

Preface

Where are we now? Contemporary Scholarship on David Bowie

Martin J. Power, Eoin Devereux and Aileen Dillane

During the early hours of 8 January 2013 (the eve of David Bowie's 66th Birthday), word began to circulate in cyberspace concerning a new David Bowie single as well as the promise of a new album. David Bowie fans awoke to a new song called 'Where Are We Now?' which was accompanied by a haunting, almost Beckett-like, video focused on his Berlin years and directed by Tony Oursler. The release of the single and *The Next Day* album, just two months later, ended years of groundless speculation and rumour concerning Bowie's career and overall well-being. In old and new media settings Bowie was retired, Bowie was ill, Bowie was a recluse who spent his days painting, Bowie was leaving New York.

The dominant media narrative which greeted the news that Bowie was recording again rehearsed many of these ill-founded and baseless rumours. In fact, Bowie had remained active as an artist following his recuperation from a significant health scare in 2004. He had clearly decided to work on his own terms and at his own pace. In the supposed hiatus between 2004 and 2013, Bowie collaborated by performing or recording with a wide range of performers (including Alicia Keys, David Gilmour, TV On The Radio and Lou Reed). He performed live twice with Arcade Fire in 2005 (a band whom he had championed and continues to record with occasionally) and in 2007 he curated the prestigious Highline Festival in Manhattan. All of this, in addition to working as a music producer and as an occasional actor in films like *The Prestige* (2006), appearing in animation series such as *Sponge Bob Square Pants* (2007), as well as playing a variety of cameo roles.

Some three months before his 're-emergence', the University of Limerick in Ireland convened a major academic event on David Bowie. *Strange Fascination? A Symposium on David Bowie* was held over three days in late October 2012. The event featured papers, performances, artwork, screenings and a panel discussion on Bowie's legacy to date. Participants (academics, fans, academics who are fans, fans who are academics) travelled from across the world to discuss, dissect, debate and, most importantly, to celebrate the work of one of the most significant figures in contemporary popular culture.

There was a very high level of media interest in the event. Predictably, there was some bemusement or lack of understanding in certain media quarters as to the legitimacy of subjecting David Bowie to such earnest scrutiny

in an academic setting. To us however the reasons were very clear. As working academics interested in culture and cultural production (in all senses of the term) we do not see ourselves as being locked away Rapunzel-like in an ivory tower. Our task is to engage with culture and cultural production as a real and lived experience whether in the library, on the street, in the supermarket or in the moshpit.

In our media-saturated world the word ‘iconic’ is an overused and abused term. David Bowie is one of the few artists to whom the term is deservedly ascribed. In convening *Strange Fascination?* and in editing this collection of essays we seek to engage critically with one of the most enduring, intriguing and complex figures within popular culture and to add to the emerging academic debate which seeks to assess Bowie’s significance as a songwriter, performer, recording artist, music producer, actor, film producer and painter (see for example Stevenson, 2006; Buckley, 2014; Waldrep, 2004; Brookes & Marsh, 2013).

As in any critical approach, our purpose here is to offer new perspectives on Bowie texts (taking ‘text’ in the broadest sense as some aspect of material culture having the ability to be ‘read’—from song texts to costumes, videos to album art, characterisations in film to the man himself and his other selves). To critically read often involves a leap of faith, even in the presence of compelling material evidence. But ultimately, engaging in the creative act of surmising on the pivot of a ‘perhaps’, as Fitch suggests (Chapter 2), surely has its rewards?

The title *David Bowie: Critical Perspectives* also makes it clear that this book is neither an exhaustive account of everything David Bowie has ever done, nor a compendium of every analysis, opinion piece or interpretation undertaken of his life and artistic output thus far. Such a task is beyond the realm of this book, and far from claiming to be definitive; this volume—even though it features examples from each of the decades of Bowie’s extensive career—is unapologetically quite the contrary. The perspectives here are multiple but they are also specific, partial, varied and sometimes even contradictory. All are driven to a greater or lesser degree with the deployment of theoretical scaffolding (some disciplinary specific, others cross- and multidisciplinary) in order to critically explore ways to think, talk about and analyse the extensive and always provocative artistic output of David Bowie in its social, historical, political and cultural context.

Key theorists whose ideas have exerted considerable influence across the arts, humanities and social sciences in particular, are harnessed throughout this volume, from sociologist and cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard (Usher & Fremaux, Chapter 4; Naiman, Chapter 10) to philosopher and literary, film and art critic Gilles Deleuze (October, Chapter 14); from psychotherapist Carl Jung (Stark, Chapter 5) to psychoanalysts Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan (Leorne, Chapter 6); from literary theorist and post-colonialist Edward Said (Waldrep, Chapter 8; Derfoufi, Chapter 9) to semiotician and literary critic Roland Barthes (Ali & Wallace, Chapter 15).

In terms of visual culture, the intentionality of Bowie's album artwork (Chapman, Chapter 11), the context of his dramatic fashion choices (Thian, Chapter 7) and the carefully story-boarded content of a song video (Dillane, Devereux & Power, Chapter 3) all point to the importance of 'the look' as well as the sound of Bowie. That said, structures of feeling and Bowie's various soundscapes also receive attention in close analyses of instrumental textures (Naiman, Chapter 10), the grain of Bowie's voice (Ali & Wallace, Chapter 15) and in the metric, melodic and harmonic orientation of a Bowie song (Dillane, Devereux & Power, Chapter 3).

Bowie and the multiple personae he has deployed throughout his career form the basis of a number of chapters, particularly those which examine processes of individuation and integration (Stark, Chapter 5) and the work performed by Bowie's often perverse alter-egos (Leorne, Chapter 6) which have exerted profound influences not just on his psyche but also, by extension, his art.

Some of the chapters have a reappraising orientation, of both celebrated musical output, such as the recording triptych of the so-called 'Berlin Period' (Buckley, Chapter 12), and of more generally written-off works, including the often-ignored band projects (Usher & Fremaux, Chapter 4). Bowie's acting roles are also reassessed, from the potential hindrance of Bowie's excessive stardom in playing a character (Wright, Chapter 13), to a cinematic role's absolute dependence on this star quality (Derfoufi, Chapter 9), while some cinematic characters are dissected in great detail (October, Chapter 14).

Bowie's creative processes in relation to lyric writing, in particular his use of the cut-up technique (Johnson, Chapter 1), allusion (Fitch, Chapter 2) and intertextual referencing (Waldrep, Chapter 8), also find expression in his musical 'dramas' (Dillane, Devereux & Power, Chapter 3; Naiman, Chapter 10), all of which are replete with sonic and generic allusions from other times and places, drawing from both high art and low-brow, populist forms in playful and ironic ways.

Many chapters ruminate on the significance of Bowie, from the curatorial level with the staging of *David Bowie* is (Johnson, Chapter 1), to his continued relevance to his legions of fans, including some of the authors here (Stevenson, Chapter 16), asking the question not 'what' his work means to people but 'how' it means (Fitch, Chapter 2), the answer to which is often unexpected, intimate and autobiographical (Garcia, Chapter 17).

Unsurprisingly, virtually all of the chapters make claims for rethinking Bowie in a broader historical, cultural, political and aesthetic context, and, we would say, with good reason. Has there ever been an artist as intellectually, musically and visually compelling, as David Bowie?

Martin J. Power, Aileen Dillane and Eoin Devereux
University of Limerick, Ireland
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