

MFA Critical Reflection (2022)

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In the afterglow of despair



Abstract

Critical reflection “In the afterglow of despair” is presented as belles-lettres/reflective diaries for it’s considered relevant to the practise. It should be viewed as an introduction and a visual exposition of the ongoing research project with the same title.

This thesis consists of a brief introduction of the self (the artist/author); a memoir on attachment; an in-depth analysis on grief as a concept combined with self-reflective notes; a short presentation of the research project; an introduction to a visual interpretation planned for the MFA Graduation show 2022; concluded with prospects of the project.

Contents

Introduction of the self	2
20.01.2022	3
A memoir on attachment	
Reflective diary	8
Introduction to grief	
In the afterglow of despair	11
Research project so far	
«You can make it rain in a room»	13
MFA project 2022	
Conclusion	14
List of references	16



“His young and fair features were almost as deathlike as those of the form beside him, and almost as fixed: but his was the hush of exhausted anguish, and hers of perfect peace. Her brow smooth, her lids closed, her lips wearing the expression of a smile; no angel in heaven could be more beautiful than she appeared. And I partook of the infinite calm in which she lay: my mind was never in a holier frame than while I gazed on that untroubled image of Divine rest. I instinctively echoed the words she had uttered a few hours before: ‘Incomparably beyond and above us all! Whether still on earth or now in heaven, her spirit is at home with God!’

I don’t know if it be a peculiarity in me, but I am seldom otherwise than happy while watching in the chamber of death, should no frenzied or despairing mourner share the duty with me. I see a repose that neither earth nor hell can break, and I feel an assurance of the endless and shadowless hereafter- the Eternity they have entered- where life is boundless in its duration, and love in its sympathy, and joy in its fulness. I noticed on that occasion how much selfishness there is even in a love like Mr. Linton’s, when he so regretted Catherine’s blessed release!”

(Brontë, 1958, 179-180)

Introduction of the self

I'm a multicultural artist (RU/SE/NO). The concepts within my practise manifests through painting, text, and mixed media installation. I view my process as composing of narratives and investigation of different communication forms. It's based on staging and materializing the immaterial, such as memories, traditions, and experiences. It's a preservation method where I merge visual representations and novels through autobiography and fiction. Inspiration arises from tales, literature, philosophy, and cinema from different cultures. The aim is to establish an exchange between the viewer and myself. A neighboring atmosphere that both parties can relate to and take from. The practice becomes an ever-growing archive and an invitation to discuss what concerns us all; loss, grief, love, home and belonging.



*Figure 2: 'The fear of being forgotten (The self)', [Oil on canvas]
2021*

Part of a triptych titled "The self, the death and the curtain", reflective studies about death

20.01.2022

A memoir on attachment

She stands in the broad white landscape, isolated with cosmos. Her visions of the day totally inverted. She feels betrayed by the universe, alone in her bewilderment. Her legs are completely covered in snow. The road is disguised and it's exhausting and difficult to navigate around the massive pale terrain surrounding her. For almost a week, the weather forecast had warned for storms and possible avalanches, information that she so naively chose to overlook as she decided to get to the peak of the mountain.

Only a couple of hours earlier, she found herself unconcerned with what life could possibly throw her way. Feeling absent: a stranger to her own existence. Lacking emotions and expectations, lacking hope of a better time to come, lacking the fear of a worse one. Alone and misunderstood in her despair and desperate to feel again, to change this otherwise unfamiliar to her condition. Naively convinced that a peak of a mountain will be the answer, the only place with ability to heal her and give her momentous state of peace. A blue-eyed hope, indeed.

A massive dark cloud creeps in from the north. The piercing, northern wind approaches her from behind, she falls over. The snow feels more and more like quicksand. With every new step she sinks deeper into the white mass surrounding her. Her right foot gets stuck in something underneath and the sense of angst becomes violently palpable. "Is this how it feels to approach death?" she thinks. She looks up to the sky; it changes frequently resembling a disorganized landscape viewed from above. Dark clouds being hills surrounded by blue rivers. Her eyes fill with tears as her thoughts begin to wander among prominent events in life. She whispers in a trembling and anxious voice "You were supposed to meet me here, I needed you here". A specific memory visits her as she determinedly holds back her tears:

I was a teenager; around fourteen years old. My father and I were on a camping trip by the lake Uvildy together with his friends and his new family, my sister and stepmother. It was neither the first nor the last time I would visit the lake accompanied by him, however, this particular time and this particular day that I am revisiting, is essential.

From an extensive perspective, the day looked like many others. Sunny and calm. Adults grilled, drank, discussed, and smoked hookah. The children jumped on rocks and caught frogs. And me, something in between. I jumped between these two groups and spent a lot of time in the lake, like a frog.

After approximately one hour in the water, sunbathing on a worn, green air mattress, my father called out to me telling me to come and help him with food preparations. My father was an outstanding man; intelligent and generous; inviting and warm. A two-meter-long giant, constantly looking for new encounters and impressions. With that said, he was also a man with incredibly poor patience. A behaviour which I definitely inherited from him. This warm, intelligent giant could

turn into an impatient, grumpy child in a moment and this very phenomenon occurred when I took a little too long to get out of the water as he called on me. I walked towards him dragging the air mattress. As I approached, he began to question my behaviour:

- "Why this childish attitude? You should come here when I ask you to!" he said.

I was surprised by his strict tone but continued walking towards him, a little bit faster now, hoping that his frustration wouldn't be long-lasting.

- "Move it!" he continued. "What kind of behaviour is this? I asked you to come a long time ago. You should help just like everyone else, and you should do it when I tell you so."

I remained silent. I felt looked down upon, unfairly treated. My eyes filled with tears and at first, I felt paralyzed. My father didn't often scold me in this way, at least not in front of others. I felt ashamed. I also felt my stepmother's sneer burning in the back of my neck. I can say with no doubt that she enjoyed my father's brief outbursts when directed at someone other than herself. She felt amused, seeing him treating me in a different approach than the one otherwise filled with admiration and affection. She is a jealous woman, my stepmother. In retrospect, I believe that she sincerely despised the bond that my father and I shared. For that very reason, her sneer became extra striking in this present.

- "Are you even listening? COME AND HELP!"

My father raising his voice became a cue for the stepmother to take her chance and join the persecution. I cannot remember precisely what she said. There and then however, it was the drop that made my cup overflow. Without saying a word, I briskly turned around, grabbed the air mattress which I apparently dropped during this outburst, and marched towards the water again. I threw in the mattress, then myself and started swimming. All the adults and children were now standing on the shore like a cheerleader troop as I decidedly swam away in the opposite direction. They shouted for me to come back. I'm stubborn however, another trait that I ironically enough inherited from my father.

The lake Uvildy... Located in the ancient Urals. One of the largest freshwater lakes in Russia. 12.7 km wide, 20-25 million years old. One of the cleanest and most beautiful lakes in the country. Amongst the citizens of this area, the lake goes by the nickname "The Pearl" and is considered a pride and a treasure in the Ural region. Another characteristic of the lake is its strong streams. If one happens to find herself in one of these, one can reposition from the shore to the deeper, central points of the lake hundreds of meters away in a matter of minutes and that's precisely where I was now heading without being even so slightly aware of it. My upper body was on the mattress, and I used my legs as a motor to take me further away from the shore.

Fortunately for me, my father who was also a curious and well-read man, knew all about the streams of this lake. Shortly after my exit he jumped in too, now swimming after me as fast as he could. I, of course, noticed his action and somewhere within myself a voice of reason began to hit me with waves of worry. I felt a certain anxiety. Unfortunately, the voice of the explosive teenager was much more prominent. "He embarrassed you in front of everybody. He is selfish and mean," I said to myself as I stubbornly continued to swim away from him.

- "Wait!" he called. He no longer sounded angry or frustrated, only worried. I stopped. "Swim towards me" he continued.

I may have been stubborn and therefore ignorant, however not stupid. The shore was now several hundred meters away and I, confused about how I could have swum so far in such a short time, began to feel a concern for both of us. At the same time, I felt gratitude and relief; he did not leave me in this childish outburst.

So, there we were myself and my father, out on deep water, literally. I moved my upper body to the left part of the mattress, and he pulled himself up on the right. He looked at me, I could sense concern from his expression, but then he smiled and said, "What now, doch...?" ("Doch" means daughter in Russian). My father addressed me in that way more often than he used my actual name. A manifestation that I truly adored. There was something very direct, simple, and loving in the way he said it. I felt oh so cherished in that directness. Then he gave me one of his famous short lectures (they were many during our time spent together), on this occasion about Uvildy and its streams.

- "It will take us some time to get back ashore and with this shitty mattress as help, it's best that we hurry"

We started swimming. In the view of our current situation, I felt irresponsible for not only putting myself but my mostly adored man in danger. I believe I apologized... And even if I didn't, I'm pretty sure he understood that I was very regretful about the incident. He looked at me, again with the warm and affirmative look that my stepmother so deeply despised. In retrospect, I think he saw himself in me. Our time with each other was always limited. My homestead, located in another country. My culture, partly distant although intriguing to him. He never had a present roll in my every day, yet I was a copy of him, to appearance and behaviour. Two restless, easily frustrated, and extremely emotional souls on a half-inflated air mattress in the middle of a huge lake, that was us. He laughed amused. I felt safe and delighted. My father would take us ashore, and I got time alone with him, it couldn't have been better.

The swim took between one and two hours that filled with several short lectures and dialogs on various topics. Once we got ashore, my stepmother was ready to continue lecturing me about my careless and selfish outburst. She did not have time to get very far in her harsh formulations before my father interrupted:

- "Is the food ready?"
- "No..." she said as she looked at him with a somewhat surprised expression. Then she looked at me and continued inclemently: "We were very, worried and..."
- "It would otherwise have been very fitting now, we are both tired and hungry" he interrupted with a calm yet sharp tone, then he turned to me and smiled: "I'm hungry indeed, will you help me to provide some food for our lazy fellows?"

I voiced an excited "Of course!" and we went to the fire to prepare the barbeque."

Affirmation between a daughter and her father... What is it if not an obscured sanctum? The kind of important safety that provides a young girl with a sense of assurance. The kind of safety that for her is now permanently absent. A hope to recapture that affirmation, the safety, the unconditional love, if only for a brief moment... That's what she so desperately searched for up there on the mountain. She searched for him. He who made her overlook all the avalanches and storm warnings. He who had followed her existence and studied her every move, every choice as if she was a magical being. Now they had changed roles. A magical being, he became to her.

The stillness of the forest, him. The wind that caresses her hair, him. The fog that covers the city some mornings, him. The rain that hits her face like loving kisses, him. She sees him in the ever-changing sky. In the clouds, the twilights, the northern lights, and the stars. That's where she can continue being accompanied by him. That's where she keeps their relationship alive, where she keeps him alive.

However, a father is not always loving nor embracing; not always kind nor fair. And not always is he present either. An actuality already familiar to her, she had only forgotten. For it's easier to romanticize the past. This time she entered nature as an unbidden guest. A naïve, abandoned child howling for attention of her absent father and in return the nature rejected her. It wasn't calm nor embracing. Magnificent, but harsh and strict. She craved warmth, instead she was hit by an enraged storm. Once again, she was in danger because of a childish outburst. This time, with no reassurance of safety, alone with herself in the outcome of her ignorant actions.

She is stubborn though. So, she took a deep breath to calm herself; then dragged her right foot up from the snow; then climbed up a cliff behind her to orient herself. About a hundred meters away she could see what appeared to be the road. Getting there would not be easy nor safe, but she would try.

- "Remember to breathe. You have a goal; get to the road that leads to the red cabin, that's it. Do what you must" she said to herself as she continued her lonely journey through the landscape of grief.



Figure 3: Aesthetic foundation

Reflective diary

Introduction to grief

“The voice of sadness is censored as sick, what if it’s sane?”¹

During October 2021, I participated in ‘*Sorgweekend*’. An event that took place at Modum Bad². During a three-day stay, I participated in education on management and analysis of various mourning/grieving processes: through lectures, group discussions, exercises, one-to-one conversation with a deacon, as well as engaging in individual research. Below, I present my reflections from the stay and introductory analyse about grief as a concept.

As we attach to one another it becomes inevitable; we make ourselves vulnerable. Allowing ourselves to be exposed to the consideration that a person and/or a state bringing us the illusion of momentous peace might not be consequential. We’re unconsciously accepting the risk of dealing with grief in a time to come.

Grief is not a feeling, rather it’s a condition, a landscape of many emotions, an ocean in constant unpredictable change. It’s a heavy physical occupation of the whole. A possession that one cannot easily resign from. A Gesamtkunstwerk in an eternal process of transformation. It will always lack a precise clarification as grief is and always will be individual.

Experiencing grief acts as a constant reminder of our expectations for a future that never became nor will become reality. Grief can be evident in the actual recognition of the absence of someone/something. It can also be disguised and indefinable: existing with a constant underlying angst and fear of feeling more pain.

Grief is fiercely enormous and overwhelming, a lack of meaning and fulfilment in life. A notion that this should not happen to me, not here and not now. Momentously, it results in decrease of confidence and ability to tackle difficulties. A state of uncertainty of one’s entire existence described as losing oneself.

As we enter the landscape of grief another element becomes distinctive: a possibility of a better future appears, a promise even. Implemented upon one by oneself and one’s community. As one enters the state of depressive and somewhat negative thinking one is also encouraged to indulge in the process of finding happiness again. Reshe³ argues that

¹ Reshe, (2020), *Depressive realism*

² *Modum Bad* is a retreat located in southern Norway that through treatment, mental health care, research and professional development aims to tackle mental health issues and focuses on improving a patient’s quality of life.

³ Julie Reshe is a philosopher, psychoanalyst, and professor at the School of Advanced Studies (SAS) at the University of Tyumen in Siberia, and director of the Institute of Psychoanalysis at the Global Center for Advanced Studies (GCAS). (Weintraub, 2020)

encouragement of such might represent a biased grasp of reality, an expectation from the mainstream to embrace our common illusions as healthy if these are positive⁴. Zapffe⁵ describes similar outcome as a suppression that goes on during our total active time.⁶ Both argues that in fact, a depressed person experiences reality with increased sense of transparency and unbiasedness⁷. Zapffe systemized suppression mechanisms⁸ that one utilizes to create a distance between oneself and our eternal suffering that we so fiercely try to avoid.

Reshe argues that the trend of encouragement towards positive thinking within psychotherapy today partly originates from our religious past that offered people a promise of salvation. An elusive happy ending if one overcame their experienced traumas without losing themselves to their sins⁹. Reshe claims that today “...heaven is no longer about the

⁴ “What if, when I was depressed, I learned something valuable, that I wouldn’t be able to learn at a lower cost? What if it was a collapse of illusions – the collapse of unrealistic thinking – and the glimpse of a reality that actually caused my anxiety? What if, when depressed, we perceive reality more accurately? What if both my need to be happy and the demand of psychotherapy to heal depression are based on the same illusion? What if the so-called gold standard of therapy is just a comforting pseudoscience itself?” (Reshe, 2020, para. 10)

⁵ Peter Wessel Zapffe (1899-1990) was a Norwegian metaphysician, author, artist, lawyer, and mountaineer. Known for his philosophically pessimistic theory and view on humans’ existence and need for justification as a flaw that opposes against nature. (Wikipedia, 2022, para. 1-2)

⁶ “... a condition for social adjustment and what is popularly called “healthy” and “normal” behaviour”. (Zapffe, 1933)

⁷ To manifest this argument, Reshe and Zapffe refers to the theory of a German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer who present the idea of our existence being entirely based on the “*aimless thriving that can never be fulfilled*”. In fact, many ulterior studies bolster the idea that one should be “healed” to become more realistic. (Reshe, 2020, para. 15)

⁸ Zapffes suppression mechanisms consists of **isolation**: a complete distancing from destructive/sensitive thoughts and emotions. Also mentioned as “*proper/professional behaviour*” encouraged from childhood. **Attachment**: “... can be seen as an attempt to establish fixed points in, or a wall around, the shifting chaos of consciousness”. Also adapted in early childhood. Zapffe uses the term “*infantile bonding*” which provides one with the sense of security that arrives from home, family, partner, social community, and other significant connexions. Dispossession of these can issue in what’s called “*attachment paralysis*”. It’s a noteworthy mechanism for it can both protect one from angst, but it can also transfer one straight to the state of depression. “*We love our attachments because they save us; but we hate them, too, because they hinder our sense of freedom*”. **Diversion**: providing oneself with new impressions, staying busy. “*Without diversions a child can’t stand himself – witness the common complaint, ‘Mom, there’s nothing to do!’*”. It’s the need of constant transformation, a need of moving forward, an escape from “... *this earthly vale of tears, one’s untenable existential situation*”. And lastly, **sublimation**: meaning transformation of agonies and depressive behaviour into useful experiences, reflections, and outcomes through for example philosophy, art, literature, and music. (Zapffe, 1933, pp. 40-52)

⁹ Reshe explains how psychology fills the void left by religion by providing explanation and hope in a modernized way: “*The role of a counsellor or therapist, and our need to attend them, finds many analogies in the practice of a pastor and the tradition of confession. Both counsellor and pastor are figures with authority to claim what is wrong with you and tell you how to fix it.*” (Reshe, 2020, para. 13)

transcendental realm, but about attaining a total state of happiness in the now”, an impossible goal indeed.

In the process of exploring the landscape of grief it's also relevant to indicate that not all loss is nor should be assembled with grief. In Didion's¹⁰ book *'The year of magical thinking'* (2005) she describes the difference between mourning and grief.¹¹ One cannot prepare for grief, as it's sudden and direct in a way that if not experienced can't truly be understood. I'm well-known with both. In mourning over passing of my grandmother I had the strength to continue with my every day: due to grief over my father's sudden passing in a hunting accident I was never myself again.



*Figure 4: [Drawing framed by my father]
2010*

¹⁰ Joan Didion (1934-2021) is a Californian author in the field of (auto)thanatology, a term associated with writings about death in relation to the self, deviating from autobiography. (Kusek, 2017, p. 171)

¹¹ Didion explains mourning as a state one unconsciously prepares for the entire life. Losing relatives, parents, grandparents. It's a slow process associated with time and aging. It's slowly approaching us from a distance and as it does one will "...need for a while to watch out for mines". Here too, one will experience bewilderment and loneliness, the loneliness of an abandoned child. Mourning is associated with the time gone by. It will live with you as you go on with your everyday. Grief on the contrary has no distance. It will absorb your entity to a completion. Didion writes "Virtually everyone who has ever experienced grief mention this phenomenon of waves" and refers to a study from 1944 by psychiatrist Eric Lindemann where he describes grief: "sensation of somatic distress occurring in waves lasting from twenty minutes to an hour at a time a feeling of tightness in the throat, choking with shortness of breath, need for sighing, and an empty feeling in the abdomen, lack of muscular power, and an intense subjective distress described as tension or mental pain." (Didion, 2005, pp. 26-27)

In the afterglow of despair

Research project so far

Referring to Zapffe's model of suppression mechanisms this research arises from a middle point of *attachment* and *sublimation*. Influenced by "infantile bonding", aiming to comprehend angst and grief by making it graspable through visualisation and memoirs. The project is viewed as an archive in constant growth and elaboration. With the aim to create an imaginative yet relatable and truthful to reality, sphere. Below, I present two works included in this project so far.



Figure 5: Documentation of 'A beginner's guide to rafting', [Site-specific mixed media installation]
2021
MFA1 exhibition 'Shed' at Nyhavna, Trondheim, Norway



Figure 6 & 7: 'A beginner's guide to rafting', [Documentation]
2021

" To realize what a rafting-trip is, one must go through three stages, the three days we have in front of us.

The first day there's a slight euphoria combined with a feeling of concern. You're excited but also a little bit anxious. Overwhelmed.

After the first night this concern is more noticeable. You're in denial, asking yourself "What the hell am I doing here?". This sensation could be confused with a hangover. You're in the woods, it's cold, you just want to take a warm shower, but you can't. So, you find the power to get out of the tent, eat breakfast and drink some warm tea, and so begins stage two... Acceptance.

You're starting to get used to the environment and the weather, getting to know the people around you, slowly starting to appreciate the feeling of disconnect and the absence of comfort. At the end of day two you're acclimatized to this temporary living situation.

And so, comes the third day, the final day. I would describe it as philosophy: You're now one with your surroundings. You've already been through the tough parts and are now fully here. After this day when you're returning to the city the acclimatization will start the other way around. It's almost scary to see all the people and getting used to the speed again. You'll once again experience denial... But that's another story.

The epiphany, however, happens on the third day. It is that philosophical moment where you understand what this rafting-trip is all about, and why you're here.

But not all at once. We will witness all three stages.

Cheers."

- Artyom Chernitsky

Figure 8: 'A beginner's guide to rafting', [Exhibition caption]
2021



*Figure 9 & 10: '#001724 Days', [Mixed media installation]
2021*

A relationship converted to numbers. These numbers affected the visual aspects of this installation through color code, size, and quantity



«You can make it rain in a room»

MFA project 2022

This conception issues from my last car trip with my father that came to be foundation for this research. It occurred from a dialog about modern art: what it represents, how I relate to it, my future in this broad direction etc. I explained the reason behind mixed media installation being my preferred method for creating a composition.

- "It's a freedom" I told him. "I do not have to relate to a predetermined frame or materials but rather work with an entire room and use it as a three-dimensional frame. I can create larger expressions where a painting or a sculpture act as a part of something larger, a character in the composition rather than a piece by itself. I aim to create scenarios that can be experienced with the whole body; for the viewer to have the ability to physically enter my composition. Does it make sense?"
- "I think I understand" he answered. "You could for instance make it rain in a room."
- "Yes! Good example" I answered.

Later that year my father's passing evoked the memory of this conversation, and I became determined, obligated even, to make it rain in a room. Our dialog and the struggle from loss evoked an interest in exploring my experiences further. The composition is a visual impression on grief as well as a symbolic gesture to allow my father's presence at the graduation show, which was originally intended. The installation is a collaboration with, as well as a portraying of him. The aim is to create an elusive scene with the underlying subject of non-existence and a presence through absence of physicality.

The inspiration for my father's notion and the aesthetics of the planned outcome descends from Andrej Tarkovskys picture "Stalker" (1979). Within this installation I also create a room at the heart of a forbidden area, a room that symbolically will make my deepest wish (presence of my father) come true. A room that cries/rains in despair. I become a self-announced Stalker inviting my audience to a private, forbidden, confusing scenery. Aiming to connect the viewer with their suffering of deepest desires.



Figure 11: Aesthetic foundation [Background]



Figure 12: Still image from "Stalker" by Andrei Tarkovsky, taken from Close-Up Film Centre May 2021

Conclusion

In a review on Joan Didion's memoir "Blue nights" writer Robert Kusek observes an increased popularity in grief memoirs in the last couple of decades. The reason for this I'm yet to explore. However, I'm approaching presented project with the aim of joining this category of authors/artists. It's my personal take on (auto)thanatography, exploring grief as a process and a condition presented through visual and text-based conclusions. A reflective journey through the collapse of illusions and sublimation of these. My interpretation of the grieving landscape based on personal and universal experiences all entering the same stage. An Epic Theatre¹² about our inverse sense of suffer and love.

The research is in an introduction stage, currently with self-based reflections at its core, the aim is to expand towards collective vulnerability and communal experience of loss. With a starting point in dialogs, exploration of personal historical archive and further research on themes such as (auto)thanatography, epic theatre, collapse of illusion, vortex effect etc.

¹² Epic Theatre is a phenomenon that occurred in the German theatre after World War. A new way of acting where the actor detach himself from the portrayed character to portrait social processes as seen in their casualty, a theatre for scientific age. Instead of creating an illusion in order to amuse the audience Epic Theatre doesn't in any way aim to create an enjoyable experience for spectator. Rather it is a recreation of the exact happening in its truest unbiased actuality. "... dispose of any special powers of suggestion", the actor "... must not 'cast a spell' over anyone". (Brecht, 1950, pp. 58-59)



“One night in times long since vanished, man awoke and saw himself. He saw that he was naked under the cosmos, homeless in his own body. Everything opened up before his searching thoughts, wonder upon wonder, terror upon terror, all blossomed in his mind.

Then woman awoke, too, and said that it was time to go out and kill something. And man took up his bow, fruit of the union between the soul and the hand and went out under the stars. But when the animals came to their waterhole, where he out of habit waited for them, he no longer knew the spring of the tiger in his blood, but a great psalm to the brotherhood of suffering shared by all that lives.

That day he came home with empty hands, and when they found him again by the rising of the new moon, he sat dead by the waterhole.”

Zapffe (1933)

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