similarly, while the image of futures cascading from clouds like rain implies that the protagonist could either keep her head lowered, or look up and meet those futures, she laments in the final track of *Hand. Cannot. Erase.* that ‘The years just pass like trains | I wave, but they don’t slow down.’¹⁴ In the beginning, she chooses not to interact with the world, whereas here, she tries but finds her efforts at interaction to be futile. Juxtapositions like this occur throughout and, in their sum total, relay a narrative of someone who at first

¹⁰Burns and McLaren, p. 396.

¹¹ Steven Wilson, *Hand. Cannot. Erase.* (Kscope, KSCOPE315, 2015), compact disc, track 1.

¹² Wilson, *Hand. Cannot. Erase.*, track 1.

¹³ Wilson, *Hand. Cannot. Erase.*, track 7.

¹⁴ Steven Wilson, *Hand. Cannot. Erase.*, track 8.

voluntarily retreats from sociability and possibility, but at length passes a point of no return and cannot retrieve them even if she wanted to. This notion is underscored by the fact that the lyrics, in the album's final moment, switch from the prevalent second person address to a first person. Before, Steven Wilson's singing suggested a second party interacting with the protagonist, however ineffectively. Towards the end, however, there is only the 'I,' an atomized individual whose attempts to reach out are met with no response whatsoever.

One of the few things that seemingly offer respite from this double-detriment of external discomfort and internal isolation is nostalgia. For instance, in the third track, titled 'Perfect Life', the protagonist takes refuge in idyllic but ephemeral childhood memories: 'When I was 13, I had a sister for six months. | She arrived one February morning, pale and shellshocked.'¹⁵ However, the lyrics mark this respite as deceptive and ultimately insufficient. The specification of 'for six months' leaves no doubt that the events described were ephemeral, and the description of the sister as 'pale and shellshocked' suggests that she was given to foster care due to previous traumatic experiences. With gestures like these, the lyrics demonstrate both the protagonist's search for sanctuary in the past and its futility. The problems that drive her to retreat from the world outside her own domestic space – physical discomfort and the dreadful passage of time – are present in just the same way in her flights of nostalgia, and even these remembered social connections are invariably tenuous: 'Gradually, [my sister] passed into another distant part of my memory, | until I could no longer remember her face, her voice, even her | name.'¹⁶ Such lines – again, one example of several throughout the album – paradigmatically reiterate the negative implication of its seemingly ambiguous title. '*Hand. Cannot. Erase.*' can be understood as a desperate insistence on the perpetuity of certain things – a wish or something that cannot be erased, uttered in short, punctuated bursts, like gasps. However, more fatalistically, they can also suggest that erasure simply happens by means other than hands. In other words, it is not the physical actions of human beings that lead to misery and death – no murder or forceful confinement – but disembodied processes: time, inaction, indifference and, notably, retreat into virtual space.

Nostalgia is just one way in which the protagonist tries to find refuge from the real world, the internet is another. The album's fifth track, 'Home Invasion / Regret #9', ventures

¹⁵ Wilson, *Hand. Cannot. Erase.*, track 3.

¹⁶ Ibid.

that present-day domestic spaces, too, fail to offer privacy or protection. Over martial drums and distorted guitars, Wilson sings repetitive injunctions evocative of advertisement:

‘Download sex and download God | [...] | Download a dream home and a wife | Download the ocean and the sky.’¹⁷ These lines are followed by a chorus in which the protagonist laments her loss of ‘faith in what’s outside’ and in ‘the awning of the stars across the sky,’ which is termed a ‘wreckage.’¹⁸ The motif of the outside sky – already from the beginning associated with extraneous discomfort and the loss of opportunity is thus juxtaposed with a descent into commercialized online realms in a way that suggests causality: a downloaded sky has wrecked the real thing, and the Internet’s simulation of religion, sexuality, and community has erased the social fabric of the physical world.

In summary, the lyrical narrative of *Hand. Cannot. Erase.* paints a picture of lethal urban isolation that starts as a retreat into one’s own comfort zone. It is aggravated by focusing on the past rather than the future and the virtual rather than the physical world, and thus, by and by, turns from a choice into a death trap. The album’s penultimate song epitomizes this as ‘things that meant so much mean nothing in the end’, and then ‘you can shut the door, but you can’t ignore | The crawl of your decline.’¹⁹ In this culmination, everything is vain, and even things that are actively held on to will inevitably vanish. Things that promise to fend off the discomfort caused by the outside world, such as holding down one’s head, severing complicated social connections, and shutting the door to the outside, are not just ineffectual but deleterious. From this angle, *Hand. Cannot. Erase.* appears a dire description of life in the modern metropolis, where the twin forces of online capitalism and offline atomization vanquish human individuals. However, counter to that run multiple alternative narratives, at least one of which suggests that retreat from the outside world can also lead to liberation.

Blog Posts, Music, and Their Multimodal Counterpoints

In his 2017 monograph *Song Acts: Writings on Words and Music*, Lawrence Kramer posits that

A song, we might say, does not use a reading that it substitutes for the text and presents in musical form. Instead, a song gives a reading, in both the performative and the critical senses of the phrase: the song gives itself as, gives itself over to, an activity of interpretation –

¹⁷ Steven Wilson, *Hand. Cannot. Erase.*, track 5.

¹⁸ Wilson, ‘Home Invasion’.

¹⁹ Ibid.

emphasis on activity – that necessarily both takes apart and reassembles the text that it incorporates.²⁰

Songs, in other words, are not just translations of lyrical narratives. They both create additional meaning and offer the chance for additional meaning to be created through the listener's interaction with them. Such meaning is to a large degree subjective and culturally contingent. My interpretation is thus not meant to establish a definitive counterpoint, but rather to draw attention to the ambiguity and multiplicity that is afforded by the multimodal storytelling of *Hand. Cannot. Erase*. While Wilson's lyrical narrative amounts to a straightforward condemnation of urban isolation; the album's music, but also its supplementary material such as online content and music videos can be seen as exploring positive affordances of solitude such as reprieve from quotidian life and an assertion of individuality, and transcendence.

As mentioned earlier, Wilson wrote dozens of diary entries from his protagonist's perspective on an online blog as part of the promotional campaign for *Hand. Cannot. Erase*. In an interview, he described the concept behind this as follows:

This is a story that mostly takes place in isolation. There is no dialogue between character and other human beings, so much of the dialogue is kind of internal. ... The answer I came up with was obviously this woman would perhaps be writing some kind of diary or the modern equivalent of course would be some kind of online blog. She may not be writing for anyone in particular ... but having established that is the way she communicates her ideas and her thoughts and her day.²¹ This blogpost complicates the notion that social isolation equals detachment from the world at large, or that the internet inadvertently leads to the erosion of social bonds. In the absence of dialogue, the album's protagonist takes to writing and photography; in the absence of social partners, she communicates with no one in particular but communicates all the same. In her blogpost, she elaborates on her exhaustion at small-talk and conventional romance, describes finding and adopting a cat for non-human company, and asserts her subjectivity as a city-dweller among millions, even if none of these millions might physically perceive her. Moreover, the closer the blog entries get to the end, the more they feature surreal, possibly supernatural events. The protagonist starts encountering ghosts and doubles of herself, she

²⁰ Lawrence Kramer, *Song Acts: Writing on Words and Music* (Brill Rodopi, 2017), pp. 3-4.

²¹ Steven Wilson, qtd. in Simon.

comes across a gnostic book and refers to ‘visitors’ asking her questions and giving her instructions.

The effect of these blog posts is threefold. First, it allows for *Hand. Cannot. Erase.* to be read as a ghost story rather than a realist tragedy. Preternatural elements can either be naturalized as figments of the protagonist’s eroding mind or understood as supernatural forces manipulating her. In the former case, the narrative remains one of singular deterioration, in which the protagonist gradually loses any social and personal assets she might have held in the beginning. In the latter, however, she actually gains knowledge over the course of the narrative, and there is an element of liberation rather than total imprisonment to its conclusion.

Second, it qualifies the absoluteness of the protagonist’s isolation: Her retreat into the domestic space might merely constitute withdrawal from specific groups – she does not seek loneliness itself but rather a severance from family members, imposing partners, and the tribulations of quotidian life. At least in her mind, she is still engaging with others, receiving visitors – the world, be it populated by ghosts or hallucinations, does not appear as indifferent as the lyrics make it seem. The very presence of the blog, as Wilson remarks, is testament of an interpersonal connection however abstract: Even after experiencing nothing but rejection and the cutting of all social ties in turn, the protagonist keeps communicating – with no one in particular, with no expectations of a response, but with a notion that there is value in communication for its own sake, in documenting her decline and thus counteracting her erasure.

Third, the online narrative imbues the story’s ending with a degree of ambiguity that allows it to be interpreted in not purely negative ways. The blog ends with the words ‘Ascendant Here On....’ above three photographs of radiant lights in a star-spangled sky.²² This implies not only an enduring willingness of the protagonist to leave the world she was a part of. The sky, which in the lyrics was connotated negatively throughout, is reconfigured here as a symbol of liberation. Ascending means untethering, but not necessarily through death. It could equally signify the shedding of weight, leaving behind the past and social

²² Steven Wilson, *handcannoterase.com*, fictional blog, [archivetoday.com](https://archive.today.com), <<https://archive.md/wjVbY>> [Accessed July 16, 2023].

pressure, moving towards the future in luminous independence, or finding the safety unavailable in the real world in one's imagination.

The photographs that accompany the blog, the album's liner notes, and the deluxe edition all convey a similar trajectory – from normalcy to darkness, surrealism, monochrome desolation, and then radiant light; from cityscapes to claustrophobic apartment interiors to wide open fields and deserts. Moreover, the music video to the song 'Routine' narrates precisely such an act of liberation. In it, a woman struggles to cope with the loss of her family in a school shooting. She initially continues performing menial tasks around the house, pretending that her husband and children are still alive, but ultimately succumbs to reality, breaks down with a primal scream, and finds release by admitting her grief. Notably, that final moment of transcending her trauma is rendered in the music video by the protagonist's solitary silhouette against a pastel-colored sky. Burns has argued that the song and music video of 'Routine' actually 'ste[p] out of the immediate *H.C.E.* narrative' and constitute a different woman's story which the album's protagonist becomes fascinated with on TV.²³ However, even if that is the case and the story of 'Routine' is distinct from the rest of the album, it nevertheless uses the visual mode to intersperse *Hand. Cannot. Erase.* with an alternative connotation of the outside sky – one that does not suggest discomfort, retreat, and isolation, but solitary contentless. The music video's protagonist does not re-join community after her moment of catharsis. Instead, in the final shots of the video, her figure is fading into the sky surrounding her. Here, it appears not like an act of erasure, but rather one of transcendence, achieved through absolute individualization.

Similarly, some of the album's bleakest lyrics are not mirrored in the accompanying music, but rather offset by moments of musical ecstasy. This is the case, for instance, in the album's fifth track, 'Home Invasion / Regret #9', in which the protagonist loses herself on the internet and is set on an inexorable downward slide. After two verses of advertisements like the ones I discussed in the previous section, and two elegiac choruses, the song segues into two long instrumental solos. The first is played by Adam Holzman on a Moog synthesizer and the second by Guthrie Govan on electric guitar. Wilson has called this part the 'spacey section', which already hints at the counter-narrative that the music creates here: Through

²³ Lori Burns, 'Multimodal and transmedia subjectivity in animated music video: Jess Cope and Steven Wilson's "Routine" from *Hand. Cannot. Erase.* (2015)', in *Transmedia Directors: Artistry, Industry and New Audiovisual Aesthetics*, ed. by Carol Vernallis, Holly Rogers and Lisa Perrott (Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), pp. 331-348.(p. 346).

solitary action, as is implied by the word ‘solo’, space unfolds in dramatic contrast to the lyrics’ claustrophobia.²⁴

In a 1991 article, Ben Goertzel describes the long-form guitar solo that emerged in the art rock of the 1970s as a ‘primary vehicle for subtle emotional expression ... used creatively to transmit the details of spiritual, psychedelic experience to a receptive audience.’²⁵ This relates not just to guitar solos alone but also, for instance, to Holzman’s synthesizer solo, whose characteristic 1970s sound combined with monophonic melodies, extensive use of glissando, and minor-scale runs result in guitar-like aesthetics. According to Goertzel, such a solo it is an act of communication from an individual to a collective, an act of meaning-making and the expression of subjectivity, connoted both with mysticism and creative imagination. In ‘Home Invasion / Regret #9’, both Govan’s and Holzman’s solos unfold from relatively restrained and self-contained phrases in a middle-register to extensive scale runs and an increased use of high and low notes. In other words, they burgeon from the enclosed into the near-limitless, from the domestic into the extraterrestrial.

The protagonist of *Hand. Cannot. Erase.* is not a musician. The triumphant self-expression of these solos and the transcendence of spatial boundaries thus achieved are not to be taken literally. Instead, similar to the blog posts implying contact with the spirit world, or the music video of ‘Routine’, they create a metaphorical counter-narrative, an alternative to the descent from chosen isolation to inescapable separation from the world described by the album’s lyrics. Isolation does not have to equal decline, they suggest, but can also be a pathway towards stabilized subjectivity, creative expression, and non-standard forms of connection. In fact, both options can co-exist, contradicting but not eliminating one another, like lyrical bleakness and musical ecstasy, or like sung realism and visual spirituality. Consequently, when the protagonist at the end of the album ascends into empty space, she simultaneously does so like a lost soul on its way to oblivion, and like a guitar solo, unforgettably bright.

²⁵ Ben Goertzel, ‘The Rock Guitar Solo: From expression to Simulation’, *Popular Music and Society* 15 (1991): p. 96 (pp. 91-101).

Joyce Carol Vincent: Historical Narrative and Ethical Complications

Beneath these contrary multimodal narratives lies another story that *Hand. Cannot. Erase.* conveys less immediately, but just as simultaneously: the life of the real Joyce Carol Vincent, or, rather, the story of her that was popularized by the 2011 documentary *Dreams of a Life*.

When city officials forced the door of her bedsit in Wood Green, north London, on the 25th of January 2006 with orders to repossess the apartment, the decomposed body of Joyce Carol Vincent was found lying in front of the still-running television, surrounded by wrapped Christmas presents.²⁶ Because her remains were ‘largely skeletal’, the precise cause of death could not be determined, and Vincent’s identity had to be confirmed through dental records.²⁷ For over ten years, no friends or former colleagues had checked on her; her family had assumed she had cut ties with them; the neighbors had attributed the smell wafting from the apartment to ‘the bins downstairs... and the... junkies [in the stairwells].’²⁸ Since Vincent was on debt relief, heating and electricity were still on, and Metropolitan Housing Trust, which owned the apartment complex, only took action after ‘significant arrears [had] built up.’²⁹ Her sisters had once hired a private detective but assumed Vincent had voluntarily broken off contact when he was unable to track her down, and after repeatedly knocking on her door to no avail, neighbors, too, concluded the apartment was uninhabited.³⁰

Vincent was born in Hammersmith, the youngest daughter to West Indian parents. She was an aspiring singer who had worked various desk jobs in the City of London. Rather than being a ‘little old bag lady that no one notices, no one cares about’, she was outgoing, well-liked by colleagues, and fawned over by men who would later recall her as a ‘good looking, intelligent’ and ‘the kind of person that would worry most women.’³¹ However, in the years before her death, she had begun to withdrawn from her social circle. The bedsit

²⁶ Anil Dawar, ‘Body of woman left to rot in her flat for two years’, *Telegraph*, 14 April 2006 <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1515664/Body-of-woman-left-to-rot-in-her-flat-for-two-years.html>>.

²⁷ Simon Pool, qtd. in ‘Woman’s body in bedsit for years’, *BBC News*, 14 April 2006 <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/4906992.stm>>.

²⁸ Michael Dobbs, qtd. in Pool.

²⁹ Metropolitan Housing Trust, qtd. in Audrey Gillian, ‘Body of woman, 40, lay unmissed in flat for more than two years’, *Guardian*, 14 April 2006 <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2006/apr/14/audreygillian.uknews2>>.

³⁰ Carol Morley, ‘Carol Morley vs Kevin Macdonald: video interview’, *Time Out London* <[exclusivehttps://web.archive.org/web/20181022073619/https://www.timeout.com/london/film/carol-morley-vs-kevin-macdonald-video-interview-exclusive](https://web.archive.org/web/20181022073619/https://www.timeout.com/london/film/carol-morley-vs-kevin-macdonald-video-interview-exclusive)>.

³¹ Wilson, ‘Air Studios’; Kirk Thorne, qtd. in Carol Morley, ‘Joyce Carol Vincent: How could this young woman lie dead and undiscovered for almost three years?’, *Guardian*, 9 October 2011. <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2011/oct/09/joyce-vincent-death-mystery-documentary>>.

where she died shortly before Christmas 2003 – in all likelihood of natural causes – had been procured for her by a charity supporting victims of domestic violence.³² As indicated by the Christmas presents she had spent her last living moments wrapping, her retreat was not intended to be permanent.

At first, few people took note of her death – in fact, most initial press coverage was anonymous, telling of a ‘woman’ found dead in her apartment. This very anonymity, however, piqued the interest of documentary filmmaker Carol Morley, who tracked down Vincent’s friends, acquaintances, former partners, and family members. Combining footage from interviews with re-enactments of scenes from Vincent’s life, Morley made the documentary *Dreams of a Life* because she ‘didn’t want [Vincent] to be forgotten.’³³ It centered on the incongruity between the numerous people who had known, spent time with, genuinely liked, or admired Vincent, and her death in absolute solitude, spinning it into a harrowing social critique of life in the 21st century metropolis. The underlying thesis of *Dreams of a Life* avers that the 21st century society bears so little genuine human connection that, when an individual retreats into the confines of her home, nobody will come looking for her. Indeed, the documentary suggests that Vincent ‘would still be here’ if only she had married her ex-boyfriend Martin and thereby avoided this lethal solitude.³⁴ The fact that Vincent had cut off contact with so many acquaintances and retreated to her bedsit precisely to escape domestic from violence – possibly by a former romantic partner – goes unmentioned.

Upon its release in 2011, *Dreams of a Life* was vaunted for its emotional and socially poignant storytelling, as well as for its relaying Vincent’s story not only to a wider public but also to some former acquaintances who learned about her death only through this documentary. However, mixed in with the praise were critical voices, especially concerning the film’s dramatic re-enactments which are sometimes based on little more than speculation. As one *New York Times* review summarized: “‘Dreams of a Life’ leaves too many blanks and is ultimately more frustrating than rewarding.”³⁵

³² Gillian.

³³ Morley, ‘Joyce’.

³⁴ *Dreams of a Life*, dir. by Carol Morley (Dogwoof Pictures, 2011).

³⁵ Stephen Holden, ‘Lost to Her Friends, but There All the Time’, *New York Times*, 2 August 2012 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/03/movies/dreams-of-a-life-looks-at-joyce-vincent.html>>.

Similar criticism has also been raised against *Hand. Cannot. Erase*. Wilson's album has been accused of being 'less interested in [Joyce Carol Vincent] as an individual than as a symbol of alienated solitude in the internet age', effectively effacing her real biography for the sake of convenient symbolism.³⁶ Indeed, given the album's chart-topping success, it is likely that many people are more familiar with its freely adapted allegorical re-telling of Vincent's story than with the actual circumstances of her life. There are acute political implications of this charge, which warrant quickly discussing in detail.

For one, in *Hand. Cannot. Erase.*, the protagonist's isolation is self-induced. She 'resists emotional attachment', creates fictionalized online personae for her authentic self to become 'invisible', and spurns the outside world because of the vague discomfort it causes. By contrast, Joyce Carol Vincent had tried to escape domestic abuse and had, presumably, kept her acquaintances in the dark about her whereabouts for self-protection.³⁷ Already before that, her social life had suffered because financial straits forced her to take on cleaning jobs she found humiliating and did not want her friends to know about.³⁸ In other words, while the album decries solipsism, passivity, and the isolating effects of the internet, it does not consider any of the structural factors such as social ostracization, gendered violence, or capitalist exploitation that might compel a person to retreat from the social sphere.

Similarly, the theme of race is wholly absent from the album. Vincent's parents had moved to the UK from Granada and had African and Indian roots, but anyone who learns about her primarily through Wilson's re-telling would not be aware of that. On the cover of *Hand. Cannot. Erase.*, as well as the accompanying photograph and music videos, its protagonist is consistently portrayed by a White woman. The UK charity Missing People reports that 'people from minority ethnic groups [are] missing for longer, less likely to be found by the police, and less likely to be recorded as being at risk, than white people',³⁹ but this statistic is merely alluded to in *Dreams of a Life* and does not feature in *Hand. Cannot. Erase.* or its accompanying material whatsoever. Instead, the album foregrounds problems of concern to White middle-class Britons such as mental health, fear of attachment, pressure to

³⁶ Ludovic Hunter-Tilney, 'Steven Wilson: Hand. Cannot. Erase – review,' *Financial Times*, 27 February 2015 <<https://www.ft.com/content/3ec3b356-bc88-11e4-b6ec-00144feab7de>>.

³⁷ Burns and McLaren, p. 394.; Steven Wilson, *handcannoterase.com*.

³⁸ Morley, *Dreams*.

³⁹ 'The Ethnicity of Missing People', *Missing People*, 7 March 2023, <<https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/for-professionals/policy-and-research/information-and-research/research-about-missing/ethnicity-missing-people>> [accessed 20 October 2023].

perform in a consumerist society, and the temptations of the internet. All these are valid subjects of critique, of course, but the album's choice to re-imagine its protagonist as White precludes any complicating questions of intersectionality and instead limits itself to those aspects of Vincent's story that overlap with those of Wilson's target audience.⁴⁰

In light of this, I venture that the real-life story that undergirds *Hand. Cannot. Erase.* does not only create yet another contrapuntal narrative to the album's lyrical and multimedial modes, but that the very juxtaposition of these different narratives is crucial. The fact that music, lyrics, and supplementary material do not necessarily tell one monolithic story in which they mutually supplement one another, but can also be read as offering a multiplicity of distinct narratives, reduces the absolute authority of any single one and instead opens up interpretative space between them. By suggesting that solitude in the 21st-century metropolis might either constitute a death trap or a means to liberation, and that the protagonist might either suffer inexorable decline or experience some form of preternatural transcendence, it marks both of these stories as interpretative potentialities rather than letting either attain canonical status. This, in turn, clearly positions *Hand. Cannot. Erase.* as a creative product that – unlike *Dreams of a Life* with its overt documentary framing – does not claim any kind of truth value. In other words: While the album does leave politically poignant aspects of Vincent's story out of its adaptation, it makes sure that story remains visible as one of its palimpsestic layers, and therefore avoids imposing itself on it, allowing for reflections of the city's effect on different races and classes instead of homing in on any one of them. Multimodality, here, allows for multiple voices to remain heard.

Conclusion: 100 Solitudes

In one of her blog posts, the protagonist of *Hand. Cannot. Erase.* claims that 'you can pretend to be whoever you want to be, create whatever construct you want to pass off as your life and personality.'⁴¹ In this article, I have shown how the album emulates that multiplicity and contingency of identity by presenting simultaneous narratives in multiple modes, but that it also suggests that they can co-exist rather than having to compete with one another for

⁴⁰ A poignant take on Vincent and the lethal loneliness of people from biracial backgrounds is Hanna Phifer, 'Why Did Joyce Carol Vincent Die Alone?', *Hazlitt*, 3 May 2023 <<https://hazlitt.net/feature/why-did-joyce-carol-vincent-die-alone>>; While there is no quantitative data about the demographics of Wilson's audience, the Whiteness and maleness of progressive rock is proverbial. For a comprehensive study on the genre's identity politics, see Edward Macan, *Rocking the Classics: English Progressive Rock and the Counterculture* (Oxford UP, 1997).

⁴¹ Ibid.

canonicity, and that such co-existence can be more productive than one monolithic master-narrative.

In its lyrics, *Hand. Cannot. Erase.* imagines a woman who feels uneasy under the open sky, who retreats into domestic solitude and finds the world slipping away from her, her home violated by modern technology as well as ravaged by time itself. Its accompanying images and blog posts, however, suggest the story of a woman who trades the quotidian world for a metaphysical one, who finds company and liberation. Finally, the music even posits solitude as a conduit for transcendence. Furthermore, the real-life story of Joyce Carol Vincent requires us to consider intersectional factors, as not all inhabitants of a 21st-century metropolis have the same amount of agency over their movement between public and private sphere, and may be compelled, rather than choose, to isolate themselves from others.

The album's main achievement, then, lies in the simultaneity of these juxtaposed narratives. Through the multimodal affordances of the concept album – in which lyrical narrative, music, supplementary visuals, and real-world sources can all be experienced within a single work of art – it allows for each of them to be considered in its own right. Ultimately, it makes a case that this multiplicity is more representative of modern urban life than any single variant would be. An often-quoted fragment by Friedrich Nietzsche states that '100 profound solitudes taken together form the city of Venice – that is her magic.'⁴² Through the co-existence of poetry, music, video, photography, online blog posts, and documentary, *Hand. Cannot. Erase.* narrates multiple profound solitudes that together form the city of London, or, really, any 21st-century metropolis. There is magic in that, too

⁴² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nachlass 1880-1882*, ed. by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag de Gruyter, 1999), p. 38. My translation.

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