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Confronting Inauthenticity – Utopias of David Bowie

Review of Bowie by Simon Critchley

New York and London: OR Books, 2014. 192pp.

Bowie consists of twenty-one short chapters that function as a collection of conceptual fragments. Bowie's artistic work already provides a series of different periods each with its own stock of identities which could easily be comprised into different sections of this book according to, as Critchley calls them, illusions he inhabited, both musically and aesthetically. Although a sense of linearity is present, as the author tends to give an overview of albums and his own fan sensibilities, dividing the book according to Bowie's own artistic eras is avoided. The division into twenty-one chapters is much closer to breaking Bowie's work into conceptual categories that are present throughout his career and are related to questions of identity, sexuality and desire or sometimes even Bowie's own life in the background of it all. Still, as the author notes at the very beginning of the book – it is important not to conflate Bowie as a persona of popular music with his work. It is a popular approach in music journalism and production of music biographies to somehow look behind the performance in search of traumas that might have provoked an artist to perform in a specific mode. This is in its own a desire of authenticity always present with popular music that Critchley seeks to deconstruct in order to give more layers to Bowie's music, or as he is approaching it – poetry.

Therefore, in the first four chapters of the book, Critchley situates Bowie in the question of authenticity that we still seek to pose whenever confronted with a product of spectacle. Authenticity

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here is not what Bowie or his fans desire – his illusions follow the Warholian aesthetic of the inability to distinguish the illusion of reality from the reality of the narrative. But as it is elaborated in the book, this is not only Bowie's publicly projected sensibility since he is completely and ironically aware of the inauthenticity he represented Critchley notes that his self-awareness is perhaps best shown in the lyrics of Quicksand where Bowie refers to Himmler's understanding of National Socialism, calling it “sacred realm of dream reality,” thus comparing the reality of a political project to the one constructed through the reality of spectacle. Critchley suggests that it is this space where Bowie's work is situated and where it ultimately provides an opportunity not to confront one's authentic and true subjectivity but rather to confront the very lack of it. Bowie's (in)authenticity lays the ground for the second part of the book where Critchley explains the utopian dimension of Bowie's work as one of the constants throughout the decades. The next several chapters show that the utopia of Bowie's work is not only situated in rejecting the normative gender and sexuality categories but also in rejecting the superficial realism that is often appropriated to artists as their specific voice and virtue. We are then given a brief overview of Bowie’s construction of his various visual identities, which shows how Bowie rejected the realism of the street in 1960s England – mostly inspired by the low-budget science fiction films of the time.

In order to find authenticity in his art, Critchley claims that to grasp the utopian something Bowie's work possesses, we need to move away from seeking autobiographical traces of his own traumas. In the chapters “Hold On to Nothing” and “Hamlet in Space” we are given a further elaboration of Bowie's persona of Ziggy as a Nietzcheian Übermensch – his own superman character, which he finally destroyed once the era was over along with the fantasy of the existence of the supermen behind the human condition. Nothing that was left led many to believe that Bowie's work was somehow nihilistic.

In the next two chapters, we are given an overview of a period after the creation and destruction of Ziggy Stardust. Diamond Dogs and Scary Monsters point out Bowie's vision of collapsing civilization and dystopia that is often present in his work and is crucial to its analysis. “The Majesty of Absurd” and “Illusion to Illusion” perhaps represent the high point of this analysis. Drawing a parallel between Bowie's dystopian vision, Georg Buchner's Danton's Death and Celan's topological interpretation of its character Lucille, Critchley suggests that the dystopian vision of

both Bowie's music and his visual narratives is a necessary condition for utopia. Seemingly nihilistic, Bowie's work here is entirely re-interpreted. Dystopic features are where Bowie creates a connection between himself and us, as later chapters elaborate in more detail.

The last five chapters are dedicated to Bowie's work in the 1990s and his comeback to music. Critchley suggests it is the period where Bowie's yearnings and desires came more clearly into shape. It functions on both sides of the artistic vision – once he abandoned the modernist narrative schemes by finally killing Ziggy, Bowie developed what Critchley calls an artistic discipline to create, imitate and then destruct. Using cut-ups and fragmenting lyrics, Bowie creates a space of desire for the audience which, according to Critchley, the audience fills with longing. Finally, he suggests that by creating and destroying illusions, Bowie teaches us to follow him in confronting the nothing behind each illusion as a space of desire and re-invention.

Bowie is both literary criticism and personal memoir. Although we are provided with an analysis of Bowie's visual performance and identities, Critchley is primarily interested in approaching Bowie's music and lyrics as poetry, thus continuing the attempt he made in Things Merely Are: Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens (2005) to show that poetry possesses important philosophical insights for which there should be a poetic epistemology.

Besides subjecting Bowie to philosophy, Critchley is also attempting to situate his own experience as that of a fan immersed in Bowie's array of illusions. Fragments of his personal memory and experiences of growing up under the influence of Bowie's music are scattered throughout the book. He is entirely unapologetic about this and situates himself firmly in the memories of Bowie's generations of fans. Critchley's memories provide an insight into the subjectivity of a popular music fan, which does feel needed when we know that Bowie's entire work seeks such engagement and re-interpretation on the part of the listener – something that is rarely experienced in popular music. Although Bowie was openly political and philosophical throughout his career, it could easily be argued that his work was left almost exclusively to the interpretations of music journalists and various bibliographers who constructed a narrative of Bowie as a music genius imbued with an eclectic mash of nihilism and schizophrenic performance. Critchley challenges these conventional narratives ascribed to Bowie by opening a space for philosophical understanding of the relationship between Bowie as popular culture persona and everyone else who watches and listens.

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