



Eoin Devereux, Aileen Dillane
and Martin J. Power (eds.),
David Bowie: Critical Perspectives

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by Pietro Deandrea

In the wake of David Bowie's death in January 2016, contemporaneous with the release of his last album *Blackstar*, the number of events and publications concerned with this artist have multiplied; the three-day conference held in Lisbon in September 2016, *David Bowie: Interart/text/media*, was only one of the many cases in point. Within this international phenomenon, Italy constitutes no exception. Pippo Delbono's and Luca Scarlini's books were published in the weeks immediately following Bowie's death, while the publisher Arcana offered an updated version of Francesco Donadio's excellent commentary on the lyrics of Bowie's complete oeuvre. Later, autumn 2016 was characterised by the publication of two important books sharing a philosophical perspective, by Simon Critchley and Pierpaolo Martino, while the Bologna MamBo (Modern Art Museum) closed its extremely successful exhibition *David Bowie Is*, inaugurated in 2013 at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

However, Bowie as an object of theoretical and academic study had started earlier than this, as this volume demonstrates. *David Bowie: Critical Perspectives* resulted from a conference held in October 2012 at the University of Limerick in



Ireland. In their "Preface", the three editors remind readers that "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" (xiii-xiv). Faced with these perplexities, the declared orientation of their conference was to consider the concept of 'text' in its widest implications, in the best tradition of Cultural Studies.

The contributions here collected represent a great variety of perspectives, while at the same time sharing an impressive depth of investigation and theoretical complexity. It is no coincidence, I feel, that the opening essay is signed by Kathryn Johnson, assistant curator of the 2013 exhibition – and that her first page is enriched with an emblematic photograph of the long queues snaking around the Victoria and Albert's imposing entrance. Her essay moves from the quote placed at the beginning of the exhibition (taken from the album *1.Outside*, 1995): "All art is unstable. Its meaning is not necessarily that implied by the author. There is no authoritative voice, there are only multiple readings." The apparent contradiction between this typically postmodern axiom, which offers a creative freedom of interpretation, and Bowie's renowned stage and biographical charisma, produces a "creative tension between power and empowerment" that, in Johnson's view, lies at the roots of Bowie's impact on contemporary culture. Her curatorial work is explained precisely with an intention (embodied in the exhibition's open title) to eschew an excessively didactic approach, and to leave room for visitors' interpretation: "The interpretive agency of the visitor was given a new level of recognition and respect." The exhibition's pattern was therefore inspired by the collage and "cut-up" technique, often employed by Bowie himself. It was the very idea of a correct, or privileged, sequential path that was abandoned, starting from the two identical access doors every visitor could freely choose between (an element unfortunately absent in Bologna, where the exhibition, though certainly a memorable experience, slightly suffered from its narrowness of spaces).

This element of "empowerment" often surfaces in the volume. In his "Foreword", Gavin Friday (from the post-punk band The Virgin Prunes) gives voice to all those who, in various ways, have been inspired by Bowie's works: "I am forever in debt to where Bowie's music has brought me, to all he has introduced me to" (xi). Richard Fitch identifies this power in Bowie's use of allusion, as a form of indirect reference which leaves ample room for interpretation to anyone, with no pretense to normalize the bizarre precisely because the strange is able to take us far away in order to show reality from a new angle (in a way similar to Foucault's heterotopia, I would add). The very title of Fitch's essay, "In This Age of Grand Allusion", is a half-quote of a famous Bowie line; many contributors to this collection have recourse to this technique to pay homage to the artist. This is a ruse abounding in Critchley's abovementioned book, too, and that invariably detonates infinite chains of associations in the mind of Bowie's fans. Barish Ali and Heidi Wallace's article focuses on the sidelining of authorship (by way of Barthes and Foucault) thanks to Bowie's alter-egos such as Ziggy Stardust and Aladdin Sane, "destabilising the central authority of the rockstar", considering identity



as multiple and in state of constant becoming, aiming at a “political validation of the need to empower individuals towards more revolutionised subjectivities.”

These first observations on the collection, in any case, do little justice to the range of media with which Bowie interacted “to broaden rock’s vocabulary”. *David Bowie: Critical Perspectives* presents one of the highest examples of how music can be, as the ethnomusicologist Giampaolo Chiriaco says (2016), a constant conflict among expressions of various powers vying for the re-definition of geographies, thus emphasising the deep bond between musicology and cultural studies. The collected essays analyse a great number of expressive means: Bowie’s extremely sophisticated use of the voice as a vehicle of meaning; musical techniques, with some extremely detailed analyses (the same perspective enhances the originality of Pierpaolo Martino’s book, too – and unsurprisingly so, Martino himself being a musician and composer); the techniques of the composition of lyrics, with special attention for the “cut-up”; album covers; film acting, as for example Mehdi Derfoufi’s essay which examines Nagisa Oshima’s *Furyo* (1983) as a postcolonial attempt of employing Bowie’s otherness to create a non-western cinema.

The theoretical perspectives here employed are just as varied: the figure of Pierrot from the *Commedia dell’Arte*, emerging in Bowie’s career repeatedly; Hegel’s master/servant dialectics to read the relationship between the artist and his personae, in Bethany Usher and Stephanie Fremaux’s essay; Baudrillard’s concept of “transaesthetics” (whereby art becomes indistinguishable from the postmodern society that it permeates), that according to musicologist Tiffany Naiman pervades Bowie’s album *1.Outside* in order to be later distanced through an estranging use of Mike Garson’s piano; the influence of Japanese art; Freudian theory as an interpretive key to Bowie’s relationship with – again – his masks, in Ana Leorne’s essay; not to mention the detailed parallel textual analysis between Bowie’s and Jung’s texts, offered by the artist Tanja Stark.

As a literary scholar, I find it a bit surprising that such a rich and multifarious collection, where even the phases of Bowie’s output that are usually least appreciated (the 1980s and 90s) receive the space they deserve, neglects textual analysis and literary intertextuality – Orwell, for instance, is not even mentioned in the final “Index”. Maybe the editors got carried away by the book’s Cultural Studies orientation, or (more likely) this is to be taken as a symptom of the conservative resilience of some traditional academia.

Personally, I consider this marginal flaw well compensated by the essay of the sociologist Nick Stevenson, who investigates the observations by some Bowie fans and goes back to the concept of the decentering of the self. Spurred by Stuart Hall’s elaboration of identity as always “in the process of becoming rather than being” (1996: 4), Stevenson sees in Bowie’s many identities the affirmation of “a world where we can exhibit a sense of hospitality toward human difference [...] the possibility of more ethical forms of selfhood”, and above all “a continual critique of the ‘fascist self’ that seeks to expel ambiguity and doubt from the ways in which we live” (284). This idea of the self as a constant search culminates in his analysis of Bowie’s ‘penultimate’ albums, marked by an exploration of death which can be read through Edward Said’s concept



of 'late style' – obviously, I could not help wondering how this contributor would comment on the 2016 events, and on *Blackstar*.

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