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Chapter 12

'Just Like the Films': *Lazarus* and Cinematic Melancholia

Denis Flannery

A. A pathological state of despondency; severe depression; (now, *Medicine*) severe endogenous depression, with loss of interest and pleasure in normal activities, disturbance of sleep and appetite, feelings of worthlessness and guilt, and thoughts of death or suicide.

B. In extended use: gloominess, a theatrical or aesthetic indulgence in reflective or maudlin emotion.

Definition of 'Melancholia', *OED Online*¹

If my love song

Could fly over mountains

Could laugh at the ocean

Just like the films

David Bowie and Enda Walsh, 'Absolute Beginners' (*Lazarus* version)²

Introduction

Lazarus (2015) depends for its existence on a melancholic relationship to cinema. David Bowie and Enda Walsh's tightly written, emotionally driven and coarsely energizing musical dream play, has an attachment to being 'just like the films', and to being like one particular film, Nicholas Roeg's 1976 *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, in a way for which the word 'melancholic' feels right, at least to me. I use the phrase 'feels right' because words like 'melancholic', 'melancholy' and 'melancholia' do not appear in Bowie and Walsh's text. Yet one viewing of the show, one reading of its published text or a little time spent listening to its original cast recording would demonstrate how it traffics in what the OED definition of melancholia terms 'pathological states of despondency'.³ The dictionary provides a second definition of melancholia as a form of theatrical or aesthetic indulgence in reflective or maudlin emotion, also at work in *Lazarus*. On many levels, I will be arguing that cinema enables many of *Lazarus*'s melancholic impacts; how it does so and what the play might help us to value in melancholia are my preoccupations in this chapter.

I pursue these preoccupations with my eye on the text of Bowie and Walsh's play, on my memories of having seen it many times and on the particularities of both Roeg's film and the 1963 novel which inspired it. It may seem odd that a book devoted to Bowie as a film performer ends with a consideration of a play and one, furthermore, in which Bowie did not appear. But *Lazarus* is, as I have claimed, passionately attached to the film of *The Man Who Fell to Earth*. *Lazarus* also depends for its theatrical force on the interaction between the moving bodies of live performers with pre-recorded, moving images. Whatever theatrical space might hold a performance of this play is required take on some of the basic features of cinema. Revisiting the plot of Roeg's film (in which Bowie the

singer appeared but did not sing), *Lazarus* is full of Bowie songs which, though not actually sung by him, inevitably invoke recollections of his force as a singer and performer. In the wake of his death, just over month after the play premiered, these recollections, for many people, took on haunted and melancholic aspects.

I also write as a literary scholar formed by very traditional critical protocols (particularly close reading), and as someone whose writing, especially in more recent years, has been impassioned and broadened by encounters with both critical theory (particularly queer theory and work on temporality) and with contemporary European theatre. Close reading has also been central to the operations of queer theory and, as I've argued elsewhere, the ethos and practice of Ivo van Hove (who directed the first production of *Lazarus*) is driven by the kinds of attentive revisitations of texts without which close reading cannot operate.⁴

Reading and remembering *Lazarus*, I draw on Judith Butler's re-reading of Sigmund Freud's 1917 writing on melancholia, both at the significant moment when, in 1990, she brought Freudian melancholia into the realms of queer theory and in her more recent work. I also draw on writers whose work considers the relationship between melancholia, representation, affect and temporality as it is manifest in Shakespeare and the Renaissance (Drew Daniel and Lee Edelman), in the odes of John Keats (Anahid Neressian) and as it is re-valued in Henry James's writing on history (David McWhirter).

Further, 'Cinema and its Ghosts', an interview with Jacques Derrida, emphasizes two aspects of cinema which are vitally important to *Lazarus*. The first is what he calls 'the thoroughly spectral structure of the cinematic image'.⁵ To experience cinematic

melancholia is to experience a mournful, ambivalent and haunted attachment to a cultural form constituted by spectral images that are caught between life and death – to be haunted by a haunting form. The second aspect relates to a word ‘free’ that, as I show, is repeated in *Lazarus*. Derrida makes clear in this interview that for his younger self, cinema (especially in its American manifestations) came to embody what he calls a ‘sensual, free expedition.’⁶ In being attached to cinema, a cultural form that necessarily inhabits a state between life and death, *Lazarus* is also attached to a cultural form that (for the young Derrida) embodied the state of being ‘free’ in which the play invests so much.

Lazarus was first performed at the New York Theatre Workshop in December 2015. ‘Inspired by *The Man Who Fell to Earth* by Walter Tevis’ are words we read on the published play’s front cover.⁷ These words give no emphasis to the fact that Tevis’s 1963 science-fiction novel had been made into a film in which Bowie had played the protagonist Thomas Jerome Newton, a humanoid alien who comes to earth to obtain water for his dying planet. His plans to enable his home world’s salvation by building his own space mission are destroyed by politics, love and alcohol. The film of *The Man Who Fell to Earth* is broadly faithful to the novel’s plot but is much more fragmented; its editing and visual style(s) are dazzling. For Susan Compo, Tevis’s novel is written in ‘a hospitable, intimate style that ... comforts the reader’; Roeg’s film is much more stylish, image-driven and disorientating.⁸ Although tightly plotted, its sense of causality is rarely rational and hardly ever linear – *Lazarus* echoes all this.

The front-cover blurb of the play’s published text announces that it is inspired by a novel and not by a film. On the back cover, we encounter a slightly different claim: *Lazarus*, we are now told, is ‘inspired by the book by Walter Tevis *and its cult film*

adaptation starring David Bowie' (my emphasis).⁹ The blurb goes on: '*Lazarus* brings the story of Thomas Newton to its devastating conclusion.'¹⁰ That promise of a 'devastating conclusion' signals that, rather than being an adaptation of Roeg's film or inspired by Tevis's novel, *Lazarus* is more accurately viewed as a kind of sequel. But to what? To Tevis's novel? I prefer to imagine *Lazarus* as a stage adaptation (with music by Bowie) of the screenplay for that film's imaginary sequel, an adaptation whose staging, as specified in Bowie and Walsh's text, requires that theatre take on the sensory dimensions of going to – being in – the cinema.

While *Lazarus* is marked by all the promises, dangers, embarrassments (and melancholia) of sequels, it is also doing something disruptive and peculiar to the promises of repetition, return and variation that inhere in the sequel as a phenomenon. A term that might better capture its relationship to its originating material is the French word *survie*, defined as the noun 'survival'.¹¹ Kristin Ross, though, defines *survie* as:

A kind of afterlife that does not exactly *come after* but in my view is part and parcel of the event itself ... a life beyond life. Not the memory of the event or its legacy, although some form of these are surely already in the making, but its *prolongation*, every bit as vital as the initial acts of insurrection in the streets of the city. It is a continuation of the combat by other means ... Actions produce dreams and ideas, and not the reverse.¹²

The 'initial acts of insurrection in the streets of the city' to which Ross refers are the early moments of the 1871 Paris Commune, a context which is, I admit, quite remote from that of *Lazarus*. There is a world of difference between, on the one hand, an 1871 mass,

insurrectionary reordering of the city of Paris and, on the other, a 2015 late-career musical play co-written by a rock icon and an Irish playwright. But Ross's *survie* provides a vocabulary that helps me better grasp *Lazarus*'s relationship to its originating 'actions' (the writing and making of *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, the novel and the film). Read with Ross's formulation, *Lazarus* is best understood not as a sequel, nor as part of a legacy, but as part and parcel of those events – it shares their initial vitality. In this context it is telling that Newton's salvational plans in both Tevis's novel and Roeg's film are themselves focused on enabling the survival of his dying home planet.

Tevis's novel is itself saturated in the cinema. Throughout, its narrator continually reminds us of the role that films had in providing Newton with a blueprint for the humanity among whom he was obliged to live. Even in the book's final pages, Newton, blinded and drunk in New York, asks Nathan Bryce, his former employee (and betrayer) if he remembers 'a motion picture, shown on television, called *A Letter to Three Wives*?' Bryce replies that he doesn't, and Newton says 'Well, I learned to write English longhand from a photograph of that letter, twenty years ago.'¹³ Newton says this having given Bryce, quite literally, a blank cheque – one that he signs to the tune of one million dollars.

In Tevis's novel, Newton's self-making emerges from his relationship to films. Newton's lack of self-regard in the passage I quoted earlier – his drinking, his readiness to give the man who has betrayed him a blank cheque – is to be maintained in the opening minutes of *Lazarus*. 'But this isn't living for a man like you,' Michael says to him early in the play, 'eating Lucky Charms, living on gin and fucking Twinkies.'¹⁴ In saying this, Michael begins *Lazarus*'s project of ousting Newton from his melancholia. The passage in Tevis's novel makes clear, however, that Newton's distanced contact with cinema (in

the form of 1949's *A Letter to Three Wives* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz)) has given him the representational skills – notably the capacity to write longhand in English – that have enabled the partial success of his mission; yet those same skills are also part of his failure. On a very basic level, cinema has enabled Newton's melancholic lack of self-regard, but not just melancholia represented in fiction that was later to be adapted into cinema. This is melancholia for which cinema has provided the basic building blocks – Roeg's 1976 adaptation kept this alive. 'I loved the fact,' Paul Mayersberg, the film's screenwriter, said in an interview, 'that he [Newton] was getting his stuff from mostly old movies, great classic movies.'¹⁵

Like a theatre actor, Bowie's Newton was costumed, had learnt his lines, was uneven, alive and obliged to respond to the particular conditions of the place and time of his performance. Part of the film's (and the novel's) suspense was derived from wondering if or when the performance (or Newton) could survive. So, the theatre was built into the DNA of the novel and the film, first on the level of plot; everything Newton does before he is exposed and captured (this is true of both the novel and the film) is theatre. Casting Bowie, whose contribution to rock 'n' roll had been a massive injection of the theatrical – one that was spectacularly critical of what Philip Auslander calls rock 'n' roll's 'ideology of authenticity' – highlighted the fundamental theatricality of Tevis's novel, whose narrator at one point compares Newton to 'an ageing Hamlet'.¹⁶ Hence a theatrical outcome for *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, an outcome like *Lazarus*, can be seen as a *survie* of both the novel's and the film's action, a continuation by other means.

Finally, there is the 'place' of Bowie's music and musicianship in the film. There are two scenes where Bowie's status as a singer is referenced or invoked: The first is when,

as Newton, he tries – and fails – to sing along in a church's congregation with 'Jerusalem'. The second is when, towards the film's end, a slow panning shot inside a record shop casually takes in an advertising display for *Young Americans* (1975), his then most-recent album. Again, the making of a piece which prolongs the narrative of *The Man Who Fell to Earth* on stage and does so with Bowie's music can be seen as a *survie* in Ross's sense: not a legacy, not an add-on, but a prolongation, a continuation of its action by other means.

Thinking about *Lazarus* in terms of *survie* also enables me to understand levels on which it does not quite 'add up' as a sequel to either Tevis's novel or Roeg's film. First, Newton, at the end of both the novel and the film, has been blinded; Bowie and Walsh's Newton can see. In both the novel and film of *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, Newton, like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939, Victor Fleming), has three 'helpers': his lawyer Oliver Farnsworth; a research scientist called Nathan Bryce; and a woman whose name is Betty-Jo in the novel (and Mary-Lou, played by Candy Clark, in the film). In *Lazarus*, Newton also has three 'helpers': the first is Michael, a new character who, the play implies, had worked in some capacity with Newton and who is clearly in love with him; the second is Girl, a character referred to in the published text's blurb as a 'lost soul'¹⁷; and finally, there is Elly, his assistant, who, like Michael, is in love with Newton and fixated on his love of Mary-Lou.

There are also murderous forces at work in the film, a rather comically designated FBI, two of whose agents (in the film, though not in the novel) murder Farnsworth. A major character in the play is a mass murderer named Valentine; murder is also a key part of the play's narrative prehistory. In the play's backstory Girl has been murdered and.

caught between life and death (a ghost of a certain kind), she gets 'stuck' in Newton's New York apartment. Girl has physical sensations (she doesn't like the way Newton's apartment smells, she feels pain) and her first (prophetic) words in the show are 'A little piece of you/The little piece in me/Will die,' the first lines of 'This is Not America', one of the two songs in *Lazarus* which Bowie originally wrote and performed for film soundtracks.¹⁸

Besides a ghostly young girl who mysteriously appears singing a Bowie-soundtrack song, the figure of Mary-Lou is another, even more obvious mode in which the play enacts its cinematic melancholia. Despite its avowed attachment to Tevis's novel, *Lazarus* hangs onto the film's name for this character, dispensing with her name in the novel. Housekeeper, lover, mother and in part betrayer, Mary-Lou is not, strictly speaking, a character in the play; she is, though, an often-mentioned force and object of obsession for Newton and for others. In different ways, both Elly and Girl 'become' her. 'I can feel Mary-Lou walk over and claim me as hers', Elly says, 'I'm dressing in her clothes and she's taking my voice.'¹⁹ As a form of what she calls 'therapy' for Newton, Girl stages a little play based on his 'last conversation with Mary-Lou'.²⁰ This play-within-a-play repeats a scene in the film, though not one that occurs in the novel. The very first piece of music in *Lazarus* is not a song by Bowie but a recording of Ricky Nelson's 'Hello Mary-Lou (Goodbye Heart)', a song which had, towards the end of the film, accompanied a violent sex scene between Bowie's Newton and Mary-Lou ().²¹ This same song provides the soundtrack to Girl's would-be therapeutic play.

Established as a sonic and musical force, Mary-Lou is also established, just before 'Lazarus', the play's first Bowie song, as a visual force. Michael asks Newton, 'Do you

never see her? Do you ever see Mary-Lou?,’ to which the latter replies, ‘Only in my head.’²² Moving images of her are later specified in the stage directions for the singing of ‘Where Are We Now?’: ‘Faint images appear on the walls around Newton – of a repeated image of Mary-Lou slowly turning and looking towards him.’²³ Many accounts of melancholia emphasize its status as a mournful, awkward and partly disavowed attachment to someone or something that is gone. Reading *Lazarus* or seeing it onstage involves being a witness to such an attachment (Newton’s love for Mary-Lou), but in a theatrical form that derives power from its attachment to the cinematic layers of the play’s source material and, more simply, to moving images themselves.

Melancholia

The intensity with which cinema is knotted into melancholia’s existence across Tevis’s novel, Roeg’s film and, inevitably, *Lazarus*, is at odds with a major strand of the play, which is to oust Newton from his melancholia. The strand is first embodied by Michael who asks Newton if he can ‘remember the person’ he once was. The following dialogue ensues:

NEWTON. That was before.

MICHAEL. And it’s gone. All of it?

NEWTON. Of course it’s gone.

MICHAEL. But this isn’t living for a man like you – eating Lucky Charms, living on gin and fucking Twinkies...

NEWTON. There’s nothing of the past. This is it now. ²⁴

In this exchange, it would appear that Newton is claiming that he has gone from melancholia to mourning; his past is, he claims, 'gone', though his drinking would suggest otherwise. Michael then asks Newton if he ever sees Mary-Lou; Newton's response – 'only in my head' – indicates that what we are witnessing is a scene of melancholy attachment. No sooner has Newton uttered these words than the music to 'Lazarus' – the play's first Bowie song – begins. Girl's agenda with Newton works in a similar way: 'You're stuck here heartbroken over Mary-Lou,' she counsels him. 'You forget about her and you can start making something else.'²⁵

I have used the word 'melancholia' so far rather hazily, relying on the definitions from the OED online that constitutes my first epigraph. For Freud, writing in 1917, we enter into melancholic states in response to the 'loss of a beloved person, or an abstraction taking the place of the person, such as one's fatherland, freedom, an ideal, and so on'.²⁶ In the moments I have quoted, Newton would be a textbook instance of the state Freud outlines.

For Freud, melancholia is distinguished by 'a profoundly painful depression, a loss of interest in the outside world, the loss of the ability to love, inhibition of any kind of performance and a reduction in the sense of self'.²⁷ He also claims that it has 'three preconditions ... the loss of the object, ambivalence and the regression of libido into the ego'.²⁸ Loss, inhibition, reduction, regression – melancholia is, at first look, a state of varied depletion. All these features are present in the plot of *Lazarus*: Newton has lost not just a 'fatherland', but a whole planet, and persons in abundance. Lost, too, is the goal of his mission to save his home planet.

Freud also observed a manic strand in melancholia, one that he connects with the ‘suspension, accomplished by toxins, of the expenditure of repression’ brought about by drinking alcohol – something that is very pertinent to *Lazarus*.²⁹ Writing recently of the relationship between melancholia and mania, Butler has considered melancholia's manic dimensions in more political terms, observing that mania’s “unrealism” ... suggests a refusal to accept the status quo, and it draws upon, and intensifies, a desire to live on the part of one who is battling against forms of heightened self-beratement’.³⁰ Several songs and moments in *Lazarus* – especially 'Killing a Little Time', one of its 'new' songs – forcefully embody this manic dimension; such mania both emerges from and merges with sorrow. Anahid Neressian has recently written that, for Freud, ‘the melancholic’s “complaints are really ‘plaints’ in the old sense of the word” – a musical lamentation or beating of the breast’.³¹ Many of *Lazarus*’s songs, from ‘Life on Mars?’ to ‘Where Are We Now?’, were not only plaintive in their original forms but have, in the context of the play, their plaintive dimensions highlighted.

For Freud, melancholia is both incomplete and mobile. In mourning, one eventually, slowly overcomes the loss of the loved one; in melancholia, that loss is internalized and mourning feels eternal – any sense of an ending is deferred. Freud notes that even during the days when one is stuck in melancholia, the condition is regularly alleviated in the evening.³² So, however wedded to depletion melancholia might be, it holds out, however grimly, a certain potential for completion, a potential perhaps signalled by its capacity to change with the day. The work of mourning, Freud claims, is completed when ‘the ego is left free and uninhibited once again’ after an experience of loss.³³ ‘This way or no way, you’ll know, I’ll be free,’ Newton sings at the outset of *Lazarus*; ‘We’re free now,’ both

Newton and Girl sing in a rewritten version of 'Heroes' at the show's very end.³⁴ The play enacts exactly such a process for Newton; it also enacts a resistance to that process.

For Freud, as we've seen, melancholia can occur in response to the loss of 'a beloved person or an abstraction taking the place of the person'.³⁵ More recently, Butler has argued that masculinity can melancholically incorporate the femininity from which its ways are barred and that heterosexuality can yearn for homosexual possibility. 'In the case of a prohibited homosexual union,' Butler writes, 'it is clear that both the desire and the object require renunciation and so become subject to the internalizing strategies of melancholia.'³⁶

Both melancholia's mania and its fondness for lament are operative in *Lazarus* and we can also see different modes of desire yearning for their purported opposites. It is easy to claim that Elly becomes fixated on Newton but it is more accurate to say that she is fixated on his love for Mary-Lou, and therefore on Mary-Lou herself. 'What's it like,' she asks Newton, 'to feel that much love for someone and to be loved back?'³⁷ Since Mary-Lou is only present in the play as a name or a moving image, Elly's erotic melancholia is as queer as it is cinematically tinged.

Earlier, I claimed that the character of Michael is 'clearly in love' with Newton. Michael doesn't last long; he is the first victim of the killer Valentine. Prior to Michael's offstage murder, Valentine inveigles his way into his apartment, claiming to be an old friend from his hometown. 'I stood by you,' Valentine further claims, 'when you told your family you were a gay man.' 'I'm fucking straight!' Michael fiercely replies.³⁸ But the situation between the two men – which is to result in Michael's murder – becomes

progressively sheltering and flirtatious. However offstage that murder might be, its aftermath is the spectacular performance of Bowie's 2013 song 'Love Is Lost'. During this song, Newton is onstage, witnessing the murder's aftermath, as are Valentine and the dead Michael who, nonetheless, 'suddenly gets up – his shirt bloody – and leaves the apartment'.³⁹ Onstage, too, are Elly and Zach and the three ghostly Teenage Girls who (like a Greek chorus or the witches in *Macbeth*) observe, comment on and sometimes partake in *Lazarus*'s action. There is an abrupt transition from Elly's question 'what's it like to feel that much love?' to the sight of Valentine putting on the jacket of the dead Michael, the 'gay man' he has just murdered as this song begins. During this performance the man who is to be Valentine's second victim, the lovestruck (and more emphatically 'straight') Ben, is introduced and there are more moving 'images from inside a packed bar ... images of people kissing' that 'appear on the walls'.⁴⁰ Again, there is a combination of the cinematic and the sexual with different erotic and gendered categories in ambivalent relations with each other. For Butler, forms of desire can almost anthropomorphically yearn for and incorporate each other; such yearning and incorporation are violently present throughout *Lazarus* and they are always associated with moving images.

So far, I have made melancholia sound like a mostly lonely affair. In his work on affect and epistemology in (and after) the English renaissance, Drew Daniel has encouraged a move away from understanding melancholia as a 'private trait', preferring to see it as 'a kind of dynamic relationship of assemblage which solicits interpretation, ascription, and diagnosis in exchange for the teasing revelation of a rhetorically charged interior'.⁴¹ Anything that solicits interpretation must be aware of some actual or potential individuals or groups who can do the interpreting. The teasing promise that, at some point, a 'rhetorically charged interior' will be revealed presupposes, again, the existence

of some actual or potential individuals or groups on whom such a revelation can have an impact. However withdrawn he may be from the world, Newton is from the outset an alluring magnet; others interpret him, ascribe motives to him and diagnose him. The play begins in the midst of an uninvited visit from Michael. Zach, Elly's husband, is fascinated by what she has to tell him about her employer and more than ready to interpret and diagnose him. 'Cut down ... buried in the ground' and 'not properly dead', though she may be, Girl nonetheless claims that, even in her partially post-mortem state, she was sufficiently magnetized by the sight of Newton at his window to wish to enter his apartment.⁴²

Witnessing and perceiving together in bodily proximity are central, of course, to theatre, and it is famously through writing for the theatre that melancholia has made its presences felt over the centuries. Central to Daniel's arguments about melancholy assemblages is a reading of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, a line from which turns up in *Lazarus*. 'In that sleep of death – what dreams may come,' Newton says, after he has fallen on the ground and, as the stage directions specify, 'the music to "This is Not America" begins'.⁴³ Like Hamlet's father, as described by Maud Ellman, Girl has been murdered in the play's prehistory. The subsequent murders in *Lazarus* – of Michael, then of Ben and then of Girl again – are re-enactments of that first 'unwitnessed and unverifiable' killing in the same way that both staged and 'real' murders in Shakespeare's play can be read as re-enactments of the murder of Hamlet senior.⁴⁴ 'Good night, sweet prince/And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest' are famously the last lines spoken by Horatio to Denmark's melancholy, dead prince; the final stage direction in *Lazarus* simply reads 'Newton finds rest.'⁴⁵ As Lee Edelman has pointed out, there is a play in *Hamlet* on the word 'rest', a word readable as 'repose' but also readable as that which

remains ('life's restless remnant' as Edelman puts it, responding to Hamlet's utterance 'the rest is silence').⁴⁶ Allusively and in terms of its structure, *Lazarus* reaches back into the Shakespearean strand of melancholia's history. Newton can be said to have found 'rest', indicating that he has been ousted from his melancholia. Or Newton can be said to have found 'the rest', that which (restlessly) remains, that which can be considered under the heading of *survie*.

Freud assumed that the objects grieved for are persons or abstractions. Butler, as we've seen, went on to broaden this assumption, claiming that melancholia's objects can be modes of gendered being and modes of desire, existing in an almost anthropomorphic relationship to each other.⁴⁷ If heterosexuality can have a melancholic relationship to its foreclosed homosexual possibilities, then there is no reason why different representational modes – theatre and cinema, say – cannot have similarly melancholic, yearning, foreclosed relationships to each other. If, to draw on the title of Paul Young's book, the cinema can dream its rivals, then the theatre, at least in the case of *Lazarus*, can also yearn for (and imitate) the cinema.⁴⁸ This yearning process slows down and questions any movement to be free from melancholia. Playing the role of Thomas Newton in *Lazarus* requires an actor to work almost as a kind of living screen (or projector), to be susceptible to things that can come to him 'in these pictures', as he puts it.⁴⁹

In his recent work on melancholia and history in the writing of Henry James, David McWhirter has claimed that melancholia is 'an affective structure especially appropriate to, necessary and even requisite for, modern lives', given that modernity (and its aftermaths) have brutally elevated 'moving on' and its attendant obliterations to something like an ethical duty.⁵⁰ Both Michael and Girl articulate this kind of wish to

move on. There is a tension, though, in *Lazarus* between melancholy as a pathology – something to be moved through – and melancholy as resource – something to be cherished. This dynamic is particularly evident in the play’s relationship to cinema, to being ‘just like the films’.

‘Just like the films’

Lazarus is a play studded with Bowie’s songs (played, with one exception, by an onstage band and sung by members of the cast), but one for which his physical and visual presence was not a requirement. In the original production, directed by Ivo van Hove, and performed (albeit with differing personnel) in New York, London and Amsterdam, Bowie’s visual presence was manifest through a stack of albums, seven-inch singles and CD covers, visible behind and around a record deck on the stage-left floor. These records included *Aladdin Sane*, *Scary Monsters (and Super Creeps)* and *Diamond Dogs*. The stunning video work for this production also included blink-and-you’ll-miss-them fragments of images of Bowie in performance, most notably from the videos of ‘Boys Keep Swinging’ and ‘Little Wonder’. These visual features were, however, not a requirement of Bowie and Walsh’s text. Other productions no doubt have, and no doubt will, do things differently. In a sense, nothing could have been more ‘Bowie’ than this playing with absence given that, throughout his career, Bowie’s work had trafficked in absence, whether sudden or slowly approaching, intimate or apocalyptic.⁵¹

Of the show’s eighteen Bowie songs, four were new compositions.⁵² The advance publicity for *Lazarus* tended to distinguish between these four new songs and well-known ‘classics’ such as ‘Life on Mars?’, ‘Changes’ and ‘“Heroes”’. The inclusion of two songs – ‘This is Not America’, written for John Schlesinger’s 1985 film *The Falcon and the*

Snowman, and ‘Absolute Beginners’, written for Julian Temple's 1986 film of that name – also reminds its audience that writing music for films was a key part of Bowie’s artistic endeavours. Of course, one of the reasons Bowie found himself being commissioned to write songs for films was that a (frequently melancholy) relationship to cinema had featured in his songwriting. There is, as Nigel Smith has pointed out, a film at the heart of ‘Life of Mars?’⁵³

I derive the title of this essay – and its second epigraph – from the second of these film-songs. In ‘Absolute Beginners’, the speaker voices a yearning wish that his song could have magical, personified and corporeal powers: that it could fly or laugh. The banal phrase ‘just like the films’ sets out to encapsulate this transcendental push of desire. The lyrics of the *Lazarus* ‘Absolute Beginners’ are also rewritten. The first line I quote in my epigraph reads ‘If my love song’; the original goes ‘If our love song.’ The move away from the original contains and enacts senses of separation and loss which are foundational to Bowie and Walsh's play. The appeal of the phrase ‘just like the films’ lies partly in its openness to failure; the agenda set is so huge, the speaker’s sense of what, precisely, constitutes ‘the films’ is so romantically, delightfully imprecise. This simile resembles the lines ‘You know, I’ll be free/just like that bluebird’ in ‘Lazarus’ (the opening song in the play) or the lines ‘I, I wish you could swim/Like the dolphins/like dolphins can swim’ in 1977’s ‘Heroes’ (a rewritten and very melancholically rearranged version of which ends it).⁵⁴ In all three instances, there is a sense of possibility (flying, laughing, being free, swimming) attached to precisely worded though vaguely designated entities: ‘the films’, ‘that bluebird’, ‘the dolphins.’ In all three instances, the line between triumph and failure is blurred; the aesthetic and emotional force of these songs – and indeed of *Lazarus* – is

dependent on that blurring. The wish for freedom and transcendence in all three songs is matched by countervailing senses of stasis and stuckness.

‘Absolute Beginners’ is the ninth of the eighteen Bowie songs that form, in Susan Bennett’s words, the play’s ‘interpretive spine’ and it is important and exceptional in many ways.⁵⁵ In this musical, songs tend to interrupt or play over dialogue. ‘You hear that!?’ Newton asks the character of Girl early on, just as ‘The Man Who Sold the World’ (sung by Michael in, ostensibly, another space and time) begins. ‘What?’ Girl replies, to which Newton responds, ‘Music.’⁵⁶ Rather differently, the *Lazarus* ‘Absolute Beginners’ starts with Newton singing a cappella, to himself, the lines ‘I’ve nothing much to offer/There’s nothing much to take’. A stage direction which reads ‘the music to “Absolute Beginners” is heard’ follows.⁵⁷ These lines conform rather strictly to the definition of melancholia outlined in my essay’s first epigraph, embodying ‘despondency, depression, feelings of worthlessness and guilt’. They can, especially in the context of this scene, be described as ‘a theatrical or aesthetic indulgence in reflective or maudlin emotion’⁵⁸. These lines also correspond to Freud’s description of melancholia as dejection, cessation of interest and inhibition of activity; singing them, Newton invites interpretation, ascription, even diagnosis.

Whether, in musical theatre, songs exist to amplify and throw light on narrative or whether the narrative aspects of musical exist to create pretexts for the performance of its songs is a question that, especially in the context of *Lazarus*, is worth considering. Traditionally, one reason (or pretext) for the very existence of songs in musical plays is that the former set out to articulate aspects of the characters’ interiority that are otherwise unavailable to the audience. A stage direction in Conor McPherson’s Bob Dylan-fuelled

musical, *Girl from the North Country* (2017), occurring just as two of that play's characters are about to sing 'I Want You', reads: 'We see what their souls are doing despite everything that's just been said.'⁵⁹

In his Preface to *Lazarus's* published text, Walsh emphasizes how the show's songs enable a process for the characters of 'accessing their souls.'⁶⁰ This is true of many songs in the show, both new and 'classic': it's true of the title song; it's true of 'The Man Who Sold the World' (which becomes a love-song from Michael to Newton); and of 'Changes', as sung by Elly. These moments wherein the audience and/or the characters can 'access their souls' are pauses in the action or they tend to throw new interpretive and emotional light on action that has already taken place. D. A. Miller caustically refers to this as the 'dramatic model' of Broadway musical describing it as the 'narrative naturalism from whose tedium and tyranny [the Broadway musical's] real merit was to keep alive ... the prospect of a liberation.'⁶¹ *Lazarus* flirts with narrative naturalism but escapes its tyranny through a ritualistic narrative (and musical) fury that is a characteristic of much of Walsh's writing, most notably *The Walworth Farce* (2006).

'Absolute Beginners' functions as both song *and* narrative. Neither a solo performance nor an articulation of what the characters' souls are doing (which would entail in both cases a pause in the action), it constitutes a populous, dramatic moment of narrative force, alteration and separation. It is sung first by Newton on his own, then in a duet by Newton and by Elly, his assistant. Her participation in the song is motivated by her love for Newton and her fixation on his own melancholic attachment to the departed Mary-Lou. Part of the song's chorus is sung by one of the play's three ghostly Teenage Girls, all three of whom provide the 'ba-ba-ba ooo' backing vocals.

The text requires the onstage presence of Valentine the murderer, and Girl, the ‘lost soul’ during the singing of ‘Absolute Beginners’. One of the few songs in the play that isn’t an interruption of dialogue – pointing back to the opening (‘Lazarus’) and to the ending (‘’Heroes’’) – ‘Absolute Beginners’ requires the presence and interaction of all of the play’s major characters and it sets them all in fateful directions.

Together Girl and Newton begin to forge their intuitive mutual death pact in which Valentine will play a major part. For Newton, this will enable a resolution that can be figured either as his death, a return home to the stars from where he first came or, at least, some respite from the stuck state of being, in his words, ‘a dying man who can’t die’.⁶² For Girl, this will be a ritual and very problematic re-enactment of her first murder, this time at Newton’s hands. The motivational push is towards a transition into a second ‘proper’ death and an eventual remembering of the name that, all the way through the play, she has been unable to recall.⁶³ There is a parallel here to the strand in the play that is about ousting Newton from his melancholia. This schema’s adherence to a distinction between ‘proper’ and ‘improper’ death is complicated, though, by the fact that no sooner has Girl been killed a second time than she is summoned out of that state by Newton’s pleading.⁶⁴

Newton’s decision to reject the replicating, melancholy love offered to him by Elly is enacted during the singing of ‘Absolute Beginners’: ‘He turns away from her and looks towards the GIRL,’ the stage directions read, and ‘the GIRL turns and looks at NEWTON ... ELLY is devastated by Newton’s rejection of her.’⁶⁵ Repeated moving images of Mary-Lou ‘turning and looking’ at Newton were operative in the singing of ‘Where Are We Now?’, the song just before ‘Absolute Beginners’. As they sing the latter, the actors

are not only singing of being ‘just like the films’ in an aspirational sense. In turning and looking at each other, they are imitating the moving image of Mary-Lou who is herself a key component of the play’s cinematic melancholia. All of this turning, looking, choosing – and devastation – takes place as the song’s chorus – of which the line ‘Just like the films’ is so important a part – is sung.

Repeated twice in the chorus of ‘Absolute Beginners’, this phrase is a link in an image-chain in the play that equates one genre (the pop song) with often-romanticized, symbolic animals (bluebirds and dolphins) and with a drive of transcendental desire. The phrase also makes that genre’s wish to be ‘just like the films’ central to the dream-driven, melancholy subjectivity – one often formed by the force of violence – that much of Bowie’s work (and certainly *Lazarus*) celebrated and enacted. Bowie’s writing of music for a film (in this case *Absolute Beginners*), and a complex and partly disavowed aspiration to being ‘just like the films’, are therefore at this play’s affective, narrative and dramatic heart.

The text of *Lazarus* tersely compels anyone making a production of the play to reckon with the extent to which they are required to turn theatrical space into something like cinema – an auditorium where people look at pre-recorded, moving images projected onto a screen. I’ve already noted the presence of moving images on the walls during the singing of ‘Love Is Lost’ and that moving images of Mary-Lou are a key component of the play’s staging of ‘Where Are We Now?’ During the song ‘Killing a Little Time’, the stage directions require that ‘An image of Newton fills the wall – it thrashes the apartment’.⁶⁶ Just before the character of Ben is murdered by Valentine, ‘the walls fill with images of a raucous night’.⁶⁷ Repeatedly, the text of *Lazarus* requires that the audience’s experience

of the show becomes akin to the experience of watching cinema. All of the images I have mentioned are moving images: the figures in bars enacting their raucousness; Mary-Lou turning and looking at Newton; Newton's image thrashing his own apartment. It is also a requirement of the text that this cinematic aspect oversteps any initial boundaries. Bowie and Walsh's stage directions require that these images 'fill the wall(s)'. If the theatre holds onto the cinema in a melancholic mode, then the cinematic takes advantage of that holding and often threatens to dominate the mode which aspired to contain it.

Deferred Endings

Lazarus opened in New York in December 2015, Bowie died just over one month later and the London performances began in October 2016. For those who were in the audience after Bowie's death, their encounter with the play would have been connected with the loss of 'a beloved person' (to repeat Freud's formulation), a person who had, over decades, come to incarnate a number of complex and emotive abstractions: sexuality, liberty, style, wit, the capacity to change, freedom from rigid categorization and so on.

Comparing the first New York performances with the later London performances, Susan Bennett has written of 'the uncanny resemblance of Michael C. Hall's voice' to Bowie's'. Hall played the role of Newton in both New York and London and his singing of seven of the show's eighteen Bowie songs had, for Bennett, amounted to the channelling of the voice of the recently dead man. In her view, this 'gave the London performance a haunting quality ... sustained and underscored' by what she claims is 'the only significant change made to the production.'⁶⁸ This change consisted in fact that:

At the end of the show a large headshot of Bowie was projected onto the centre-stage screen ... After the curtain call, many spectators wandered down to the front of the house to take selfies and group shots in the company of this last trace of David Bowie, a Lazarus that even the most devoted fans could not raise from the dead.⁶⁹

In New York, I remember, the same screen had remained stolidly blank at the play's end. When, in December 2019, a Dutch-language version of the show – also directed by Ivo van Hove and with the same set, video-work and musical arrangements – opened in Amsterdam, that large final headshot of Bowie also appeared. As they took their selfies and group shots, the audience members Bennett describes were also putting photography to one of its most time-honoured uses: prolonging the fleshly existence of a lost person or ideal – in this case, Bowie.⁷⁰

Like many commentators (myself included) Bennett connects the play's title with the figure of Lazarus, the friend that Christ, as recounted in the Gospel of St. John, brings back from the dead.⁷¹ But the title has other sources: In his preface, Walsh recounts Bowie's early wish that their play feature a woman who 'thought she might be Emma Lazarus ... the American poet whose poem "The New Colossus" is engraved on the base of the statue of Liberty.'⁷² This one woman envisaged by Bowie is, in *Lazarus*, split into two characters: Elly (the first two letters of whose name replicate Emma Lazarus's initials); and Girl. In the published text, Emma Lazarus's sonnet appears in its entirety, one turn of the page after the words 'The End'. Like the post-show photograph of Bowie on the video screen in London and Amsterdam – an image that functioned as a visual postscript – her poem therefore registers as a second ending, keeping ending itself at bay.

'The New Colossus' is a sonnet that is itself split in two. Its first eight lines anthropomorphically describe the statue of Liberty: 'a mighty woman with a torch whose flame/is the imprisoned lightning'. The last six lines are uncannily spoken 'by' this monument as she addresses the old world, or 'ancient lands', famously demanding that they 'give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free'.⁷³ For a reader of Bowie and Walsh's published text, that word 'free', as encountered in the poem, amounts to a repetition of a crucial word that had occurred in the play's opening and closing songs, 'Lazarus' and "'Heroes'".

The presence of Bowie's image on the screen at the end of the London and Amsterdam performances can be considered melancholic because it keeps present the face of the lost, 'beloved person or an abstraction taking the place of the person', even as the possibility of seeing that face in the flesh has gone.⁷⁴ The eight-foot screen had, for the two intense and unbroken hours of the show, fulfilled the role of a cinema screen in the most basic sense: it had been the blank space onto which moving images (what Bennett describes as the show's 'extraordinary and poetic video work') had been projected in a darkened auditorium.⁷⁵ The London audience members grouped around Bowie's photo-image can also be considered as open to 'cinematic' melancholia because of *Lazarus*'s deep affiliation with a particular film (*The Man Who Fell to Earth*). Furthermore, those images had broken their bounds and, often, filled the walls. If, both in the text of *Lazarus* and in its manifestations after Bowie's death, processes of completion, closure and ousting from melancholia are energetically enacted, then they are also resisted. The passage from melancholia to mourning, however theoretically desirable or however convenient for others, clearly came at a cost which *Lazarus* – in itself and in its *survie* – was not prepared to pay.

¹ <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/115994?redirectedFrom=melancholia#eid>. Accessed June 22, 2021.

² David Bowie and Enda Walsh, *Lazarus: A Musical* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2016), p. 36.

³ <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/115994?redirectedFrom=melancholia#eid>. Accessed June 22, 2021.

⁴ For a discussion of the relationship between close reading and Queer Theory, see Elizabeth Freeman, *Times Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. xvi-xvii. See also my 'Ivo van Hove: Celebrity and Reader' in *Contemporary European Theatre Directors*, (Second Edition), edited by Maria Delgado and Dan Reballato (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 275-98, p. 285.

⁵ Jacques Derrida, 'Cinema and Its Ghosts', p. 26.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁷ *Lazarus*, Front matter.

⁸ *Earthbound: David Bowie and The Man Who fell to Earth* (London: Jawbone, 2017), p. 20.

⁹ *Lazarus*, back matter.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191739545.001.0001/b-fr-en-00003-0018037?rskey=zY7sLX&result=1>. Accessed June 23, 2021.

¹² *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune* (London and New York: Verso, 2015), 6-7.

¹³ *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (London: Penguin, 2005), 184.

¹⁴ *Lazarus*, p. 6.

¹⁵ *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (40th Anniversary), Collector's Edition [Blu-ray] [2016]

¹⁶ Auslander, *Performing Glam Rock: Gender and Theatricality in Popular Music* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), pp. 13-14. Tevis, *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, p. 80.

¹⁷ *Lazarus*, back matter.

¹⁸ *Lazarus*, p. 11.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 38

²⁰ Ibid., p. 33.

²¹ Ibid., p. 4.

²² Ibid., p. 6.

²³ Ibid., p. 27.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 6.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 26.

²⁶ Freud, *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*, translated by Shaun Whitside with an Introduction by Maud Ellman (London: Penguin, 2005) p. 203.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 204.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 217

²⁹ Ibid.,p. 214

³⁰ Butler, *The Force of Non-Violence: An Ethico-Political Bind* (London: Verso, 2020), p. 170.

³¹ Neressian, *Keats's Odes: A Lover's Discourse* (Chicago University Press: Chicago and London, 2021), p. 82.

³² Freud, *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*, p. 213.

³³ Ibid. p. 205.

³⁴ *Lazarus*, p. 7, p. 62.

³⁵ *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*, p. 203.

³⁶ Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London, 1999), p. 75.

³⁷ *Lazarus*, p. 20.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 16.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 20.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 20

⁴¹ Daniel, *The Melancholy Assemblage: Affect and Epistemology in the English Renaissance* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 142.

⁴² *Lazarus*, p. 56.

⁴³ Ibid. p.10

⁴⁴ *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*, xiv.

⁴⁵ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 5. 2, ll. 333-34, *Lazarus*, p. 63.

⁴⁶ Edelman, 'Hamlet's Wounded Name' in *Shakespeareer*, edited by Madhavi Menon (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 97. *Hamlet*, 5. 2., l. 331.

⁴⁷ *Gender Trouble*. p. 75

⁴⁸ Young, *The Cinema Dreams its Rivals: Media Fantasy Films from Radio to the Internet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

⁴⁹ *Lazarus*, p. 5.

⁵⁰ The phrase is David McWhirter's, from his 'Feeling Backwards with Henry James: The Melancholy of History', *The Henry James Review*, 41, 1, 2020, 11-14, 9.

⁵¹ On this see my 'Absence, Resistance and Visitable Pasts: David Bowie, Todd Haynes, Henry James,' *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, 31:4, 542-55.

⁵² The four (then) new songs were 'Lazarus', 'No Plan', 'Killing a Little Time' and 'When I Met You'. Bowie's own versions of them were released with the *Lazarus* OCR in 2016 and, separately, as the *No Plan* EP in 2017. The show also features four songs from *The Next Day*, Bowie's 2013 album. These songs are 'Love is Lost', 'Where are We Now?', 'Dirty Boys' and 'Valentine's Day.'

⁵³ ‘Song Lyrics: Any Room at the Feast?’, 58.

⁵⁴ *Lazarus*, p. 7, p. 62.

⁵⁵ Bennett, ‘A Tale of Two Cities: *Lazarus* in New York and London’ in *Ivo van Hove: From Shakespeare to Bowie*, edited by Susan Bennett and Sonia Massai (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), p. 201.

⁵⁶ *Lazarus*, p. 13

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁵⁸ <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/115994?redirectedFrom=melancholia#eid>. Accessed June 22, 2021

⁵⁹ *Girl from the North Country* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2017), p. 48.

⁶⁰ *Lazarus*, p. ix

⁶¹ *Place for Us: Essay on the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 2.

⁶² *Lazarus*, p. 12.

⁶³ ‘I’ve found out my name’s Marley,’ Girl says towards the end – echoing the names of singer Bob Marley (1945-1981) and of Charles Dickens’s Jacob Marley, Scrooge’s dead colleague in *A Christmas Carol* (1843), p. 61.

⁶⁴ I discuss this moment and its aftermath at length in ‘Apostrophe’, *The Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Literature*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.1048>

⁶⁵ *Lazarus*, p. 37.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁶⁸ Bennett, ‘A Tale of Two Cities’, p. 204. There was in fact another significant change. An entire scene, one where Girl’s murderer (played by Alan Cummings) speaks with her from the video screen, was part of the New York production and cut from the London production. But that is a topic for another essay.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

⁷⁰ For Jay Prosser, ‘Photography is a melancholic object a memento mori.’ *Light in the Dark Room: Photography and Loss*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), pp. 1-2.

⁷¹ I make this connection in my 2015 essay 'Why We Should Expect Great Thing from David Bowie's New Musical Play' <https://theconversation.com/why-we-should-expect-great-things-from-david-bowies-new-musical-play-39946>.

⁷² *Lazarus*, p. viii.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 65

⁷⁴ *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*, p. 203.

⁷⁵ Bennett, 'A Tale of Two Cities', p. 201.