

Bowie's Books: David Bowie and Literature



13-14 January 2017
Avenue Campus, University of Northampton

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As an artist, David Bowie is famous for crossing boundaries of genre, form, and identity. But the touring “David Bowie Is” exhibition, curated by the V&A, has not only promoted an image of Bowie as highly literate and widely read, but documented Bowie’s extensive reading habits for the first time, making explicit the connection between his music, personae, and patterns of reading. *The Guardian* has followed this up with a list of Bowie’s “100 Must-Read Books” – <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/oct/01/david-bowie-books-kerouac-milligan>. This conference, hosted by the University of Northampton to commemorate the one year anniversary of Bowie’s death, aims to build on this new perspective on Bowie’s work, with a selection of papers that deal with the myriad connections between Bowie and literature.

Organisers:

Dr. Sam Reese
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Prof. Richard Canning
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Friday 13 January

9:30-10:00 Welcome and registration

10:00-11:00 Keynote: Nathan Wiseman-Trowse
“Writing / Imagining / Using Bowie”

11:00-11:30 Refreshments

11:30-12:30 Panel Session 1

Trip McCrossin: “Raising Newton—The Man Who Fell to Earth, Lazarus, and the Problem of Evil”

Peter Parker: “Bowie, Berlin and Isherwood: Just a Gigolo”

12:30-13:30 Lunch

13:30-15:00 Panel Session 2

Richard Canning: “The Effortless Bibliomancer?: Dolphins, Serpents, Bowie and the Legacy of Alberto Denti di Pirajno”

Sam Reese: “Black Star: Bowie, Bowles, and Oblivion”

Thom Robinson: “Watching the Cruisers Below: Bowie, *City of Night* and *Last Exit to Brooklyn*”

15:00-15:30 Refreshments

15:30-16:30 Round Table: Impressions of Bowie
Carole Hayman, Adrian Berry

16:30-16:45 Refreshments

16:45-17:45 Panel Session 3

Shawna Guenther: “All I Really Needed to Know I Learned from David Bowie: The Thin White Duke and the Academy”

Dene October: “‘Skull designs upon my shoes’: David Bowie Fans in the Media Mirror”

18:00-19:30: Performance of *From Ibiza to the Norfolk Broads*, including Q & A session.

20:00- Conference Dinner

Saturday 14 January

10:00-11:00 Keynote: Gavin Hopps
“Varieties of Voice in Bowie’s Lyrics”

11:00-11:30: Refreshments

11:30-12:30 Panel Session 4

Ciarán Treacy: “‘This Chaos is Killing me’: The (Anti-) Narrative of Bowie’s *Outside*”

Kevin J. Hunt: “David Bowie, Barnbrook Studios, and Visually Communicating the ‘Outsider’s Outside’”

12:30-13:30 Lunch

13:30-14:30 Special Session: Black Sifichi

“David Bowie and Black Sifichi: Two Histories Crossed from Afar”

14:30-15:00 Refreshments

15:00-16:00 Panel Session 5

Julie Lobalzo Wright: “Reading Bowie: Myths, Stardom, and David Bowie Is...”

Victoria Christine Wiet: “Reading David Bowie’s Homosexual Argot Across Time”

16:00-16:30 Closing Comments

Keynote and Special Sessions

Gavin Hopps, University of St Andrews: “Exempting from Sense: David Bowie and the Swooning of Language”

This talk is concerned with two interrelated features in the work of David Bowie: escaping the self and an exempting from sense. The former tendency is of course most pronounced in his serial adoption and renunciation of performatively constituted personae. Yet there is frequently in his lyrics, too, a more radical but less conspicuous evasion of self-expression and realist sense. This is, I suggest, manifest in a wide variety of textual features—such as the use of pastiche, nonsense, fragmentation, magic realism, elected banality, levity and metaphorical opacity—which seems, in some cases at least, to be the result of a ‘cut-up’ technique or what we might refer to as the *sprezzatura* of intoxication. In these and other ways, Bowie appears to renounce a conventional model of meaning, in which language is governed by and expressive of a self, in favour of one in which, as Deleuze has it, language itself is allowed to speak and caused to ‘swoon’—in which language is as it were set adrift to form its own meanings and is more concerned with the ‘production of presence’ than with ‘meaning effects’. What, in general, I wish to explore in this talk is the paradoxical hypothesis that Bowie’s lyrics may gain some of their power as a result and not in spite of their movement away from sense.

Black Sifichi: “David Bowie and Black Sifichi: Two Histories Crossed from Afar”

“I was born in 1960. David Bowie was born in 1947. We have the same middle name and we also have both changed our names. Jones to Bowie to Ziggy Stardust or 'A Lad Insane' and me first from Ross into 'Destiny' during my early years of acting school and in off-Broadway plays then later to Black Sifichi as I grew up to become an artist. Bowie studied with Lindsey Kemp and I studied with Stella Adler. Bowie was born in Brixton, London and I was born in Astoria, New York. We both have mothers of Irish heritage. We both come from middle-class working backgrounds. My mother loved Little Richard, and Bowie heard God when he first listened to *Tutti Frutti ...*”

Nathan Wiseman-Trowse, University of Northampton: “Writing / Imagining / Using Bowie”

If David Bowie has been recognised throughout his career as a pop chameleon, shifting identities and absorbing a myriad of cultural influences and styles, one might see ‘him’ as a difficult subject to pin down. Given his career spanning half a decade’s worth of rampant pop cultural change and hybridity, his status has consistently been assessed and reassessed through many different types of media, but most specifically for this paper, through the written word, from the weekly music press to the many biographies and appraisals of his life and work that have appeared in print. This paper assesses the variety of ways of understanding Bowie as experienced through those who wrote about him, considering Bowie not just as someone who makes music, but rather as an intersection between a material musician / artist and a literary rendition of that musician / artist through an intensely complex series of perspectives and uses.

Bowie in print may be as chimerical as Bowie’s public persona, both engaging with and confounding ‘genre worlds’ in a way that perhaps may give the reader some illumination, or the writer some means of articulating their own experiences. Whether it does anything for David Robert Jones may be another matter. In this sense I want to understand David Bowie, through the writing about him, as a literary fiction, one facilitated by certain forms of written music discourse at certain historical moments. How might writers such as diverse as Wilfred Mellers, Lester Bangs, Jon Savage, Simon Frith, Philip Norman and countless others, create this ‘fictional’ Bowie, and to what ends?.

Panel Speakers

Professor Richard Canning, University of Northampton:

Surely the most unusual inclusion in the list of David Bowie’s top 100 books was the second volume of memoirs by Alberto Denti di Pirajno (1886-1968), an Italian doctor (and later Count) who spent eighteen years practising medicine in Italian-administered North Africa. *A Grave For A Dolphin* – unlike its predecessor, written by di Pirajno in English – was published in 1956, just a year after his first book, *A Cure for*

Serpents, received wide acclaim, including in its English translation by Kathleen Naylor.

Bookfinder.com currently has just six copies for sale globally of *A Grave For A Dolphin*, rendering it just about *the* impossible text to set for the many book clubs of Bowie fans who have determined to read the entire hundred. *A Cure for Serpents*, meanwhile, is still widely available, having been reprinted by Eland Books in 2005, with an Afterword by renowned travel writer Dervla Murphy. This paper assumes nothing, and quite possibly declares nothing, in offering close readings of di Pirajno's writings through the prism of Bowie's creative legacy. Assuming that the book's inclusion in the list was not some sort of absurdist joke, I consider the ways in which the beliefs, claims and truths offered by di Pirajno, in respect of the deeply conservative Muslim societies he got to know in Libya, Ethiopia and Somaliland in the 1920s, might have struck Bowie as indispensable.

Shawna Guenther, Dalhousie University:

In a call for papers on a 2016 panel on lyrics as literature, Dr. Irwin Streight cites several musicians (such as Sting and Bob Dylan) whose lyrics have been considered (by themselves or others) as poetry, and asks scholars to consider the place of song lyrics as literature. Under such consideration, the list contains a glaring omission: David Bowie. I posit that David Bowie, as lyricist, musician, and creator of multiple fictional/real personae, is very much a *literary* figure worthy of serious scholarly attention for at least three major reasons. First, Bowie's lyrics, generally composed in a fragmentary style (and a fragmentary technique), are, despite their iconoclastic power, expressive of the despairing zeitgeist of the second half of the twentieth century. Bowie's prolific literary production includes songs that breach diverse cultural, political, and individual boundaries -- identity and sexual ambiguity, authoritarianism and revolution, apocalypse and messianic cultism, fanaticism and celebrity, futurity and intergalactic life -- while suggesting the temporal solution of wild escapism, through drugs, alcohol, sex, and, perhaps most importantly, art and creativity. Indeed, biographer Peter Doggett suggests that "Bowie effectively...created his own microculture." Second, Bowie's expressive mode is one that follows the literary tradition of intercourse: Bowie pays attention to his literary predecessors, his lyrics frequently alluding to novels and poems (most famously to George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four*). In turn, other musical artists use Bowie's work as influences on their own music, as fragments of their own songs, and as important pieces that deserve homage in the form of covers. For my own part, Bowie's canon

provides not only inspiration but the subtext for my upcoming non-fiction text. Third, and this point reflects Streight's question of whether the lyrics can be teased away from the lyrics and studied independently, one's lyric interpretation is enhanced not only by the musical styling but also by the personae attached to each album. *In toto*, the Bowie package is an iconoclast, an experiment in social philosophy, and a questioning of expressive modes.

Kevin J. Hunt, Nottingham Trent University:

In the list of David Bowie's 100 'must-read' books *The Outsider* occurs twice: once for Colin Wilson's 1956 study of remarkable but flawed individuals and then again for Albert Camus' 1942 philosophical novel of the absurd, *L'Étranger* [*The Stranger* or *The Outsider*]. This seems appropriate, because Bowie's position as an 'outsider' (or representative for the outsider) is a significant part of his appeal (as inferred by a YouGov [poll of Bowie's fanbase](#) taken in January 2016). As a creative artist who embraced the uncanny, the alternate, and the 'other' as a defining element of his star persona, this research explores how Bowie's outsider qualities are visually communicated through graphic design. In particular, I'm interested in how Jonathan Barnbrook's album cover designs (*Heathen*, 2002; *Reality*, 2003; *The Next Day*, 2013; *Nothing Has Changed*, 2014; and *Blackstar*, 2016) and involvement in the V&A exhibition *David Bowie is* (which included designing the exhibition catalogue) convey, and draw upon, Bowie's outsider status in the later stages of his career, when he was already an iconic figure within mainstream popular culture.

Trip McCrossin, Rutgers University:

"I'm done with this living," Newton cries out, ecstatic, eyes and arms raised aloft, in the climactic scene of David Bowie's and Enda Walsh's play, *Lazarus*. Thomas Jerome Newton, that is, the long-suffering extraterrestrial protagonist of Walter Tevis' 1963 novel *The Man Who Fell to Earth*. It first inspired Paul Mayersberg's and Nicolas Roeg's 1976 film adaptation, including Bowie's memorable characterization of Newton. And now it's inspired Bowie and Walsh to bring us as well, finally, a little over half a century later, late in 2015, the sequel that is the play. The proposed presentation takes its cue from Newton's outcry, on the one hand, the title of the play, on the other, with its biblical allusion, and finally the otherwise secular nature his overall storyline, beginning in the novel, to locate it in the long conversation about the problem of evil.

The problem of evil is commonly phrased as the question, “why do bad things happen to good people, and good things to bad,” or, a bit more philosophically, why in the world are virtue and happiness so often reflected in us so disproportionately. It began life as a theological problem, farther back even than the New Testament’s parables of Lazarus, indeed as far back as the Old Testament’s parable of Job—how, according to Milton’s turn of phrase in *Paradise Lost*, do we “justify the ways of God” to humanity? We can’t, Pierre Bayle famously insisted, in 1697 in the *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, not reasonably so at least, which he thought in turn shows reason to be less powerful than we might otherwise hope. The problem of evil is also a secular problem, as Susan Neiman has persuasively argued, in 2002 in *Evil in Modern Thought*, beginning its life with Rousseau’s public dispute with Voltaire midway through the eighteenth century. Human reason’s standing is again threatened, but without worrying about God’s—how can we make reasonable sense of a world teeming with suffering that would appear to defy reason?—in response to which arise primarily two competing perspectives, according to Neiman, which continue to this day, one beginning with Rousseau, insisting that “morality demands that we make evil intelligible,” the other beginning with Voltaire, insisting that “morality demands that we don’t.” The proposed presentation identifies Newton’s overall storyline more specifically, then, as reflecting in effect neither Rousseau’s perspective, nor Voltaire’s, but instead, what is arguably no less interesting, a novel sort of amalgam of the two.

Dene October, UAL:

The day Stephen Shapiro’s photographic study *Bowie* (2016) was published, I hastily took a snap to promote my good taste on social media. My phone’s camera spilled light across Shapiro’s beautiful cover, trapping my own reflection, a dark shape that by chance aligned perfectly with the shadow of Bowie cast by professional lighting. The serendipity became clear later that day as I wrote this proposal deliberating on the uncanny “anti-narcissistic form of self-reflection” (Boym, 2001) that media offers fans. Fan Studies vacillates between theorising fans as media-consumers (Sandvoss, 2005), active users (Duffett, 2013) and projecting identity onto it (Gee, 2003) tending to frame the interaction around an active/passive reader dynamic (per Barthes, 1998). However, my aim is to identify and explore media as reflecting back the image of the fan at the moment of their most enchanted engagement with the fan object.

I begin by outlining the concepts of *remediation* (Bolter and Grusin 2000) and *seriality* (repetition-with-variation or difference as per Deleuze

1994 and *différance* Derrida 1982) seeing Bowie as both mediated and media. This conceit is made possible via McLuhan's claim that *the medium is the message* (1999) and, tangentially, through Colin Wilson's claim that Bowie is a *medium* (Blanks, 2016). I then identify how Bowie-related media function as memory sites, looking at media-specific monuments as well as intermedial and remedial morphing between music papers, film, records and fan interactions.

Finally, I explore the notion of media-as-mirror, one developed from Holmes' observation of photography as "the mirror with a memory" (quoted in Ruchatz, 2010), Holdsworth's account of domestic television as a *black mirror* (2011), and my own work on fan memories as augmented by intersensual listening experiences with Bowie (October, 2015b). The character of Thomas Jerome Newton from *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (Roeg, 1976) is a cipher for these ideas, glancing 'himself' differently through multiple television screens (October, 2015a) and re-emerging as *Lazarus* (2016). That Bowie could not let go of this character is evidenced by Shapiro's photographic remediation of the film, and through fan reflection, one that engenders further reflections and seriality.

Peter Parker, Visiting Professor University of Northampton:

The 1970s have had a generally bad press, but this was the decade in which David Bowie rose to have a major influence not only in music but also in fashion and social attitudes. From *The Man Who Sold the World* (1970) to *Lodger* (1979) he produced a remarkable body of work that did much to change what people listened to and how they dressed, thought and behaved. Partly inspired by Christopher Isherwood's accounts of Berlin in its 'decadent' and sexually free Weimar heyday, but also to escape a bad drug habit that had become disabling while he was living in Los Angeles, Bowie relocated to Berlin in 1976 and remained there until 1979. It was during this period that he recorded his so-called 'Berlin Trilogy' of albums: *Low* (January 1977), "*Heroes*" (October 1977) and *Lodger* (May 1979). Bowie shared his flat in Schöneberg with Iggy Pop, who was also attempting to combat drug addiction and whose solo albums *The Idiot* and *Lust for Life* (both 1977) Bowie helped write and produce. The Berlin period also, however, harked back to an earlier phase in Bowie's career, and this paper will examine the lure of Berlin for the singer, from the era of *Cabaret* (1972) to that of *Just a Gigolo* (1979).

Dr Sam Reese, University of Northampton:

Reflecting on the death of Bowie in *The Boston Globe*, Ty Burr reminisced on *Lodger*, in which “Bowie’s pose (if it’s a pose) is of an exhausted world traveler, a musical hero out of a Paul Bowles novel.” The comparison, if instinctive, is nonetheless compelling; aside from gaunt, blonde appearances, Bowie and Bowles shared a range of conceptual preoccupations, not limited to world-weariness, oblivion and death. These points of intersection were made more explicit by Bowies’ final album, *Black Star* or ★, which co-producer Toby Visconti has described as his “swan song”: a conscious meditation on death and bodily disintegration. Both the title and the album’s insistent chiaroscuro imagery of darkness and light recall the moment of protagonist Port Moresby’s death in Bowles’ novel *The Sheltering Sky*, when “a black star appears, a point of darkness in the night sky’s clarity. Point of darkness and gateway to repose.” And although Bowles’ novel does not appear on the well-publicised list of Bowie’s favourite books, a copy of the novel was amongst the paperbacks collected in the *David Bowie is...* exhibition, attesting to the author’s familiarity with the novel (if not Bowles’ 1993 spoken word recording *Black Star at the Point of Darkness*). In this paper, I want to explore the influence of Bowles’ work on Bowie’s final album, considering how both writer and musician reflect on absence to map out the possible consolations of oblivion.

Thom Robinson, Bishop Grosseteste University:

My paper will examine the influence of two thematically-linked texts from Bowie’s list of 100 books: John Rechy’s *City of Night* (1963) and Hubert Selby Jr.’s *Last Exit to Brooklyn* (1964), American novels that met controversy on release for their stark depictions of gay and transgender subcultures. Interviewed in the 1990s, Bowie acknowledged the ‘huge impact’ that both books made on him, crediting *City of Night* with helping inspire his interest in androgyny and bisexuality. I intend to trace these texts’ influence on Bowie through the infatuation with androgyny, sexual ambiguity and American subcultures expressed throughout his work of the early 1970s. Firstly, I will contextualise Rechy and Selby in terms of their initial appearances alongside the lead writers of the Beat Generation in countercultural magazines of the late 1950s. I will then draw parallels between Rechy and Selby’s work and another of Bowie’s seminal influences, the underworld aesthetics of *The Velvet Underground* (highlighting Lou Reed as a fellow Rechy and Selby devotee). Finally, I will use ‘Queen Bitch’s lyrical image of

‘watching the cruisers below’ to establish the idea of Bowie as spectator in relation to these American source materials. Through doing so, I will present Bowie as a suburban youth in thrall to cultural evocations of otherness, setting a template later followed by successive generations of his own fans.

Ciarán Treacy, University of York:

Outside is at one and the same time David Bowie’s most sustained attempt to create a narrative-driven concept album, and the most fragmented, heterogenous and incomprehensible of his attempts at narrative form – less a sustained teleology and more a series of disconnected vignettes. I want to examine this paradox, observing how the narrative, or “anti-narrative” structure of *Outside* is comprised, and whether its incoherent state is a conscious, postmodern attempt to subvert meaning, or Bowie and collaborator Brian Eno – famous for his attempts to undermine the established manner in which an album is made - were simply overwhelmed by the chaos they were creating. I will look at the various ways in which meaning may be sought around the album – the music, the lyrics, the spoken “segues”, the liner notes, the accompanying music videos – and ask if any coherent meaning or order can be exhumed from the mass of chaos. I will also contrast the album with other album-based attempts at narrative (both Bowie’s own and those of others), to see how it departs from and subverts the form.

Victoria Christine Wiet, Columbia University:

This paper situates David Bowie’s oft-remarked upon protean performance of gender and sexuality within the verbal idioms characteristic of urban homosexuality in late nineteenth and twentieth-century London and New York City. That Bowie’s experimental gender presentation, especially in the early 1970s, provoked audiences to locate him within the tradition of homosexual dandyism is now something of a cultural axiom, as vividly exemplified by the comparison drawn between Bowie and Wilde in Todd Haynes’ *Velvet Goldmine* and Morrissey’s *Autobiography*. Yet, the presence of John Rechy’s *City of Night* (1965) on the list of Bowie’s “Must Read” books suggests the importance of the literary and linguistic to Bowie’s engagement of homosexuality’s subcultural practices. While this paper references Bowie’s comments on Rechy’s novel only in passing, it uses Rechy’s influence as a premise for pivoting away from the queerness of Bowie’s visual style and turning to face how the repeated use of gay slang throughout Bowie’s lyrical output provokes listeners to approach his

music with the reading practices generated by urban gay subcultures. Given that this idiom would be esoteric and even cryptic for many listeners, Bowie's use of homosexual argot promotes disorientation in those endeavoring to decipher the narratives of sexual encounter elaborated within his songs.

In exploring the interpretive responses mobilized by Bowie's use of gay slang, this paper positions Bowie against a surprising scholarly context: historiography on Victorian London's homosexual subcultures, where the idiom of *polari* and variations on androgynous and travestied style that would define the Soho clubs Bowie visited in the 1960s and 70s were first coalescing into an intelligible form of homosexual self-presentation. Scholars like Jeffrey Weeks, William Cohen and H.C. Cocks examine in various ways how what would become homosexuality consisted of a collection of hypervisible signs rather than a kind of sexual activity, making possible Lord Queensbury's infamous charge that Wilde "posed as a sodomite." Yet, at the same time, the homosexual body and his speech were made inscrutable because not everyone would be literate in decoding these signs, and so *polari*'s vocabulary provided a way of freely discussing sexual activity while deceiving public mechanisms of surveillance. This paper adapts the reading practices constitutive of homosexual urban communities to a reading of Bowie's lyrics, with particular emphasis on *Hunky Dory*'s (1971) "Queen Bitch" and "Girl Loves Me" from Bowie's last album ★. The confounding use of *polari* in "Girl Loves Me" resituates Bowie's engagement of homosexual styles of speech and dress within a larger project of nostalgia because of the idiom's new status as esoteric and reaching extinction. The song thus encourages us to redefine Bowie's citation of homosexual styles as not merely a project in rendering indeterminate the binary of sexual difference but a project in exploring the affective and hermeneutic consequences of obsolescence. Language and the literary are central to this project as an idiom's intelligibility depends upon the scope of its transmission not only across space across time, and Bowie's death makes all too poignant the nostalgic longing for a time and space where "Girl Loves Me" would be something other than indecipherable.

Julie Lobalzo Wright, University of Surrey:

Myths and mythology are ideologically rooted in allegories, stories and narratives. Myths often feature Gods or supernatural beings and film and/or music stars, our closest Gods and Goddesses, often exist between the 'real' and the 'imagined'- the real self and the constructed star image- similar to mythologies. As Edgar Morin wrote in *Les Stars*,

‘Stars are beings that partake at once of the human and the divine, they are analogous in some respects to the heroes of mythologies or the gods of Olympus, generating a cult, or even a sort of religion’.

The Victoria and Albert Museum’s *David Bowie Is...* exhibit, its most successful exhibit in the history of the museum, openly engaged with the mythology of stardom through the particular case of David Bowie. The title *David Bowie Is...*, with its open-ended dot-dot-dot, presented Bowie’s stardom, legacy and mythology as a flexible set of multiple meanings to a wide group of individuals. These meanings were to be read and interpreted through objects, images, and words- through the mythology of the star and the possibility of discovering the real self behind public image.

This paper will consider the V & A’s exhibit as an expression of David Bowie’s stardom, but also his mythology, which came to overshadow the individual in the last decade of his life and career. While Bowie’s visual image had always dominated the narrative of his career, the exhibit, and his final two albums (*The Next Day* and ★) displayed the importance of words, in addition to visual objects, to not only his oeuvre, but the reading of his star image. The exhibit also displayed how fans are always searching for the ‘real person’ beyond the star or mythology, with the exhibit actually confirming that the myth is more than the man, and we could never know who David Bowie is...