



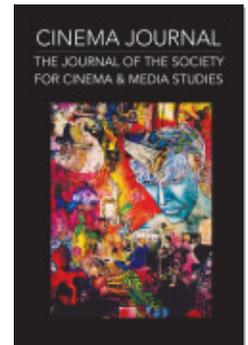
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*Future Nostalgia: Performing David Bowie* by Shelton Waldrep  
(review)

Lisa Perrott

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sociological studies understandings of the contextual and industrial specificities of the contemporary celebrity cultures in which the aforementioned star texts operate and circulate. He therefore demonstrates the extent to which the former retains its purchase as an analytical tool, methodological approach, and conceptual entry point into raising and addressing questions about body politics in contemporary popular culture. But he also goes to some lengths to account for the importance of the relationship between text and context. In so doing, he makes abundantly clear the sociopolitical urgency that underpins the cultural work done by the stars he uses as his case studies and the research questions posed by this work. His discussions thus shed considerable light on the relevance, topicality, and cultural barometer status of each case study, with regard to debates about the corporeality of citizenship that arise from the US cultural politics of issues like obesity, disability, immigration, the socioeconomics of intergenerationality, and the changing legal rights of LGBTQ+ citizens and communities.

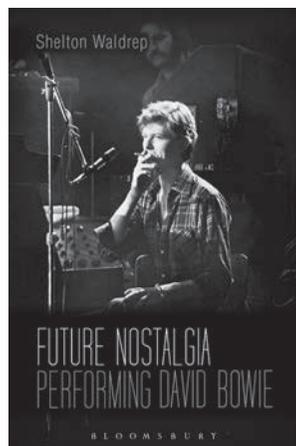
*Rebellious Bodies* is a highly engaging book that makes a smart and important contribution to star and celebrity studies, and to scholarship on twenty-first-century Hollywood and the cultural politics of identity. It offers a timely snapshot of neoliberal Hollywood celebrity culture and its intersectional body politics during the Obama era and at a time when the Trump era's assaults on diversity and inclusivity bring the urgency of answering the questions raised by this work into increasingly sharp focus.\*

## Future Nostalgia: Performing David Bowie

by Shelton Waldrep. Bloomsbury.  
2015. \$100.00 hardcover; \$24.56 paperback;  
\$25.99 e-book. 240 pages.

reviewed by LISA PERROTT

**O**n my way to Melbourne to give a presentation at the symposium *The Stardom and Celebrity of David Bowie*, the airport customs official smirked and shook her head in disbelief—"Really? Your university is sending you to a David Bowie conference? Well, I've heard it all now!"<sup>1</sup> Interpreted as frivolous fandom, many New



1 Katrina Grant, "Symposium | The Stardom and Celebrity of David Bowie | ACMI," *Melbourne Art Network*, May 19, 2015, <http://melbournartnetwork.com.au/2015/05/19/symposium-the-stardom-and-celebrity-of-david-bowie-acmi/>.

Zealanders were dubious about the prospect that a figure like Bowie might generate serious scholarly attention. Despite such antipodean bemusement, the year of 2015 was strangely fascinating for the emerging field of Bowie studies. It was a year marked by a hive of activity devoted to studying, celebrating, and performing David Bowie. This was the year when news presenters donned tailored ice-blue suits reminiscent of the Freddie Burretti–designed outfit depicted in the music video for *Life on Mars*, when fashion photographers focused their lenses on androgynous models adopting Bowie-esque poses, glammed up in Ziggy Stardust garb or Thin White Duke suits. There were musical tributes, academic conferences, and exhibitions devoted to Bowie. In 2015 the critically acclaimed *David Bowie Is* exhibition made its presence felt in Chicago, Paris, Melbourne, and Groningen, achieving record-breaking attendance.<sup>2</sup> I gorged on the feast of the Melbourne *David Bowie Is* exhibition and the conjoined Bowie conference. Staged at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image, these events energized the heart of Melbourne, drawing in stylish fans, pundits, and the performative presence of serious Bowie doppelgängers.<sup>3</sup> The intensity of examination, dissection, and celebration—verging on worship of Bowie—felt preemptive, like the sort of laudatory activity triggered by the death of a great thinker or artist.

There seemed to be a prescience to the collective unconscious in this year leading up to Bowie's death. Academics, fans, and “aca-fans” indulged in critical and creative events and publications, which examined Bowie as a serious cultural phenomenon. *Future Nostalgia: Performing David Bowie* took its place within the pantheon of these critical Bowie books of 2015, which included *Enchanting David Bowie: Space/Time/Body/Memory*, *David Bowie: Critical Perspectives*, and *Experiencing David Bowie*.<sup>4</sup> Authored and edited by an articulate collection of scholars representing diverse disciplines, identities, and locales, these books have helped establish Bowie studies as a serious scholarly field.

To this pantheon *Future Nostalgia* contributes an expansive interdisciplinary examination of the cultural and aesthetic influence of Bowie as he engaged in various performative practices. Examining several different approaches to the study of performance, Waldrep aims to stay close to his original thesis—“that Bowie gives us a way to understand the vicissitudes of performance, aestheticizing the link between rock music and everyday life by calling attention to the artificiality of both.”<sup>5</sup> Such a thesis can be likened to woven silk—when cut it opens up a frayed edge, with numerous threads unraveling in multiple directions. Although remaining proximal to his thesis, Waldrep invites his readers to pick up and follow many tangential threads.

2 Martin Bailey, “How David Bowie Show Went from Hard Sell to Record Breaker,” *Art Newspaper*, March 31, 2016, <http://theartnewspaper.com/reports/david-bowie-is-a-platinum-success-/>.

3 Alisha Gani, “Ch-ch-ch-Changes: Academic to Spend Year as David Bowie's Many Personas,” *The Guardian*, August 18, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/aug/18/ch-ch-ch-changes-academic-to-spend-year-as-david-bowies-many-personas>.

4 Shelton Waldrep, *Future Nostalgia: Performing David Bowie* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015); Toija Cinque, Christopher Moore, and Sean Redmond, eds., *Enchanting David Bowie: Space/Time/Body/Memory* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015); Eoin Devereux, Aileen Dillane, and Martin Power, eds., *David Bowie: Critical Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Ian Chapman, *Experiencing David Bowie: A Listener's Companion* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

5 Waldrep, *Future Nostalgia*, 3.

*Future Nostalgia*'s most significant contribution is Waldrep's probing examination of Bowie as a performer—one whose performativity across music, stage, visual media, and everyday life incites further performativity. Rather than relying on a conventional or singular understanding of performance, Waldrep critically surveys a number of differing approaches, all of which are important for understanding the sheer complexity of Bowie as a performer, his impact on mass culture and subcultures, and his role in liberating identity.

The first chapter provides an extensive discussion of performance art, which includes stage and theatrical performance, Brechtian minimalism, mime, Asian theater gesture, the performativity of the *bunraku* puppet theater, performative body art, and the performance of self in relation to personae. In other sections, Waldrep discusses musical and vocal performance as well as the notion of performativity as a banal aspect of everyday social interactions. Chapter 1 includes a useful examination of Bowie's engagement with the pastiche of gender. While noting that Judith Butler's theories of gender and sexuality are helpful for their emphasis on performativity, more space could have been devoted to discussing specifically how Butler's theory of performativity could be usefully applied to an examination of Bowie's gestural performances. Waldrep notes that for Butler, "gender has no script, no origin story, and therefore must be constantly performed in order to keep up the illusion that it is natural," but he omits Butler's theorization on how gender codes can be subverted through reiterated bodily performances that defamiliarize normalized gender codes.<sup>6</sup> Bowie provided some excellent examples of his role in this cycle of performativity, played out via gestural reiteration across album covers and in music videos such as "Boys Keep Swinging" and "The Stars (Are Out Tonight)." Although Waldrep may not have found Butler's theory of performativity to be useful to his analysis, he devotes much attention to examining how Bowie "recodes the body for the future."<sup>7</sup>

In conjunction with his multifarious theoretical examination of performance, Waldrep's interdisciplinary approach is a key strength of this book. He draws from, and contributes to, the disciplinary fields of performance studies, cultural studies, art history, visual culture, music criticism, gender studies, and disability studies. Though requiring readers to hop intellectually from one perspective to another and to delve into what might be foreign theoretical terrain, this multiaccented movement across disciplines is in keeping with the way in which Bowie approached his personal and intellectual development and his work across media platforms. It has been said that "Bowie was the Internet before the Internet existed"—a repeated metaphor that alludes to Bowie's capacity to connect his audience in a rhizomatic sense, so that endless lines of connection are established between sign systems, power relations, and social struggles, leading to new knowledge and cultural enrichment.<sup>8</sup> Bowie's songs, music videos, stage and film performances, and visual artworks constitute an enchanting synthesis of signs and cultural, literary, and philosophical references, such that fans of

6 Ibid., 32.

7 Ibid., 41.

8 Katharine Wroth, "David Bowie Was the Internet before the Internet Existed," *Grist*, January 15, 2016, <http://grist.org/living/oh-you-thought-we-were-done-talking-about-bowie/>.

Bowie have described being turned on and opened up to an endless network of new material from which to spark the brain, body, and soul, leading to identity liberation and the generation of new cultural forms.<sup>9</sup>

One of the ways in which Waldrep demonstrates this process is by discussing the persistence of the dandy as a framework for understanding the performative dimension of Bowie in relation to subcultures and resistance. By first establishing the dandy as a figure of alterity within cultural history, Waldrep examines how this symbol has been variously played out in the work of avant-garde artists and popular culture. To illustrate this, Waldrep examines the work of a variety of visual artists, such as Yinka Shonibare, Oscar Wilde, Leon Johnson, Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons, and Klaus Nomi. By linking the cultural history of the dandy with these avant-garde artists and subcultures such as punk and goth, Waldrep follows in the spirit of Bowie by bridging high and low culture, and by opening up a discourse with diverse audiences.

While designed to cater more to a scholarly audience, large parts of the book would also be accessible to a general audience and appeal to followers of Bowie and music culture enthusiasts.<sup>10</sup> Such readers may be pleasantly surprised at the extent to which the book not only deepens their understanding of Bowie as a performer but also opens up new areas of knowledge, thus enriching their understanding of Bowie, performance, music, and culture. While the theoretical content of the book is vital to providing this enriching experience, a few chapters of the book suffer from theoretical excess, and this may be a source of frustration to some readers. For instance, chapter 3, “Avatars of the Future: Structuring Music,” begins with a lengthy critique of Adorno’s theorization of popular music, followed by a discussion of Bernard Gendron’s response to Adorno. This provides an interesting window onto how Adorno interpreted popular music in a diametric sense, in contrast to what he considered “serious music.” However, this section does little to contextualize Bowie’s approach to constructing music other than to point out that “combining high and low, he proves that Adorno’s rejection of the popular in preference for the avant-garde need not be the only solution to the split between high and low, or artistic and vernacular, culture that Adorno bemoaned.”<sup>11</sup>

Despite the slight frustration of wading through Adorno’s hierarchical approach to musical value and gendered listening, the chapter sections that follow provide a thoroughly engaging detailed analysis of selected Bowie albums and songs. Particularly riveting is Waldrep’s analysis of “Ashes to Ashes,” along with several other songs from the *Scary Monsters* (1980) album, providing a detailed and convincing rationale for why he rates this song and album as Bowie’s best musical work. Less convincing is his judgment of the album *Young Americans* (1975), which he does not analyze but of which he notes that it includes “five slow songs in a row that begin to sound the same—aural wallpaper, or the feeling that we are getting a black nightclub performance done too seriously. This is not Bowie’s most compelling music and seems to come

9 Lisa Perrott, “Bowie the Cultural Alchemist: Performing Gender, Synthesizing Gesture and Liberating Identity,” *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 31, no. 4 (2017): 528–541.

10 Office of Public Affairs, “English Professor Shelton Waldrep Publishes Book: *Future Nostalgia: Performing David Bowie*,” University of Southern Maine, January 12, 2016, <https://usm.maine.edu/publicaffairs/english-professor-shelton-waldrep-publishes-book-future-nostalgia-performing-david>.

11 Waldrep, *Future Nostalgia*, 78.

close to becoming generic or mood music.<sup>12</sup> Authors are entitled to make subjective judgments, but this statement would appear to dismiss a rich and sophisticated album with a fascinating production process. As much as the *Scary Monsters* album screams out for detailed analysis, the *Young Americans* album calls for in-depth analysis along with an examination of the fascinating cultural and political context underpinning its production process—as demonstrated by Amedeo D’Adamo and Chris O’Leary.<sup>13</sup>

With regard to production process, Waldrep’s examination of the use of the studio as an instrument in the creation of modern rock music is fascinating and extremely thorough. His historical overview of the spatial elements of musical composition elucidates the innovations of Frédéric Chopin, Erik Satie, John Cage, and Brian Eno, ultimately demonstrating how Bowie fed off a long tradition of musical innovation. The notion of compositional innovation weaves its way through the book, as Waldrep demonstrates Bowie’s simpatico relationship with musical, literary, and cultural innovators of aleatory composition, such as William Burroughs and Brian Eno, in a way that speaks to practitioners, scholars, and fans.

No single book can possibly provide a complete examination of the performative significance and legacy of a figure such as David Bowie. A book on such a topic will inevitably be critically appraised for its omissions, excesses, structural oddities, and tangents. While I have drawn attention to some of these points, my lasting impression of *Future Nostalgia* is that these are in keeping with Bowie’s oddities. Like the lyrics of a Bowie song, Waldrep’s tangential threads drew me in and opened up new cultural and intellectual pathways. Such is the strange fascination of Bowie studies. \*

12 Ibid., 88.

13 Amedeo D’Adamo, “Ain’t There One Damn Flag That Can Make Me Break Down and Cry? The Formal, Performative and Emotional Tactics of Bowie’s Singular Critical Anthem ‘Young Americans,’” in *Enchanting David Bowie: Space/Time/Body/Memory*, ed. Tojja Cinque, Christopher Moore, and Sean Redmond (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 119–151; Chris O’Leary, “Reissues: Win,” *Pushing Ahead of the Dame* (blog), August 9, 2016, <https://bowiesongs.wordpress.com/category/young-americans-1975/>.