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Transition Transmission: Media, Seriality and the Bowie-Newton Matrix

(Author's Accepted Manuscript)

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Abstract: The character Thomas Jerome Newton survives the film *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (Roeg 1976) to appear in adaptations, music videos and the play *Lazarus* (2015). Like David Bowie he can be understood as a serial figure, one who exists as a series across media. The notion of Bowie as changeling resonates with popular culture's preoccupation with identity and a common trope of biographies in reading his music (Pegg 2016), film (Lobalzo Wright 2015) and art (Paytress and Pafford 2000), yet there has been little attempt to acknowledge recursive themes and patterns or explore his identity as serially instantiated through and across media or read his story through a transmedia lens (Jenkins 1972). Working with the concepts of performance theory and performativity (Derrida 1982, Butler 1990), celebrity (Marshall 2014), media communications (McLuhan 1951), actor-network theory (Latour 1993) and seriality (Kelleter 2014, Buonanno 2008), I ask about Bowie's agency as medium for 'his' characters, a conceit made possible via McLuhan's claim that *the medium is the message* (1999) and indeed, Bowie's own suggestion that he 'is the medium for a conglomerate of statements and illusions' (cited Hauptfuhrer 1976). Drawing particular attention to the figuration of *Bowie-watching-Newton-watching* (after a sequence in Roeg's film), I pursue the notion of a Bowie-Newton matrix (October 2003, 2012, 2015a, 2015b), and speculate on the dispersed agencies – of author/actor, character, and studious viewer – behind Newton's resurrection.

Keywords: seriality; media-consciousness; Bowie-Newton matrix; character-agency;
agent of continuation

Transition Transmission: Media, Seriality and the Bowie-Newton Matrix

But the film is a saddening bore

‘Cause I wrote it ten times or more

It’s about to be writ again

– ‘Life on Mars?’ David Bowie, 1971

‘The TV puts over its own plan’: Media and Message

On July 6th, 1972, after nearly a decade seeking fame, David Bowie pointed through one of the cameras recording BBC’s weekly music chart show *Top of the Pops* and sang to the watching audience that he *had* to phone someone ... *so I picked on you-hoo-oo*. The performance identifies technologies and practices, such as listening to the radio, as linked in a network of media that the titular ‘Starman’ channels his energy through, one that can dim lights, induce a ‘wave of phase’ and ‘may land tonight’ but only if given the appropriate user signals (‘if we can sparkle’). This *star-man* is not David Bowie himself, rather a force that the song’s narrator eulogises, one that ‘all the children’ should learn to use and one that suggests how any public figure is created by the synergies of media and message (McLuhan 1964). ‘Starman’ was initially left off the album *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* (1972) – included only at the insistence of his record company, RCA – and is the most surprising musical omission from *Lazarus* (2015), given its value as a placeholder for Bowie (and the alien Thomas Jerome Newton)¹. On the day Bowie’s death was announced, Londoners gathered in Brixton for a spontaneous party; ‘Starman’ was not the only song they sang, but the one most knew best.

In many ways, 'Starman' is an example of how content, unhooked from the past through postmodern modes of media consumption and convergence, migrates across information and media platforms, without compelling a unifying message. Yet it is also an example of how media connects users in networks where experience can be shared. As the song goes, 'that's far out' because 'you heard him too': we (the singer and his audience) hooked up through the medial extension. Bowie is one of many inter-connecting media in the matrix, for, whoever the *star-man* is, this message is one 'he told me'. Equally, it can be argued that the success and continuation of 'Starman' occurs through the economies of popular culture where consumer feedback is an integral part of serial processes alongside authorial and character agencies. While Bowie exemplifies this media seriality, and identifies it as a cultural truth, he does not transcend the medial environment but freely admits to his own immanence as medium.

'Starman' advocates the study of media, a message that continues serially through Bowie's characters. At several points in the film *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (Roeg 1976), we are invited to watch him in his character study of Thomas Jerome Newton, the latter watching an array of screens some of which he features on. This television viewing is coded as alien and other, and there is as much ambiguity about who we are watching – star or character – as there is about intermedial address: what exactly does all this television watching signify? For some reviewers, Newton's 'dysynchronous' and 'discontinuous' television consumption marks an 'original way of thinking and perceiving' (Jameson 1991, p. 65), suggesting a relationship between his otherness and his studied ability to marshal media. For others, media effects are bound to be deleterious: '[t]he more he sees, the less he seems to know' (Sinyard 1991, p. 61). The question of Newton's agency takes on greater poignancy in the light of his migration between media, escaping the metaphorical gravity of Nicolas Roeg's film and

materialising serially and erratically in the albums (and art to) *Station to Station* (1976) and *Low* (1977); Paul Mayersberg's television movie rewrite (1987); the play *Lazarus* co-written by Bowie and Enda Walsh (2015); Johan Renck's video for 'Blackstar' (2015) and Tom Hingston's video for the posthumous Bowie single 'No Plan' (2017).

According to Stevenson (2006, p. 62), Newton can be partially read as the creation of the alien-styled singer, representing a key concept for understanding him, if not (say Gillman and Gillman, 1986, p. 414) an uncanny parallel. Indeed, David Bowie's own television consumption has come into focus in recent years as a source of inspiration – as his early memories² and fannish interest³ show – and evidence of his concern with the power of media. 'Television is the most fascist', Bowie tells *Playboy* (Crowe 1976c, p.61), identifying its potential as a medium which could be deployed for rapid change. 'It's like a kaleidoscope', he says, advocating its study (O'Grady 1975, p.6).

'No matter how many little colours you put in it, that kaleidoscope will make those colours have a pattern ... and that's what happens with TV – it doesn't matter who puts what in the TV, by the end of the year there's a whole format that the TV put together. The TV puts over its own plan.' (ibid.)

Television seems to have its own plan in the song 'TVC15' (1976), written in the wake of Roeg's film in a drug-induced frenzy and still channelling the character Newton. Here television has evolved into something 'quadrophonic ... got more channels, so holographic', a media that consumes viewers – including his 'baby', the date who accompanies him back to his room – and extends our senses, offering a 'rainbow way' through which Bowie can follow her. Such medial consumption is perhaps what Marshall McLuhan means by insisting, 'The inner trip is not the sole prerogative of the LSD traveler; it's the universal experience of TV

watchers' (interviewed by Norden 1969, p.59).

Multiple agencies and power dynamics thus suggest themselves. Bowie's plagiaristic authorship of Newton suggests Bowie uses media to a desired effect. Yet Bowie's fascination with Newton also engenders a more speculative reading of the character as working the author: here, Newton is an agent in his own serial continuation, an idea suggested by Bowie's confession in Alan Yentob's documentary *Cracked Actor* (1974) that Ziggy Stardust continued to haunt him. A third reading focuses on the entanglement of Bowie and Newton as elements of a generative system; here agency is spread across a matrix in which the Bowie-Newton figuration acts as a *mise en abîme* for the watching fan's medial study.

This article examines these competing claims for agency using several theoretical compasses within the subject areas of *performativity* and *seriality*, particularly in relation to the concepts of media and authorship, and Bruno Latour's (1993) notion of actor-network, which I ally to my own recent work on Bowie-as-matrix (October 2003, 2012, 2015a, 2015b). Bowie's agency is indicated by his authorship of public personae, manipulation of media and studied interest in 1960s media guru McLuhan. Yet the theories of *performativity* and *seriality* are utilised here to support the claim that Bowie is one of popular culture's serial figures instantiated through a matrix of actor-character entanglements. The complex authorship of *Lazarus*, which I outline below, is itself a lure for reading back through Bowie's seriality beyond Newton, and including 'Starman'. Enabling a matrix of generative agencies allows us to revisit Newton's television consumption as a serial story told across media, one that exploits writerly gaps, defers character death, invites the audience as agents of continuation and challenges the assumption that media must always succeed in *its* plan.

‘Why does the guy on the World Enterprises commercial look like you?’: the Bowie-Newton matrix

Any evaluation of the phenomenon of David Bowie must surely discuss how his roles as author, musician, actor, and star contribute to the overall picture of him. This is equally true of his character in *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, Thomas Jerome Newton, the alien who exploits advanced media technologies to generate the wealth required to rescue his planet from catastrophic drought – media he uses in sending messages home, but equally used by the authorities in their surveillance of him. At one point, threatened by betrayal and exposure of his core alien self, Newton focuses his attention on a television commercial in which a figure who looks exactly like him suddenly appears, as if his will to escape has expressed itself in a migrating medial energy. Although his lover, Mary Lou (Candy Clark), reminds him he is not American but ‘just an alien’ – a status that results in his detention – when Bryce (Rip Torn) examines the x-ray he has secretly taken, it reveals a blank *becoming* form, energies pulsing out in waves, befitting Newton’s successful medial migration. This scene is also a *mise en abîme* of Bowie’s own studied fascination with Newton. Playing the role had a profound effect upon him, one he felt more intensely than with his other characters, like he was outering⁴ ‘a spirit within’ (cited *Davidson Dalling* 1976a, p. 19), an identity that crystalized in the artwork to the albums *Station to Station* and *Low*, re-emerged in the Thin White Duke, and again, much later, in work that reflects back on his life.

The musical play *Lazarus* is an adaptation of Roeg’s film which picks up from the point of the character’s alcoholic detachment and places him in a limbo state between life and death, where hallucinatory characters step out from the enormous television that dominates the set. Bowie had ‘never been entirely satisfied with the alien he’d played’ (Cunningham 2017) and here was an opportunity to reinforce the association between character and actor. Bowie’s

intention to write it as a sequel goes back at least to 2003 when he approached novelist Michael Cunningham for a play with the central idea that art outlived the fame of the artist. The artist Bowie had particularly in mind was Emma ‘Lazarus’ (1849-1887) who penned the poem ‘The New Colossus’ which is inscribed on the Statue of Liberty. A heart attack interrupted this collaboration; undeterred, Bowie took the ideas to a second co-author, Enda Walsh whose late involvement, together with the inclusion of back-catalogue songs, fed suppositions that *Lazarus* – along with *Blackstar* – is Bowie’s attempt to deal with his own mortality⁵.

Bowie’s authorial appropriation of Newton may have begun earlier. He signed a first edition of *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (Tevis 1963) novel for me, in 1978, striking through the author by-line, thus *performing* an act of plagiaristic authorship that predates his buying of the stage rights in 2005. This action speaks to his reverence for artist Marcel Duchamp, who signed a found object – a urinal – as ‘R. Mutt’ and submitted it as ‘Fountain’, one of the most important artworks, and statements, of the twentieth century. Both these acts can be seen as creatively questioning the ‘author function’ (Foucault 1969)⁶ of novelist Walter Tevis, film director Nicolas Roeg and screenplay writer Paul Mayersberg.

But what if Bowie’s *act* was exhorted *by* Newton as an effort of the character’s will to survive? Newton, after all, succeeds where Bowie does not; he apparently cannot die (Bowie and Walsh 2016, p. 13) and is played in *Lazarus* by Michael C. Hall. This confusion of identity can be read, *ex post facto*, as Newton exhorting Bowie’s performance in Yentob’s *Cracked Actor*. The documentary for BBC’s *Omnibus* strand was so admired by director Nicolas Roeg, it convinced him Bowie was already Newton and should not be required to act (Davidson Dalling 1976b, p. 11). In addition, the documentary sets the template for many

scenes in the film, such as those where Newton is being driven across the New Mexico desert by Bowie's actual driver Tony Mascia.

Bowie's performance of Newton attests to the instability of identity as an act as it were. The question of identity, as formulated through Jacques Derrida's (1988) and Judith Butler's (1990) conceptualisations of J. L. Austin's *performativity* (1962), takes account of the relative powers and agencies of actors within any social setting. Drawing on performance theory, *performativity*, through Derrida's formulation, is 'structured by a generalised iterability, a pervasive theatricality common to stage and world alike' (Parker and Sedgwick 1990, p. 4). Identity is essentially a mimicable 'speech act' which refuses to be anchored absolutely (Derrida 1988, p. 12) but can be received and taken up differently. Butler retools performativity as a critique of common-sense claims to identity: we do not transcend the regulatory social (or medial) context where we pick up the very tools that make identity possible and intelligible – one is the expression rather than the instigator of *doing* identity (1990, p. 43). These warning notes on identity remind us that David Bowie does not transcend media but is, indeed, historically situated as a subject and medium of its cultural importance and influence.

Performance and celebrity studies, whilst supporting this constructionist view of identity, do so with the actor's agency at the forefront. Indeed, Bowie is not just an actor but a *star*, a media figure with a different value in the matrix. Richard Dyer notes that *stars* collapse the 'distinction between the actor's authenticity and the authentication of the character s/he is playing ... what is interesting about them is not the character they have constructed (the traditional role of the actor) but rather the business of constructing/performing/being a character' (1979, p. 24). Richard Schechner's work on theatre goes further, showing how

performance intersects with the everyday, in transitions ‘between ‘my’ behaviour and that which I am citing’ (cited Loxley 2007, p. 149) such as laughing and crying (ibid., p. 145), acts played out by the body for ‘real’. These liminal performances also trade off the biographical and paratextual *zones of transition* and *transaction* (Genette 1997, p. 1) as effecting the boundaries of the self. As a decentred star-man, it is true therefore that Bowie is not Newton, and equally true that he is not *not* Newton, and vice-versa, but rather serially instantiated through the Bowie-Newton matrix.

Such observations have important implications for seeing performance as an entanglement of identities suggested by a matrix of actor-character rather than the outing of an intrinsic inner core self. The view of identity as matrixed suggests the fallacy lies in reifying the boundaries of David Bowie and Thomas Jerome Newton, insisting on seeing them as author-installed rather than instantiated through serial agencies.

Although seriality has been explored largely in relation to fictional narratives, the study of its forms, practices and processes is – appropriately enough – still ongoing, ‘challenging disciplinary compartmentalization’ (Denson 2011) and deferring any settled idea of what can be evaluated through its lens. The subject’s conceptual evolution has taken it from the ‘simple’ print forms of the *feuilleton* (Buonanno 2008), Victorian serial novels (Hughes and Lund 1991; Hayward 1997), and *nouveau roman* (Sherzer 1980) through to comics (Eco 1972), film (Mayer 2016), television, where it arguably finds its ‘particular mode’ (Creeber 2004) – not least as the complex serial (Mittell 2007) – to media that emphasises the role of the user, such as computer games (Newman and Simon 2011), web-disseminated narratives (Denson 2011), and other fan textual practices (Thomas 2010). In art, seriality is considered beyond compositional and organizational modes (see Bochner 1968, Zhou 2015), and as a

practice of viewership, a protracted encounter with the work: ‘Stand in any museum, anywhere, and it’s hard to extricate seriality from spectacle’ (Fer 2005, p. 67).

Seriality has also been conceptualised in ways that support the concept of the matrix as a decentred entanglement of performance agencies. The link between seriality and persona has been made by P. D. Marshall (2014) who connects it to what he calls ‘John Wayne Syndrome’ identifying how the construction of public persona ‘flows between the fictional and real person – that allows an actor to claim a persona that can be exchanged within the industry’ (Marshall 2014, p. 4). For Frank Kelleter (2014b), serial narratives evolve in a feedback loop so that characters impact the series in developments that are authorially unplanned – the fictional character becomes a driving force of the serial and can therefore be considered a co-author of the series.

Pramod K. Nayar (2009) meanwhile uses the term ‘celefiction’ to identify famous characters (such as Lara Croft and Harry Potter) as screens partially completed by audience interaction and whose public visibility enables them to travel across media platforms. These formulations suggest ways to read Bowie’s ‘management’ of serial persona as co-authored by characters and admiring audiences investing para social energies into those characters. Floria Sigismondi’s video for Bowie’s ‘The Stars (Are Out Tonight)’ (2013), highlights a two-way flow of energy transference between actor and persona. When the character, played by Bowie, picks up a celebrity-tabloid, the cover flashes an image of the Newton alien, one apparently with sufficient ‘second life’ to have his own celebrity sex life scandal. The lines between player and persona are further blurred when we realise the intermedial transference of energies is initiated through television consumption, through the viewing practices of the Bowie character, sitting at home enjoying a ‘nice life’, practices mirrored by the celebrity

peering through windows.

The diverse and ongoing enquiries into seriality are useful here in formulating the figure of Bowie-Newton as a matrix of dispersed agencies, including the elements of actor (or author), character and viewer, agents that contribute to sustaining the story serially and transmedially.

‘Let the children use it’: audiences as agents of continuation

The Bowie-Newton matrix is a media-mirror reflecting the significance of the serial viewer as an agent of continuation. This assertion of enabled agency is a critical departure from Jameson’s reading of *The Man Who Fell to Earth*’s ‘random’ viewership (Jameson 1991) and the media-effects paradigm, dominant in the 1970s, that frames television consumption as passive; *the transmission model* of communication (see Shannon and Weaver 1949) privileges the sender of the message, in discerning meaning, and dismisses the receiver. On his space travels, Newton learns about Earth through a studied viewing of television, ‘waves in space’ which, he reflects, is a serial distribution of information that nevertheless ‘doesn’t tell you everything’⁷.

A repeated viewing of the film, per Newton’s own repeated viewing of television, suggests a way of reading his viewership as a navigation of the multiplicity of images before him, the mosaic that makes up the vortex, and his eventual gravitation towards one particular screen. Here, dialogue from Carol Reed’s 1949 film *The Third Man* echoes in diegetic and extra-diegetic fashion across Roeg’s film, untimely sounds that might equally be *stuttering-outerings* from Newton’s mind. Newton’s migration coincides with that of Reed’s character Holly Martins, whose actions lead to the betrayal of his best friend, racketeer Harry Limes, and who writes himself into a novel, also called *The Third Man*. In Roeg’s film, Newton

imitates this biographical assertiveness recording a poetry album entitled *The Visitor*.

However, if Martins expects the means to justify the ends he is sorely mistaken when the conventional romantic ending fizzles out, along with a spent cigarette, when the girl walks out of shot, signalling the darkness and the end-titles to the movie.

This is surely only an interval in Martins' frustrated subjectivity. He is, like Mary-Lou in Roeg's film, someone who expects only to be a character in someone else's story but is gifted with an end that becomes a means to expand on his taste for self-authorship. For Newton, viewing is generative of *becoming*, his study of media offering him gaps to defy the will of his author in scripting the character as subject to the laws of gravity. Newton's studied viewing of *The Third Man* aligns with my studied viewing of *The Man Who Fell to Earth* inasmuch as gaps open up in the text that, as Milly Buonanno argues in the context of television seriality, means 'the imagination overloads itself with expectations and reaches out towards the new discoveries that will follow with the resumption of the narrative flow' (Buonanno 2008, p. 123). Buonanno makes a connection between the deferment of mortality and narrative seriality through the figure of Scheherazade, whose delays and deferrals to her stories keep her alive. These gaps are a matter of (second) life and death to characters; is it really a surprise how my own studied viewership insists on seeing the gap as an academic opportunity? Who taught me this way of reading media?

Newton is a persuasive storyteller. In 1987 he migrated to television in a TV movie. Roeg's screenwriter Paul Mayersberg was persuaded to write the teleplay. It was then adapted by Richard Kletter intending a television series. Newton's character adapts in readiness to the new medium, absorbing elements from Tevis' book and Roeg's film and also injecting fresh material, such as an ability to heal, equipping him for encounters with new vulnerable

characters over the serial's extended adventures. These plans for a series were aborted. Could it be that Newton's swaggering ego over-valued his own agency? Was the television film a critical failure because certain elements of the matrix were missing? Newton had changed his name to John Dory, and was acted by Lewis Smith, not by David Bowie, without whom Newton was unable to gather the audience, an overlooked element in the matrix.

It is not Newton who gathers the audience in *Lazarus* either; rather it is Valentine (Michael Esper), another media migrant (from the single 'Valentine's Day', 2013), a sinister figure with a propensity for random violence, who like Girl (Sophia Anne Caruso) slips between story realities targeting Newton. According to Visconti the song is inspired by a spate of high school shootings in America but, in the context of *Lazarus*, could equally describe the nihilistic impulses of Newton – and indeed Bowie who has described the song as isolation, revenge and osmosis (Moody 2013). The casting call for the New York Theatre Workshop auditions (posted May 20th, 2015) describes the character as 'physically withdrawn to the point of invisibility'. The lyrics state Valentine 'knows it all / He's got something to say' yet he is no storyteller; installed rather as an interdiction that inspires the hero's re-*action* (Propp 1968, p.25), and like *King Šahryār*, seeks retribution upon romance itself. The latter's murderous rampage is forestalled by Scheherazade's will to live which is expressed as an exploitation of narrative seriality. When Valentine kills Ben (Jamie Muscato), the character's blood splashes across the screen, and, during Valentine's song, black ink squirts out as wings across the set, threatening to spill over into London's King's Cross Theatre audience. In a way, it does. Valentine's success as a character might jokingly be explained in terms of his *spreadability*, a concept Henry Jenkins uses in reference to the audience's potential 'to share content for their own purposes' (Jenkins, Ford and Green 2013, p. 3) and in contrast with the term 'sticky' which identifies media that tries to hold users in one place. Jenkins says,

dramatically, 'If it doesn't spread, it's dead' (2009). It is clear, from its response, that the audience appreciates Valentine's value, the wave of infectious applause spreading throughout the auditorium during the preview run, an interaction not repeated with any song other than 'Valentine's Day'.

But why should the audience value a homicidal character who puts at risk the very survival of Newton? Is not Valentine in fact a *serial* killer (pun intended)? Or is he it's saviour? Newton despairs that he cannot die – 'I'm a dying man who can't die actually' (Bowie and Walsh 2016, p. 12) – therefore Valentine serves a narrative function in dispatching him, yet this killer is also serving other needs of the serial narrative, such as refreshing it and contributing to an evolving narrative (which is one definition of the serial narrative per Kelleter 2014b). Valentine's intervention comes at a critical point of serial-narrative failure (its potential closure), his unexpected popularity with the audience creating a temporal overlap, where the audience feedback is integrated into the performance. Valentine, in threatening to extinguish the serial, assembles the audience as agents of continuation since *if it doesn't spread, it's dead*.

'David Bowie Pulls a Lazarus': studying the media maelstrom

On what would have been David Bowie's seventieth birthday, Tom Hingston's video for the 'No Plan' EP was released, featuring multiple television screens in a shop window for 'Newton Electricals' on Foxgrove Road, where Bowie once lived. 'This is no place, but here I am' sings the disembodied voice, the message remediated as digital on-screen graphics.

Outside the rain-washed window, a crowd gathers, each face reflected back to its owner in the black mirror of television.

The crowd's persistence is understandable in light of serial narrative. As Kelleter points out, commercial television serials often disappear 'in the middle of an incomplete plotline whose continuation was no longer financially feasible' (Kelleter 2014b, p. 65). Audiences are used to the limitations of industrial mass commodities and to consuming serials in the knowledge of a probable lack of closure. This does not seem to put them off. Rather, it may indicate why the serial is so popular, affording story gaps to be taken up in the imagination of the audience through fan appropriations and 'official' productions, such as Hingston's video. Why else has the crowd gathered?

Kelleter (2014a), through his reading of complex HBO series *The Wire* (2002-2008), suggests serial texts have a *performative* function as an actor-network. He follows Latour's conceptualizing of actor-network theory (ANT) (1993, 2005) and Niklas Luhmann's conceptualization of systems theory – which applies autopoiesis to non-biological systems to show they are 'simultaneously real, discursive, and social' (Latour 1993, p. 64). The serial ensures 'the continuation of its own existence' through activating the agency of the audience as co-authors and enlisting 'different players and products, ambitions and commitments, affiliations and identifications' (Kelleter 2014a, p. 16). Fans, bloggers, and even academics are 'agents of continuation ... directly involved in the formalization, acceleration, and dissemination' (Kelleter 2014a, p. 58) of the cultural work.

Kelleter's network, like the matrix model, reverses the tendency for reading the crowd as a mindless mob caught up in the flow of the medial storm raging over their heads, a view

asserted by young David Bowie in ascribing to media a regulatory control far in excess of individual user agency. 'The media should be used. You can't let it use you', he told *Rolling Stone* (Crowe 1976a) noting that rock stars are typically slaves. In enabling a positive account of agency, however, there is no need, as Buonanno (2008) points out, to reject outright the idea of television as a flow. The alien Newton absorbs television waves to learn about Earth; later they appear as a relentless flow of energies, decentring him and threatening his sense of self. 'Get out of my mind, all of you', he commands the *becoming* flow, unable to take his gaze from the media vortex.

From the perspective of 'the unaccustomed gaze of the tourist' (Buonanno 2008, p. 34), the critic who shuns the medium of television, the medial patterns fade unchallenged into a sameness. In contrast, as McLuhan says of the mariner caught up in the maelstrom, salvation lies in recognizing the patterns of the vortex. It is through consumption that the practitioner learns to apply the medium's facilities to his/her own ends. As the figuration of *Bowie-watching-Newton-watching* attests, the viewer exercises a competency in grasping the pattern created by the mosaic of fragments even 'when one is zapping' (Buonanno 2008, p. 34).

The role of the audience, as Valentine realises, is not passive; the serial is 'a form of storytelling that demands and produces various forms of sustained audience engagement' (Leavenworth 2011), personalising subjects and according to Creeber (2005, p. 16) engendering domestic discussion where the audience weaves in and out at different points, and where '*production and reception often occur almost simultaneously*' (Kelleter 2012, pp. 22-23). This view of popular culture engendering simultaneous proliferation through its audience was one Bowie recognised. In an interview with *Newsnight*'s Jeremy Paxman (BBC2, December 3rd 1999) he describes art as 'the grey space in the middle' between artist

and audience, a view inspired both by the internet and a fascination with the possibilities of media: ‘We’re on the cusp of something exhilarating and terrifying,’ he predicts; ‘the interplay between the user and the producer will be so in simpatico it’s going to crush our ideas of what mediums are about’ (ibid).

This fascination is evident from an article in *Creem* magazine (May 1976) where Bowie discusses his paranoid fear of media effects, extols its potential, and name-drops McLuhan. While the encounter is a repeated variation on Bowie’s strategy for using press and television interviews to stage his characters (October 2017) – a practice which frequently backfired – what draws the historian’s eye is the *deja lu* (already read) of its subtitle: *David Bowie Pulls a Lazarus*.

Some forty years after the interview, the ‘Lazarus’ reference reads as a proleptic leap to Bowie’s musical play, one attesting to recursive themes across a career, told serially through changing characters, embodied particularly in the return of Newton. At the time of the interview, the subtitle is a wry comment on the Thin White Duke, the drug-addled character who has risen from the grave of *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, and, for the reporter, it is clearly Bowie who is *pulling* a Lazarus, and not the other way around. The simultaneous synergies of production and reception within the ‘grey space’ of the medial network do not entirely discredit the agency of the author and, indeed, Bowie’s position as studious viewer may actually reinforce the impression of his controlling hand in the management of himself as a serial figure.

While this essay seeks to reverse the attribution of agency to the author-actor, Crowe’s reference (to Bowie pulling a Lazarus) assumes Bowie’s mediumship of previous characters,

like Ziggy Stardust, who he channelled so effectively that many misread Ziggy's on-stage retirement as Bowie's. The 'farewell' performance at London's Hammersmith Odeon in 1973 was immortalised by Donn Alan Pennebaker's film *Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* (1973) causing Ziggy, like Newton, to live on, disturbing the temporal distinction between the live and mediated (see Auslander 1999). The film also puts Bowie's retirement speech into the context of an instalment, one in a sequence of similarly short-lived characters, now collected in a kind of retrospective 'boxset' from whose perspective Bowie appears himself to be a 'serial figure' making transformations 'as a rock and roll star' ('Star' 1972). Such an analogy suggests his relationship to iconic figures like Superman and Sherlock Holmes, who appear in popular narrative forms and whose stories recur episodically, migrating across media, such as from comics to film, starting on each occasion from a 'virtual new beginning' (Eco 1972, p. 117).

Bowie's stint in graphic design and advertising, as a young man, introduced him to McLuhan, who noted how advertising exploits the unconscious by exercising 'an hypnotic spell' regardless of audience and, indeed, 'especially on sociologists' (McLuhan 1964, p. 228) who disdained from studying it. Bowie also claimed, per McLuhan, that media was an extension of the senses. Music, particularly on American media, was being used to block the senses. 'It's absolutely incredible the way media is used over here,' Bowie says (O'Grady 1975, p.5). 'It just repads what is padded'. Struggling to exorcise characters he initially employed to blunt his own nervy self-consciousness, Bowie nevertheless identifies himself as their author-creator, explaining that he used characters as a way to freshen consciousness. The characters' migration across media, and in press and television interviews, disturbs the boundary between reality and fiction, attacking the basis upon which rock's authenticity as a medium had been assumed (Auslander 2006). But Bowie's study of media reveals a conflicted view of

agency. Although he asserts himself as an author marshalling media to effect, understanding his decentred character voices as creative probes, he is also aware of the power of media, that his acts might ‘turn back around’ on him (Crowe 1976b, p.37), and sees himself as a medium for serial characters whose ‘wild mutations’ across media make it increasingly hard to designate a definitive origin.

For McLuhan, the media *is* the message⁸ and the environment for an accumulation of effects. Technology does not just extend the capacities of body, senses and nerves, it ‘affects the whole psychic and social complex’ (McLuhan 1964, p. 4) and therefore has a profound effect upon our identities. Thus, while Bowie’s transitions can be understood as transmitted by him through the transcendent study of the media vortex, his serial-figuration is also an affective state induced by his immanence within it. Just as David Bowie *pulls* a Lazarus, so indeed the media matrix exerts a pull upon him, as Newton – a character imperilled by the gravity and the attracting forces of identity – demonstrates.

Conclusion: ‘At the centre of it all, your eyes’

David Bowie’s lyrics and video for ‘Blackstar’ are replete with many messages – some private, such as the smiley-badge nod to the robot *GERTY* from ‘Moon’ (2009), a film by his son Duncan Jones – including references to cancer, the occult (Aleister Crowley) and pop culture (Elvis Presley)⁹. A eulogy for Bowie’s characters from ‘Starman’ through *The Man Who Fell to Earth* and others, ‘Blackstar’ demonstrates the principals of seriality, the lens through which Bowie himself can be understood as a serial character. According to Kelleter

(2017, pp. 7-31), serial storytelling is comprised of evolving narratives, whose continual realignment and recursivity is shaped through adaptive feedback and intermedial proliferation. This evolution is not attributable to a single authorial source, as Bowie himself acknowledges by insisting on the involvement of the audience in the 'grey space', but the results of active agencies within a network (see Latour 1993, 2005) including readers as agents of continuation.

Just as the bejewelled skull we see at the start of the video could equally be a reference to the starman that Bowie acts as medium for, or indeed to characters like Thomas Jerome Newton who Bowie played, so the 'grey space' draws attention to the diverse and intermedial reception context, often contiguous with production. Are anyone's eyes truly at the centre of it all? Bowie's swan song is also the opportunity to recapitulate how Bowie becomes the medium for a historical progression of ideas outlined here – from McLuhan's notion of media as an extension of the senses, through the birth of the reader being occasioned by the death of the author (Barthes 1977, pp. 42-48), the instability and *performativity* of speech acts (Derrida 1988) and *seriality* as an explanation for the popularity of some commercial texts. Particularly through his study of media, Bowie can be understood as granting himself a particular kind of agency as a central cultural figure in promoting the notion of matrixed identity that seriality exhibits; indeed, in extending it beyond his own death.

On one hand, 'Blackstar' can be read as the starman's skull being celebrated by the priestess and priest (Bowie) as a coda for the final death and reification of the serial figure of Newton. Yet, as seriality teaches us, the elements of the serial figure are dispersed beyond the property of a controlling author or specific character transubstantiation. Indeed, just as 'we can trace countless transmutations of the character without ever being able to decide which one is

definitive' ... the evolution and proliferation of characters occurs, 'at a higher level of pop-cultural self-observation' (Kelleter 2017, p. 21).

The video to 'No Plan' is thus a further reminder both of Bowie's presence as a mediated celebrity and also of our role in the construction of celebrity, something Marshall (1997) speaks to in shifting attention away from the social control aspects of celebrity and onto 'audience-subjectivities' in negotiating the meaning of celebrity. The window full of televisions, like the central media plinth in *Lazarus*, and the multiple screens in Roeg's film, if permitted, takes on the authoritarian overtones of the Panopticon (Foucault 1977); it is equally the mechanism for gathering the crowd as agents of continuation. Like Marilyn Monroe, whose image, McCann notes, is 'now everywhere yet nowhere ... obscuring the fact of her permanent absence' (1988, p. 199), Bowie is suddenly everywhere, in videos, books, academic journals, and fan textual production. He is even here, in the window of Newton's shop, but unlike Monroe, his image is mainly visible through the gaze of fan-*flâneurs* who have gathered to follow (up) the story. As Bowie-Newton once did.

What is this pilgrimage really about? Why, in their studious gaze, are the viewers' own reflections so central? Perhaps, as they were once taught, their own agency begins *if they can sparkle* ... then, who knows, *he may land tonight*.

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¹ *The Guardian*, for example, notes how Michael C. Hall ‘takes the role of the starman’ (Soloski 2015).

² He waived his Equity fee due for the BBC charity single ‘Perfect Day’ (1997) as ‘a way of saying thank you for the Flower Pot Men’ (Thompson 2006, p. 188); his earliest memory was a televisual one: his mother, Peggy, singing along to Ernest Lough’s recital of Mendelssohn’s ‘O for the wings of a Dove’ (Leigh 2014, Pegg 2016).

³ Bowie was a high-profile fan of UK serial *Peaky Blinders*. His 2014 collaboration with jazz composer Marie Schneider, on *Sue (or a Season in Crime)*, is a nod to complex television, while the track *Blackstar* was the theme to *The Last Panthers* (Johan Renck 2015).

⁴ Julian Jaynes’ (1976) notion of ‘outring’ interior voices (and the thematic links with schizophrenia) was familiar to Bowie (anxious that mental illness had claimed many relatives on his mother’s side, including his half-brother Terry Burns), as was McLuhan’s insistence that media was an outered extension of the senses (1962, p.265).

⁵ See for example Barry Nicholson’s piece ‘Blackstar Reappraised’ (2016), Michael Paulson’s ‘After David Bowie’s Death, Lazarus Holds New Meaning for Fans’ (2016) and Eric Wandrey’s ‘David Bowie, Shakespeare, Death and Hope’ (2016). As Nicholas Pegg says (2016, p. 477), ‘Theories will doubtless abound for as long as people listen to David Bowie’s music, and there is certainly no shortage of fuel’.

⁶ The ‘author function’ is a concept developed by Foucault to suggest how power attempts to identify the source of discourse thus impeding ‘the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition and recomposition of fiction’ (1969, p.119).

⁷ ‘The strange thing about television is that it doesn’t tell you everything,’ Newton says in the film. ‘It shows you everything about life on Earth, but the true mysteries remain. Perhaps it’s in the nature of television.’ (*The Man Who Fell to Earth*, 1976).

⁸ Media contains other media – such as in the way the telegraph contains print, which contains writing, which contains speech – operating so that the contained medium becomes the message of the containing medium.

⁹ Presley was born the same date as Bowie – January 8th – and also recorded a song called ‘Black Star’ in 1960 for the film that became ‘Flaming Star’, the latter featuring him as a ‘mixed-blood’ character caught between two worlds (although the song, about death being ever over the shoulder of life, was subsequently dropped).