

Intermedial Storytelling in Steven Wilson's *Hand. Cannot. Erase.*

Research Conducted by Emma Murdock and Dr. Lori Burns

Abstract

Progressive Rock as a genre has always, since its inception in the late 1960s, been grounded in storytelling. Steven Wilson is highly regarded as a progressive rock artist, and he declares his own motivation to tell stories through music, word, and image. His most recent album, *Hand. Cannot. Erase.* (2015), is a multimedia music project that features music recordings, videos, narrative texts, artwork, photography, historical artifacts and social media. For this multimedia project, Wilson has built a story that features multiple levels of paratextual materials, but the individual media together comprise a hypertext.

A comprehensive understanding of the narrative is achieved through access to all media.

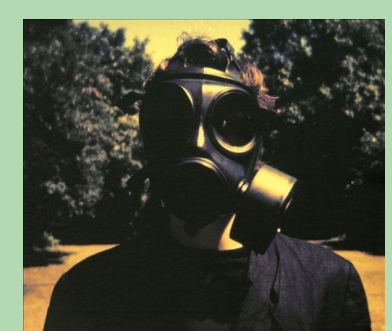
To illustrate this album's multimodality and intermediality, this research examines two significant songs on the album that communicate essential elements of the narrative.

Steven Wilson



UK musician Steven Wilson first gained esteem with his Progressive Rock band Porcupine Tree, formed in 1987. Wilson prefers his music to be classified as "Conceptual Rock," and is known to work with concepts when creating his albums.² Since 2008, Wilson has been releasing albums as a solo artist to much acclaim.

Discography as a solo artist:



Insurgentes (2008)



Grace for Drowning (2011)



The Raven That Refused to Sing (And Other Stories) (2013)



Hand. Cannot. Erase. (2015)



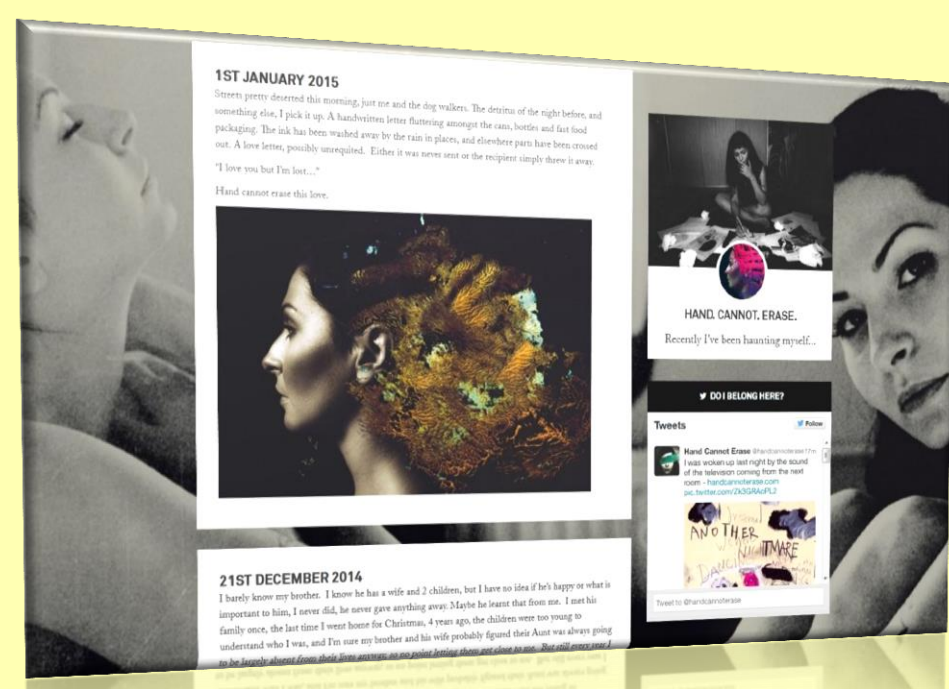
4 ½ (2016)

Media and Materials

CD: *Hand. Cannot. Erase.* (2015)

EP: 4 ½ (2016)

Blog



Music Videos



CD Booklet



Deluxe Edition



Summary of the Narrative of *Hand. Cannot. Erase*

Influenced by documentary, *Dreams of a Life*:

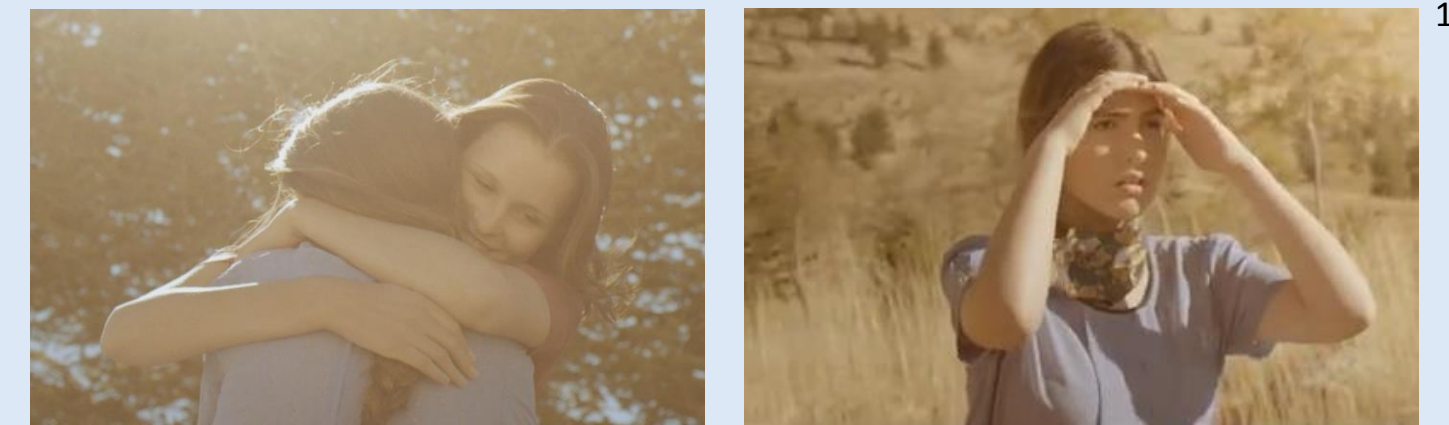
- story of Joyce Carol Vincent, 38-year-old London woman who isolated herself before her mysterious death.
- body remained undiscovered for over 2 years.¹²

Hand. Cannot. Erase.:

- 7 years of narration from a 30-year-old painter known only as "H."
- H. isolates herself and becomes increasingly reluctant to leave her apartment.
- spends her days recalling family memories and regretting past decisions, until her mysterious disappearance.

"Perfect Life"

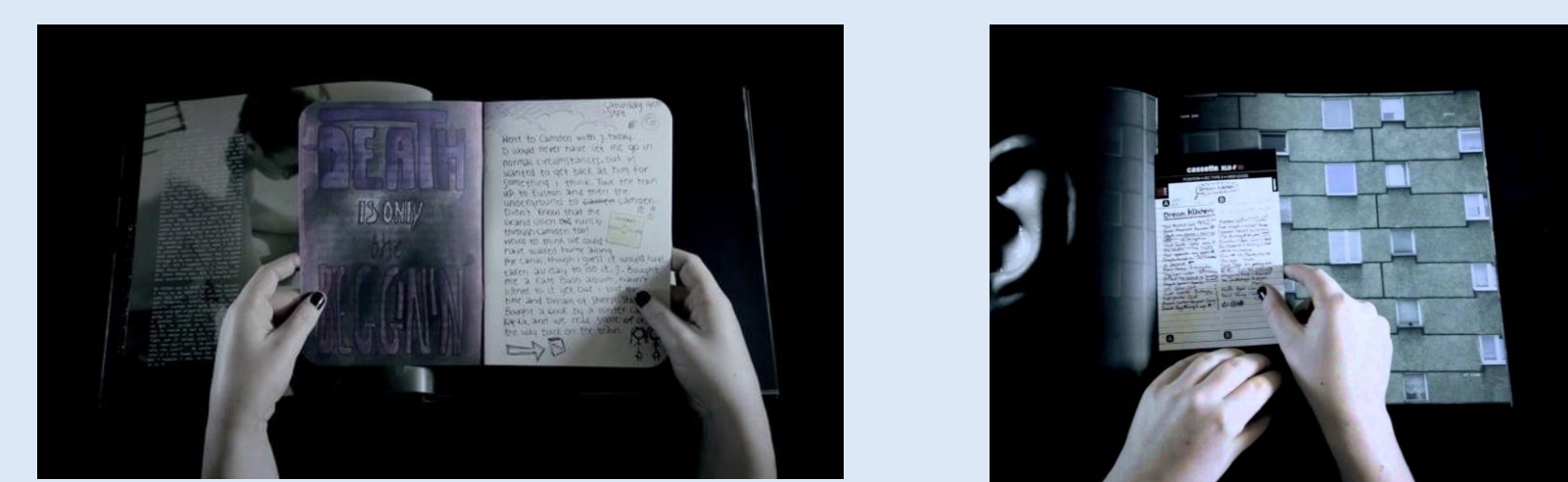
- Lyrics from the point of view of a woman who has lost her sister many years ago.
- The sisters are very close until their sudden separation, which leaves them extremely far apart, at least mentally, from each other.
- Depicts how emotional ties between sisters cannot be broken, even upon separation.



- Video depicts a time when two teenage sisters have the "perfect life" together, until their separation, which leaves the younger sister disoriented and preoccupied by memories of her older sister.
- Narratives of memory and nostalgia prominent in Wilson's earlier videos, such as those for Porcupine Tree songs "Lazarus" and "Time Flies," as well as those for solo songs "The Raven That Refused To Sing" and "Drive Home."



- Blog explains that when H. was 13 her parents adopted a girl for 6 months. Her parents gave the girl back up for adoption after they divorced, devastating H., who was attached to her.
- Regrets about not making an effort to find her sister.
- Sister is only person H. has been close to.
- Still grieves loss of sister, but seems to continue a relationship with her, judging by photo of them together as adults, and H. sometimes addressing blog posts to her.



- Scrapbook includes journal H. wrote at the time she had a sister, as well as mixtape cover.



- Song "My Book of Regrets," relates to blog post titled "My Book of Regrets."
- Cover art reminiscent of story.

Methodology

- To analyze (break down) the contents of the individual media components;
- To understand what narrative work is accomplished by each media element;
- To analyze the intermedial relations;
- To interpret the social and cultural meanings of Steven Wilson's storytelling.

Case studies (selected songs):

Track #4 "Perfect Life":

- What is the narrative work that the track, video, blog, scrapbook and EP accomplish to communicate the story?

Tracks #10-11 "Happy Returns/Ascendant Here On...":

- What is the narrative work that the track, blog and scrapbook accomplish to communicate the story?

"Happy Returns/ Ascendant Here On..."

- H. addresses brother after much time without contact.
- Her life has been troublesome since their last visit.
- H. expresses how fast these years without seeing her brother have gone by.
- Lyrics depict how siblings can fall out of touch to the point of barely knowing each other once they lead lives outside their childhood home.
- These are the final lyrics on the album, and, as this final song has the same title as final words of the blog, corresponds to the end of the character's story.
- Leaves many questions. Although H. is interested in disappearing, "I'll finish this tomorrow" implies she plans to return to what she was doing tomorrow, not disappear.



- H. refers directly to situation described in the lyrics in her "21st December 2014" blog post.
- H.'s brother and his family still send H. Christmas cards each year and invitations to visit.
- H. recalls that she met her brother's family for the first time 4 years ago and has not seen them since.
- H. writes that her brother's children were "too young to understand who (she) was" when she met them, so they likely do not remember her.
- The final blog post H. writes only contains words "Happy Returns/ Ascendant Here On..." and photos of light.



- "21st December 2014" blog post written over childhood photo of H. and brother beside Christmas tree.
- On next page is envelope with letter inside duplicating song's lyrics.
- Lyrics in letter form shows H.'s intention to finally communicate her thoughts to her brother.

Analytic Findings

Steven Wilson uses these media elements to depict prominent concerns in today's society, such as the relation of isolation and social media, as well as loss.

Thematic Concerns:

Isolation
Narcissism and subjectivity
Nostalgia and memory
Regret
Attachment and detachment
Public/private space
Social media
Human vulnerability

The analysis has revealed the depth of the intermedial dependency. No single media element communicates the full narrative. Steven Wilson uses intermediality to provide different lenses through which we can see this character's perspective. These different materials work together to create a complex multimodal narrative.

References

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