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BYE-BYE SPACEBOY: RECENT BOOKS ON DAVID BOWIE

DAVID BOWIE'S DEATH PRECIPITATED A DELUGE OF NEW BOOKS, and those considered here are a mere sampling. The guiding principle of the sample is, loosely, books taking a more serious or philosophical approach, since the context of my interest, aside from life-long fandom, is a university course I teach at the University of King's College. Such a phenomenon (the course, I mean) was enabled by the Victoria and Albert Museum's 2013 exhibition *David Bowie Is....* This show affected me, and others, with a sense of the legitimacy of serious inquiry into the artist, and the two volumes of academic essays that had arrived by 2015 (Eoin Devereux and Aileen Dillane's *David Bowie: Critical Perspectives* and Toija Cinque, Christopher Moore, and Sean Redmond's *Enchanting David Bowie: Space/Time/Body/Memory*) were driven by the same impetus. By this time Bowie had been clearly established as a defining cultural force for more than forty years—a figure who had over time expressed more than one *Zeitgeist* for his era and who, after the surprising release of 2013's *The Next Day*, was plainly making a whole new set of artistic moves in old age rather than parading the greatest hits reunion. Then came 2016's vastly ambitious *Blackstar* album, which was followed a few days later by the artist's death, when everything became suddenly and irrevocably retrospective.

Simon Critchley's *Bowie* (also found under the English title *On Bowie*) first appeared in 2014 and has since been revised to add three or four chapters reflecting on the meaning of Bowie's recent work and the effect of mortality on the whole of his work. Critchley's book has been much reviewed because of his standing as an eminent philosopher. He also has a line in outreach from the academy; for example, he writes a philosophy column for the *New York Times* and has written a little book, *Notes on Suicide*, which has affinities with *Bowie* in that it is personal, meditative, and aimed

at a general reader. *Bowie* is also much slighter than the description might indicate; it is an octavo volume and at least a third of the pages are blank, black, or have only line drawings. To call the sections “chapters” is an overstatement. Some are only three or four pages long, though most have some kind of pithy theme or aperçu holding them together. The book is as much about Critchley as Bowie—that is, it is a reflection on being a fan and on the ways in which elective affinities, recognitions, and identifications with a pop culture figure can be more potent forces in one’s life than can usually be avowed.

Nonetheless, I was taken aback by Critchley’s opening confession that “no person has given me greater pleasure throughout my life than David Bowie” (9). I don’t take this as a statement of the essential poverty of Critchley’s human relationships, since I was more struck on two other levels. For one thing, philosophers since the ancients (or perhaps only the ancients) take practising philosophy to be the best or highest human activity; what does it mean that a practicing philosopher admits to enjoying Bowie more? Why do we do it if there is no pleasure in it? The question of pleasure is of course itself a philosophical topic. What kind of pleasure is this, and should we take pleasure in a song like “Valentine’s Day,” which is about mass murder? My second pause was in relation to the notion that Bowie is a person. I’m sure there was a person there but, like most pop culture idols, there is also something more—call it a machine, an apparatus, an aura, a magnification. Bowie was an artist, but he was not an artist in the way Henry James was an artist—that is, he was not in total control of what he did. Indeed, it seems to me that there was a definite tension in Bowie’s work between artistic control and a more magus-like relation of letting go—putting people together and letting them do what they did best or submitting to planned accidents, as suggested by Brian Eno. Who made “Let’s Dance”: Bowie or Nile Rodgers? The idea of Bowie as a collaborative “artist” has largely vanished in the postmortem fog of adulation.

Having got beyond the first sentence, I found this little book to be thought-provoking and engaging. Critchley is obviously steeped in the songs and has some curious favourites that were always far from radio play. It is a worthwhile lesson to listen again on the basis of what he says. He is particularly strong on the appeal of Bowie to kids like him (and me), accurately evoking the circumstances of “our dumb, tangled-up, self-lacerating suburban confusion” (32). That this form of teen spirit is peculiarly open to

charges of being self-indulgent twaddle, even by those who experienced it, is also something Bowie seemed to know from the start—even your agony is inauthentic. Critchley is incisive, at the beginning, on this central problem of authenticity. Bowie was always about the truth of appearance and illusion—or, shall we say, authentic inauthenticity. A different Bowie begins to emerge towards the end of the book, in the postmortem section, when Critchley hears a “profound yearning for connection” (193) and “an extraordinary hope for transformation” (194). This is true in some places, but then there’s also “Ashes to Ashes,” to name one from another mood.

Critchley is, as other reviewers have remarked, light-handed in his allusions to his philosophical tools, and that is perhaps wise for the intended reader, though I’d have liked more on Martin Heidegger’s concept of mood (*Stimmung*) and what the play of mood does in Bowie. I’d have also liked a more robust account of why Bowie is not a nihilist, given his yearning for the end times and self-annihilation. Perhaps he is, instead, the great troubadour of nihilism—a condition that may need its songs. In any case, it is unfortunate to fix on the line “saying no but meaning yes” from “I Can’t Give Everything Away” as the key evidence for his “affirmative” art, given the echoes such a line has for feminism. But leaving you wanting more is not a fault in a book of this kind, and the only point of interpretation I would quarrel with is Critchley’s account of religion. It is correct that Bowie detested the “jiggery-pokery of organized religion” (193) and said as much in many songs. What is left out, however, is his knowledge of his own complicity in the “new religion”: cults of personality, idolatry in star culture, all those who are looking for the leper messiah, and what they might do to him if they found him. This is in “Ziggy Stardust” in the beginning, and it is still all over the song and video for “Blackstar” at the very end. Bowie knows how dangerous he is.

Theodore G. Ammon’s 2016 anthology *David Bowie and Philosophy: Rebel Rebel*, volume 103 in the *Popular Culture and Philosophy* series, is Bowie lite and philosophy lite, with short quick essays by a variety of academic philosophers trying to make a few points inside the sales horizon. They do make points of entry for discussion, if that is your idea of philosophy, although some of the authors seem to know very little about Bowie or to read very superficially, and too much of it centres on the biographical. Depth might be indicated by Nicolas Michaud’s “The Babe with the Power”: “what if the real world is only a creation of our minds, like in dreams?” (87).

Whooha. But others are more suggestive—even Ammon’s “The Flux of it All” (add Parmenides, stir, and yes, that is more like it). I believe something interesting should be done with Bowie’s near obsession with time, and there are ingredients here, especially in Christopher Kethcham’s “David Bowie’s Sadness.” But this book hardly offers the rudiments of a discussion of art and philosophy, takes its own “philosophy” in the most banal way, and attempts to offer some whizz-poppers to neophytes. Go, philosophy!

The most recent entry in academic Bowie studies is Will Brooker’s 2016 book *Forever Stardust: David Bowie Across the Universe*. Brooker is an English cultural studies professor who has written extensively in the field, including books on *Batman* and *Star Wars*. However, he got more buzz for the year he spent impersonating or channelling Bowie—wearing the clothes, reading the archive, having what he describes as a totally immersive experience “being” Bowie while doing his research. He began in May 2015 and ended a year later, after Bowie’s very obliging death, on-stage with an eye patch, scarlet hair, and six-inch heels. How then could he write such a very dull book?

The first chapter laboriously establishes that Bowie was not quite an author in the Jamesian sense and that, since interpretations vary considerably, we should accept them as subjective and personal; moreover, “Bowie’s work has a transformative role. It changes those who engage with it” (48). Writing on his work “is a co-creation with Bowie” (49). I tend to agree with these claims—my intellectual formation is also steeped in postmodernist thought—while nonetheless believing that some interpretations are better than others. For example, I find Chris O’Leary’s better than Brooker’s, and so does Brooker, judging from the number of times he cites O’Leary even when it is to argue slowly and carefully for a different reading. This book does not offer many new interpretations at all, but sticks to the well-worn topoi of Bowie commentary: suburbia, aliens, gender-bending, etc. This is a scholarly book—Brooker has read everything in the academic ambit—though there could be more from the culture. We don’t hear from Iggy Pop or Brian Eno, who perhaps did not want to be interviewed by a man dressed as Bowie.

This is a dutiful, middling academic book. The first chapter reads like a methodology and literature review—a thesis in sociology—and I became alarmed, not for the first time, by the staleness of the critical tool box in cultural studies. Brooker begins by explaining Michel Foucault’s “What Is an

Author?” (1969) and then reverts to Roland Barthes’ “The Death of the Author” (1969). By page 44 he predictably arrives at Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), Jacques Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* (1967), Fredric Jameson’s “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” (1984), and so on. These works were thrilling in their day, but there is no serious reader who doesn’t already know this. Who is the intended audience? Perhaps undergraduates, but even for them the topics could be covered much more quickly. This is not only Brooker’s problem; other academic writers on Bowie are equally stuck on Jean Baudrillard. There is, surprisingly, very little consideration of the feedback loop in the theory we use—that is, parts of the theory used in cultural studies arose as a result of Bowie and others like him, who immediately intuited the simulacrum.

Brooker continues to process Bowie through a set of categories and values entirely typical of 2017. The chapter on suburbia oddly concentrates on the relative dearth of references to actual suburban locations; for Bowie suburbia is not a location but a state of mind. The chapter on the alien has nothing really to say about Bowie’s space alien imaginary, but concentrates instead on race and the question of whether Bowie was a racist “appropriating” black music on the assumption that black music is more “authentic.” He puts forward as a defence that Bowie is actually “quoting” whiteness and thus problematizing it, though of course he “reaped the benefits of being white throughout his life” (105). Similarly the chapter on gender ends with a scolding tone: “A socially progressive gender fluidity, surely, should also aim at change on a more fundamental level, working to unsettle power structures...” (160). Bowie dwindles into an inauthentic poseur stuck at a level of superficiality—wait a minute, isn’t that what Bowie always was? And didn’t he say as much—from “plastic soul” to the conman in “Blackstar”? The last two chapters are better: a thoughtful take on death in the work and an interesting excursus, “Sailor,” in which the interpretation finally does become original. But in sum, Bowie has not changed this author enough—not nearly enough.

O’Leary’s 2015 book *Rebel Rebel: All the Songs of David Bowie from ’64 to ’76* is a song-by-song account of, well, every song from 1964 to 1976. It is a book version of the material that has appeared on his blog, “Pushing Ahead of the Dame,” since 2009, and it provides a great deal of detail on songs considered individually (including those that do not really deserve the attention). Useful material on supporting musicians, musical indebted-

ness, sources and analogues, and cultural context is joined by incisive critical remarks and trenchant and catchy judgements. The intense scrutiny of early work allows for a sense of evolution and development through to the most important era. O'Leary makes many generalizations and connections, but the song-by-song structure also means that sometimes the big picture recedes from view. I regret buying the Kindle edition; this is a reference work—a great aid to teaching and focusing one's thoughts—but its entries need to be flipped to by present interest rather than read linearly.

The book I most looked forward to receiving after Bowie died is not a new book, but merely an updated one: the seventh edition of Nicholas Pegg's encyclopedia *The Complete David Bowie*. It would be foolish to think that another edition will not be needed, when stuff starts coming out of the vault, but this edition does have a completeness nothing else could; it covers everything Bowie put out in his lifetime. Pegg, like O'Leary, is very adept at bringing the musicscape of the work forward in terms largely understandable by the unmusical. He is soaked in cultural references to the most minute sources, resonances, and contexts. This is all valuable, but it is not the reason for my high regard or for mentioning a new edition here. Pegg is himself a wonderfully nuanced and thoughtful commentator on Bowie. He often manages to provide fascinating readings in the condensed space of a short entry. For example, in the song "Rock 'n' Roll Suicide," which concludes *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*, the final refrain "gimme your hands, 'cos you're wonderful," which was a gimmick to get the audience to really reach out their hands, is often read as affirmative and/or consoling, but Pegg hears its ambivalence: it is *also* "a savagely ironic take on the Las Vegas schmaltz that is the last resort of the fallen superstar" (228). With Bowie, it is always both/and.