

Editor's note (1) : We expect the readership to agree that the passing of David Bowie is worthy of comment in these pages. Indeed a range of symposia and special issues have already been announced in our related fields, and prior to his death Bowie was already the subject of an 'in character' research experiment (see Brooker, 2016). Thus we give over this issue's editorial to Mark Readman's reflections on the figure of Bowie as artist and media practitioner.
Julian McDougall, Co-Editor.

While David Bowie was alive it was hard to say what he was – easier to say what he wasn't – in the documentary *Five Years*, for example, he rounds on an interviewer for daring to suggest that he's a rock star (perhaps conjuring up the ghost of Arthur Seaton – “whatever people say I am, that's what I'm not”), and on the title track of his final album *Blackstar*, he sings: “I'm not a pop star”. The death of David Bowie, paradoxically, brings his ontic status into sharp relief, and, in turn, throws light on the construction of the figure of the artist – a spectre – the ‘creative practitioner’. An ontology of Bowie entails an interrogation of presence, absence and the historiographic portrait of the artist as a dead rock star (or not). Mike Garson (responsible for remarkable piano solo on *Aladdin Sane*) in a special tribute issue of *Mojo* magazine said “He'll be remembered like Leonardo da Vinci – a true Renaissance man” a comparison that may remind us of Catherine Soussloff's discussion of Freud's study of da Vinci, based in turn on Otto Rank's paper *Der Mythos von der Geburt des Helden* (The Myth of the Birth of the Hero).

Soussloff shows us how the historical figure of the artist has been produced through biographies and anecdotes, which build upon and reinforce myths of the artist; myths in the Barthesian sense - not falsehoods, but structures that are bigger than, and more enduring than reality. The construction of ‘David Bowie’ is characterised by many of Soussloff's observations about such mythic construction. And since his death we have abundant evidence of Soussloff's schematic structure of the artist's biography, with stories of Bowie's birth, youth, maturity, ‘old age’ and death, the fate of his body (a ‘secret cremation’) and, of course, the fate of his many works.

Particular tropes regarding Bowie's extraordinariness have always circulated, but even more so, since his death, and now we have the makings of a hagiography: the groundbreaking originality; the timelessness (“it's music that still sounds vital and modern” says Siouxsie Sioux); the multiple attributions of influence and legacy in a wide range of genres and attitudes; the authoritative assertions of historical importance; the liberating effect of his performances (“When I first saw him [performing *Starman* on Top of the Pops in 1972] I was really ill and in a hospital TV room. It was like I was being woken up, like being let out of a chrysalis. Suddenly I was allowed to just *become*” – Siouxsie Sioux again); and a return to more tangible qualities, such as his craftsmanship as well as his artistry (“In fact he's so culturally significant that his musicianship is often overlooked – like the guitar riff on *Rebel Rebel*, or

his piano-playing for Iggy Pop, he was a real musician, a bona fide genius. I can't overstate his impact on me growing up with those records", says Johnny Marr).

The contradictions are all absorbed into a glorious fluidity, both clear and indecipherable, crystallised, perhaps in the notion of Bowie as simultaneously *sui generis* and an amalgam of multiple influences ("He was the consummate tastemaker – and the consummate magpie, but that's a great art in itself" says Jim Kerr). And this moves us towards the central paradox, that of oxymoronic authenticity, in which every invention, every appropriation becomes somehow a marker of even greater integrity. In this sense the figure of Bowie transcends Soussloff's analysis of the figure of the artist. His simultaneous presence and absence were manifested in the 2013 V&A show, in which he had a curatorial hand (re-inscribing his own story), called, significantly: *David Bowie is*. Paul Morley (who gave the show its title) said at the time: "There was no single entity named David Bowie coordinating or influencing proceedings, but somehow he made his presence felt" (Morley 2016). Others have commented: "Both a statement and a deliberately unfinished statement, the title functioned as a teaser and a catalyst" (Kathryn Johnson in Devereux et al).

The ontic assertion in the title – David Bowie *is* – is not necessarily undercut by the fact that David Bowie now *isn't*; after all, David Bowie has always both *been* and *not been*. Even behind the multiple 'fictional' personae, the 'real' persona of David Bowie was always already a fiction adopted to distinguish *this* performer from *that* performer (Davy Jones of the Monkees), and 'Bowie' itself is a slippery signifier given that Bowie himself joked about the undecided nature of how to pronounce it (in an interview with Jeremy Paxman).

It is this fundamentally contradictory nature that arouses our interest as media practitioners – this extraordinary performance that took place over 40 years succeeded in maintaining oppositions with equal commitment – absolute sincerity with playfulness, superficiality with integrity, universal accessibility with obscurantism. Even his death, a real event with real impact, seemed to be a performance, announced as it was a few days after the release of *Blackstar*, on a Monday morning at the beginning of a news cycle. The story of this performance, both corporeal and incorporeal, everywhere and nowhere belongs with Soussloff's recounted anecdotes about Renaissance artists – particularly the one about the corpse of Michelangelo who, 22 days in his coffin still looked peaceful and smelled sweet. As Soussloff comments: "This body is not like other bodies; this is the body of an absolute artist".

David Bowie: Five Years (2013) Directed by Frances Whately. UK.
Devereux, E., Dillain, A., Power, J. (2015) *David Bowie: Critical Perspectives*.
Abingdon: Routledge.
Mojo (March 2016)
Morley, P. (2016) <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/music/what-to-listen-to/david-bowie-the-human-equivalent-of-a-google-search/>

Sousloff, C. (1997) *The Absolute Artist: The Historiography of a Concept*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

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