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David Bowie is . . . actor, star and character

Entangled agencies in *The Man Who Fell to Earth*

Dene October

I got lost at one point. I couldn't decide whether I was writing the characters or whether the characters were writing me.

(BOWIE, *CRACKED ACTOR*, 1975)

Introduction

In 1977, David Bowie rang up Herb Caen of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, agitated. Someone had stolen his identity and was acting as him, a lookalike fooling fans into parting with cash and living it up at expensive restaurants. 'I have not been in San Francisco since April', Bowie complained, 'and I am highly irritated by this imposter.'[1] This odd story about a *doppelganger* is an uncanny mirror to scenes in *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, *Cracked Actor* and 1970s interviews in which Bowie is a most slippery subject. 'Don't ask me any questions', he warns Dick Cavett, 'cos I'll say something different every time.'[2] 'I'm sort of inventing me at the moment', he tells Russell Harty.[3] Bowie's serial construction of character, across multiple media,[4] challenges

the notion of a stable, coherent identity, as well as established theories about acting.

In this chapter, I consider Bowie's performance as Thomas Jerome Newton in *The Man Who* as the product of untimely and entangled agencies – of actor, star and character – rather than solely on acting ability. Newton seems to exert a particular agency including stepping from the celluloid screen into the star interview, thus ensuring the continuation of the character's story.[5] Although Bowie later claims his interviews were often acted 'as the character',[6] even he doubts the extent of his own agency, claiming to be haunted by characters. In stating this, I am contributing to a debate on the general orientation of the actor never fully resolved within performance theory (and its dovetail with *performativity*), regarding the sameness and unity of actor and character. Indeed, Bowie's performances in general might be understood through the concept of matrixed identity, something I explore in previous analyses of Bowie and the film,[7] applying strategic frameworks such as Deleuzian concepts of becoming;[8] seriality and actor network theory;[9] the composer, performer and listener as artistic figures;[10] and the agency of costume in character construction.[11] This reading of Bowie as actor, star and character is indebted to the seminal work of James Naremore and Richard Schechner on acting,[12] Richard Dyer on stardom[13] and Shelton Waldrep on the management of public personae.[14] My argument is also obliged to Erving Goffman for his conceptualizing of 'self', 'personality' and 'character' as outgrowths of everyday performance.[15]

According to Judith Butler, identity is *performatively* constituted by those 'expressions' which are claimed to be its results[16] – an assertion that takes up Goffman's observation that all social life involves acting – and J. L. Austin's 'speech act' theory insisting language constructs rather than merely describes the world.[17] For Butler, the scene of construction is also a scene of agency – a 'frame', to use Goffman's term – here performance is a regulated and repeated practice, yet equally involves reflexivity. The performance of Newton invites us to consider how identity congeals through everyday acting and speculate on David Bowie as an acted identity par excellence. 'I'm Pierrot. I'm Everyman. What I'm doing is theatre, and only theatre',[18] he claims, presenting himself as a puzzle of performer and role, for who is this ascendant 'I'? 'I'm using myself as a canvas and trying to paint the truth of our time on it', he continues, acknowledging his immanence in an untimely matrix of social and psychic contexts.

The Man Who can itself be read as a rejection of identity essentialism, one addressing the fallacy at the heart of Method approaches to acting, by substituting the film's central metaphor of Newtonian gravity with Entanglement Theory. The latter posits the instantaneous interaction between distantly separated agents – a quantum handshake[19] – since once entangled, they behave as part of the same system.[20] Thus, Newton is never alone in acting himself. His alien Otherness is an unstratified desire, a

schizoid *becoming* force, free to congress with other agencies such as the polycentric television waves in space he picks up, learning what it is to be human,[21] or Bowie's own agency as actor and performer. These agencies frequently actualize Newton as a discreet identity, a (human) being, a spirit Bowie claims was evoked from within. Yet, Newton's becoming challenges ascendance since,[22] as Butler says, there is no one behind the act: the acting is everything.[23]

Unmasking the actor

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When jaded professor Nathan Bryce (Rip Torn) attempts to unmask his employer as an alien imposter, Newton is highly aware of the betrayal yet distracted by his simulacrum appearing on a television commercial. The ad begins with the camera positioned behind the *doppelganger*, so audiences share Newton's immanence in the puzzle of who is acting as whom. 'Why does the guy in the W. E. television commercial look like you?' Bryce asks. Newton's response maintains the polysemy. 'Does he?' he says, indifferent to questions of provenance and the boundaries separating actor, character and spectator.

The connection between actor and audience is a theme in James Naremore's book *Acting in the Cinema*. Tracking the history of acting under the disappearance of the viewer and proscenium arch, the author attempts to develop a method for analysing performance in the era of mechanical reproduction. Walter Benjamin has argued that 'the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition' substituting 'a plurality of copies for a unique existence . . . permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder'.[24] For Benjamin, the most powerful agent of this is film, for which *The Man Who* seems a perfect study, with its repeated scenes of television gazing, suggesting the screen as a scene of identity construction and blurring any distinction between original and copy.

In tracing its history, Naremore reminds us that acting is an extension of social performance. Reviewing *Kid Auto Races at Venice* (aka *The Pest*, 1914), the earliest film featuring Charlie Chaplin's famous character Little Tramp, Naremore calls attention to Chaplin's ambiguous performance as an annoying and drunk spectator who repeatedly steps in front of director Henry Lehrman's camera, dissolving the distinctions between actor and audience by 'exaggerating the role-playing that was already happening on the street, turning it into theatre'.[25] Naremore argues that

> people in a film can be regarded in at least three different senses: as actors playing theatrical personages, as public figures playing theatrical versions of themselves, and as documentary evidence.[26]

Like Chaplin, David Bowie was publicly known through his persona (Ziggy Stardust), a role incorporated into his first major film which capitalizes on themes associated with him (e.g. alienation and masks such as the death mask Alan Yentob got him to model for his documentary *Cracked Actor*).[27] Newton, like the tramp, can be regarded as a drunken imposter fascinated by visual media and narcissistically inserting himself into the frame.

Like Chaplin, Bowie was provided a general steer by his director and repeatedly pulled away from 'ostensive' acting. Nicolas Roeg hadn't sought an established actor, preferring 'someone uninfluenced by previous roles, or by fear',[28] drawing parallels between actor and character in the perception of new experience:

> With an actor's performance you must just let it happen. Newton had never encountered human beings before. He had been taught and set up as to what to expect but it was completely new to him. He hadn't built up any experience.[29]

Roeg's comments note the tension between what Newton has 'been taught' and his experience, thus drawing a distinction between an actor's schooling and praxis. Bowie came to the role with expectations about acting and was considerably troubled when Roeg urged him to 'float through the film, with a vacant stare'.[30] Roeg's strategy of relying on Bowie's 'natural' mannerisms, way of speaking and meticulous self-crafting – indulging, for example, the actor's *own* stage wardrobe and hairstylist – recognizes how acting is matrixed.

Theoretically, the concepts of performance and performativity are related ones drawing from theatre and wider studies of human interaction within anthropology and psychology. Each theoretical area addresses performance as an event or ritual, taking place within a social context that governs the production of meanings. Goffman uses the term 'frame' as the convergence point for actor and observer, yet permits the possibility for an identity behind the act, whereas Butler is unequivocal in stating identity is about *doing* rather than *being*. Her theory is a critique of common-sense claims to authentic identity, insisting the 'repeated stylization of the body' takes place within the regulatory social contexts where we pick up the tools that make identity intelligible: one does not transcend these contexts as an actor, instead one is already the expression of identity since the 'I' is constituted through repeated assertions that come to feel natural and inarguable.[31]

Although Butler's and Goffman's ideas might seem too broadly theoretical when applied to acting theory, they can be seen to dovetail with it. The performance studies theorist, Richard Schechner, in his book *Between Theater and Anthropology*, argues that acting is not restricted to the discreet boundaries of stage space, but crosses into the everyday, a liminality 'suspended between "my" behaviour and that which I am citing

or imitating', which may include transitions into acts that 'actors' are not simply 'playing', such as laughter and crying.[32] In the scene where Mary-Lou (Candy Clark) persuades Newton to accompany her to church, the latter's voice falters as he joins her in singing a hymn. Clearly when Newton sings, Bowie does, the act a transition through the materiality of the body. The act is also a pose where original and copy are visible at once.[33] The constructed artificiality of the performance is a reminder of how Bowie's singing is often contrived as 'a self-conscious performance of character and emotion'.[34] This is of course a joke the film plays on its knowing audience, but one that nonetheless challenges the notion of stable subjectivity.[35]

Naremore draws critical attention to the instability of the figure of actor in his survey of the history of acting, particularly noting the dominant tension between the approaches of Konstantin Stanislavsky and Bertolt Brecht. Stanislavsky's 'System' of spiritual realism draws on 'emotional memories' and experiential truth, with Lee Strasberg's Method school bringing a naturalness to expression that falls 'back upon the behavioural regimes of ordinary life'.[36] This style of internalized acting had overturned the mannered conventions of the theatre and proved suitable for cinema where the audience is removed. Brecht, on the other hand, in developing *epic theatre* and *verfremdungseffekt* (V-effekt, or 'alienation effect'), sought to *estrange* the audience and empower them as intellectual agents: 'The audience can no longer have the illusion of being the unseen spectator at an event which is really taking place.'[37] This tension is evident in its influence across Bowie's acting portfolio: his mime training; inhabiting of character as an 'integrated performance' through to the spectacle of awkward 'autonomous performance';[38] his use of 'stylistic gesture' in drawing 'audience into the emotional content';[39] and his unglamorous performance in the BBC's version of Brecht's *Baal* (1982). Bowie argued, 'A lot of what is perceived as mannered performance or writing is a distancing from the subject matter to allow an audience to have their own association with what I'm writing about. That comes straight from Brecht.'[40]

Bowie's acting in *The Man Who* can be seen as collapsing these schools of thought together through a naïve and polysemic performance, reflecting not only the strategy of the director and sincere intentions of the star but also the alienation of the character Newton and how the relationship between observer and observed is embodied in an apprehensive self-reflexivity. Afraid of letting Roeg down, Bowie pressed the director for meetings, feeling 'pushed out' when co-star Candy Clark – in a relationship with Roeg – was the one granted support. Still, Bowie's acting was recognized by winning the Saturn award.[41] According to cinematographer Tony Richmond, he was always punctual and prepared, spending hours alone rehearsing and practising scenes so that he was word-perfect.[42] Offset photos show him absorbed in a biography of acting hero Buster Keaton upon whom Bowie modelled his stone face – 'on which you could read anything'.[43] He rehearsed one scene

so diligently, when it came for Mary-Lou (Candy Clark) to clumsily knock over a bottle of gin, he – as Newton – caught it in the same practised way, not once but on every single take.[44]

All the same, his 'one snapshot memory of that film is not having to act', and of putting in 'a pretty naturalistic performance'.[45] He took so many drugs that, at one point, filming was delayed by two days when – having seen an alien in his milk – he was convinced he'd been poisoned; many on the crew considered it part of his 'Method approach'.[46] Despite a poor memory of the shoot, Bowie notes his performance was 'a good exhibition of someone literally falling apart in front of you. . . . I was totally insecure with about 10 grams a day in me.'[47] The comment might speak equally to Newton succumbing to unhealthy human habits as to a general philosophy for performance: 'People go to concerts to gain information, and the information they go to get is that of seeing an artist reconcile himself with his own failings, gradually, over a period of years.'[48]

As Keir Elam points out, the theatrical exchange between actor and audience is a moment of transformation which grants 'a symbolic or signifying role' whereby roles are acknowledged.[49] The BBC documentary *Cracked Actor*,[50] in mixing Bowie's stage performances with candid backstage filming, dissolves the boundaries of this exchange. Its crowd scenes, as with *Kids Races*, celebrate liminality and show the theatre-going fans, some in costume and make-up, performing codified gestures while taking their cue from the camera. 'I'm just a space cadet. He's the commander', one fan says, indicating their role in the performance. These observers act in one of two ways: either ostensibly aware of the camera and self-consciously breaching the well-known conventions of the fourth wall or posing, as though the camera isn't there.[51] In *The Man Who*, Bowie seems to extend this combination of the ostensive (onstage) and apparently 'candid' (backstage) – or, as Richard Dyer puts it, ordinary and extraordinary, presence and absence, in constructing himself as a star.[52]

Snapshot of the star

Roeg encouraged his team to pursue the slippage between his star and Newton, delighted when Bowie insisted Martin Samuel, the film's hairstylist, source Ziggy's original Schwarzkopf Hot Red colour from the UK, while the director provided precise instructions on the maintenance of the look.[53] After watching *Cracked Actor*, he was also convinced Bowie embodied Newton, waiting eight hours at the star's house on West 20th Street, New York, to sign him up. Bowie eventually turned up wearing the olive duffle coat that later appeared in the film.[54] The eerie entanglement continued on set with Roeg pampering his star, feeding him martinis,[55] mirroring scenes where the abducted Newton is subdued with alcohol. In both films Bowie plays an

unsettled passenger in a limousine chauffeur-driven by Tony Mascia (whom Roeg cast as Arthur), paranoid about being discovered by the authorities and complaining about going too fast.

Newton's association with Bowie's Otherness is established early with a backlit, low-angle medium close-up exaggerating his awkward, yet studied, body movements in descending the New Mexico mine slag heap. A formal shot-reverse-shot displays Newton's pasty and fragile look, then jumps to his distorted perspective of the drunk on the child's swing. In the pawn shop, where Newton must show his British passport, anamorphic lenses and dizzying camera mobility suggest the imposter's paranoia. In another scene, the camera is positioned behind Newton just as he removes the hood to his duffle coat, at which point we recognize the iconic flame hair of late Ziggy Stardust. This mixture of identification and spectacle is enabled by techniques of focalization commonly employed in film when shifting between internal and external gazes, rendering subjective point of view as readable as objective 'reality'. Occurring simultaneously, it is experienced here as schizophrenic, an opportunity to hop from Newton's altered point of view into an eerie spectatorship of the alien, and the star playing him.

In recalling Bowie as an ethereal subject to shoot, cinematographer Tony Richmond acknowledges, 'I can't imagine any other actor in that role.'[56] Critics were equally convinced. Jonathan Rosenbaum was 'particularly transfixed by [the] extra-terrestrial persona', considering the performance 'genuinely uncanny with his sexual ambivalence, surreal red hair, chiseled features, and underplayed reactions [and] one of the eeriest screen presences since Katharine Hepburn in *Sylvia Scarlett*'.[57] Tom Milne, of *Sight & Sound*, felt everyone would be 'unanimous . . . in finding David Bowie entirely convincing as a visitor from another planet'.[58] Even the author of the original novel, Walter Tevis, upon visiting the set, 'was stunned to see what I had years before imagined become flesh – or something like flesh . . . [Bowie] gave me the *déjà vu*'.[59] Thus Roeg and Richmond were hardly alone in considering Bowie 'absolutely perfect' as Newton, and simply acting himself.

The view that stars act as themselves permits the assumption that an actor is just 'being' while his characters are '*fictional extension*[s] of the *actors*' true personalities'.[60] The personification style of acting, which Barry King describes as a fusion of roles played by the actor with their own personalities in 'concerted cynosure',[61] has been associated with non-acting, even bad acting,[62] since the actor is visible behind the role, and is seen to compare poorly with schooled impersonation approaches, which require the sacrifice of the actor's personality. On the other hand, a simple commutation test highlights the value of imagining the quality another actor would bring to the role.[63] Peter O'Toole, Roeg's original casting for Newton, was an appropriate one for the novel's tall alien, while Bowie's stardom promotes an intriguing intertextuality as a visual spectacle, significantly enriching the

semiotic thickness of Roeg's non-linear narrative through an extraordinary mirroring between star and character.

Stars come to embody different social types which accord with various fits between actor and character, ranging from problematic to perfect.[64] As Julie Lobalzo Wright says, some music stars are able to adapt stardoms constructed through music into a cinematic fit.[65] Bowie was a perfect fit for Newton, since he had already been constructed through his visual transformations, the performance focus to his songs and his alien image – all aspects that relate to his queer iconography, the very elements that make him a problematic fit for many later films.[66] Although it limits the lens through which Bowie's acting is viewed,[67] Dyer's notion of the 'perfect fit' is useful in demonstrating how a wide range of industry and consumer interests accord, meeting the expectations and desires of audiences in choosing constructions that help them 'feel secure . . . they had fallen in love with an image . . . very much like the real thing'.[68]

The Man Who operates as 'an ironic dramatization' of Bowie's 'desire to become a star' (as Naremore opines of Chaplin's first tramp film),[69] mirroring his early dogged pursuit of fame through to an encounter with its drug-fuelled effects. His song 'Fame' (1975), co-written with John Lennon, is inspired by the latter's cynicism about the star industry, and a reflection of Bowie's exhaustion and doubts.[70] Stardom did not arrive instantly; in the 1960s and early 1970s, Bowie moved swiftly between musical genres in its pursuit, astutely switching from penning character voices for songs to the construction of himself as a star persona. With the help of a coterie of close friends, like the designer Freddie Burretti, he posed as a star, dressing and behaving like one, while manager Tony Defries modelled his strategy to break into the United States after the Hollywood star system.[71]

In *Cracked Actor*, Bowie reflects on his rising stardom, using the limousine as a metaphor about agency:

> Do you know that feeling you get in a car when somebody's accelerating very fast and you're not driving? And you get that 'Uhhh' thing in your chest when you're being forced backwards [. . .] That's what success was like.[72]

In retrospect, the comment suggests *The Man Who* as an autobiographical continuum given how, in particular cases, 'all aspects of a star's image fit with the traits of a character'.[73] Dyer reminds us that while stars perform 'constructed representations of persons',[74] their image is also constructed through the promotions and interviews associated with the film and press coverage 'of the star's doings and "private" life'.[75] Yet by already posing as a star in the everyday, and in his management of a created persona, Bowie challenges the already slippery concept of star authenticity. Stars may not always offer fixed meanings or positions; they are, as Christine Gledhill

notes, both signifying elements in the performing arts and 'products of mass culture . . . carrying cultural meanings and ideological values',[76] *structured polysemies* referring to a multiplicity of sometimes contradictory values and meanings some of which are 'foregrounded and others are masked or displaced'.[77] Stars may thus challenge analysis by crossing boundaries between disciplines. Indeed, as Sean Redmond suggests of Bowie's later films, which seem *always* to be in cameo, his performances range from modern to postmodern, self-reflexive registers, leaving his star image polysemic.[78]

Roeg seems to anticipate this, by inserting into the movie static black-and-white portraits posed by his two leads, images that would be more conventionally employed in the promotion of the movie. These images can be understood both as spectacular disruptions to the narrative and as intertextual augmentation of the semiotically thick, visual storytelling that is Roeg's forte.[79] Spectacle need not always be considered an interruption to film but can invite a deeper critical or reflexive contemplation normally associated with art.[80] As Newton himself discovers, the screen surface can avail itself to a surprising depth, encouraging spectatorial immersion alongside critical reflection on the media or cinematic construction.

Media constructions of stars, Dyer says, encourage us to ask 'really'?[81] What is Bowie really like? Which biography, and which moment in film, reveals him as he really is? The spectacular and uncanny doubling between Bowie and Newton adds to this by subverting the relationship between original and copy. Stars generate prototypes for behaviour, influencing our body shapes and fashions,[82] connecting us memetically through apparently trivial images,[83] even perhaps providing the flesh and blood for Jungian archetypes onto which are mapped dominant cultural discourses.[84] Through the character Newton, Bowie is arguably at his most accessible as a star, offering a fan connection far in excess of his stage characters. This is something I discussed in conversation with Nick Knight, Tim Blanks, Dylan Jones and Victoria Broackes, at the V&A's *Ooh Fashion!* event, arguing the intensity of Newton's fashion influence on fans, including my own teenage wardrobe choices and poses as Newton. Was this because Newton brought Bowie more vividly alive, as both extraordinary and equally down to earth, through film's capacity to promote stars as authentic?[85]

Psychoanalytical approaches foreground stars 'as mechanisms of identification' involving complex subjective processes and acting as an inducement to watch films as part of the 'completion of star image and self image'.[86] Stars thus operate at a threshold between screen and social space, a scene of construction and agency, where the struggle to make sense of social identity is played out with consequences for observer and observed, positions collapsed in the posed figure of Newton as watcher. Bowie's self-conscious stardom serves to deconstruct the star-making process that he himself falls victim to. This is perhaps what Newton reflects on during the commercial in which he is shown watching his *doppelganger* posing before

the camera, who in turn is holding yet another camera and slowly turning to watch him back. According to Judith Peraino, posing 'insists on self-awareness, image, and surface and keeps in place the temporal and material positions of "original" and "copy"', pausing 'to allow the viewer to become absorbed in visual pleasure and desire, and also to allow the poser the pleasure of inhabiting the object position'.[87] Posing and self-construction are 'not opposed to agency' but are 'the necessary scene' of it.[88]

Character construction

Cracked Actor begins with a close-up on a television set upon which is playing a broadcast interview between Bowie and bewildered reporter Wayne Satz of *Eyewitness News*. 'If you didn't understand that [interview] don't feel too badly', Satz tells the viewer, 'because I certainly didn't.' A sequence of edits shows Bowie sitting in a darkened room watching the footage. 'David, I know you're watching tonight', Satz continues, as we continue to watch Bowie watching.

Yentob's documentary makes for an untimely reflection of the cracked actor caught in a hall of mirrors, one that foreshadows Newton's television watching in *The Man Who* and presents an uncertain account of Bowie's agency in marshalling his promotional interviews as a stage on which to act (as it were) his characters. The *Radio Times*, in previewing *Cracked Actor*, makes it sound easy: 'In the beginning there was no David Bowie, so he had to invent himself',[89] yet Bowie's talent for character construction is a reminder of how the media has been used by certain artists in wrestling control of their 'star presence' from industry manipulation in the creation and management of a public persona.[90] Shelton Waldrep notes of Oscar Wilde how the study of the writer begins with self-invention.[91] Wilde, who desired to transform his life into art, influenced the queer pose of Truman Capote (a writer whose appearances on *The Tonight Show* made him a celebrity) while Andy Warhol's star obsession with Capote is uncannily mirrored by Bowie's fascination with Warhol. Like Wilde, Capote and Warhol, Bowie set about overturning the 'tyranny' of the media and inserting himself into art by using an alarming star persona, mixing gossip, 'autobiography . . . doctored fact, stardom and the quotidian' in what Capote labelled the 'conversational portrait' (even noting how being a chameleon 'is a way to survive').[92] 'You can't let it use you', Bowie told *Rolling Stone*,[93] quoting Marshall McLuhan's argument 'the medium is the message'[94] and claiming himself as 'the medium for a conglomerate of statements and illusions'.[95] Bowie's *talk as performance* echoes Austin's observation that certain speech acts have a performative power and underlines Dyer's query: who is the star *really*?

Bowie's 'autobiography', which he started during filming of *The Man Who*, is certainly in the mode of written works by Warhol and Capote in blurring the lines between conversation and construction. *The Return of the Thin White Duke* is a documentation of his life and ideas, with fiction and 'a deal of magic in it',[96] using themes and images that crystalize in the icy figure of the Duke character from the album *Station to Station* (1976). 'I've still not read an autobiography by a rock person that had the same degree of presumptuousness and arrogance that a rock & roll record used to have', Bowie says, in explaining his ambition for the work.[97] It may also be considered an assertion of his agency in taking control of his star image, in the same way Newton compiles an album of Anthean poetry called 'The Visitor', countering any media construction of him his wife may eventually receive, broadcast through waves in space. Mary Desjardins has argued the conventional biography is a cultural battleground for the star body, while the experimental biography exposes the 'interpellative/hegemonic functions of the "star"'.[98] *Rolling Stone*, however, considered *The Return* merely 'a series of sketchy self-portraits and isolated incidents . . . more telling of Bowie's "fragmented mind" than of his life story'.[99]

Asked in interview whether his bisexuality was real or a stunt, Bowie teased, 'We'll talk all about it.' When it is pointed out that former publicist, Cherry Vanilla, claims he only lets people think he likes guys, Bowie is delighted: 'Oh, I'd love to meet this impostor she's talking about', adding, 'Cherry's almost as good as I am at using the media'.[100] This ambiguity is echoed in *The Man Who* when Newton tells Mary-Lou, 'I see things . . . Bodies.' 'Women?' she asks. 'And men', he responds enigmatically, the scene then dissolving into the alien's fisheye perspective of his dying family. Bowie's words create a puzzle of identity, candid yet slippery, confessional yet staged, claiming to be haunted by characters and the spectre of (his family's) mental illness, while also asserting authorship. 'You strip down all the things you don't like about yourself', he tells Lisa Robinson of *New Musical Express*. Robinson nevertheless alerts her reader to the trickster whose laugh is itself a performance – '[t]he eyes flash, the head is artfully tossed back' – suspecting the 'entire production' is little more than 'a film David's directed himself'.[101]

In his broadcast interviews, the slippage between actor and character suggests a less than clear account of Bowie's agency. On *The Dick Cavett Show* (1974), he sniffs (from coke use) through an interview in which Cavett tellingly refers to him as 'a working actor', then *glits* – a word, he explains, is 'like flit, but it's the '70s version' – from persona to persona, seemingly out of control of his self-presentation. At points haughty, he warns Cavett not to ask certain questions, drawing images on the studio floor with his cane (as if suffering stage fright) and switching from formal received pronunciation to relaxed cockney. When prompted by the host, Bowie insists, intriguingly, 'I don't want to know whether I'm nervous.'

Bowie's *glitting* is also a feature of his appearance on the *Russell Harty Show* (1975), a live interview made to promote his performance in *The Man Who*. The international time delay adds to the sense of the pair being out of kilter, with Bowie grumpily refusing to give direct answers and spurning attempts by Harty to lighten things up. The strange studio set-up has Harty sitting in a chair in front of a television, watching Bowie from the perspective of the audience. When asked about his plans for 1976, Bowie replies, 'I'm coming back to England in May to . . . play shows and . . . look at you . . . and look at England . . . and be English'; the 'look at you' is of course something he is already doing from a shifted perspective.

Like Cavett, Harty seems to be onto 'Bowie's act', ironically suggesting Bowie hasn't changed since they last met two years ago: 'You know you haven't . . . your accent, your voice, your method of speech has not changed.' The phrase 'method of speech' is a particularly odd and technical one, seemingly an attempt to unmask an intruder. There follows an icy exchange of words and an escalation of Bowie's body tics, his double eyebrow wriggle used as visual quote marks in asserting himself over Harty. But when Harty introduces a clip from the film, the eyebrow wriggle is equally evident in Bowie's performance as Newton. He particularly uses it to emphasize his request that Mary-Lou bring him a television. The clip suggests a *mise en abyme*, a mirror in each text, but without definitive origin.

When asked what he contributed to the movie, Bowie's answer is his acting 'and persona in general'. It is a slippery response, inviting the viewer to speculate on his agency in character construction, one undermined somewhat by the order of events. In *The Man Who* press pack, he claims he centred in Newton in a way that differs from previous characters: 'stage performances are more ceremonial. . . . In a film you are evoking a spirit within yourself.'[102] He thus echoes Gerald Mast's comparison of film and stage actors: 'Movie stars do not so much play characters; they are the characters. The movie star capitalizes on an essential paradox of the movies – that they are fictional truths.'[103]

As many actors find, costume played a role in the formulation of character. But outfits sourced for *The Man Who* found previous use in the *Diamond Dogs* tour, and then appear in *Cracked Actor*, largely due to Bowie's relationship with costume designer, Ola Hudson. They were also used in subsequent performances, since 'I literally walked off with the clothes'.[104] While Bowie filmed *The Man Who* between 2 June and 25 August 1975, he had earlier ambitions to play the role of an alien, the Martian-raised Valentine Michael Smith, in a mooted film adaptation of Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961) from a novel which also influenced Tevis and Roeg. Later, he realized he'd found something in Newton 'I wanted desperately . . . not to finish'.[105] 'It rang so true', he told *Melody Maker*.[106]

Disagreeing with Roeg's interpretation of the alien as *fallen*, Bowie preferred to believe the character acquired a previously muted emotional

drive to connect with people[107] and, shortly before his death, resurrected Newton for his Broadway play *Lazarus*. These apparently discreet biographical events indicate something less local or causal than a Newtonian analogy for identity suggests, something more along the lines of an untimely and entangled handshake. As Bowie himself recalls, on location, he isolated himself from the film crew, returning alone to his rented ranch every night, crossing the 'hauntingly beautiful desert' as if he was 'skimming along through some kind of parallel interpretation of the film itself'.[108]

While Bowie appears to use the media as a sandpit for identity construction, he may nevertheless have presented the opportunity for his characters to make their voices heard. As his list of 100 favourite books attests, Bowie was well versed in the controversial theories of R. D. Laing and Julian Jaynes.[109] Jaynes's book claims to identify the beginnings of consciousness, arguing inner thoughts were perceived as outer presences, destabilizing the boundary (and sequential ordering) of inner and outer. Bowie pursued an interest in decentring his voice through various character experiments: the cut-up techniques popularized by William S. Burroughs; the pencil sketches of characters in early songs; the multitracking of his own vocals as backing voices; and songs with a dialectical dimension, such as 'Space Oddity' (1969), performed on the *Diamond Dogs* tour (1974) with a telephone prop as the medium through which Bowie separates Major Tom and Ground Control. In the song's performance shown on *Cracked Actor*, the two voices are revisited through Halloween Jack, a character haunted by the ghost of Ziggy.

Bowie professed he lost control of the persona: 'he tried to take me over',[110] denying the author's in-built death drive,[111] evident in the *Ziggy Stardust* song where 'the kids killed the man'. On the contrary, it was the kids who kept Ziggy alive, rejecting Bowie's retirement of the character at London's Hammersmith Odeon on 3 July 1973, while the press continued to hail Bowie as Ziggy.[112] Rikke Schubart, writing about *Rocky* (Avildsen, 1976), notes how an entanglement may occur between actor and fictional role collapsing them into a single star persona in the public consciousness.[113] In *The Man Who* Newton's posing as a human decentres him, smudging away the alien's Otherness, into an identity actualized through human observation, thus providing identity's alibi as being stable and coherent. Newton, like Ziggy, can be considered a serial character, reprised through public popularity, into a continuation of story exceeding any authorial agency. It is their reciprocal agency that leads me to speculate, in 'Transition Transmission',[114] that Bowie might just as easily be the invention of Newton, a switch that makes sense of the untimely way identity is exhorted through performance.

Bowie's press and media performances illustrate the conundrum in whether to take him at his word – indeed whether that word originates with Bowie or one of his characters. His mid-1970s broadcast and print interviews

can be understood equally as Bowie acting out his public persona and, as with cases of stage fright, opportunities for nervy, liminal entanglements between person and persona. Speech acts, regardless of their truth or fiction, construct a believable world, a scene where the agency of the actor may be usurped by 'his' act.

Conclusion

Bowie's acting in *The Man Who* can be considered a study in self-conscious (perhaps highly managed) stardom and equally the chance to observe something slippery in an actor's performance – a mindfulness – or hint of a challenge to the notion that behind any character construction, or acting performance, is an authentic self. The scene I have made central to this chapter, that of the watcher watching, assembles actor, star and character, an entanglement of agencies which resist preferred hierarchies and find expression as a chaos of signs and spectacular affects, where original may be usurped by imposter copy. Where do we draw the line between Bowie the actor and the character created by David Jones in 1965, upon which other characters are premised? Where on this line is that San Francisco imposter? Bowie's talking-as-performance suggests he was always acting. Yet, whether in the feature film, documentary or 'candid' media performances discussed above, there is also a suspicion that he was merely the medium for other agencies.

Notes

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