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No Time, Make, or Reason: The Affective Forms of Portishead's *Only You* Music Video

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Abstract

Sigmund Freud famously distinguished normal mourning and pathological melancholy by the affects' duration and persistence. This temporal perspective paves the way for reading affect beyond its expressivity and considering it a question of form. In the article, this radical formalist approach is used to examine the way depressive affect manifests itself in the structure of the music video to Portishead's *Only You* (dir. Chris Cunningham, 1998), in particular concerning tempo and rhythm. Eugenie Brinkema's remarks on grief as an affective form marked by heaviness and inertia serve as the basis for analysing tempo. The exploration of rhythm is rooted in Peter Kivy's assertion that reading musical expression is mediated by understanding the affective properties of the human voice. This makes way for applying Julia Kristeva's concept of the depressive discourse, understood as a set of particular speech patterns and qualities indicative of depression/melancholy.

*At one stage I was thinking you write songs and you hope you're gonna communicate with people – half the reason you write them is that you're feeling misunderstood and frustrated with life in general. Then it's sort of successful and you think you've communicated with people, but then you realise you haven't communicated with them at all ... so then you're even more lonely than when you started.*¹

Beth Gibbons

*She always sounds powerless, like she's about to burst into tears.*²

James Hannaham commenting on Beth Gibbons' vocals on the album *Third*

It is unusual to write about affect in the audiovisual arts in an entirely impersonal manner, as I intend to for the remainder of this article. I do, however, have one personal story to share. At the tender age of thirteen, I participated in a language contest, part of which was an interview with three jurors. It started informally with a conversation about my interests, which at the time mainly concerned music, mostly of the indie rock variety. One juror asked what I found most compelling in my hobby, so, the naïve youth that I was, I attempted to impress him by focusing on the expressive and moving qualities of the lyrics. This was, understandably, not the answer he was looking for, so he attempted to redirect me toward the *s o u n d* of music by asking what my favourite instrument was – a question so misplaced it in some ways baffles me to this day. We were not able to achieve a mutual understanding and, as the interview went on to its more official part, I kept wondering how it was possible for two people, at least one of whom never left the house without her headphones on, to so gravely lack a common language for discussing the complex and enthralling emotions brought about by listening to their favourite music.

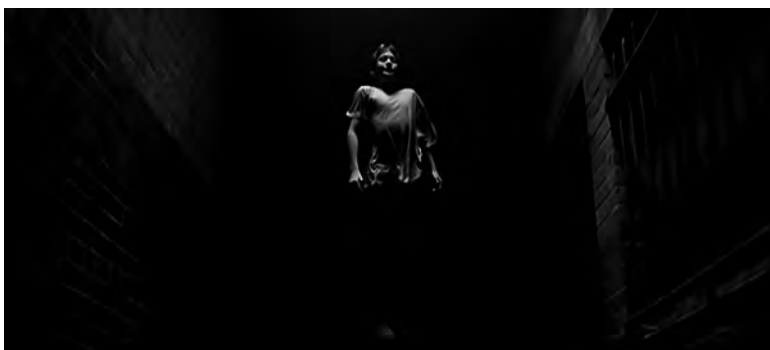
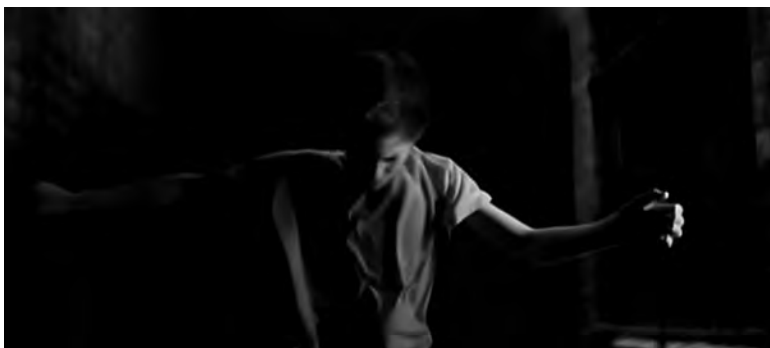
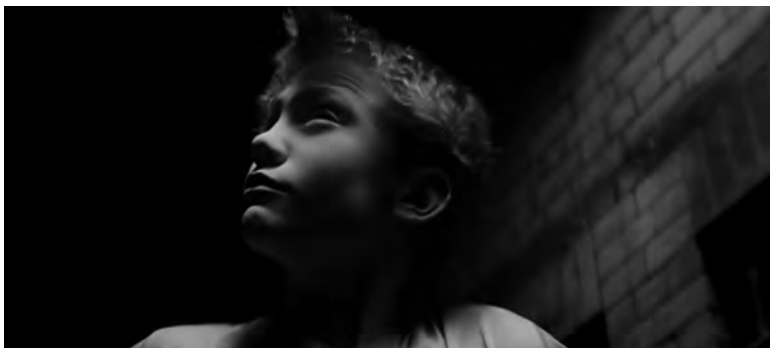
The theories of how music relates to affect are abundant – from the musical *ethos* systems of the ancient Greeks to contemporary psychological and cognitivist perspectives on music and emotion – but while many are interested in what is expressed or evoked, few focus on how musical affect can be described and intersubjectively communicated in a comprehensive and methodical manner. The latter is the aim of Peter Kivy's *The Corded Shell* (1980), in which the author draws on 18th- and 19th-century theories of musical expression to build his own proposition of how music can be expressive of certain affects. Music has been commonly described either in strictly technical terms (e.g., this movement is characterized by a strong chord progression from IV to I) or as expressing a particular sentiment (often in biographical terms, e.g., this sonata conveys the composer's grief for his lost son), evoking it in the listener (e.g., this melody makes me feel serene) or as if the music itself had feelings of its own (e.g., this crescendo is triumphant). Kivy, in turn, argues that a music piece does not necessarily *express* actual, inner, or prior emotions (although it may), but *is expressive* of them via its formal elements, whose structural properties are then subject to interpretation.³

While music scholarship has always concerned itself with the formal qualities of its subject, and the search for the affective in the formal seems natural to the discipline – and is indeed, as Kivy shows, deeply rooted in the history of the

philosophy of music – the same cannot be said of film studies, whose continuing interest in the affective focuses mainly either on the materiality of the spectator's body or the inner states and emotions produced in the audience by the audiovisual text. Because of their seemingly immediate visuality, the legibility of their thematic dominants and narrative structures, and the mimetically charged presence of human actors, the affective properties of films are often taken as a given. As a result, few authors pose the question: what does it mean for an audiovisual text to be affective in the first place? The paradoxes of film's affectivity are elaborated upon in Eugenie Brinkema's *The Forms of Affects* (2014), in which the author approaches the affective turn (or in fact several turns, which she dates back to the 1990s) with a refreshing wariness and criticizes other scholars' reliance on affect's assumed self-evidence. Instead, she proposes a *radical formalism*: reading affect entirely beyond its presumptive expressivity and considering it exclusively as a question of form.⁴

While Kivy's and Brinkema's proposals have certain things in common – they both focus on form as a conveyor of affect, they derive (some) affective structures from bodily experience, and they share a passion for late modern continental philosophy (while the former cites Schopenhauer's remarks on meaning in music, the latter invokes Kierkegaard in her discussion of anxiety) – they differ in the particularities of their respective subject matters and methodologies. In order to ascertain how well these approaches fare in practice, I want to put them to work against each other in an analysis of a hybrid audiovisual form that emerges on the crossroads of their disciplines: the music video. As noted by Tomáš Jirsa, while *audiovisual scholarship attributes a crucial role to the affective dimensions of music videos*,⁵ it is plagued by the same shortcomings many other affectively inclined disciplines deal with: *the notion of affect ... remains limited by its understanding as either the matter of bodily sensations or an emotional interiority, escaping representation and meaning, and determined to be felt rather than scrutinised*.⁶ Before eventually returning to the experience of the viewer-listener in claiming that music video's affectivity is performative,⁷ Jirsa does attempt to read for music video's affect in its formal characteristics at the intersection of musical and visual structures. Indeed, the music video as an object of analysis is equally compelling as it is perplexing: since its multiple components (lyrics, vocals, music, image, editing, etc.) each have a form of their own, they may be expressive of different affects or different aspects of an affect – and as such, all of them may / should be taken into account in any analysis.

An advantage of the example I intend to focus on in this article – the music video to Portishead's *Only You* (dir. Chris Cunningham, 1998) – is that while the group's work does exhibit some formal complexity, it is affectively consistent⁸ (regardless whether said affect is understood as *barren claustrophobia*,⁹ *resolute gloom*¹⁰ or the *heights of agony*¹¹) and consistently read as affective. For now, I will refer to the affect in question with the term *melancholy*, although this designation will be subject to revision. Historically, melancholy was often linked with temporality; Sigmund Freud's distinction between normal mourning and pathological melancholy was famously rooted in a question of time: while mourning eventually subsides, melancholy is characterized by its indefinite, expanded duration.¹² I will, therefore, focus on two temporal components of the music video's form:



Only You, dir. Chris Cunningham (1998)



Only You, dir. Chris Cunningham (1998)

tempo and rhythm. The analysis of the former will be predicated on Brinkema's remarks on grief as an affective form marked by heaviness and inertia.¹³ For the latter, I will draw on Kivy's assertion that reading musical structures as affective is mediated (in part) by our understanding of the affective properties of the human voice.¹⁴ This presumption will allow me to turn to Julia Kristeva's concept of the depressive discourse – understood as a set of particular speech patterns and qualities indicative of depression/melancholy – explicated in *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*.¹⁵ My intention is not to provide a comprehensive, in-depth analysis of the *Only You* music video. Instead, it will be used as an example to explore the effectiveness of particular modes of radical formalist reading of an audiovisual text.

*Emotionally undone*¹⁶

According to at least one reviewer, Portishead's debut album's *astonishing melancholy ... felt like nothing that had gone before. ... If there was a more powerful and exacting evocation of terminal, hopeless adult loneliness than "Dummy," it must only have been available on prescription*.¹⁷ An exceedingly mournful – *seductively sepulchral*¹⁸ – band within the famously melancholy trip-hop genre, their sound was seen as marked by a *stubborn stygian murk*.¹⁹ Portishead's eponymous second album, in particular, was supposed to be *more gothic than Goth, more deadly than death metal, more trippy than trip-hop*.²⁰ A reviewer described its *moody vibe of lovelorn lamentation*²¹ as running *the full gamut of emotion from misery to unhappiness*.²² *Only You* is the third single from *Portishead* and their final release before a decade-long hiatus. Its slow tempo of 60BPM combined with a 2/2 time signature makes for a stately, monotonous pace; the beat of the rhythm section is marked by frequent rests in an almost irregular stop-start pattern. Apart from traditional instruments (bass, guitar, Rhodes piano, drums, and organ), the song features two foreign samples, one instrumental and one vocal, dispersed throughout the track alongside sampled fragments of the band's original music. The track adheres, for the most part, to a traditional verse-chorus-bridge song structure (ABABCAB), with slight variation of melody between the three verses. The tune is drawn out and sparse, led by Beth Gibbons's vocals. The lyrics touch on themes of suffering, weariness, emotional numbness, conflict, and the sense of an end; they seem to hint at a tumultuous and miserable decline of a once-loving relationship.²³

The music video to *Only You* marks the first and only time the band collaborated with the famous video artist. The video is particularly noteworthy in that it balances the song's musical structures and lyrical themes with Cunningham's directorial aesthetics and his favourite visual motifs,²⁴ as well as including elements recurring in some of Portishead's other music videos (the theme of alienation and loneliness, the motif of children, and the onscreen presence of the lead singer). Maintaining this delicate equilibrium sets it apart from the group's other visual output, which can be roughly split into two categories. Most of Portishead's early music videos have a strong cinematic quality of a more traditional sort: they employ conventionally filmic means of frame composition, narrative, and editing, and they are often laden with genre film and early television motifs and aesthetics (the former comprise mostly film *noir* and 1960s spy films; the latter

are exemplified by Dick Caruthers' 1997 video to *All Mine*, inspired by an Italian talent show). This applies in particular to several videos accompanying the singles from their debut album *Dummy* (1994), directed by Alexander Hemming – such as *Sour Times* (1994), which was assembled from fragments of his earlier short spy film *To Kill a Dead Man* (1994), or the gender-bending thriller-styled *Glory Box* (1995) – but also to the much later video to *Humming* (dir. Ben Waters, 2003), considered a narrative short in its own right. On the opposite end of the spectrum are Portishead's more openly formal, structural endeavours: the found footage aesthetic employed in *Numb* (dir. Alexander Hemming, 1994), the raw minimalism of *Machine Gun* (dir. John Minton, 2008), the 1950s structural/materialist film tradition found in *Magic Doors* (dir. John Minton, 2008), Nick Uff's distinctive animation in *The Rip* (2008) and *We Carry On* (2008) – all ripe for interpretation in and of themselves and equally (if not more so) open to a radical formalist reading. Cunningham's video to *Only You*, however, is neither simply following the rules of a classic Hollywood-style cinematic narrative nor has its form dictated entirely by a particular stylistic choice – and this is precisely why it provides compelling material for analysis.²⁵

Cunningham's music video is set in a dark alleyway and features Portishead singer Beth Gibbons and a boy in his early tweens. Throughout the video, the two human figures emerge partially from the thick darkness and into the cold bluish-white light emanating from the high-placed windows of the surrounding buildings, only to be engulfed again. The rhythm and pace of the characters' movements – painstakingly slow and repetitive, as if reverting to a recursive loop²⁶ – seem dictated by the delayed downtempo beat, drawn-out instrumentals, and a distinctive sample loop: the motion of the bodies is synchronized with the scratch track as it stalls and rewinds, abruptly starts and pauses. The sequences featuring Gibbons and the boy cut away periodically to single takes featuring male characters (some of whom have no mouths) standing indifferently in the windows above the alleyway, staring down at the figures separated from them by glass and distance. In one sequence, the boy grabs a white piece of fabric which then transforms in his hands into a dove that flies up, past the windows, and into the night sky. Near the end of the video, Gibbons smiles slightly and reaches out to the boy, who grabs her hand, but after several seconds their grasp loosens, and they slip away from each other and into their respective shrouds of darkness. The video ends with the boy alone again, tumbling slowly and aimlessly in a somersault motion, suspended in the air.

The blackness of darkness, forever

The sorrowful pain of loss is *passive, subjecting, and mute*²⁷ – it blinds and silences, deprives one of their senses: *Grief darkens, it blackens; dim eyes, dusky heart – all such hurt is stygian*.²⁸ Eugenie Brinkema discusses the murkiness of bereavement in relation to theoretical terms as well: where some authors may use mourning, melancholy, grief, and even depression synonymously, she insists on treating them as separate concepts and delineating the subtle differences between them. Central to Brinkema's radical formalism is the intention to transcend the

subject of affect; she proposes *thinking of grief outside of the grieving subject*, indeed, beyond subjectivity as such.²⁹ She insists that *reading grief as a matter of form, composition, and structure requires leaving behind narrative thematics and critical treatments that claim mourning for meaning*.³⁰ This leads her to reject both melancholy and mourning which, in her view, had become contaminated (as an undifferentiated, hybrid form of *mourninchoia*) and conceptually oversaturated, and therefore may no longer refer to the formal starkness of grief's affect, since in their *transformation of loss into an ongoing negotiation* they fail to see grief as *an experience of pure destruction, an infinite loss*.³¹ This perspective may seem reductive but, Brinkema argues, it is necessarily so: by reducing mourning and melancholy to grief she refuses to equate it, as some authors do, with signification as such. Her argument is that grief as an affect – the blinding, mute, sorrowful pain of loss which transcends its subject – is, in fact, undialectical; *it resists the relational dimension of loss and provides the form for that suffering ... in which not everything can be made to mean and things escape systematicity without return*.³² Grief, then, unlike melancholy, is *opposed to all that is common, shared, or shareable*,³³ it is undialectical in that it is senseless, and meaningless, and not subject to discussion.

Furthermore, unlike mourning – a verb or gerund with an unmistakable processual quality: it serves to describe what one does – grief is a noun because it is meant to be carried. Returning to the word's etymological roots (derived from the Latin *gravare* which refers to burdening, loading, and oppressing) Brinkema figures grief as *the felt experience of heaviness, of being weighted down, of pushing and pressing, as on one's sternum in sighing, choking breaths that do not fully arrive. The etymological archeology of 'grief' is clear on this matter: it begins with a pressure on the body, a dragging the body down to earth like gravity, a vector of invisible force pulling down and down further still*.³⁴ The heaviness of grief can then take shape in audiovisual texts – not necessarily in the form of pressure or gravity but as the effects of its oppressive weightiness. In this way, the form of grief works in a text in a similar manner to the affect itself – structured by absence, by an emptiness at the heart of it, an invisible kernel of loss, grief manifests by *impressing itself, ... bending the text to its force*.³⁵ This is also how grief reclaims temporality, its heaviness slowing down and prolonging the body's movement and speech, suspending its subject in an inertia of the unrelenting 'now,' weighing on the very passage of time. These impressions of the heaviness of grief constitute the effects of its affective form; an audiovisual text may then be read for the formal traces of the affect's impact even when said affect is not explicitly present in its narrative and thematic motifs. I will argue that in the *Only You* music video, the heavy burden of grief manifests in its visual and temporal forms as inertia, duration, and suspension.

While Brinkema is adamant that grief is static – at one point, following Roland Barthes' remarks on photography, she goes as far as to wonder whether the form of grief can at all be thought in relation to the moving image³⁶ – its inertia affects the mobility of bodies and objects: movement weighed down by grief is drawn out, slow, and strenuous. Such is the pace of the movements of the two figures stuck in the dark alleyway in *Only You*. Their motion is arduous and uneven, distorted by the passive resistance of their surroundings, which seem to weigh heavy on the surface of their bodies. The boy's t-shirt appears to cling to his chest

in a constricting and suffocating manner, which gives an impression of a crushed, misshapen body succumbing to the immense pressure of its environment. Here, the effect of grief is that of relentless violence, which subdues the body and turns it into a plastic form, made to exhibit the force of grief as a representational problem of line and curve for the arrangement of elements; no longer psychological, personal or subjective, it becomes a study in pose and posture, a question of moving figures across space in felt heavy time and the way bodies as lines are weighed down with loss's pain.³⁷ At several points throughout the video, the boy assumes the same static pose: suspended vertically in the air, tense and immobile, his arms and legs hanging along his body, as if he was either surrendering to the pressure or attempting to diminish himself to escape the crushing force. He resembles a biological specimen submerged in formaldehyde – a figure of both preservation and death. These moments of motionless pause transform the body into a study in weighted materiality,³⁸ an inert, lifeless object. The heavy imprint of grief and the near impossibility of movement liken the grieving to the dead in that their immobility speaks to the unattainability of change and transformation.³⁹

The immense, suffocating heaviness of grief is combined with relentless perseverance: this peculiar pain, argues Brinkema, ... takes the shape of a form with duration, the heavy form of duration.⁴⁰ To be grief-stricken is to be weighed down indefinitely by an expanded affective duration without end or change⁴¹ – a duration which, heavy and imposing, has itself the formal qualities of grief. In *Only You*, this can be found in the lethargic downtempo beat and painfully extended notes of the song's instrumental layer. The deliberate slowing down of the bass line transposes it to lower frequencies, giving the main motive a steadier, weightier tone – the solemn *gravitas* of a decelerating heartbeat – while increasing the intervals between notes laces the song with the empty temporality of silence. As with the loss at the heart of grief, duration too requires its other – hence the temporal impression of grief takes on somewhat paradoxical forms, both constant and recurrent, fluctuating yet monotonous, simultaneously unchanging and marked by violent throes. *Grief comes in waves, paroxysms, sudden apprehensions*⁴² – and remains ceaseless, persistent, and seemingly without end. The form of grief might therefore manifest as either stagnation or a recursive loop – as both remaining unchanged and the eternal return. For duration to become a formal structure, it needs to be recursive – otherwise, it's just stasis; incessant repetition confirms that nothing has changed. This aspect of duration can also be found in *Only You*; indeed, the figure of the loop features prominently in both the music and the video: from the repetitive vocal sample scratched into the song's opening, through the suspended boy's circular summersault motion, to repurposing the recorded scenes over and over, intermittently playing them forward and backward, reversing – and in a way erasing – the characters' movements, constantly reverting them to their previous state.

This entanglement of weightiness and emptiness, inertia and duration, stasis and loop, shapes grief into a state of heavy suspension⁴³ – ceaseless, unchanging, and solipsistic, unrelenting as time itself. In the cinematic image, Brinkema claims, this takes the form of a lack of exteriority, where neither the edges of the frame, the passage of diegetic time, nor the conventional narrative resolutions offer re-



Glory Box, dir. Alexander Hemming (1995)



Humming, dir. Ben Waters (2003)



Magic Doors, dir. John Minton (2008)



Numb, dir. Alexander Hemming (1994)

course or refuge from the overbearing force of grief.⁴⁴ While from the perspective of representation and narrative meaning, Portishead's music video may seem to grant the characters a way out from the dark alleyway – the dove's escape into the night sky might be read symbolically as a glimmer of hope – the same cannot be said in regard to its form, which detains them in an endless suspension, with no fulcrum on which they could lean for their effort to produce an escape velocity that would allow them to break free from the immense gravity of grief. Floating heavily in the thick air, their movements do not affect things, making them virtually incapable of touching each other and leaving them unable to reliably reach the ground or rise up. Such is the undialectical dimension of grief: an image *without transformation, reflection, sublation, or revelation* – [it] is not fixed, passive, or ... merely unchanging. Rather, the undialectical is given its force, its power and affect as the duration of suspended form. ... This suffering does not work, does not resolve agony, but is suspended in a revelation without revelation, a revelation that will never take place.⁴⁵ True to form, neither the music nor the video has a distinctive end; while the former gradually fades out to silence without conclusion or resolution, the latter finds its characters still engulfed in the same darkness from which they emerged in the beginning. Escaping grief would require transformation where only repetitive duration persists; the oppressive pain of loss takes the form of unending suspension. *Staging this movement*, Brinkema asserts, ... puts on display the materiality of film form weighted down, as well, struggling to breathe under the pressure ... The image labors to step forward, to re-find the smoothness of cinematic movement free from the heaviness of irreversible mortality.⁴⁶

Salted eyes and a sordid dye

Since in Brinkema's theory grief is understood as static, she does not explicitly link it to any particular rhythm; in fact, in the entire book, she concerns herself with questions of rhythm only in relation to anxiety.⁴⁷ Even though it proved possible to derive a repetitive, recursive temporal structure from her remarks on duration, a more comprehensive way to read the rhythm of *Only You* is required. Hence, I turn to Peter Kivy and Julia Kristeva for a different approach to form, temporality, and affect itself.

A crucial parallel between Kivy's and Brinkema's propositions is their insistence on reading affect as a question of form; throughout his book, Kivy repeatedly asserts that music's ability to both convey and arouse emotions⁴⁸ has nothing to do with its emotional *expressiveness* (to be expressive of)⁴⁹ which, according to him, is reliant on a formal resemblance to certain aspects of the *phenomenological structures* of particular emotions and the way they manifest in behaviour.⁵⁰ Among these structures, he singles out the formal properties of speech and other types of human utterance: *music is sad ... in virtue of its representing the expressive tones and other expressive characteristics of the human voice*.⁵¹ Such relation between music and voice is based purely on their formal qualities – a matter of structural resemblance, not expressive imprint nor intentional representation – and should not be taken as self-evident but instead requires a cognitive response. While Kivy recognizes the historicity of his proposition – he goes on to argue that the decoding of affective

forms in music is necessarily reliant on changing and unspoken cultural conventions (a perspective Brinkema does not explicitly invoke, even though she does derive some of her affective forms not from the body as such but from accounts of affect in literary and philosophical texts) – he stands by the claim that most of the forms read as affective by convention are derived from those more closely linked to the structures of human expressive behaviour.⁵² *We hear sadness* [in music], Kivy reiterates, *in that we hear the musical sounds as appropriate to the expression of sadness. And we hear them as appropriate to the expression of sadness (in part) because we hear them as human utterances and perceive the features of these utterances as structurally similar to our own voices when we express our own sadness in speech.*⁵³

Unlike Brinkema, Kivy provides only cursory and fragmental examinations of the structures of particular affects in music – his goal is to build a (relatively) comprehensive theory of musical expression, the work of analysis is left mostly to his successors. Therefore, for a more extensive discussion of the formal qualities of speech and utterance, and their relation to affect,⁵⁴ I will refer to Kristeva. Not so much an heiress to Kivy's musicological/philosophical approach as to the psychoanalytical tradition of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, her theory of the depressive discourse will nonetheless provide a suitable framework for analysing the melancholy⁵⁵ rhythms present in *Only You*.

Tell me apart

Let us keep in mind, begins the second chapter of Kristeva's *Black Sun*, titled "Life and Death of Speech," *the speech of the depressed – repetitive and monotonous. Faced with the impossibility of concatenating, they utter sentences that are interrupted, exhausted, come to a standstill. ... A repetitive rhythm, a monotonous melody emerge and dominate the broken logical sequences, changing them into recurring, obsessive litanies.*⁵⁶ In Kristeva's work, melancholy is a distortion of the subject's symbolic relation to the world: the loss of a beloved object triggers a loss of reference and a lapse of faith in the signifying power of language, in sense and meaning as such, leaving the depressed incapable of communication and connection with others. Cast into a cruel form of disillusionment, *persons in despair become hyperlucid ... A signifying sequence, necessarily an arbitrary one, will appear to them as heavily, violently arbitrary: they will think it absurd, it will have no meaning.*⁵⁷ Unable to rely on the symbolic structures of language and meaning, the melancholy subject becomes submerged in the inarticulate realm of the *semiotic*⁵⁸ riveted to and overpowered by affect. Similarly to Brinkema's assertion of the undialectical character of grief, Kristeva's melancholy lacks the oscillating dialectic of unity and separation, which is the basis of symbolisation and dialogue; as one commentator states, *If the semiotic order is the order of affect, then melancholy is pure, unmediated affect, devoid of communicative potentiality.*⁵⁹

According to Kristeva, this retreat into the depressive affect is a pathological defence mechanism against the discontinuity and loss of integrity experienced in the face of trauma or loss – which, paradoxically, is itself an expression of the death drive. Death as such (again similarly to grief in Brinkema's terms) is not subject to representation and may figure in the unconscious only as the *nonrepre-*

sentative spacing of representation,⁶⁰ an *insistence without presence*⁶¹ – the titular *black sun* whose impact, however, can be discerned in how it affects form, including the semiotic aspects of speech: *the work of death ... can be spotted precisely in the dissociation of form itself, when form is distorted, abstracted, disfigured, hollowed out*.⁶² In Kristeva's theory, the death drive works differently from grief in that it splits the ego of the subject, which then is simultaneously unawaresly affected by it and struggling against it – a conflict that leads to the breakdown of logical, behavioural, and even biological sequentiality. This split may then be identified in the empty spaces within the depressive's speech, its repetitive melodies, and discontinuous rhythmic patterns.

Such a splitting correspondingly cuts across language, dissociating the melancholy subject from symbolic meaning, leaving them unable to address their *noncommunicable grief*,⁶³ and forcing them to rely only on semiotic structures such as rhythm and melody: as signs become loaded with affect and devoid of meaning, their formal properties come to the fore, making them ambiguous, alliterative, nonsensical. Therefore, even though affect itself escapes articulation, it imprints on prosody, and its lost meaning can be detected from the tone of the voice. The depressive discourse manifests in the form of retardation, recurrence, and discontinuity: *speech delivery is slow, silences are long and frequent, rhythms slacken, intonations become monotonous, and the very syntactic structures ... are often characterized by nonrecoverable elisions (objects or verbs that are omitted and cannot be restored on the basis of context)*.⁶⁴

One would be correct in associating such structural patterns with the stylistic devices of poetry; in fact, a large part of *Black Sun* consists of Kristeva applying her findings on melancholy to interpreting works of art and literature (although, curiously, she does not devote a separate chapter to music). Not only a psychoanalyst but a literary critic as well, her work is particularly fit to interpret written texts, and it is indeed tempting to focus my analysis on the lyrical structure of *Only You*, perhaps even expand it to the rest of Gibbons's poetic output – an urge I intend not to give in to, or at least to limit such pursuits to a minimum, since, enticing as they are, they lie beyond the scope of this article. The prosodic properties of Kristeva's depressive discourse are also not entirely convenient for consistently formalist (i.e., fully disregarding the content) song analysis. Since the song structure per se is more often than not repetitive by its very nature – as is the case with the verse-chorus-bridge sequence of *Only You* – it will not be subject to separate analysis either. Instead, I will focus on the particular distinguishing rhythmic features of the song and music video that may be read as relevant to the speech patterns of Kristeva's depressive: retardation, recurrence, and discontinuity.

If the emptiness and loss intrinsic to Brinkema's grief took the form of heaviness, in Kristeva's melancholy they manifest as discontinuities and gaps. Rhythmical disruptions are strewn through the prosody and song structure of *Only You*: both the delivery of the lyrics and the construction of the instrumental layer are marked by abrupt pauses and interruptions. Little kernels of silence interspersed throughout the song are indicators of the painful split at the heart of meaning, and they, in turn, disrupt the logic and sequentiality of utterance. In the opening line of each verse, Gibbons's vocals – drawn out into a slow, exhausted recitative – are punctuated

by pensive halts, which fracture the grammatic structure of sentences and obscure their meaning. This pattern is most prominent in the first verse, where the placement of the silent pauses obliterates the syntax of the question: *We suffer. Every day. What. Is it for.* The transformation of an inquiry into a statement via the semiotic – in addition to the noncontinuous utterance, Gibbons's flat delivery eradicates the questioning intonation – hints poignantly at the depressive's hopelessness and isolation, their strained or ruptured relations and their incapability of communication with others: there is no use asking questions when connection is impossible because the significance of language and meaning is lost.

This depressive discontinuity is mirrored in the rhythm section of the song, tirelessly reiterative yet marked by subtly uneven patches of silence: while the musical rest repeatedly falls on the fourth beat, the pauses themselves are of different lengths. Over time, the rests become more frequent and the beat more intricate – utilising double takes and adding extra notes per bar – making the entire rhythm section more complex and irregular while maintaining the base metre mostly unchanged. Like the rhythm of melancholy speech, the downtempo beat of *Only You* is simultaneously drawn-out, repetitive, and broken. On another level, the irregularity of the rhythm's discontinuities divides the song into two dissociated parts: the pauses in the instrumental layer and those in the vocal delivery are misaligned, their separate patterns replicating the form of a depressive split subject. At certain points in the song, however, the two rhythmic sequences meet in a shared silence, putting the unspoken emptiness of melancholy on display.

Similar irregularities and disruptions can be found in the music video as well. From the beginning, the boy's motion follows a jagged, uneven rhythm: he gradually emerges from the shadow, becomes engulfed again, and then slides abruptly towards the camera, only to slow down once more – all within the first few seconds. His gestures seem disjointed and arbitrary, their rhythm incongruent: some parts of his body are virtually immobile, and the movement of others is, in turn, unnaturally hampered and uncannily accelerated. While particular actions are mostly legible on their own – the boy repeatedly wipes his face, waves his arms, and attempts to walk forward – they do not form a coherent, meaningful sequence of gestures with a clear cause or purpose. Not only does this relate to the depressive's loss of meaning, but it also gives the impression of *a breakdown of biological and logical sequentiality*,⁶⁵ which, according to Kristeva, originates in the workings of the death drive. Melancholy imprints not only on speech, but its struggles manifest in other forms of movement as well: *the rhythm of overall behaviour is shattered, there is neither time nor place for acts and sequences to be carried out.*⁶⁶ Such disordered rhythm and broken sequentiality mark the entire structure of the video, which, while partially following the song, verges on disintegrating into separate visual segments, which do not form a coherent story or carry conventional narrative meaning. Instead, the discontinuity and incoherence are the meaning: the video's content is its form, which follows bodies moving aimlessly and erratically through the darkness.

One particular structural element in *Only You* may serve as a prism for the workings of the semiotic formal operations of melancholy – a distinctive vocal sample looped repeatedly and scratched into the song in a jagged, intermittent



Sour Times, dir. Alexander Hemming (1994)



The Rip, dir. Nick Uff (2008)



We Carry On, dir. Nick Uff (2008)

rhythm. The sampling breaks up words into sounds, reduces them to their affective properties, and literally divorces the utterance from its symbolic meaning through reiteration amplified to absurdity – like repeating a word over and over until it stops making sense. A decidedly Kristevan measure: the voice used as pure melody, speech reduced to a rhythmic structure, language and music blended into one form which resembles simultaneously both and neither. The partially unintelligible sample appears early in the intro, constantly rewinding and restarting in a broken, stuttering rhythm, giving the impression that the song is unable to begin, the fragment's distorted voice incapable of formulating or uttering its opening phrase. In online song lyric aggregators, the misshapen words are often absent or otherwise transcribed as either *whip like that* or *flip it like that* – neither phrase makes particular sense in the context of the song or on its own. However, in the original snippet, taken from American hip-hop group The Pharcyde's 1996 single *She Said*, the warped words were, in fact: *lose it like that*. Hence, an overlooked, omitted loss, lost itself to formal, semiotic distortion, is revealed to be the invisible centre of melancholy, the source of the perceived lack of meaning, the black sun whose dark radiation disfigures form itself.

***Please, could you stay awhile
to share my grief***

The two theories of the affective forms of the sadness of loss formulated by Eugenie Brinkema and Julia Kristeva originate in different assumptions and methodological traditions. Since both authors derive their formal structures from different aspects of the affective experience – the heaviness of grief stems from the perceived weightiness of the grieving body, the discontinuity of melancholy stems from the disintegrated speech of the depressive – their formulations are reflected in different elements of the audiovisual text. Brinkema understands affect as derived from the body but exterior to the subject, processed psychologically through cognitive interpretation. In Kristeva's work, the affective is manifested through the body, situated on the threshold of the animalic and the symbolic, its presence in the psyche mediated by representation. Both authors agree that, while itself noncommunicable, affect – *a force that takes form in texts*⁶⁷ – distorts the forms of all it comes in contact with due to its own formal properties. And even though they insist on using different terms, both agree that the structure of grief/melancholy is determined by the invisible absence at its centre, an infinite loss that radiates tremendous, sorrowful pain.

Instead of undermining each other's claims, the two authors' propositions shed light on each other: while the former positions grief as pure affect – undialectical, oppressive, and all-encompassing – the latter discusses melancholy as the manner in which the subject's struggle with this burden manifests in language. Therefore, while the affect itself might not have an outside, as Brinkema suggests, Kristeva proposes the struggling subject may find respite, perhaps even resolution, through communication and art: even though it is transposed into a different material, creation *bears witness to the affect*.⁶⁸ Eventually, as implied by its very title, *Only You* is aimed at someone: it is evidence of the subject subdued by grief at-

tempting to communicate – both with the lost object and with an outside world – striving to overstep grief’s boundary, tear away from its gravity, and regain meaning. Its formal structure – discontinuous and recursive, marked by inertia and persistence – tells the story of yearning for something to change, attempting to break out of the numbness and overwhelm of grief, and being allowed glimpses of connectivity in the darkness. *A formal grief hurts no less*, Brinkema asserts, *that affect is tangled up with light lessens none of the cruelty of bereavement’s pain. It is only that the image bears this out in place of a subject.*⁶⁹

- ¹ As cited in: B. Thomson, “Portishead on Music, Misogyny and Debunking Their Own Mystery”, *The Guardian* 13.08.2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/aug/13/portishead-on-music-misogyny-and-debunking-their-own-mystery> (accessed: 3.06.2023).
- ² J. Hannaham, “Did Portishead Kill Trip Hop?”, *Salon* 17.04.2008, <https://www.salon.com/2008/04/17/portishead/> (accessed: 3.06.2023).
- ³ See: P. Kivy, *The Corded Shell: Reflections on Musical Expression*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1980, pp. 3-17. I depart here slightly from Kivy’s own nomenclature and examples for the sake of simplicity.
- ⁴ E. Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects*, Duke University Press, Durham – London 2014, p. 37.
- ⁵ T. Jirsa, “For the Affective Aesthetics of Contemporary Music Video”, *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image* 2019, vol. 13, no. 2, p. 188.
- ⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 202.
- ⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 205.
- ⁸ I agree with Kivy’s assertion that some debate regarding distinguishing particular affects is inevitable, however, a reasonable degree of agreement is sufficient to speak of consensus: *noble grief* and *abject sorrow* are similar enough not to be mistaken for joy. P. Kivy, *op. cit.*, pp. 47-48.
- ⁹ E. Vincetelli, “Portishead”, *The Rolling Stone* 14.10.1997, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-album-reviews/portishead-181784/> (accessed: 3.06.2023).
- ¹⁰ S. Walton, “How Portishead’s *Portishead* Is the Definition of a Forgotten Middle Child”, *Loud and Quiet* 29.09.2017, <https://www.loudandquiet.com/short/portisheads-portishead-definition-forgotten-middle-child/> (accessed: 3.06.2023).
- ¹¹ F. Guan, “Revisiting Portishead’s Harrowing Self-Titled Second Album”, *Vulture* 2.10.2017, <https://www.vulture.com/2017/10/revisiting-portisheads-self-titled-album.html> (accessed: 3.06.2023).
- ¹² S. Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia”, in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (Vol. 14)*, ed. J. Strachey, Hogarth Press, London 1953.
- ¹³ E. Brinkema, *op. cit.*, pp. 76-112.
- ¹⁴ P. Kivy, *op. cit.*, pp. 18-26.
- ¹⁵ J. Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. L. S. Roudiez, Columbia University Press, New York 1992.
- ¹⁶ All headings within the article are taken from Portishead’s song lyrics.
- ¹⁷ A. Harrison, “Portishead, *Portishead*”, Q (n.d.), <https://web.archive.org/web/20001210175300/http://www.qonline.co.uk/reviews/server.asp?id=16330&ss=portishead&cs=artist&st=ep&stars=0&cp=1> (accessed: 3.06.2023).
- ¹⁸ S. Reynolds, “Sounds of Paranoia: Trip-Hop, Tricky, and Pre-Millennium Tension, 1990-97”, in: *idem, Generation Ecstasy: Into the World of Techno and Rave Culture*, Routledge, New York 2010, p. 321.
- ¹⁹ S. Walton, *op. cit.*
- ²⁰ B. Walters, “Portishead, *Portishead*”, *Spin* 1997, vol. 13, no. 8, p. 142.
- ²¹ *Ibidem*.
- ²² S. Williams, “Portishead, *Portishead*”, *NME* 27.09.1997, <http://web.archive.org/web/20001006132036/http://www.nme.com/reviews/reviews/19980101000205reviews.html> (accessed: 3.06.2023).
- ²³ Since my focus here is on the formal aspects of the music video’s structure, further discussion of the lyrical and thematic content of the song lies, for the most part, beyond the scope of this article.
- ²⁴ For a more in-depth discussion of Cunningham’s style, particularly the treatment of bodies in his music videos, see: D. Lockwood, “Blackened Puppets: Chris Cunningham’s Weird Anatomies”, in: *Music/Video: Histories, Aesthetics, Media*, eds. G. Arnold,

- D. Cookney, K. Fairclough, M. Goddard, Bloomsbury Publishing, New York – London 2017, pp. 195-207.
- ²⁵ Another Portishead music video that matches this description is Chris Bran's 1997 promotional clip to *Over*, which would also work well in a radical formalist reading for melancholy/grief. However, I chose Cunningham's video due to its greater complexity, more prominent use of temporal structures, and substantial focus on the body.
- ²⁶ This remarkable motion dynamic was achieved by filming the actors' movements in a water tank.
- ²⁷ E. Brinkema, op. cit., p. 69.
- ²⁸ Ibidem, p. 54.
- ²⁹ Ibidem, p. 76.
- ³⁰ Ibidem, p. 99.
- ³¹ Ibidem, p. 69.
- ³² Ibidem, p. 71.
- ³³ Ibidem, p. 74.
- ³⁴ Ibidem.
- ³⁵ Ibidem, p. 86.
- ³⁶ See: ibidem, pp. 89-93.
- ³⁷ Ibidem, p. 109.
- ³⁸ Ibidem.
- ³⁹ One might recall Barthes' comments on the relation of death and photography, seen as both an image without future and evidence of the certainty of a once and future death. See: R. Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. R. Howard, Hill and Wang, New York 1981, pp. 90-91. See also: E. Brinkema, op. cit., p. 91-92.
- ⁴⁰ E. Brinkema, op. cit., p. 105.
- ⁴¹ Ibidem, p. 67.
- ⁴² J. Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Vintage, New York 2006, p. 27.
- ⁴³ E. Brinkema, op. cit., p. 111.
- ⁴⁴ See: ibidem.
- ⁴⁵ Ibidem, p. 111-112.
- ⁴⁶ Ibidem, p. 109.
- ⁴⁷ See: ibidem, pp. 185-201, esp. 197-198.
- ⁴⁸ Since Kivy's book predates the affective turn(s) in the humanities, and he does not introduce a precise distinction between his understanding of affect and emotion, I will be using these terms interchangeably in discussing his theory.
- ⁴⁹ P. Kivy, op. cit., pp. 12-17.
- ⁵⁰ Ibidem, pp. 37-38.
- ⁵¹ Ibidem, p. 24.
- ⁵² Ibidem, p. 83.
- ⁵³ Ibidem, p. 51.
- ⁵⁴ Acknowledging the lack of an adequate conceptual framework for a less vague definition, Kristeva uses affect and mood synonymously for referring to *psychic representations of energy displacements caused by external or internal traumas, which stamps the entire behavior and all the sign systems (from motor functions to speech production and idealization)*. J. Kristeva, op. cit., p. 21.
- ⁵⁵ Unlike Brinkema's firm disavowal of *mourning-incholia*, Kristeva is much more casual with her terms. Admitting that demarcation lines between melancholy and depression are not clear-cut, throughout her book she uses these categories interchangeably for referring to an *impossible mourning* in reaction to the experience of loss, even going as far as linking them into a *composite that might be called melancholy/depressive, whose borders are in fact blurred*. Ibidem, pp. 9, 10.
- ⁵⁶ Ibidem, p. 33.
- ⁵⁷ Ibidem, p. 51.
- ⁵⁸ For a more detailed discussion of the symbolic and the semiotic see: J. Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. M. Waller, Columbia University Press, New York 1984.
- ⁵⁹ M. P. Markowski, "Przygoda ciała i znaków. Wprowadzenie do pism Julii Kristevej", in: J. Kristeva, *Czarne słońce. Depresja i melancholia*, Universitas, Kraków 2007, p. XXVIII.
- ⁶⁰ J. Kristeva, *Black Sun...* op. cit., p. 27.
- ⁶¹ Ibidem, p. 13.
- ⁶² Ibidem, p. 27.
- ⁶³ Ibidem, p. 3.
- ⁶⁴ Ibidem, p. 34.
- ⁶⁵ Ibidem, p. 20.
- ⁶⁶ Ibidem, p. 34.
- ⁶⁷ E. Brinkema, op. cit., p. 92.
- ⁶⁸ J. Kristeva, *Black Sun...* op. cit., p. 22.
- ⁶⁹ E. Brinkema, op. cit., p. 93.

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Słowa kluczowe:

żal;
melancholia;
afekt;
struktury czasowe;
radykalny formalizm

Abstrakt

Klaudia Rachubińska

***No Time, Make, or Reason*. Afektywne formy teledysku *Only You* zespołu Portishead**

Zygmunt Freud rozróżnił normalną żalobę i patologiczną melancholię w oparciu o czas trwania i trwałość afektu. Spojrzenie na afekt z perspektywy czasowości pozwala odczytywać go nie przez pryzmat treści, ale formy. W artykule perspektywa radykalnego formalizmu została wykorzystana do zbadania sposobu, w jaki depresyjny afekt przejawia się w strukturze teledysku do utworu Portishead *Only You* (reż. Chris Cunningham, 1998), w szczególności w odniesieniu do tempa i rytmu. Teoretyczną podstawę analizy tempa stanowią uwagi Eugenie Brinkemy na temat żalu jako afektywnej formy naznaczonej ciężkością i bezwładnością. Eksploracja rytmu jest zakorzeniona w stwierdzeniu Petera Kivy'ego, że odczytywanie ekspresji muzycznej jest za pośrednictwem rozumienia afektywnych właściwości ludzkiego głosu. Umożliwia to zastosowanie koncepcji dyskursu depresyjnego Julii Kristevej, rozumianego jako zestaw określonych wzorców i prozodycznych właściwości mowy wskazujących na depresję/melancholię.