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AVICII: TRUE STORIES

DIR. LEVAN TSIKURISHVILI

USA: Black Dalmation Films, OPA People Production, Piece of Magic Entertainment, and SF Bio, 2017.
<<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7357302/>>

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It is extremely hard to review a documentary like *Avicii: True Stories* and disentangle myself from the research on mental health and the music industry which I have spent the last four years immersed in (Gross and Musgrave 2016; 2017; 2020). With almost every minute that passes of this profoundly sad, and at times chilling film, I found myself thinking that, in many respects, what I was watching was one of the most extreme case studies imaginable for the conceptual architecture we have developed to try and grapple with the potential for toxicity which a music career presents. Knowing the tragic endpoint, of course, changes the way one watches and experiences the film. On the one hand, it is a simple story of a young man making music and the stresses and strains of his working life which ends in tragedy. On the other, it is an allegorical morality tale, which challenges us to think about themes such as corporate ethics, responsibility, creativity, passion and exploitation.

The film pivots around two central relationships. The first is the relationship *Tim Bergling* has with music making, realised in the spellbinding form of deeply personal, at times even intimate, footage of him in the studio. We see him creating early versions of loops between 2008 and 2010 (which we as fans know will go on to be huge records), or jamming with Nile Rodgers, or creating toplines with Aloe Blacc and Chris Martin; each of these artists seemingly mesmerised at Tim's ability to reformat their different talents within the remit of EDM. The second key relationship is between *Avicii* and the music industry, exemplified and crystallised in his connection with his manager Arash "Ash" Pournouri. It is through this relationship in particular that the moral and ethical challenges of the piece are articulated. At the beginning of the film, it is hard not to begrudgingly admire Pournouri — who embodies the entrepreneurial spirit of spinning gold from thin air — as we hear him on the phone to EMI pushing the deal for Avicii's first major single higher and higher, up to \$500,000. This feeling of respect does not last for long. Thirteen minutes in, still at the beginning of Avicii's career, we hear Pournouri exclaim almost excitedly, in what turns out to be a chilling and prophetic statement: "Tim is going to die. With all the interviews, radio tours and everything, he'll drop dead". As a viewer, this early feeling of discomfort permeates much of the ensuing ninety minutes.

Just a few scenes later, we see Bergling having to cancel performing at the 2013 Ultra Music Festival in Australia — for what we now know was alcohol induced pancreatitis (Ralston 2018) — working on his laptop in hospital and talking about upcoming performances. At this point of the documentary we start to see how his career has become more than just about making music, but is now an infrastructure; with stakeholders and responsibilities and pressures and expectations and dependence. It is in this environment, as those around him make entirely fatuous statements such as “you can do the show if you want to”, that, as a viewer, you start asking questions about whose interests are really being prioritised. Who is working for who? Indeed, perhaps more conceptually; what *is* coercion, what is control, and what does it look like? The subtle operation of a system of exploitation rooted in ideas of guilt and responsibility where, as Bergling himself says he feels “lucky and blessed”, is laid bare before our eyes. Here, and indeed throughout the documentary, you find yourself thinking simply: “who is looking after him?” One day later, we see Bergling looking exhausted — a picture of enervate fragility with his eyes rolling back in his head — being cajoled into accepting a series of interviews with the press. It is frightening to watch. Appalling, honestly.

Ticking in the background like a sombre metronome is the counter of shows performed, which we see rattling exponentially higher as the film progresses. Forty-six minutes into the film, we are now in 2015, and the show counter ticks over 700 towards 775. We hear from Bergling about the enormous stresses and pressures as more and more shows are added to his diary. We hear too from David Guetta about the burden of expectations to deliver a global hit again. The sense of pressure feels intense in these scenes, as we see Bergling sitting in his villa in Ibiza creating the album *Stories*, being reminded by those around him to eat and described by his childhood friend as a “shell”. It is interesting, personally, that I could place my own connection to the music of Avicii, as a fan, at this point in the journey of the film. In August 2015, I saw him play at Ushuaia in Ibiza — the venue which would eventually host his final ever performance. The party was incredible, and just as Bergling talks about finding genuine happiness in moments of those shows, so too from my perspective as a fan, I remember that happiness. The following month, in September 2015, he cancelled all of his future performances. It is surreal to think that standing in Ushuaia at that time, I had no idea about what was happening to him or the pain he was going through.

Within the first minute of the documentary, I was reminded of a quote by an interviewee from my own research who described fame as being akin to sitting in the back of a car that someone else is driving at ferocious speed as the G forces push you back in the seat and the world spins past you. This is perhaps the easiest way to read the heart-breaking narrative unfolding over the course of the documentary: a naive, introverted boy hurtling through a world he did not, or could not, understand, in which all he was searching for was, as he phrased it, “finding a connection with people and being accepted”. The speed at which he goes from sending demos to blogs and eating pasta on his bed to headlining a festival and being introduced by Madonna is frightening. Pournouri has, of course, denied this reading and presentation of events (Ralston 2018). Indeed, reading things purely in this way denies

the very real moments of joy we see in the film: the smile on Bergling's face in the early moments as crowds chant along to his first global hit "Levels"; the stages with all of the crowds and lights and lasers and confetti; the incredible outdoor studio at the top of the Grand Canyon writing songs; the footage of him relaxing with his friends in Malibu, in the mansion that he was finally able to bring them to honour the "contracts" they wrote in crayons as kids (stating that if any of them "made it" they would invite each other along to their mansions); or on the Ile Sainte-Marie in Madagascar after retiring, seemingly at calm. This is the duality of the story, and indeed of musical careers generally; the immense highs and joys, and the indescribable lows. In addition, this reading also denies Bergling any sense of agency, and again, this is not what the film shows either. There is footage showing how acutely aware he is of himself and his personality; at sixty minutes in we see him discussing Carl Jung's conceptualisation of introversion and we learn that he has been in therapy. He is emotionally attuned in a way that is not surprising for a musician; a type of work that is reliant on the understanding of, and connection to, emotion in the same way that a builder relies on and develops physical strength.

Bergling was clearly aware that things were deeply wrong with how he was feeling, both physically and emotionally. At the moment in the film when he announces his retirement, one still, as a viewer, finds oneself asking: "how does it get from here, to his suicide in Oman?". You still hope that perhaps there will be a different ending. At around seventy minutes in, there is a marked shift in the tone of Bergling's voice, as what up until this point has been a kind of resigned acceptance morphs into resentful anger. It is in his realisation and articulation of this anger that we see how the environment within which he lived and worked was reliant on him continuing to run on the treadmill. He tells everyone around him that he just wants the performances to stop, seemingly desperate for people to listen to him. "It's harder to cancel these shows than to do them", we hear someone in his team say. "It would be harder to do them, for me", he says. "Hear me out". "As long as you know it could cost you quite a lot", and they run through each show and how much money would be lost. "It's giving me anxiety", he tells them.

Again, this scene is horrible to watch. We hear the coerciveness of commitments "needing to be honoured", leading the viewer to ask in whose interest it is for Bergling to keep going and whose interests are being represented. We hear his team tell him that he will lose money, but of course what they mean is that they will lose money too. Ten minutes later, there is an exchange which, given where the story concludes, makes one feel slightly sick. His manager, tellingly, says:

He doesn't understand the value of money or that his decisions can have very negative consequences for other people, or that the only reason people care is because he is successful right now. If he stopped being successful a lot of people would jump ship. I'm sure of it.

What is perhaps most unsettling, or frustrating, or dispiriting, or upsetting — I am unsure of the best word to capture the feeling — is how the film concludes. We see Tim in 2016 on a beach, retired from performing live, having separated from his manager, apparently

healthier and feeling stronger and working on new music; in theory doing the thing he loved most. By April 2018, he would be dead having taken his own life whilst on holiday in Oman. As a viewer, you are left devastatingly unclear how he arrived at the point of such despair. Perhaps no one will know. What the documentary appears to show, to my reading at least, was the tragic story of a shy and anxious young man, who loved making music and the deep, meaningful joy it brought him, propelled into a world reliant on the ever more avaricious exploitation of his labour in order to support the development of an economy which had formed around him, where simple human care and compassion had been decimated by the compulsion to keep going and market his music, and against which he tried to fight back. Certainly, this is just one reading, and it is important to note that many of the individuals whom the film appears to point fingers of blame at have disputed their representation. Nonetheless, it is hard to watch it and not feel that Tim had been profoundly let down by many of those around him.

RIP Tim Bergling / Avicii: 1989-2018

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