

Bowie in Berlin, or, the Postcolonial Intellectual Unmasked

Graham Huggan

University of Leeds, UK

Abstract In this chapter, I use the perhaps unlikely figure of David Bowie to test the boundaries of the postcolonial intellectual, referring primarily to his years in Berlin, the city where, in his celebrated 1987 concert at the Reichstag, he sent his “best wishes to our friends who are on the other side of the Wall”. At the same time, I use Bowie’s extraordinary life and work, and the media machinery that surrounded it, to contest the so-called ‘demotic turn’ through which increasing intellectual authority has been given to ordinary citizens, each of whom can become a celebrity, if not necessarily an intellectual, in his or her own right.

Keywords Bowie. Intellectual. Postcolonial. Celebrity. Social media.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Bowie as Intellectual. – 3 Bowie as Postcolonial. – 4 Bowie as Celebrity. – 5 Coda: The Duke is Dead. Long Live the Duke!

1 Introduction

The best portrait of David Bowie I know is also the shortest: a chapter in the Canadian travel writer Rory MacLean’s excellent 2014 collection of interviews and sketches about historical and contemporary Berlin. Bowie, MacLean explains, was “driven by a relentless urge to create, as well as a great deal of cocaine”, reaching a nadir in LA where, for years already world-famous, he lived

in a kind of prolific mania [...] denying himself sleep for seven or eight days at a time [and] slipping into a bizarre, nihilistic fantasy world of [Egyptian mysticism and] imminent doom. (2014, 335)

Drug-addled, confused, increasingly taken over by his own theatrical personas, Bowie badly needed to escape – and he did so by returning to Europe, more specifically to “the capital of reinvention”, West Berlin (336).

Not that Bowie was a reformed character in Berlin; he was never a reformed character. The years he spent in Berlin were scarcely less manic than the ones he had previously spent in LA, and MacLean paints a vivid picture of Bowie, accompanied by his old chum and self-styled degenerate Iggy Pop, parading around the city in an open-top Mercedes, snorting coke whenever and wherever possible and “stumbling into gutters and [seedy] transvestite bars” (338). But at the same time, the Berlin years were cathartic, and the music he produced, notably the albums *Low* and *Heroes*, both “portrayed the darkness and purged him of it” (340), helping him in the process to exorcise one of his most negative personas, the faintly menacing, crypto-fascistic figure of the Thin White Duke.

The Thin White Duke (of whom more later) was himself a perverse Teutonic character, born of Bowie’s lifelong fascination with the Nazis and his own childhood experiences of growing up in the shadow of the Second World War (MacLean 2014, 343). But a few ill-judged comments aside, Bowie was no Nazi; rather, as MacLean suggests, he was entranced by the theatrical potential Nazism offered, and he studied Riefenstahl’s choreographed films and Goebbels’ “manufactured mythology”, even going so far as to sketch out a musical – perhaps thankfully never performed – “based on the Propaganda Minister’s life” (343). He was also keenly aware of Nazism’s victims, and the more he came to know Berlin, the more his sympathies extended to those other victims as he saw them: those East Berliners whose lives, scarcely known to him, were lived out on the other side of the Wall.

The double life of a partitioned city was always likely to appeal to a performing artist whose multiple selves were forever shadowed by multiple others, and whose romanticized portrayals of the marginalized and/or disenfranchised accorded with his own deeply felt sense of his own dissociated sensibility – of a double or, perhaps better, a multiply fractured self (Critchley 2016). Berlin was attractive in other ways as well: as a theatrical city, rich in pageantry and spectacle; and as a place of continual transformation, in which the young were seemingly in constant battle with the old and sometimes violent resistance to authority was, for many of the city’s residents, a way of life (MacLean 2014, 336-8).

2 Bowie as Intellectual

“Bowie in Berlin” is an oft-told tale, part of the Bowie myth, and I don’t intend to rehearse it properly here (for more worked-through renditions, see Critchley 2016; Seabrook 2008). What interests me, instead, is the extent to which Bowie’s time in Berlin, which was a catalyst for some of his best work, can also be seen as testing the boundaries of the postcolonial intellectual – and, by loose East-West association, of Europe itself (Huggan 2011). At first sight, using Bowie to test the boundaries of the intellectual, whether postcolonial or not, doesn’t seem like a particularly promising exercise. Bowie was formidably well read, but he had little desire to be seen as an intellectual. He was a celebrity, certainly, most of whose life was lived on a public stage; and he was also an aesthete of a kind, whose huge contribution to contemporary global popular culture involved the cultivation of a particular, post-Wildean version of the “aesthetics of the self” (d’Cruz 2015, 259). But he was hardly a scholar or philosopher-king, conventional albeit elitist understandings of the word “intellectual”; nor was he in an organic intellectual in the more inclusive Gramscian sense of someone who seeks to manipulate public opinion, and who may in turn be manipulated as a conduit for particular class or enterprise interests – as a route to political power (Gramsci 1996). Similarly, revisionist understandings of the public intellectual within the ostensibly democratizing context of so-called “citizen media” – a focal point for several of the essays collected in this volume – don’t quite fit the bill either; and while Bowie was well aware of the usefulness of new digital technologies in attracting and consolidating his mass following, he was much too much the individualist, and much too little the citizen, to commit to the collective forms of social transformation that such media activity supports (Stephansen 2016; see also Baker, Blaagaard 2016; Stephansen et al. 2019).

Bowie was an intellectual, perhaps, in the broad Saidian sense of “an individual endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying [and] articulating a message [...] to and for a public, in public” (Said 1996), in full knowledge that this message may not prove popular to the authorities, and may even be co-opted by the very authorities it confronts. But so scattered and inconsistent were Bowie’s “messages” that they hardly qualify as a thought-through agenda to advance the causes of freedom and justice, the cornerstones of Said’s “critical consciousness”; and many of his rebellious words and actions were clearly the product of confusion: emanations of a restless, and often dysfunctional, spirit rather than a coolly confrontational mind. To a large extent, Bowie let his music do the talking for him; and while his lyrics have been critically dissected, the consensus is often little more than a celebratory recognition that he was a fascinating “chameleon-like figure, one who continually reinvent[ed] himself in and

across the media and art platforms in which he [was] found” (Cinque et al. 2015, 1).

3 Bowie as Postcolonial

So much, then, for Bowie as an intellectual, but to what extent can be seen as a *postcolonial* figure? Further caveats apply here. The first and most obvious caveat is that the term “postcolonial” refers as much to a way of reading as anything else; it is certainly not an identifying label, though – frustratingly for postcolonial critics – it continues to be used as one in the service of the contemporary culture wars (McLeod 2000). Bowie, to put it bluntly, was not from the colonies, nor did much of his work – with some exceptions – intersect with colonial experience; and if he was “anti-colonial”, this was never thought through or acted upon in anything other than a broadly anti-authoritarian frame.

As suggested above, though, this doesn’t mean that his life and work can’t be read through a postcolonial lens, and indeed there have been some critical attempts to do so (see, for example, Hisama 1993; Redmond 2015). Probably the most interesting of these is by the Australian cultural critic Sean Redmond, who sees Bowie as having engaged more or less consistently in his work with the idea (and ideology) of *whiteness*. Whiteness, Redmond suggests, is nearly always double-edged in Bowie’s work, with his star image drawing attention to “the cloak of invisibility that whiteness usually travels under, uncovering whiteness in the process while creating the very conditions for its representational and cultural power to be sustained” (Redmond 2015, 215; see also Dyer 1997). While perhaps the best example of this is the previously mentioned alter ego of the Thin White Duke, Redmond focuses on three other Bowie “white masks” – the glancing reference to Fanon is wholly intended – all of which he draws from films or videos released in 1983. In juxtaposing the deathly vampire John Blaylock in *The Hunger*, the faux-messianic major Jack (“Strafer”) Celliers in *Merry Christmas Mr Lawrence*, and the cool-blond narrator of the video of “Let’s Dance”, Redmond shows how Bowie uses these pseudo-autobiographical figures to unmask whiteness as an always ambivalent, but also always potentially destructive, cipher for social hierarchy and colonial power.

To take just one of these three examples, the video of “Let’s Dance”, in Redmond’s words, “narrates the unequal relationship between two young indigenous Australians and the white power structures that operate on them” (225). Bowie features in the video as a lofty magus-figure, lording it over the people and places he encounters, but also critical of the position from which he enunciates – a position Redmond links explicitly to the postcolonial critique of white

imperial authority (226). As Redmond points out, though, this critique only goes so far, and in the final scenes of the video, which feature the Aboriginal couple dancing (red shoes and all) to Bowie's riff, it is clear – quite literally – that the white master is still calling the tune (227). The primitivist tropes of the “Let's Dance” video, which would later be repeated in the mock-Orientalist words and images of “China Girl”, may thus be seen as confirming the symbolic power of whiteness even as they try to uncover the false foundations of its privilege, undermining Bowie's ostensibly anti-racist “message” and appropriating the supposed authenticity of the indigenous/non-western other for himself (227).

4 **Bowie as Celebrity**

Much more could be said here, but hopefully my general point is made: that in his brilliant mimicry, his almost preternatural ability to channel other voices and other selves, Bowie found himself repeatedly torn between his imagined sympathy for the other and his own default narcissism: a postcolonial parable for our times. Let me return now to Germany and set the scene for one of Bowie's most memorable stagings of self-as-other: his 1987 concert at the Reichstag, within spitting distance of that pre-eminent symbol of twentieth-century self-separation: the Berlin Wall. This is beautifully described by MacLean, so I will rely on him in what follows:

Ten years after his departure from Berlin [...] Bowie returned to the divided city. In June 1987 his driver drove him past [his] old Hauptstrasse apartment [...] to a stage in front of the Reichstag. As night fell he performed to a crowd of 70,000 fans, their sparklers and candles glittering around the Platz der Republik. Towards the end of the show he read aloud a message in German. ‘We send our best wishes to all our friends who are on the other side of the Wall.’ Then he sang ‘Heroes’.

On the other side of the hateful divide, hundreds of young East Berliners strained to hear the echoes of the concert. They caught sight of stage lights flashing off blank, bullet-marked walls. They heard Bowie greet them. They listened to his song. Their song. Berlin's song. [“Heroes” tells the story of aggressive border guards at the Wall firing over the heads of an amorous young couple; as MacLean says elsewhere, it would become “Berlin's rock anthem”, a song so affecting and powerful that it may even have played its part in bringing down the Wall (2014, 343).] ‘We can be heroes for just one day’, Bowie sang in a daring, ironic elegy to both the divided world and his past life. Everyone can be a hero, can be their own hero, and love can prevail, if only for one day, if only in a myth.

As 'Heroes' reached its climax some of the East German crowd pushed towards the Brandenburg Gate, whistling and chanting, 'Down with the Wall'. They threw insults and bottles at the *Volks-polizei*, rising together against the Party's thugs in a rare moment of protest. On stage Bowie heard the cheers from the other side. He was in tears. (2014, 346)

It is difficult not to be moved by this. MacLean's superbly atmospheric rendition brings the event alive for us, encapsulating its raw emotion, and confirming Bowie's own confession, given to MacLean who spent some time with him in Berlin, that "It was one of the most emotional performances I've ever done" (346). "It was breaking my heart", Bowie continues:

I'd never done anything like that in my life, and I guess I never will again... That's the town where [the song] was written, and that's the particular situation that it was written about. It was just extraordinary. (346)

MacLean's conclusion, however, is less satisfying, playing into the romantic "Bowie-in-Berlin" myth by which our hero, having "made his journey from addiction to independence", emerges from

celebrity paranoia to [become the] radical, unmasked messenger who told us, all us fat-skinny people, all the nobody people who had dreamt of a world of equals, that we were all beautiful, that we could be ourselves. (347)

Here, a dose of postcolonial realism might come in useful. This is not to take away from Bowie's idealism; nor is it to suggest that he was unaware, whether in Berlin or elsewhere, of the social and political capital that might be derived from his star image and the global appeal of his work. Perhaps, as MacLean dreamily suggests, Bowie did indeed play his own small part in bringing down the Berlin Wall. However, this needs to be seen in the context of Bowie's own circumscribed world, the surreal world of a global rock star whose transgressive persona and cultivated eccentricities were, at least in part, deliberate attempts to inhabit an 'alien' realm of his own making, sequestered from social and political realities and encased in what he probably cared about most, creative attributes of Style.

Does this mean, then, that we should discount him as an intellectual in so far as the intellectual vocation is - by most accounts - a serious-minded one, dedicated to real-world transformation, the redress of social injustice, and the betterment of life? I would argue not. Bowie, after all, even in his most stupefied states, never stopped believing in the possibility of social change, though change for him resided

first and foremost in the creative reinvention of his persona – which is a very different thing to say than that he was interested in the reinvention of himself. For me, however, it probably makes most sense to see Bowie as a *celebrity* in Nunn and Biressi’s revisionist sense of celebrity as a contemporary form of “emotional labour” at a time when “the economies of affect and intimacy [have increasingly come to] structure public life” (Cinque 2015, 207; see also Nunn, Biressi 2010). The emotional work attached to celebrity can be conscripted to very different causes, not all of them particularly progressive; the main thing to emphasize is that, due in large part to their eagerness to be seen and heard in public, celebrities serve as useful conduits for social and political debate (Turner 2004).

This isn’t so far, after all, from Gramsci’s influential concept of the organic intellectual, with the obvious exception that celebrities are often given to style themselves as “ordinary” people even though the ruthlessly competitive media-driven world in which they move ensures that they are not (Huggan 2013; Turner 2004). It is not so much, as is sometimes mistakenly assumed, that celebrities are by definition anti-intellectual; rather their effectiveness depends on their capacity to function as more or less interchangeable commodities circulating within a global symbolic economy that mobilizes what the media theorist David Marshall calls celebrities’ “affective power” (Marshall 1997, xii). Celebrities, in this last sense, are bounded figures in a way that Bowie certainly was not, though it would be equally illusory to imagine that Bowie had full control over the marketing of his self-image, or that the artistic choices that governed his multiple identities were his and his alone.

Perhaps it might make most sense to see Bowie as testing the boundaries of *both* the intellectual (which he probably was not) *and* the celebrity (which he most certainly was). These boundaries, as I hope to have made clear, are permeable up to a point without being entirely porous; and so it is with many of the walls and borders – apparently increasing in number (Friedman 2016) – that are characteristic of our times. I first came across MacLean’s work during a public reading in the UK, where he read from his Bowie “Heroes” chapter. In the introduction to his talk, MacLean said that Berlin was, for him and Bowie alike, an enchanted city, “forever in the process of becoming” yet always haunted by its divided past (2014, 2). Since MacLean’s charmed life with Bowie in Berlin, the Wall has come down, but others have sprung up worldwide to replace it. As the geographer Derek Gregory said nearly thirty years ago, we live in a partitioned world that is shaped in large part by imaginative geography, and in which we never tire of finding new ideational as well as material ways of separating others from ourselves (Gregory 1994). This remains agonizingly true today – possibly truer than when Gregory first said it. The task of the intellectual is to challenge the ways of thinking that

help produce these walls; and Bowie's work, whether "intellectual" or not, has arguably contributed as much as anyone's to that task.

5 Coda: The Duke is Dead. Long Live the Duke!

Like most celebrities, Bowie was a creature of the media: a superb public performer, he was fully aware of the multifunctional appeal of his star image, and of the media's role in nurturing it as it metamorphosed from one, self-consciously spectacular stage to the next. As the media theorist Rita Figueiras argues, the increasing privatization of the public sphere has

led to the erosion of the modern notion of public culture built on rationality, reflexivity and critical spirit [the traditional properties of the public intellectual], and to the emergence of a culture of intimacy, informality and emotions [in its stead]. (2012, 145)

Bowie intuitively understood this. He also understood, in his own idiosyncratic way, that popular culture - including his own domain, popular music - was spawning new, emotion-driven kinds of social commentators, perhaps too loose and scattershot in their views to merit the term 'intellectual', but perhaps too socially conscious to merit the term 'celebrity', which suffers by association with the very narcissism it is often keen to disavow by, for example, supporting popular causes and morally upstanding works (Turner 2004).

It is not hard to see why these two terms, which have arguably never been opposed in the first place, have become increasingly blurred in an image-conscious age in which social recognition often seems to trump intellectual authority, and where celebrities offer sometimes unsolicited opinions on subjects about which they have little knowledge to audiences who are fully aware that some of these opinions make little sense. It is important of course not to exaggerate the hold that celebrity has - that celebrities have - over public opinion at a time when the very notion of 'public' has become increasingly fragmented, and the media channels through which it operates are increasingly dispersed (Dahlgren 2005). But perhaps we should be wary as well of seeing what Figueiras calls "the democratization of opinion production" (152) as a sign of the emancipatory potential of citizen media to mobilize dissenting counter-publics that lend voice to the marginalized and strength to the solidarity of the oppressed (Stephansen 2016; see also section 2 above).

Bowie's dissent, in any case, was of a different kind, more linked to his own rebel image than to realizable acts of social and political opposition; he was also ironically aware that the heroes he sang of were as transient, and as everyday, as celebrity itself. That said,

Bowie was no everyday celebrity, and part of his own staged rebellion was against the very idea of “ordinariness”: an ordinariness towards which much of his most powerful work shows a withering contempt. He was his own Starman waiting in the sky, his own Ziggy Stardust making love to his self-image; and he was keenly aware of the evanescence of celebrity culture – the professional imperative to move on from one celebrity persona to the next. Paradoxically, it was this extraordinary ability to shed his celebrity skin that was the guarantor of his lasting stardom: a stardom never more apparent than in the circumstances surrounding his death.

As I have noted before, nothing becomes the celebrity in his or her life like the leaving it, and Bowie was certainly no exception in this respect (Huggan 2013, 185). His untimely death in January 2016 was unexpected in so far as his long-term battle with cancer had – contrary to normative patterns of celebrity hyper-visibility – been kept out of the public eye (Van den Bulck, Larsson 2019, 308). What *was* expected, was the explosion of media coverage that swiftly followed upon it, much of it generated on social media. In scrutinizing the upsurge of Twitter activity produced by Bowie’s death – over 250,000 tweets via the #bowie hashtag within the first two days of his passing – communications scholars Hilde Van den Bulck and Anders Olof Larsson point to the broader phenomenon of “iMourning”: those various ways in which “audiences and fans [latch onto] social media as a means to unite virtually and share their grief” (Van den Bulck, Larsson 2019, 308).

Mediated mourning of this kind, the two authors suggest, supports celebratory views of Twitter as a

democratic communicative space [in which] fans and wider audiences create communities of mourners, express parasocial ties, perform creative acts and engage in worthwhile communication. (308)

However, they stop short of making the kinds of oppositional claims commonly linked with citizen media as a particular form of and/or catalyst for social activism, making it clear that what interests them are rather the ways in which popular Internet handles such as Twitter have the capacity to create multifaceted social networks around celebrity figures that extend well beyond self-designated fans (308).

They also question the ease with which social media have come to be seen as transformative spaces where “ordinary citizens” (311) can shape the news as well as participating in shared discussions about it. Twitter is a case in point in so far as different users exercise sometimes vastly different amounts of power and influence (312; see also Deller 2011). Van den Bulck and Larsson’s analysis of early Twitter reactions to Bowie’s death reveals a relatively small core of tweets, some of them retweeted several thousands of times, that

originate from what they call “a Twitter elite of mainly traditional media, bloggers, celebrities and artists” (319). This is unsurprising, they contend, in as much the relationship between celebrities and their audiences is

fundamentally mediated, and people [of all stripes are routinely] used to looking at media and other celebrities to guide them both in remaining up to date about celebrities and in many other aspects of their lives. (320)

Still, what the Twitter community shows in this particular instance is “a certain hierarchy of opinion leaders and followers, something that has been observed in other contexts as well” (321; see also Hills 2002).

It is possible, Van den Bulck and Larsson cautiously conclude, that Twitter responses to Bowie’s death will come to “prove typical of contemporary public responses to celebrity deaths in a networked society” (321), though they freely admit the shortcomings of their own research, which concentrates on a single hashtag (#bowie) operating over a limited period of time (48 hours). My own caution echoes theirs, but ranges across wider territory. Bowie was always allergic to categories, and perhaps we should be as well in view of overdrawn attempts to trace “the media’s demotic turn from the cult of the intellectual to the cult of the ordinary citizen” (Figueiras 2012, 149). To suggest that Bowie was unique is probably going too far; but if his specific case, along with the global circulation of his celebrity image, proves anything at all, it is that the shorthand of ‘cults’ and ‘turns’ is insufficient to account for *either* intellectuals *or* celebrities *or* ordinary citizens, or for the vast spectrum of differences contained within loosely descriptive categories that are not as convergent with each other as the too-easy phrase ‘demotic turn’ suggests.

Bibliography

- Baker, M.; Blaagaard B.B. (eds) (2016). *Citizen Media and Public Spaces: Diverse Expressions of Citizenship and Dissent*. London: Routledge.
- Cinque, T. (2015). “Semantic Shock! David Bowie”. Cinque, Moore, Redmond 2015, 197-214.
- Cinque, T.; Moore, C.; Redmond, S. (eds) (2015). *Enchanting David Bowie*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Critchley, S. (2016). *On Bowie*. London: Serpent’s Tail.
- Dahlgren, P. (2005). “The Internet, Public Spheres, and Political Communication: Dispersion and Deliberation”. *Political Communication*, 22, 147-62.
- D’Cruz, G. (2015). “He’s Not There: Velvet Goldmine and the Spectres of David Bowie”. Cinque, Moore, Redmond 2015, 259-74.
- Deller, R. (2011). “Twittering on: Audience Research and Participation Using Twitter”. *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*, 8(1), 216-45.

- Dyer, R. (1997). *White*. London: Routledge.
- Fanon, F. (2007). *Black Skin, White Masks*. Transl. by R. Philcox. New York: Grove Press.
- Figueiras, R. (2012). "Intellectuals and Social Networks: New Media, Old Traditions". *MATRIZES*, 6(1-2), 145-60.
- Friedman, U. (2016). "A World of Walls". *The Atlantic*, 19 May. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/05/donald-trump-wall-mexico/483156/>.
- Gramsci, A. (1996). *Prison Notebooks*. Transl. and ed. by J.A. Buttigieg. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Gregory, D. (1994). *Geographical Imaginations*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hills, M. (2002). *Fan Cultures*. London: Routledge.
- Hisama, E. (1993). "Postcolonialism on the Make: The Music of John Mellencamp, David Bowie and John Zorn". *Popular Music*, 12(2), 91-104.
- Huggan, G. (2013). *Nature's Saviours: Celebrity Conservationists in the Television Age*. London: Routledge; Earthscan.
- Huggan, G. (ed.) (2011). "Postcolonial Europe". *Moving Worlds: A Journal of Transcultural Writings*, special issue, 11(2).
- MacLean, R. (2014). *Berlin: Imagine a City*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
- McLeod, J. (2000). *Beginning Postcolonialism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Marshall, D.P. (1997). *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Nunn, H.; Biressi, A. (2010). "'A Trust Betrayed': Celebrity and the Work of Emotion". *Celebrity Studies*, 1(1), 49-64.
- Redmond, S. (2015). "The Whiteness of David Bowie". *Cinque*, Moore, Redmond 2015, 215-30.
- Said, E.W. (1996). *Representations of the Intellectual*. New York: Vintage.
- Seabrook, T.J. (2008). *Bowie in Berlin: A New Career in a New Town*. London: Jawbone Press.
- Stephansen, H.C. (2016). "Understanding Citizen Media as Practice: Agents, Processes, Publics". *Baker, Blaagaard* 2016, 25-41.
- Stephansen, H.; Couldry, N.; Treré, E. (eds) (2019). *Citizen Media and Practice: Currents, Connections, Challenges*. London: Routledge.
- Turner, G. (2004). *Understanding Celebrity*. London: Sage.
- Van den Bulck, H.; Larsson, A.O. (2019). "'There's a Starman Waiting in the Sky': Mourning David #Bowie on Twitter". *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 25(2), 307-23.

