

Impact case study (REF3b)

<p>Institution: University of Sheffield</p>
<p>Unit of Assessment: 35 - Music, Drama, Dance and Performing Arts</p>
<p>Title of case study: Creative, cultural and economic impact through collaboration on Björk's <i>Biophilia</i> project</p>
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Nicola Dibben's research into the music of international pop icon Björk led to her creative role in Björk's ambitious multi-media project <i>Biophilia</i>. The <i>Biophilia</i> app is the first of a new format, a touchstone for developments in artist apps, sold in 200 countries, and described by the <i>New York Times</i> as "among the most creative, innovative and important new projects in popular culture" (2011). Dibben contributed musicological expertise and provided accompanying narrative to help create this internationally-renowned and pioneering artefact. Her research was pivotal to the development of public understanding of music and science, as evidenced by critics' use of Dibben's research, and feedback from teachers and students on associated educational activities. Her research also brought economic benefits to the music industry through the financial premium of products using her materials.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>In 2009 Professor Nicola Dibben (University of Sheffield since 1997) published the first large-scale musicological analysis and critique of Icelandic musician Björk's artistic output [R1]. It is one of few academic works which presents detailed musicological analysis of the work of a popular music artist, previous studies of which tend to emphasise the historical or sociological aspects of an artist's work. Dibben conducted this research between 2006 and 2008, with Arts and Humanities Research Council Research Leave funding (Sept 2006 to Jan 2007), which resulted in a monograph and peer review article [R1, R2].</p> <p>Dibben's research provides a detailed musicological analysis of Björk's musical processes and products (audio and video tracks, live performances and recorded sound), examined in the light of the videos, artwork, critical reception, and fanzines that surround the music, supplemented by original interview material. The analysis draws on the discourse surrounding her music to reveal and explore recurrent cultural themes brought into focus by her music: constructions of nature and identity, the relationship between humans and technology, song as a vehicle for emotional expression, and female autonomy and authorship. This includes an assessment of her reception by the media, which focused largely upon her role as mother, girlfriend, and as an 'eccentric'. Dibben argued that this is part of a broader reception ideology of (female) popular musicians, which functions to devalue the contribution made by popular musicians and their music to cultural life.</p> <p>This detailed study provided new insights into studio-based compositional processes and products. The focus on specific cultural themes furthered understanding of how contemporary music participates in larger discourses, and how these discourses are drawn upon to make meaning of musical experiences. This is particularly relevant to the subsequent impacts of Dibben's research as part of the <i>Biophilia</i> project, which centered on her ability to articulate the way in which Björk's musical processes communicated ideas about the human relationship with nature and technology. As well as addressing a scholarly audience the monograph aimed to allow a more general interest audience to engage with in-depth analysis of music by showing how Björk's artistic vision of "unity" is manifested across sonic and visual properties of her work.</p>
<p>3. References to the research</p> <p>R1. Dibben, N. 2009. <i>Björk</i>. Equinox Press. (In North America this is published by Indiana University Press). [Submitted in REF2]</p> <p>R2. Dibben, N. 2009. Nature and Nation: National Identity and Environmentalism in Icelandic Popular Music Video and Music Documentary. <i>Ethnomusicology Forum</i>, Screened Music: Global Perspectives, 18, 1, 131-151. [Submitted in REF2]</p> <p>Funded by Arts and Humanities Research Council Research Leave, Sept 2006 – Jan 2007.</p>

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Reviews:

Sarah Boak, Björk by Nicola Dibben. *Popular Music*, 31 (2012),1,175-177.

Chloe Mullett, Review of Nicola Dibben, Björk, *Popular Music History*, 4 (2009), 95-97.

Elise O. Takehana, Review of Nicola Dibben, Björk, *Music Theory Online*, 16, 3, August 2010.

4. Details of the impact

Dibben's monograph on Björk's music had a direct impact on the artist and her creative team, by identifying, articulating and evidencing the artistic value of Björk's work. Björk remarked of the book: "I liked it because it wasn't about my boyfriends or my children which female artists get a lot ... but seemed to be quite up front and down to earth about my music. She also seemed to be able to cover both the electronic and the more academic angle of my music which is rare. You either have the pop folks being intimidated about the string and the choir arrangements or you get the semi classical lot who sort of seem keen of "promoting" me into being a composer my fair lady style. Like they want to rescue me from pop. Which I am quite comfortable and proud to be part of. Nicola Dibben seemed not to care about either of those hurdles." (Björk, *The Guardian*, 2011). Her manager remarked in an email to Dibben in 2009 that even though he'd known Björk's work for 20 years, Dibben's research had given him new ways to understand and appreciate her music.

Based on the insights Dibben provided in that monograph, and her non-elitist attitude to music and music-education (see the quotation from Björk above), Björk invited Dibben to work with her on her next album project – *Biophilia* (2011). Beyond Björk and her creative team, Dibben's research had three additional types of impact: creative and cultural, quality of life and understanding, and economic.

1. Creative and cultural impact: supporting a new form of artistic expression

Dibben's research contributed to a new type of musical artefact, the "app album", widely referred to as a reinvention of the album format and a touchstone for future developments in music for mobile devices (e.g. *LATimes*, *The Guardian*, 2011). The *Biophilia* app is the first interactive music album for mobile devices, as part of which, songs are presented as interactive, semi-educational games based on structures derived from the natural world. The current version has more than a 70% 5 star rating from purchasers in the App Store (*AppAnnie*, 2013). Dibben contributed to the design of the *Biophilia* apps: she provided feedback on the musical and educational components to the developers based on her understanding of Björk's compositional aims, and worked with the designers and Björk to create an appropriate layering of the text within the app architecture. Dibben's research also added creative value through the inclusion of essays within the *Björk Biophilia* app album (2011), and physical album releases (*Biophilia Ultimate Edition*, 2011; *Biophilia Manual*, 2011). Notably, this was the first time Björk integrated academic research into her creative artefacts, and a rare (perhaps only) instance of a collaboration between an academic and internationally-renowned pop musician on an album project. In addition, Dibben's research had a creative and cultural impact on audiences of Björk's music through its presentation as interpretive material within the apps ("a stunning analytical essay put together by Nikki Dibben", *2020k*, 2011; "fascinating essays" *The Telegraph*, 2011), a 7000 word programme (*Biophilia Live* 2011), and as the exhibition text accompanying the world tour of live performances, where it was incorporated both as subtitles accompanying documentary films, and stand-alone text displayed on plasma screens (e.g. Harpa concert hall, Reykjavik, October-November 2011). Based on an estimated 5,000 attendees during the Reykjavik residency, the exhibition could reach a total 40,000 people by the end of the tour in 2014.

2. Quality of life and understanding.

Dibben's research had cultural and societal impact on the international reception of Björk's music and of the new app-album format. For example, she was one of three members of the creative team who represented *Biophilia* at the press launch in June 2011; she collaborated with Björk's manager and personal assistant to write press releases for *Biophilia*; and wrote the app descriptions for the iTunes store which guide purchasers' decisions. Phrases from her press releases appear in international press coverage of the release of *Biophilia* showing a direct impact of her words on journalists' understanding of Björk's work, and potentially on public reception of

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Biophilia. Dibben's exhibition materials were also used by critics to inform their reviews: "According to an essay on display in the lobby, along with half a dozen video screens showing graphics and film clips associated with the album, *biophilia* is an ancient philosophical notion..." (review by David Fricke in *Rolling Stone*, 2011). The *Biophilia* project continues to receive world-wide press coverage from hundreds of media outlets: a google search with the terms "Björk Biophilia" reveals in excess of 1,260,000 hits. In the UK alone there were 176 stories listed in the NewsBank newspaper database, and BBC News featured *Biophilia* 15 times. Dibben also used her knowledge of the connections between music and nature to justify the conceptual appropriateness of the *Biophilia* live show for the New York Hall of Science as part of a bid to use the museum as a venue, thereby influencing the connections audiences would draw between music and science.

Dibben's research reached audiences through a variety of artefacts and activities. Dibben's most visible contributions to the *Biophilia* app are the ten essays that accompany the album's ten songs. These texts inform audiences of the conceptual underpinnings of the project: in the words of Björk's manager, "I think that to realise the aims of including an education and learning aspect to the project - your writing on each song would be a very important aspect of the project" (email to Dibben from Manager of One Little Indian, 2010). Two aspects of Dibben's research impacted on Björk during the process, and then on subsequent audiences: first, Björk wanted to communicate her ideas about musical structure to a mass audience – a principle Dibben had advocated in her monograph *Björk*; and second, Dibben applied her understanding of the relationship between Björk's compositional strategies and ideas of nature and technology to interpret, and promote understanding of the *Biophilia* project for a global audience (e.g. "you really get the full experience of the music and the rationale behind its conception and creation", *Scientific American*, 2011). Dibben was also commissioned by Björk to interview her and others in order to document the creative process, extracting interview material for the record company to use in promotional features on the artist website, and advising on the script for a Channel 4 documentary (*When Björk Met Attenborough*, Pulse films, 2013). Dibben's research has therefore influenced the understanding of Björk's music, and of how music might 'be about' human relationships with nature and technology, either directly through her own writings, interviews, and editing choices, or indirectly, through other intermediaries.

At a more individual level, Dibben's research informed the pop-up music school curriculum which runs alongside the *Biophilia* world tour. She briefed and taught on the first of these (Manchester International Festival, 2011), advised on later incarnations (e.g. Reykjavik, 2011), and her work is part of the online educational materials at <http://biophiliaeducational.org/>. For example, the one-week *Biophilia* music school in Manchester comprised science and music classes for 25 school children from under-privileged homes and some of their teachers: "I have personally become interested in how apps and music programmes can be used to inspire music making rather than be just a tool to record compositions." (Teacher, Manchester); "It's taught me that any sound can make music, and how much science and music is related" (Student, Manchester); "The educational part of *Biophilia* is a spectacular and groundbreaking project. Inspiring teachers to work in an interdisciplinary manner with mixed age groups and using creativity as a learning tool works remarkably well. This kind of fusion in teaching can play a part in shaping curriculums in the future." (Teacher, Reykjavik). Further testimonies are available at the *Biophilia* educational website <http://biophiliaeducational.org/>.

3. Economic impact.

Dibben's research had three types of economic impact: i) the small but direct economic impact of the original publication - *Björk* (Equinox, 2009); ii) added value to Björk's *Biophilia* artefacts (2011), and iii) added value to the *Biophilia* touring show (2011-13).

- i) There is a small direct economic benefit of the monograph (c.2700 copies sold @ £11.99) to the British publishing industry.
- ii) The other types of economic impact are potentially larger but are harder to separate from the significant economic impact made by Björk's *Biophilia* project as a whole (e.g. the iPad app alone was the top selling music app in 41 countries). The presence of Dibben's research added creative and economic value to four artefacts (*Björk: Biophilia* app album, 2011; *Biophilia Ultimate Edition*, 2011; *Biophilia Manual*, 2011; and *Biophilia*

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Live programme, 2011) and this benefitted the record companies One Little Indian, Wellhart and Nonesuch. In evidence of this, products including Dibben's work were sold at a higher price point than those without: the *Biophilia Manual Edition* retails at £35, and *Ultimate Edition* was £500 (both containing Dibben's essays), whereas the *Biophilia* CD in jewel case (without Dibben's essays) retails at £9.99.

- iii) Dibben was commissioned to write exhibition material displayed in the show's performance venues (e.g. Manchester International Festival 2011, Reykjavik Harpa Concert Hall 2011, New York Hall of Science 2012, Alexandra Palace, 2013), enhancing the events by creating a clearer understanding/augmented experience, and therefore adding value.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- S1. Björk's manager at One Little Indian and creative team could corroborate Dibben's contribution to the creative process of the making of the *Biophilia* project, the promotion of the project, and its commercial benefits.
- S2. The producers of the film documentary *When Björk Met Attenborough* can verify the role of Dibben's expertise in creating the script of the film.
- S3. The education officer the Manchester International Festival can verify Dibben's contribution to the music school there. See also documentation on <http://biophiliaeducational.org/>
- S4. Credits within the cited artefacts and on the artist website corroborate Dibben's contribution (<http://bjork.com/#/past/discography/biophilia>): Dibben is credited as author of the essays within *Björk: Biophilia* (2011), at the end of each essay within the app, and is credited as "music consultant" on the documentary *When Björk Met Attenborough* (2013).
- S5. Reviews of Björk's *Biophilia* in the international press attest to the success of the project and reach and interpretive role of Dibben's writings within the artefacts and exhibitions. Examples:
- <http://www.nonesuch.com/albums/biophilia/press>
 - http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/25/arts/video-games/bjorks-biophilia-an-album-as-game.html?_r=0
 - <http://www.dummymag.com/features/bjork-biophilia-comment>
 - <http://200percentmag.com/2011/07/27/bjork%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%98biophilia%E2%80%99/>
 - <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/feat/archives/2011/07/06/2003507517>
 - <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2011/jul/04/bjork-manchester-biophilia>