
David Bowie: Critical Perspectives

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Edited by Eoin Devereux, Aileen Dillane, and Martin J. Power

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*Shapes of things before my eyes / Just teach me to despise / Will time
make man more wise / Here within my lonely frame / My eyes just hurt
my brain / But will it seem the same?*

Driven by a pounding drum beat and followed by a dissonant saxophone teasing David Bowie's singing voice, these words make up the first verse of 'Shapes of Things', a cover of a Yardbirds song released on Bowie's 1973 album *Pin Ups*.

In many ways, *Pin Ups* epitomises the artist's work as much as it pinpoints precisely those aspects of popular culture that have spawned countless theoretical debates and critical discussion: the concept of a cover album, as well as the actual cover image showing Bowie and fashion model Twiggy half-naked and with mask-like faces relates to postmodernist ideas of superficiality and reproduction, to art as a play of surfaces, to questions of identity, gender, iconicity, fashion, signs and meanings. Questions about "the shapes of things" that pervade Bowie's creative output as a whole and concern his various personae, his music, his lyrics, as well as his acting career. We know his alter egos, Ziggy Stardust, Aladdin Sane, or The Thin White Duke; we know him as a chameleonic phenomenon, as a fascinosum on stage, on the cinema screen, and on innumerable magazine covers. But do we really know him?

Of course the answer has to be 'No', but as an essential part of fandom as such, the thought of getting to look behind and the star's aura is admittedly exciting. Yet it is as tempting as it is misleading, turning biographical facts into suggestions and from forms of artistic expression into tautological shortcuts. It is the dangerous desire to assign one specific meaning or reason to a certain act, text, or behaviour, which is the essence bestselling biographies feed from. Accordingly, up to this day quite a few of them have been published about David Bowie: *Bowie: The Biography* (Wendy Leigh, 2014), *David Bowie: Ever Changing Hero* (Sean Egan, 2013), *David Bowie: Starman* (Paul Trynka, 2011) and *Strange Fascination: David Bowie: The Definitive Story* (David Buckley, 2001).

In the wake of these more or less comprehensive accounts, however, we also saw the publication of books focusing on specific periods of Bowie's career, such as Kevin Cann's *David Bowie: Any Day Now: The London Years 1947-74* (2010) and Peter Doggett's *The Man Who Sold the World: David Bowie and the 1970s* (2012). Nicholas Pegg's *The Complete David Bowie* (2011) turned out to be the first critical study of the artist's oeuvre, providing a balanced mixture of information and analysis.

In this regard, *David Bowie: Critical Perspectives*, edited by Eoin Devereux, Aileen Dillane, and Martin J. Power, now seems to be a true novelty: a compilation of essays by authors who approach the artist, his work, his influences and his impact from various academic viewpoints. Although the book is not divided into thematic parts, the essays are grouped according to their theoretical propositions. Kathryn Johnson discusses Bowie as an authorial figure, as well as his creative tension between power and empowerment based on V&A's recent exhibition "David Bowie is"—a simple yet complex question, as it provokes multiple readings of Bowie's work and illustrates the cultural purpose of the exhibition format as such. With reference to Mieke Bal's monograph on the subject of cultural analysis, *Double Exposures*, Johnson conceives this specific exhibition as an 'utterance' within the musical discourse, which makes Bowie a medium himself. Moving on from there, and drawing on the philosophical doctrine of nihilism, Richard Fitch sheds light on Bowie's use of allusions. Here, too, the question is not *what* the artist's work can mean but *how* it can mean. Rather than extracting a certain meaning from Bowie's texts, Fitch focuses on the author Bowie and his technique of creating ambiguous connections to existential questions as a 'grand organisation of chaos'. By centring on an even more concrete aspect of his musical language, Aileen Dillane, Eoin Devereux and Martin J. Power analyse the figure of the Pierrot as a recurring motif and medium in Bowie's songs.

The following three chapters look into the star's 'self' from a predominantly psychoanalytical point of view, examining his hyperreal performances (see Bethany Usher and Stephanie Fremaux's text), his numinous archetypes and conformance to C.G. Jung's concept of the 'Visionary Artist' (see Tanja Stark's chapter), and his personae as forms of self-defence in a Freudian sense (see Ana Leorne's essay). While such approaches are usually unsatisfyingly suggestive, they are not as farfetched in this case, as David Bowie himself has expressed his fondness for psychoanalytical theory, and for Jung's elaborations on the unconscious and ancient symbolism in particular. It seems however more fruitful to apply this analytical framework to the idea of a social psychology negotiated in Bowie's performances as a musician and actor, comments on worldly matters as expressed through the roles and styles he chose. Most notably, this would concern grades of 'otherness',

exoticism and androgyny. In her contribution to the volume, Helene Marie Thian interprets Bowie's display of Japanese-inspired design in the 1970s not as a provocative postcolonial statement, but as a symbolic reconciliation of post-War Japan and the Allies (142), while Shelton Waldrep defines Bowie's 1980s output, and especially his album *Let's Dance*, as "a multi-performative model in which the meanings of the individual songs are merely the ur-text on which to drape other possible interpretations and performances" (157), a model involving the process of 'orientalising the self' (154). Mehdi Derfoufi turns to the films *Merry Christmas*, *Mr. Lawrence* (Nagisa Oshima, 1983) and *The Hunger* (Tony Scott, 1983) to describe them as a diptych subverting masculinity. Following Derfoufi's argument, viewers of Oshima's film would get to experience the position of the postcolonial subject—a hypothesis that seems to contradict Thian but in fact proves to be a productive extension of her claim: The symbolic reconciliation of 'self' and 'other' takes place *within* the viewing subject, namely as a confrontation with their own desire (a deduction based on Gaylyn Studlar's analysis of *The Blue Angel*[1]).

The subsequent chapters focus on several elements of superficiality, simulacra and representation: Tiffany Naiman's musicological and Baudrillardian take on Bowie's song "The Heart's Filthy Lesson", Ian Chapman's visual analysis of a selection of Bowie album covers, David Buckley's rather biographical text on "Bowie's Berlin" and the sense of disorientation dominating his late-seventies work, and Julie Lobalzo Wright's essay on "The Extraordinary Rock Star as Film Star". Chapters 14 by Dene October and 15 by Barish Ali and Heidi Wallace provide two different Deleuzian readings of Bowie's performativity, both describing it as a process of unfinished becoming in terms of gender and identity.

While Nick Stevenson's text on fandom and late style treats Bowie's meaning for and impact on his fans on a more general level, the volume's very last chapter by Vanessa Garcia is written from the author's very personal point of view: Garcia initially tells the anecdote about attending a painting class with artist Elizabeth Peyton, then takes the reader on a journey through her memory and her reading experience of Dana Spiotta's novel *Stone Arabia* (2011). By using the cultural icon David Bowie as a tool to unravel both the novel and her own relation to the text's implications, Garcia provides a perfect conclusion to the volume, combining theory and analysis with bits of subjective reflection that enable the reader to relate easily and enthusiastically to her writing.

Critical Perspectives brings together multiple interpretations of Bowie's contribution to popular culture. The strongest chapters are indeed those that do not try to theorise the artist's unconscious but acknowledge his fluidity instead—his allusive character, his mutability, his art of playing

with surfaces. Despite including perspectives that, naturally, have to be critically evaluated themselves, the volume successfully conveys David Bowie's contemporaneity, emphasising that he can be seen as a medium through which certain positions towards life and culture can be developed. Thus the critical perspectives *on* David Bowie are also the critical perspectives *of* David Bowie as "The Karma Man" (one of his earlier songs): "I see my times and who I've been / I only live now and I don't know why."

[1] See Gaylyn Studlar, "Masochism, Masquerade and the Erotic Metamorphoses of Marlene Dietrich". In *Fabrications: Costume and the Female Body*, edited by Charlotte Herzog and Jane M. Gaines, 229-243. New York: Routledge, 1990.

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