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The Reification of Celebrity: Global Newspaper Coverage of the Death of David Bowie

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The Reification of Celebrity: Global Newspaper Coverage of the Death of David Bowie

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Abstract

This paper examines global English language newspaper coverage of the death of David Bowie. Drawing upon the concept of reification, it is argued that the notion of celebrity is discursively (re)produced and configured through a ‘public face’ that is defined, maintained and shaped via media reports and public responses that aim to know and reflect upon celebrity. In this paper, the findings highlight how Bowie’s reification was supported by discourses that represented him as an observable, reified form. Here, Bowie’s ‘reality’, that is, his authentic/veridical self, was obscured behind a façade of mediation, interpretation and representation, that debated and decided his ‘authenticity’ as a cultural icon. Such debates, however, were engagements with a reified image, enveloped in continual (re)interpretation. As a result, Bowie’s reification was grounded in a polysemous process that allowed numerous versions of ‘himself’ to be aesthetically reimagined, reinvented and repeated.

Keywords

Reification, authenticity, celebrity, Lukács, media, David Bowie, celebrity death, audience, fan, public

Introduction: Celebrity death – A ‘permanent absence’

On 11 January 2016, the London-born, English singer, songwriter, actor and record producer, David Bowie, died from cancer. Surprisingly, both Bowie and a select group of family, friends and colleagues, were able to keep Bowie’s illness a secret, with his final album *Blackstar* (ISO/RCA/Columbia/Sony) being released two days before his death. In fact, writing in *The Daily Telegraph*, McCormick (2016) stated that ‘Like a great magician vanishing amid his last illusion, Bowie’s final act appears as masterfully and mysteriously staged as everything else in his extraordinary career’ (12/01/16). In media commentaries surrounding his death, much was made of Bowie’s ability to traverse music, film and art. ‘[H]e has been described as a singer-songwriter, which seems hopelessly inadequate’, wrote Linehan (2016), before adding, ‘He was David Bowie. There was no one like him, although millions dreamed they could be’ (*The Irish Times*, 12/01/16). Indeed, when ‘Celebrity construction and presentation involve an imaginary public face’ (Rojek 2001, pg. 25); an ‘illusion’ that is both ‘masterfully and mysteriously staged’ (McCormick, *The Daily Telegraph*, 12/01/16), then, how do celebrities, as noted by Linehan (2016), evoke feelings of intense emotion amongst audiences and fans and what role does the media play in this process?

Elsewhere, Kitch (2000) has argued that media coverage of celebrity deaths is inscribed with ‘moral tales’ that seek to reflect upon the celebrity’s life and their impact upon, and, relation to, society. There is a degree to which such events ‘do not merely unfold; especially when crafting a “life story” told in retrospect’, but are subject to, ‘journalists ... [who] play an *active role in how* celebrities’ lives are assessed’ (Kitch 2007, pg. 39 [italics added]). Such assessments, however, are not entirely dependent upon the media. In fact, Marshall’s (1997) concept of ‘audience-subjectivities’ is, as Rojek notes, an attempt:

to refer to the constant negotiation around the public face of celebrity, between types or forms of audience and particular cultural industries. ... [This] deflect[s] analysis from attributing omnipotence to the mass-media and to propose that audiences must be regarded as sophisticated, creative agents in the construction and development of the celebrity system (2001, pg. 37-38)

Viewing audiences ‘as sophisticated, creative agents’ directs attention to *how* the celebrity is remembered. When ‘There is increased interest in the role that the fan plays in making and developing the personae of the celebrity’ (Radford and Bloch 2012, pg. 139), then it is important that celebrity analyses are not separated from the representation of celebrity or the representation of public responses to celebrity. In fact, this posits a consideration of how processes of remembering are interdependently related to an ‘active’ media (Kitch 2007) and a ‘creative’ audience/public (Marshall 1997; Rojek 2001). This serves as an important conjunction between the journalist’s ‘active role’ in providing cultural reflections and formal obituaries (Kitch 2007) and in their coverage of public displays of grief, sites of mourning, audience letters and personal opinion/commentary pieces from selected – often ‘famous’ individuals – as well as the general public. Beyond the celebrity’s ‘real flesh and blood’, it is the ‘collective myths and ideals’ (Gibson 2007, pg. 420) that endow the celebrity a ‘permanent absence’ in popular media culture (McCann 1996). This is noted by McCann (1999, pg. 199 cited Rojek 2001, pg. 78), who in commenting upon Marilyn Monroe, argues that, ‘Monroe is now everywhere yet nowhere: her image is on walls, in movies, in books – all after-images, obscuring the fact of her permanent absence’.

In view of exploring this ‘permanent absence’, the following sections will examine global English language newspaper coverage of the death of David Bowie. This will explore how, despite death, Bowie was discursively (re)produced in media reports and public responses. In particular, it will consider how such ‘construction[s]’,

‘presentation[s]’ and ‘imaginary public face[s]’ (Rojek 2001) coalesce in mediated coverage of celebrity death and how the ‘reality’ of the star is mediated and entwined with a desire to know the ‘real’ celebrity and an apparent ‘authentic self’.

These aims will be considered in relation to the concept of reification. Indeed, it will be argued that it is in applying this concept that the ‘operationalising of celebrity’ can be explored (Driessens 2015). Importantly, reification is not used here to denote an overarching ‘state apparatus’ that uniformly manipulates audiences and which presents a homogenous celebrity type. Rather, the concept of reification is used to examine how media representations, and the representations of public responses to celebrity, interdependently work to ‘objectify’ celebrity/ies as reified forms (Elias 2001; Feenberg 2011; Lukács 1971; 1973; 1996).

Reification

Bewes (2002, pg. 3 [italics added]) notes that ‘Reification refers to the moment that a process or relation is generalized into an *abstraction*, and thereby turned into a “*thing*”’. For Marx (1867), this process reflected how social relations (class relations) are perceived as relations between commodities. Accordingly, ‘In Marxist theories of labour, reification is what happens when workers are installed in a place within the capitalist mode of production, and thus reduced to the status of a machine part’ (Bewes 2002, pg.3-4 see also Markus 1982).¹ This is extended in the work of Georg Lukács (1971; 1973; 1996), who moved beyond the economic context to include the cultural. Drawing upon the work of both Max Weber and Karl Marx, Lukács (1971) examined

¹ It is important to note that reification is not alienation. Indeed, the two terms have often been considered synonymously (Markus 1982). For Marx, ‘The notion of alienation centers around the idea that ... individuals, both separately and in their totality, lose control over the results of their social activities, that their own products confront them as immutable objective conditions of life, under which they are institutionally subsumed and which determine their fate according to their own logic, independently of the intentions of the individuals’ (Markus 1982, pg. 146).

how 'capitalism is itself a system of reification' (Milner 1995, pg. 63), with class relations and commodity exchange *legitimated* by reification (Lukács 1971). This presents capitalism as a natural and inevitable phenomenon; a process that obscures exploitation. Following Lukács's (1971) ideas, two important attributes can be outlined.²

First, reification is a reflection of *human consciousness* (Lukács 1971). Entwined with the interdependent workings of capitalism and bureaucracy, reification serves as a '*constitutive* of capitalist society' (Feenberg 2011, pg. 176 [italics in original]), so that consciousness is itself 'reified' and uncritically accepted as an accordant of commodity exchange (Lukács 1971; Milner 1995). Here, 'Bureaucracy implies the adjustment of one's way of life, mode of work and hence of consciousness, to the general socio-economic premises of the capitalist economy' (Lukács, 1923; English translation: 1971, pg. 98). This is echoed in Adorno and Horkheimer's (1979, pg. ref cited Bewes 1997, pg. 141) assertion that: 'Everyone is worth what he [sic] earns and earns what he is worth. He learns what he is through the vicissitudes of his economic existence. He knows nothing else'.³

Elsewhere, the Frankfurt School (Adorno 1955; 1978; Horkheimer and Adorno 1947; Marcuse 1964) have employed Lukács's notion of reification to their analyses of consumerism, with culture itself becoming a commodity that is rationalised and homogenised through mass production. The Frankfurt School's focus on the 'totality' of capitalism, and its 'success' in ensuring 'a fully rationalized system of domination' (Milner 1994, pg. 64), underpins their conceptions of the 'cultural industry'. As a result,

² Reference to Lukács ideas are drawn specifically from his essays on 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat' (Lukács 1971).

³ Similarly, take Malcolm's (2012, pg. 170 [italics added]) example on English national identity: 'The English perception of themselves as "an Island race" is a pertinent example of the *unreflective way* people can respond to an imagined, not to say fallacious, unity (for Britain rather than England is an island)'. Here, it can be noted how the 'fallacious' perception of 'an Island race', unreflectively works to present a reified conception of 'England'.

reification is a class-obscuring term, with the concealment of class differences hidden behind the ‘pseudo-individuality’ of cultural goods.⁴

Second, reification refers to *objectification*. Feenberg elaborates:

When most goods circulate as commodities the original relationships between producers and consumers are obscured and a new kind of society, a capitalist society, emerges. In that society all sorts of relational properties of objects and institutions are treated as things or as attributes of things. Prices determine production and move goods from place to place independent of their use value. Corporations assume a reality independent of the underlying laboring activity through which they exist, and technical control is extended throughout the society, even to the human beings who people it. (2011, pg. 176-177)

Reification, therefore, ‘objectifies’ reality, it subsumes human relations as ‘things’ (Feenberg 2011) and ‘is the process in which “thing-hood” becomes the standard of objective reality; the “given world”’ (Bewes 2002, pg. 4). This sense of ‘thingitude’ can be considered in relation to the commercial value that is placed on a celebrity’s name and image.⁵ Here, the ‘Celebrity persona has become a heritable, alienable “thing” from which the owner may arbitrarily exclude others. In other words, it has become property’ (Armstrong 1991, pg. 444).

There are a number of criticisms that can be levelled at Lukács’s work, most notably, the sense of idealism that pervades Lukács (1973) use of the term; indeed, a perspective that commands the ‘de-ifying’ of proletarian ‘consciousness’ beyond its social context (Adorno 1966). Equally, its application can provide a view of the public

⁴ There is a lack of agency in the Frankfurt School’s analysis, functionalist to the extent that class exploitation and the system that it maintains is largely predisposed.

⁵ Whereas for Debord (1994), it is the spectacle that reflects the reified commodity, for Lukács (1923; 1973; 1996), it is the abstract idea that is objectified and consumed.

as both obedient and passive, ignoring the potential to both resist and reinterpret cultural meanings. To this extent, the Frankfurt School are complicit in pushing Lukács notion of reification ‘too far’ by directing attention to the alienating qualities of capitalism and culture (Bewes 1997).

Despite these criticisms, there is the potential to view the concept of reification as a constitutive feature of human relations. For example, whereas reification serves to highlight a form of consciousness under which human relations are objectified, Feenberg (2011, pg. 185 [italics added]) notes how Lukács’s ‘theory [on] *human action* in modern societies, whether capitalist or socialist, *continually constructs reified social objects out of the underlying human relations on which it is based*’. In such instances, reified ‘social objects’ provide a sense of ‘stability’ and orientation for individuals (Feenberg, 2011).

Here, one can consider celebrities as reified ‘social objects’, based upon media and public (audience/fan) relations that work to objectify the celebrity with various cultural meanings that are subsequently consumed (Armstrong 1991; Lukács 1923; 1973; 1996). The reification of celebrity is not just dependent upon the celebrity’s talent, or, sometimes lack of, but also, the ways in which both the media and public are incorporated in this process by imbuing the celebrity with particular meaning, value and desire (Dyer 2004; Rojek 2015; Van Krieken, 2012). This illustrates a circulatory in Lukács (1923; 1996) work that details how processes of reification are maintained by cultural contexts that interdependently ‘orientate’ both the celebrity and public (Feenberg 2011). In order to elaborate upon this process, the following sections will examine how the objectification of celebrity is related to authenticity and a desire for the ‘authentic celebrity’ (Bewes 1997).

The ‘authentic celebrity’: a ‘search for an essential humanness’

In his work on postmodernity, Bewes argues that:

We are deluged, ... with instances of a collective social anxiety around authenticity. ... The 1990s were prepackaged as ‘the age of honesty’. Now it seems a bandwagon is in motion, accelerating quickly. From pop stars to politicians, actors to advertising executives, everybody is clambering aboard. Sincerity has replaced wit and subtlety as *the* mark of commercial credibility (1997, pg. 50 [italics in original])

Bewes’s (1997, pg. 33 [italics in original]) contention that sincerity is itself perceived as an ‘authentic’ response and that ‘Contemporary interest in decadence is really an interest in *being*, a desire to *be* something *authentically*’, serves as a useful reflection of media coverage on celebrity. In such instances, a celebrity’s apparent sincerity, despite their fame and adulation, as well as the (media) attention that is often afforded to acts of celebrity deviance (Blackshaw and Crabbe, 2005), are echoed in Bewes’s (1997) comments on the authentic and decadent.⁶ Accordingly, it is possible to view debates on the ‘authentic’ celebrity as contiguous with their ‘production’ (Rojek 2001). Here, both authenticity and reification are not abstract, separated conceptions but are closely entwined in the (re)production of celebrity (Morris and Anderson 2015; Rojek 2001; 2016; Van Krieken 2012).

For example, discussions on authenticity are often attributed to the celebrity’s ‘raw’ talent and ‘veridical self’ (Allen and Mendick 2013; Rojek 2001). Kavka and West (2010) consider how the ‘reality TV’ celebrity, Jade Goody – who died in 2009 of

⁶ For Bewes (1997), notions of agency and the possibility of identifying or even uncovering an ‘authentic self’ occupy an important role in ‘postmodern’ society.

cervical cancer – maintained media attention throughout her treatment and eventual death through a carefully constructed media representation that sought to mediate Goody’s final moments. They note that:

The lesson to be learned from Goody’s brand of celebrity, however, is that it is a mistake to think of the mediated world as any less authentic than that lived behind closed doors. The classic resolution to the oxymoron of celebrity authenticity is to insist on a division between public and private, between star before the camera and ‘real’ person behind the scenes (Kavka and West 2010, pg. 228)

As a result, whereas media representations have been subject to numerous analyses, highlighting the media’s ability to distort or (re)construct events, individuals and messages, Morris and Anderson (2015) posit how a performer’s ‘authenticity’ forms an important part of online audiences’ engagement with ‘vloggers’.⁷ Drawing upon McCormack’s (2011) work on homosexuality, Morris and Anderson (2015, pg. 1204-1205) highlight how ‘authenticity’ was ‘principally about being open and expressive of one’s individuality’, indeed, ‘the presentation of a “truthful” and “honest” self’ (McCormack 2011, pg. 93).

Similar themes are echoed in Redmond’s (2008, pg. 154) work on celebrity confessionals as ‘a pure form of truth-telling’. In doing so:

the television or videoed confession centres on physical, psychological and symbolic damage. ... The carnage of the confessional promises unmediated *access to the human real*, in an age of simulation, and it enables the fan/

⁷ A ‘vlog’ refers to a blog that is recorded using video. These ‘vlogs’ can be uploaded to online video sharing websites, such as, YouTube.

viewer/reader to search, hunt, and interrogate for *the real* in recognition that one lives a performance-driven culture full of masks and fake personae. In short, the carnal (celebrity) confessional creates a (be)longing space for the search for an *essential humanness*, and a belief in an innate good and evil that somehow lies above and beyond the artifice of the celebrity and the withering irony of the age (Redmond 2008, pg. 154 [italics added])

As can be seen, a desire for ‘access to the human real’, indeed, ‘an essential humanness’, is encapsulated in attempts to uncover (‘search, hunt ... interrogate’) the ‘authentic’.

Accordingly, while ‘the celebrity persona is always a battleground between manufacture and authenticity’ (Kavka and West 2010, pg. 228), the above examples reveal how discussions on authenticity, whether real or manipulated (Dyer 2004), are conducive of a media presence that (re)presents an image of celebrity/ies that is grounded in ‘an appearance of naturalness or inevitability’ (Burris 1988, pg. 23). Importantly, this ‘appearance’ is not just dependent upon the media but is closely tied to media audiences and public acknowledgement. Merrin, referencing Nietzsche, elaborates upon this process:

the media are not a mirror reflecting the world, nor a window upon it, nor even ‘media’ – standing between us and a ‘reality’ they mediate – but are themselves constitutive of the experience and thus the reality of the event, becoming, therefore, inseparable from the event – from its occurrence, its unfolding, its ‘greatness’, its ‘eventness’, its historical status, and from our knowledge, experience and memory of it. Hence today the event and its broadcast have become a single phenomenon: the media event, a phrase which, however, is too easily misunderstood, suggesting either the obvious (that events today enjoy a

saturation coverage and hype), or the ridiculous (that the media produce the whole event as an illusion or special effect). (1999, pg. 42)

In short, Merrin (1999, pg. 42 [*italics added*]) asserts that ‘The media event instead represents *a much more complex relationship between the event, the media and their audience*’.

This ‘complex relationship’ can be considered in relation to celebrity and how media audience(s)/fan(s) are entwined in celebrity production, playing an important role in judging and bestowing authenticity on particular individuals (Morris and Anderson 2015). In fact, for Morris and Anderson (2015), the use of online media accentuates the ‘ordinary’, providing a direct link between the celebrity and the audience that, in the context of video blogs, can be completed in the celebrity’s chosen location. ‘Vloggers’ were judged to be authentic due to their projected sincerity (see also Bewes 1997). As a result, ‘authentic behaviors’ were subsequently ‘enabled’ by online media audiences, ‘establishing and maintaining’ the vloggers’ relationship with their audiences and upholding their celebrity status (Morris and Anderson 2015, pg. 1213). In such instances, both the media and public are interdependently related in ‘the experience and thus the reality’ of celebrity as a form of cultural reification (Merrin 1999, pg. 42). Here, the celebrity is viewed as an ‘objective’ creation of the audiences’/fans’ own devotion and involvement (Morris and Anderson 2015; Rojek 2001; Thomas 2008; Williamson 1998).⁸

⁸ In fact, with regard to Eco’s (1987) “‘demystification” of the figure of the hero’, Bewes (1997, pg. 96 [*italics in original*]) argues that ‘the concept “hero” is realized ... only as a consequence of public acclaim; its realization is public acclaim, and therefore to talk of a “true” hero, distinct somehow from the recognition ... is an absurdity’.

This does not suggest that the reification of celebrity reveals a homogeneous account of the celebrification process (Gamson 1994; Van Krieken 2012).⁹ Rather, this article argues that audiences, instead of being culturally duped, are – alongside the media – interdependently related in the reification of celebrity. Indeed, ‘through a dialectical process between reporters and their audiences, who take their cues from each other as social values are debated and reaffirmed’, celebrity deaths are endowed with ‘cultural meaning’ (Kitch 2000, pg. 176). This endowment and the dialectical process that sustains it is never final nor complete, but rather, such ‘meaning’ forms part of the ‘tension between performance and authenticity’ (Van Krieken 2012, pg. 97).

In light of efforts to uncover the ‘authentic’, celebrity-fan relationships are prefigured by ‘an abstraction ... translated through the mass media’ (Rojek 2001, pg. 48). It is ‘Through the media, [that] audiences come to feel as if they “know” celebrities’, with Kitch (2000, pg. 173) adding that ‘it is both ironic and fitting that they can fully mourn them only through media’. This highlights how celebrity-fan relationships are dependent upon a level of abstraction (Lukács 1923; 1973; Rojek 2001; 2015). Here, the ‘desire’ to know the ‘real’ is always unobtainable, and, as a result, the media play ‘a direct and sustained intervention into the construction of people’s desires, cultural identities and expectations of the real’ (Turner 2006, pg. 162).

The reification of celebrity

It is evident that the reification of celebrity, both living and dead, is intricately tied to the media. Take, for example, Williamson’s remarks on the death of Princess Diana:

⁹ Nor, does it aim to draw connections with the cultural critique offered by The Frankfurt School (indeed, a sense of false consciousness, through which the celebrity merely exists to support capitalism).

Life is messy and confusing, but many of our feelings are caught up in media stories – real and fictional – whose meaning, both because of its unpredictability (it was not a plot move we had seen coming) and because it removed the real person behind the images, so that they were suddenly, simply images – as if paper money was suddenly revealed as just paper. The drive to go physically to the Palace and other landmarks has perhaps been an attempt to grasp something more solid – a run on the band of the Real (Williamson 1998, pg. 26 see also Gibson 2007, pg. 420)

Williamson (1998) highlights how the desire to know the ‘real’ individual, that which lies ‘behind’ the celebrity persona, and the desire to visit locations associated with Diana, were closely enveloped in a process of reification, indeed, a desire for the authentic. Similarly, in examining both media and public responses (Mass Observation [MO] survey) to the death of Diana, Thomas (2008, pg. 369) notes how an ‘identification of intimacy’ between the public and Diana was ‘reported in other people, or described as a general phenomenon, rather than owned by the speakers themselves’. Notably, Thomas (2008, pg. 369) adds that ‘This is true not just of the journalists ... who encountered personal-seeming mourning, but also the man [a participant in the MO survey] who felt it was “like” he knew Diana personally, rather than actually feeling he did’. Indeed, it is the ‘like’ knowing, highlighted in Thomas’s (2008) work, that serves to *reify* the celebrity in the respondent’s remarks.

Instead of downplaying the importance that certain celebrities can have for particular individuals, the above discussion serves to elaborate upon the significance of the celebrity-fan relationship. According to Redmond (2012), this relationship is based upon a ‘productive intimacy’. That is, ‘stars and celebrities *feel* they are an important and valued part of everyday life, and fans/consumers employ stars/celebrities to extend and enrich their everyday world’ (Redmond 2012, pg. 35). Accordingly, it is this sense

of ‘feeling’ – a ‘like’ knowing – that (re)produces the audiences’/fans’ involvement in the process of reification (Redmond 2008; 2012; Thomas 2008). Audiences/fans may never meet their celebrity and contact may only ever be ‘felt’ through the ‘intimacy’ provided when listening or watching them, yet, it is the ‘production’ of these intimate feelings and their location within ‘everyday lives’ that serves to aid the celebrity’s ‘reification’ (Feenberg 2011; Redmond 2008; 2012). The following sections will explore this process in relation to global press coverage of the death of David Bowie.

Methodology

In total, 221 newspaper articles were selected from 48 newspapers. This included national and regional editions from 21 countries.¹⁰ Newspapers were collected on the two days following Bowie’s death (12 and 13 January 2016), with news and feature articles, editorials, opinion pieces and interviews (with Bowie as well as colleagues, friends and family) pertaining to Bowie’s life and career, selected for analysis.

Indeed, the decision to include a global sample was based upon the assertion that ‘global’ celebrity deaths can ‘narrow and focus attention, arresting and concentrating vast and diverse populations across the globe’ (Gibson 2007, pg. 418). As a result, a close textual analysis of national media texts was administered via a qualitative

¹⁰ English language newspapers were selected. The sample included: Australia: *Herald Sun*, *The Courier Mail*, *The Advertiser*, *The Age*, *The Daily Telegraph* [Sydney]; Canada: *National Post*, *The Globe and Mail*, *Toronto Star*; China: *China Daily*, *Global Times*; England: *Daily Express*, *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Mail*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Sun*, *The Times*; India: *The Hindu*; *The New Indian Express*, *The Times of India*; Indonesia: *Jakarta Post*; Israel: *Jerusalem Post*; Kuwait: *Arab Times*; Lebanon: *The Daily Star*; New Zealand: *The Dominion Post*, *The New Zealand Herald*; Northern Ireland: *Belfast Telegraph*; Pakistan: *Daily Times*; Philippines: *The Philippine Star*; Oman: *Oman Daily Observer*; Republic of Ireland: *Irish Independent*, *The Irish Times*; Scotland: *Daily Record*, *The Herald*; South Africa: *Cape Argus*, *The Times* [South Africa]; Thailand: *Bangkok Post*, *The Nation*; United Arab Emirates: *Gulf News*, *The National*; United States: *Chicago Sun-Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Post*, *The New York Times*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*; Wales: *Western Mail*. Note, English editions of the *Daily Express*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Mirror*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Sun* and *The Times* were used.

thematic analysis of each article (Flick 2006). This examined how the global press framed Bowie in the wake of his death, and, in particular, identified the ways in which journalists' opinions and members of the public were used to construct the narratives surrounding Bowie's death (Dyer 2004). This analytical method highlighted a number of narratives which were collectively analysed following a process of open and axial coding (Black 2016; Neuman 2003).

Open coding allowed for each article to be organised in relation to their respective nationality and newspaper. Each article was then read and relevant sentences and paragraphs pertaining to Bowie's life, career and death were highlighted (Neuman 2003). Highlighted sections were subsequently brought together under a process of axial coding. Axial coding allowed for a synthesis of the global press' coverage (Neuman 2003), so that 'cultural discourses and narrative structures', within, and, between, each text, could be identified (Jermyn 2001, pg. 345). This 'intertextual' process allowed for 'recurrent, underlying patterns and implicit meanings' (Jermyn 2001, pg. 345) to emerge across the global sample. Identified themes were organised in relation to the following questions: to what extent did discussions on Bowie's authenticity form part of media discourses and in what ways did the media try to 'understand' Bowie posthumously, indeed, his life, his image and his stardom?

'Authentic' Bowie: 'just a boy from Brixton'

UNRECOGNISABLE in flat cap, jeans, scruffy hoody and wraparound sunglasses as he carried his lunch – a beef sandwich and salad – in a paper bag, David Bowie wouldn't attract a second glance on his rare forays out on to the streets of Manhattan.

(Leonard, *Daily Mail* 12/01/16 [emphasis in original])

Across the press' coverage, reports were clear to highlight Bowie's 'iconic' status (Adams and McAbe 2016), with the *Global Times* (2016) stating: 'Bowie was an iconic figure in rock music for decades and admired by fans around the world' (12/01/16). The *Western Mail* (2016) noted that 'Others [had] described the ... singer as "iconic", "a genius" and "one of the greatest performance artists in history"' (13/01/16). This was reflected in the 'way in which David Bowie confronted his own mortality', something which for Gill (2016), 'confirmed the true nobility of this most vital cultural icon' (*The Independent* 12/01/16).

In fact, Bowie's ability to imbue his music and songwriting with themes that authentically portrayed 'real' life (Kavka and West 2010; Rojek, 2001), was echoed in his ability to 'show he had a sensitive side' (Dingwall, *Daily Record* 12/01/16). Bowie was 'a gentleman and an understanding artist in one irreplaceable package' (McLean, *Belfast Telegraph* 12/01/16). Someone who was 'an extremely nice guy' (Doyle, *The Irish Times* 13/01/16), with 'genuine nature and humility that shone through' (*The New Zealand Herald* 13/01/16). This was matched by reports that argued that Bowie 'was just like us' (Frere-Jones, *Los Angeles Times* 12/01/16 [italics added]). Without ever elaborating upon who this 'us' was specifically referring to, Bowie continued to maintain 'a connection with his audience' (Carr, *Irish Independent* 12/01/16). This audience was one that grew up in the 1970s and was explicitly working-class:

It was a grim, grey decade, the 70s. Bowie was a thrilling splash of colour and danger. Of course, we knew about the vast majority of working class kids then, leaving school to work in local factories, flower power was far away, long ago and not for the likes of us. However Bowie WAS like us. He was a working class guy who knew his rock 'n' roll. (*Jakarta Post* 12/01/16 [emphasis in original] see also Flett 2016)

Here, Bowie's 'ordinariness' (Retter 2016a) was reflected in his London upbringing (*Daily Times* 2016; *The Philippine Star* 2016). Bowie was considered to be 'a local hero', indeed, 'a local boy made good' (Bilefsky et al., *The New York Times* 12/01/16). Despite its current 'gentrification', the 'immigrant neighborhood' that Bowie grew up in, served to emphasize his celebrity status (Bilefsky et al. 2016). Jones noted that:

Even though he had a remarkable self-possession, there was no suggestion then that Bowie would become one of the most iconic stars in rock history, master of a universe of alter egos, images and recordings unlike anything that had come before. *He was just a boy from Brixton* who got lucky when he moved to Bromley. (*Daily Mail* 12/01/16 [italics added])

Indeed, for many, Bowie's 'normality' was an important quality. Kenny (2016) stated that 'He [Bowie] would blow you away every day that he could be that famous and yet that normal' (*The Irish Times* 12/01/16). In fact, Midgley (2016) added that 'it is worth reflecting on how a boy from humble beginnings in Brixton, south London, grew up to become such a global legend' (*Daily Express* 12/01/16 see also Adams 2016; *Daily Mirror* 2016a; 2016b). Again, Jones commented:

In some ways, that reflects the extraordinary journey he himself made: the boy from Brixton who conquered the world but never lost touch with himself; or forgot, behind the make-up and the suits and the millions, who he really was. (*Daily Mail* 12/01/16)

The sense that Bowie had not forgotten 'who he really was', was a theme enacted in various accounts of his background and upbringing (Bilefsky et al., 2016; L-A. Jones 2016; Kenny 2016) and one that subsequently served to support his 'authenticity'. That

is, despite his ‘working-class’ origins (*Jakarta Post* 2016; Retter 2016a), Bowie’s ‘rags-to-riches’ portrayal was configured by the fact that he never forgot who he was (L-A. Jones 2016; Kenny 2016).

Nevertheless, the sense that certain individuals, the general public, and the media could ever truly ‘know’ Bowie (Brinn 2016), was a conundrum that was reflected upon by O’Connell (2016). Commenting on an interview with Bowie, O’Connell (2016) remarked that ‘Bowie was always hyper-aware of how he was coming across. I’ve never felt so strongly when interviewing someone that what I was getting was an *acted out projection*’ adding that, ‘At the same time it *felt completely authentic*, not at all a cynical masquerade’ (*The Times* 12/01/16 [italics added]).

It is here that one can begin to trace an important theme in the framing of Bowie, notably, an ability to straddle both the ‘authentic’ and the ‘acted out projection’. Reflecting upon Bowie’s ‘genial’, ‘local hero’ character, O’Connell (2016) added that ‘In my vanity I’d like to believe this was the “real” Bowie’ (*The Times* 12/01/16). Indeed, the paradox underlying O’Connell’s (2016) remarks was confirmed by Brown:

The paradox of Bowie was that for all the air of other-worldliness he created around himself, in person he was the most affable, charming – and down-to-earth – man. The south London mateyness, the air of breezy candour, conspired to effect that great social trick of leading you to believe after five minutes’ acquaintanceship that you’d known him all your life. (*The Daily Telegraph* 12/01/16)

Uncovering who Bowie ‘was’, was itself an important part of his penultimate album, *The Next Day* (ISO/Columbia). Released in March 2013, ‘The album and subsequent music videos drew explicitly on the question of who Bowie was and had been, creating a media frenzy around his past work, fan nostalgia for previous Bowie

incarnations and a pleasurable negotiation with his new output' (Cinque and Redmond 2013, pg. 377). In doing so, uncovering a 'real' Bowie had become part of the artistic process. Indeed, whereas the previous examples sought to identify Bowie's 'real' persona in Bowie's music, sense of familiarity and genial character, this was, for some, a 'great social trick' (Kureishi, *The Times* 12/01/16). In fact, 'Bowie was a master of PR', with Kureishi (2016) adding that 'He really knew how to be photographed, how to be dressed. He knew that pop music was really to do with image. And people always looked at the photographs rather than read the writing' (*The Times* 12/01/16).

As can be seen, Bowie's charisma (Retter 2016b) and sense of 'musical epiphany' (Boshoff 2016), was marked by Bowie's ability to confound the authentic with the inauthenticity of the staged performance. In fact, Linehan argued that:

Bowie was extraordinarily adept at marrying the visceral intensity of rock 'n' roll with other modes of performance. Whereas most of his contemporaries aspired to various forms of authenticity, he knew that to be the worst sham of all. Truth, if it existed, was to be found in fiction. And even then it was elliptical, transitory, sometimes hallucinatory. Truth was a lovesick alien lost on a cold, uncaring Earth, a single long, distorted screech on a synthesiser, a lightning flash across a human face. But it was also a heart-rending ballad or a rabble-rousing anthem. (*The Irish Times* 12/01/16)

Linehan's (2016) remarks succinctly draw upon the contradictions in Bowie's representation. That is, the 'sham' of authenticity was marked by the 'truth' of the performance, producing emotional 'heart-rending' and 'rabble-rousing' performances (Linehan 2016) that were 'suffused' with 'genuine soul' (*Bangkok Post* 2016 see also Menon 2016).

Here, we find discussions regarding Bowie's authenticity serving as an important undercurrent in his celebrity image. Bowie's various 'characters' were manifestations of his musical and theatrical capabilities through which he could diligently 'reinvent' himself via his 'on-stage' personas (Fredericks 2016; *The New Indian Express* 2016). These characters aimed to subvert the relationship between celebrity and the 'real' in an 'attempt to have his fictional character accepted as authentic' (Usher and Fremaux 2013, pg. 393). McLean (2016) confirmed this, noting that 'Bowie was the changing man, forever reinventing his sound and remoulding his image as he alone saw fit' (*Belfast Telegraph* 12/01/16 see also *The Daily Telegraph* [Sydney] 2016; *Western Mail* 2016). In short, Bowie 'was impossible to categorise or label, constantly changing musical direction and putting an innovative twist to his genius, be it on stage, on albums, in film or even leading the online music revolution' (*Belfast Telegraph* 12/01/16).

There is, in the above examples, a number of complicated appraisals at play. That is, whereas Bowie was a cultural 'icon' and an authentic, sincere musician (Dingwall 2016; Doyle 2016; Gill 2016; McLean 2016; Menon 2016; *The Dominion Post* 2016) who could deliberately manipulate and reinvent his image through a multitude of performances (Brown 2016; Kureishi 2016; O'Connell 2016), he was also, paradoxically, 'just like us' (Frere-Jones 2016). This conflict was summarized by Dempsey, who in meeting Bowie, exclaimed that:

What struck me both times I met him was how disturbingly normal he was off-stage. He was a chameleon; onstage he was an eccentric, at times even avant-garde, performer but off-stage he was a down-to-earth Brixton boy who was thoughtful, gracious and generous with his time. (*Irish Independent* 12/01/16)

Echoing Goffman's (1990) dramaturgical analysis of the self, the 'on-stage'/'off-stage' persona was recounted in the various references to Bowie's ability to play with identity. Newspaper reports frequently referred to Bowie as a 'chameleon' (*Daily Record* 2016; *Oman Daily Observer* 2016; Sandle and Faulconbridge 2016; *The Indian Express* 2016).

Despite his own acknowledgements (*Arab Times* 2016), Bowie was 'a brilliant fusion of his own glaring contradictions and paradoxes' (*The Irish Times* 12/01/16 [italics added]). In such instances, Bowie was able to maintain a performance of authenticity that encouraged 'us to look for his real self behind the mask' (Cinque and Redmond 2013, pg. 377). Yet, in looking for the 'real/authentic' Bowie, newspaper reports reflected on Bowie's authenticity via discourses that highlighted his 'iconic status' (Adams and McAbe 2016; *Global Times* 2016; O'Doherty 2016; Reynolds 2016; Roberts 2016; *Western Mail* 2016), nobility (Gill 2016) and 'original talents' (Silva 2016), producing music that reflected themes more commonly associated with 'artists and philosophers' (O'Toole 12/01/16). From 'cultural icon', to 'local hero', to the various reinventions in Bowie's performances, Bowie played with renewal in ways that did not undermine his artistry.

Indeed, this echoes Jameson's (1979) cultural critique of the film *Jaws* (Universal Pictures). In interpreting the 'shark', Jameson (1979, pg. 142) argues that the shark's reification provided a 'polysemous function', by containing the various anxieties appropriated to the shark. In similar fashion, Bowie's 'polysemous function', enacted in his various manifestations, served to underline his reification in that Bowie's celebrity image 'literally enacted' such difference (O'Toole 2016).¹¹ Indeed, Bowie was 'multi-faceted' but also 'consistent' (Usher and Fremaux 2013). Despite there being

¹¹ Indeed, 'none' of the various readings attributed to the shark's significance 'can be said to be wrong or aberrant, but their very multiplicity suggests that the vocation of the symbol – the killer shark – lies less in any single message or meaning than in its very capacity to absorb and organize all of these quite distinct anxieties together' (Jameson 1979, pg. 142).

‘many Bowies’ (Walker, *Belfast Telegraph* 12/01/16), Bowie ‘was always recognizable’ (Pareles et al., *The New York Times* 12/01/16); with Frere-Jones (2016) exclaiming that ‘We always knew it was him’ (*Los Angeles Times* 12/01/16). Elaborating upon this, Murray noted:

It would be the most tedious and redundant cliché imaginable to say that ‘there was only one David Bowie’ because, after all, *there were many, but they were all him*. He was large: he contained multitudes. He was legion. He was beauty and the beast: the prettiest star, the man who sold the world and the man who fell to earth. (*The Times* 12/01/16 [italics added])

In such instances, Bowie’s representation subsumed difference under an overarching rhetoric and image (Jameson 1979). Despite attempts to define a distinct identity, aim or objective to Bowie’s career, newspaper reflections were subject to a plurality of discourses through which the various meanings appropriated to Bowie were continually constructed and (re)constructed, yet, ‘*always in his image*’ (Zuel, *The Age* 12/01/16 [italics added]). Bowie represented a varied, yet, coherent image, indeed, ‘an all-encompassing aesthetic identity’ (Fury, *The Independent* 12/01/16). In doing so, ‘There was a David Bowie for everyone’ (Brown, *The Daily Telegraph* 12/01/16).

Bowie: the ‘enigma claimed by everyone’

‘From pop star to soul boy to enigmatic avant-garde artist, there’s a Bowie for
everyone’

(McLean, *Belfast Telegraph* 12/01/16)

Bowie's various personas and musical directions afforded him a considerable fan base. For Brinn (2016), 'He was the one artist who united leather-jacketed punks, platform-shoed glitter rockers, pop divas, street-corner buskers and hip hop outlaws under his all-encompassing banner' (*Jerusalem Post* 12/01/16). This emphasizes how the media serve to 'speak for' the public during occasions of notable significance, acquiring 'the role of national healers' (Kitch 2000, pg. 189). Yet, rather than voicing the opinions of its national readership, a number of newspapers reflected a degree of internationalism, openly declaring that Bowie had been adored by 'everyone', regardless of nationality. The *Daily Record* (2016) stated: 'Everyone has a Bowie song in their heads, and everyone can feel cool because of Bowie's amazing creative legacy' (12/01/16). As a result:

He was equal parts living work of art and crash course in postmodernism. And in being so many things, in accounting for so much of what it meant to be alive in the latter half of the 20th century (and early stretch of the 21st), David Bowie was everything to everyone. (Semley, *Toronto Star* 12/01/16)

Semley's (2016) comments highlight the significance that Bowie held for those 'alive in the latter half of the 20th century'. In fact, 'David Bowie encapsulated the Seventies like no one else in rock music' (Connolly, *Daily Mail* 12/01/16).

Both Maconie (2016) and Hamilton (2016) located Bowie's significance in a context of previous 'celebrity' deaths as well as the social and political context of the late twentieth-century (cited Doyle 2016). Maconie stated that:

For those of us who grew up in the 1970s, the passing of David Bowie is a moment of huge and seismic generational grief. We knew the greatness and heft

of Kennedy and Presley and Lennon – but even so, they felt like giants from a different era. (*Daily Mirror* 12/01/16)

In fact, elsewhere, Kitch (2000, pg. 174) has highlighted how Fogo's (1994) work considered the death of John Lennon as a 'liminal' moment for the 1960s 'Baby Boomers', with 'journalistic discussions of the meaning of Lennon's life and death ... articulat[ing] ... the Boomers' acceptance of an adult identity'. This 'acceptance' was echoed by Hamilton, who noted:

If you were 16 in 1969 – you saw the Russian tanks rolling into Prague, you saw the first landing on the moon, you heard David Bowie singing Space Oddity – that haunting, tragicomic figure of Major Tom, floating around in his capsule, far above the world. It was only later that you realised how it described not only a man strung out on drugs but a more general kind of isolation and loneliness. He was describing the time we were in. (cited Doyle, *The Irish Times* 13/01/16)

Here, it is the celebrity's ability to 'tell a larger story', which reflects their reified status as cultural signifiers. Jones (2016a) noted that 'while the images he created throughout the Seventies have now reached saturation point, they remain as strong as when he first created them' (*The Sun* 12/01/16a).

Elsewhere, Gibson (2007, pg. 421) asserts that 'the loss of a celebrity pop star or movie actor has an emotional and psychical impact precisely because it ruptures the continuity of a biography melded with that of a celebrity'. This was echoed by Jones:

For me and members of my generation, the Bowie generation, his death is more momentous than John Lennon's. Of course it would be invidious to compare the two, but it is still difficult even now for me to grasp just how much he meant to

me. I was a teenager when he emerged, and was one of the many people who saw his performance of 'Starman' on Top Of The Pops in the summer of 1972 (I had just turned 12), one of the many millions whose lives were altered at such an impressionable age. (*The Independent* 12/01/16b)

Jones's (2016b) comments support Gibson's (2007) reflections, revealing that it is in moments of 'rupture' that 'the notion of the death as an unstable public moment' is a 'moment in which people feel compelled to assess their identities and beliefs' (Kitch 2000, pg. 174). This was echoed by Reynolds's (2016), who added that 'it was hard to listen to Monday's radio without wondering whether all these people were mourning the passing of their own time as much as the death of an idol' (*The Daily Telegraph* 13/01/16).

This sense of mourning was echoed in the impact that Bowie had on the lives of his fans (*Irish Independent* 2016). *China Daily* (2016) noted that 'Many spoke of Bowie as an artist who had an extraordinary impact on both their own lives and times' (13/01/16). Steinberg (2016) added that 'David Bowie helped shape my world' (*Chicago Sun-Times* 12/01/16). Here, Bowie 'didn't just release a bunch of singles and albums which influenced people at formative stages of their lives. He also influenced how they looked, what they read and how they lived their lives' (Jones, *The Sun* 12/01/16a). Accordingly, 'for many people he [Bowie] was a cultural icon who provided the soundtrack to their lives' (*Daily Mirror* 12/01/16b). This was echoed by Maconie:

We watched Starman and it was a moment of epiphany, of revelation – for a generation, for kids gay or straight, male or female, from the nation's crap estates and provincial towns and stifling suburbs. It was a validation of the right to be strange, to be unusual, to be you. Suddenly it was OK to be weird or gay or

geeky, a fey boy or a tough girl, a weed or a nerd, wonky-toothed or boss-eyed. Bowie was all these things and he was the coolest rock star ever. (*Daily Mirror* 12/01/16 see also Ghazal 2016)

Consequently, the close ‘connection’ (Carr 2016; Gardner 2016) Bowie held with his fans was reflected in reports that highlighted a sense of anomie from his death (Rojek 2015).¹² Moran grieved:

Why is it sad? Why is it sad that he’s gone? Why am I mourning the death of David Bowie more than any other I have known? Why does it feel as if the world is flatter, and colder, and less able to transcend than it did last week? It’s because an energy source has been turned off; a worldview has disappeared. We will never again see things through Bowie’s eyes: a man so effortlessly able to write the songs of the human heart, to explain ourselves back to ourselves that he spent his last 18 months writing an album to tell us he was dying. (*The Times* 12/01/16)

For Dunne (2016), ‘Imagin[ing] life without Bowie ... It doesn’t seem possible’ (*Irish Independent* 12/01/16). Here, the alienation felt by Bowie’s fans was represented in discourses that alluded to the para-social ‘friendship’ that Bowie offered (Brinn 2016; Rojek 2015); a friendship that was brought to light by the fact that Bowie ‘was just everything, period’ (Berry, *National Post* 12/01/16).

Gibson (2007, pg. 421) has explained that ‘Because so much of our identities and histories are forged through mediated culture, there are very profound, identifications that build up or carry through, often unconsciously, over-time’. Indeed,

¹² Rojek (2016) identifies a similar example of this occurring during the death of Marylyn Monroe.

the sense of personal validation that Bowie encouraged, highlighted how his career had provided a degree of stability in the lives of his fans (Brinn 2016; Dunne 2016; Flett 2016; Moran 2016). As previously noted, whereas ‘reified social objects’ are grounded in human relations that construct ‘objective social objects’ in order to provide ‘a measure of stability and control’, such constructions are also dependent on ‘sacrificing significant dimensions of the human lives they structure’ (Feenberg 2011, pg. 185). As a result, while both Moran (2016) and Dunne (2016) reflected upon the palpable impact Bowie’s death had caused, the construction of Bowie as an ‘objective’ and ‘reified form’ (Berry 2016) was provided in the personal memories that his passing evoked (Dingwall 2016, Walker 2016). Here, memories of Bowie were closely entwined with personal histories that were subsequently (re)produced by the press. This included notable performances (Baillie 2016; Connolly 2016; Kerr 2016; Murray 2016; Smithies 2016) as well as childhood recollections (Dempsey 2016; Murphy 2016). Indeed, Flett explained:

I am hurtled back to being 13 ... It is the 1970s and I am sprawled on the floor of my bedroom in London’s north west suburbs, headphones on, plugged into Heroes. I lift the needle on the music centre and replace it, over and over, and over... ‘I... I wish I could swim. Like the dolphins. Like dolphins can swim...’ An only child who lives a commute from school, I am lonely. And I think: ‘You don’t know me, David Bowie, but thank God you understand me’ (*The Daily Telegraph* 12/01/16)

Certainly, whereas for Brinn (2016), Bowie had ‘helped us discover ourselves’, this was preceded by the fact that ‘we never really knew who David Bowie was’ (*Jerusalem Post* 12/01/16). That is, while recollections on Bowie’s career could evoke vivid, personal memories and whereas many fans could ‘feel’ that they knew Bowie (Dunne

2016; Flett 2016; Moran 2016), Bowie was widely acknowledged as maintaining a degree of elusivity. In fact, as highlighted in the previous section, such elusivity worked alongside the press's attempt to identify the 'authentic' Bowie. As a result, while Bowie 'cultivated mystery and understood the power of ambiguity' (McCormick, *The Daily Telegraph* 12/01/16), he was 'deeply elusive' (Petridis, *The Guardian* 12/01/16 see also Gardner 2016) and 'a complete enigma' (Street-Porter 2016).

To this end, Brown (2016) noted that 'For 40 years, in any evaluation of his life and work, the abiding question has been, who is David Bowie?' (*The Daily Telegraph* 12/01/16). When asked a similar question, Tucker noted how:

A little while ago, a friend of mine who'd never really found himself drawn to David Bowie asked me exactly what it was about the musician that I loved. It's a harder question to answer than you might think. ... I settled on a cop-out, saying something along the lines of 'He's just... something else' (*National Post* 12/01/16)

Echoing Tucker's (2016) sentiments, Carr (2016) argued, 'Having absorbed much of what had gone before, *he* [Bowie] *constructed the most fascinating, mysterious and challenging pop creation ever. Himself*' (*Irish Independent* 12/01/16 [italics added]).

Corresponding with the previous section, the above examples highlight how Bowie's variability and multiple interpretations were objectively aligned under a standard and transcendent connotation – 'himself' (Carr 2016). This supports Cinque and Redmond's (2015, pg. 377 [italics added]) assertion that 'In this environment of death and resurrection, *Bowie becomes a heightened, exaggerated enigma*, a figure who constantly seems to be artificial or constructed'. In fact, in reference to Bowie's penultimate album, *The Next Day*, Palmer stated that:

Practices of investigating the assortment of potential references available in *The Next Day* situate recollection as an action, a performance of historiography that contributes to the construction of the star text through a laborious, interpretive and communal relationship to the various meanings associated with that text. (2013, pg. 385)

As can be seen from Palmer's (2013) comments, 'the construction of the star text' is closely related to the 'various meanings' that are appropriated to the star. Here, it becomes apparent that the 'communal relationship' that many fans held with Bowie was conducive to, but also, dependent upon, 'the various meanings associated with' his interpretation (Palmer 2013, pg. 385 see also Jones 2016a; 2016b; McCormick 2016; Petridis 2016; Steinberg 2016; Street-Porter 2016).

Therefore, in addition to forming a conscious part of the lives of many fans, it was evident that Bowie's polysemous function was situated under an overarching image of the star that served to orientate fans by providing a selective, yet, stable, referent to the past. Bowie's image – variable, yet consistent – was dialectically located in a myriad of media and public responses that achieved equivalence ('himself') in Bowie's abstract reification ('He's just ... *something* else') (Feenberg 2011; Lukács 1923). Indeed, whereas Berger and Pullberg (1965, pg. 207) argue that 'Institutions are reified by mystifying their true character as human objectifications and by defining them, again, as supra-human facticities analogous to the facticities of nature', Bowie, and his 'true character', was objectified as a reified form that, through a process of mystification, presented him with 'supra-human' qualities. The following section will elaborate upon these 'supra-human' qualities in further detail.

An immortal Bowie

‘David Bowie is not dead. Nor can he ever be’

(Moore, *The Guardian* 12/01/16)

Across the press, Bowie was frequently referred to as being ‘much more than a pop star’ (*Belfast Telegraph* 12/01/16). In certain instances, he was an ‘other-worldly musician’ (*Arab Times* 2016) whose ‘aura’ (Wellington 2016) seemed ‘alien’ (Maconie 2016). Echoing McCann’s (1999) remarks on Monroe, O’Donnell suggested that:

He was never just the starman, never just sitting in a tin can. He was beyond that, nebulous and celestial. Whatever it was, what he did came from everywhere, like background radiation. It had passed through everyone you had learned from, everything you thought you knew (cited Doyle, *The Irish Times* 13/01/16)

Indeed, while Bowie achieved ‘almost religious significance’ (O’Doherty, *Irish Independent* 12/01/16), Tucker (2016) argued that he was ‘not just one of otherworldliness, but immortality’ (Tucker, *National Post* 12/01/16). Indeed, Rojek highlights that:

Celebrity immortality is obviously more readily achieved in the era of mass communications, since film footage and sound recordings preserve the celebrity in the public sphere. Mass communication preserves the cultural capital of celebrities and increases their chances of becoming immortal in the public sphere (2001, pg. 78)

In this respect, Bowie’s preservation was underscored by his cultural transcendence. ‘Bowie was messianic’ (Reason, *The Dominion Post* 13/01/16), indeed, ‘an image so

mutable and potent that it will never be bested, only put on repeat' (Parker, *The Globe and Mail* 12/01/16). As a result, Bowie's influence on popular culture would 'see him reborn countless times over the coming decades' (Jonze, *The Guardian* 12/01/16). Certainly, this wasn't a nostalgic reflection, as noted by Walker (2016):

As the years slip by, the sounds of our youth can become not less important but more. More vital because Bowie never became nostalgia. And because he was always reinventing himself we thought the process would go on forever (*Belfast Telegraph* 12/01/16)

Instead, 'Bowie will never be retro. ... he will never fade away. ... his work will stay forever' (Wightwick, *Western Mail* 13/01/16). In doing so, Bowie 'maintained an ethereal beauty, a hypnotic presence' (Blumgart, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* 13/01/16). The 'ethereal, immortal quality' (Davies 2010, pg. 144) exhibited in Blumgart's (2016) account, is reflected in Davies's (2010) 'technological taxidermy'. This describes the 'process of preserving celebrity identities within an idealised form, often erasing negative associations in posthumous media coverage and accentuating aesthetic connotations of youth and beauty' (Davies 2010, pg. 144). This selective preservation was clearly evoked in those representations that served to idealise an aesthetic of Bowie as culturally significant (Fury 2016; Jonze 2016; Parker 2016; Reason 2016). Both musically and aesthetically, Bowie's 'idealised form' (Davies 2010) was made immortal through his notable TV appearances (Rojek 2001). This was brought to light by the author and journalist, Dylan Jones. Visiting his father, Jones's motives for writing a book on Bowie's 1972 performance as Ziggy Stardust on 'Top of the Pops', were questioned by his father. He replied:

I reeled off the elements of his performance that had been so challenging, so inspiring and so transgressive. I described the way in which Bowie had toyed sexually with his guitarist Mick Ronson, the way in which he had dressed like a pansexual spaceman, the way in which he sashayed across the screen like a 1920s film star, and, saliently, the way in which his flame-red hair, his dayglo jumpsuit and the general glam colour-fest had almost colonised the programme. I explained that this was the moment when the 1970s finally outgrew the 1960s, when the monochrome world of boring boring south-east England had exploded in a fiesta of colour. (Jones, *The Independent* 12/01/16b)

Reciting his father's response, Jones (2016b) noted: 'My father looked at the floor, took a moment, and then said, very quietly: 'You know we had a black-and-white television, don't you' (*The Independent* 12/01/16b).

Indeed, Driessens (2015, pg. 372) considers the celebrity's 'accumulated media visibility' as well as their location 'embedded in specific contexts and shared among particular groups' as a form of 'cultural working memory'. Driessens (2015, pg. 372) adds that 'memory includes media content, public representations (e.g. billboards), material artefacts (e.g. merchandising) and archives, as well as oral memories, individual recollections and memories about celebrities'. With regard to Jones's (2016b) remarks, these memories are brought to light in reified notions of the 'authentic celebrity', who is subsequently re-worked, objectified and made 'real' in processes of remembering. In recounting Bowie's performance, Jones's (2016b) comments followed a process of reification that, in accordance with the media image and his own distorted recollections, served to legitimately preserve a reified image of Bowie (Davies 2010; Rojek 2001; Lukács 1923; 1973; 1996).

As noted in the previous section and highlighted in the above examples, newspaper accounts served to reify Bowie's celebrity image and aesthetic as a timeless

source of inspiration, a process that was compounded by the numerous allusions to his preferred privacy (Brinn 2016; McCormack 2016; Petridis 2016; Street-Porter 2016). That is, Bowie's silence provided 'publications and fans space to *imagine the version* of him they want[ed] as the current one' (Usher and Fremaux 2013, pg. 393 [italics added]). Bowie's silence is particularly important as it suggests a complicity in the process of celebrification. By distorting the 'on-stage'/'off-stage' dialectic, by appearing as both authentic, yet, performed, interpretations and representations of Bowie were closely entwined in a process of reification that could 'imagine' Bowie's heterogeneous persona as a timeless and transcendent aesthetic (Fury 2016; Jonze 2016; Parker 2016; Reason 2016; Usher and Fremaux 2013; Walker 2016; Wightwick 2016).

Discussion and concluding thoughts

This article has used the concept of reification as a way of examining the media coverage of celebrity death. Beyond its class determinants, the concept of reification has been used to highlight how cultural representations of celebrity are embroiled within a complex dialectic that involves both the individual celebrity, the media and the public. This has been considered in relation to global newspaper representations of Bowie as well as representations of public responses to Bowie's death. In global newspaper coverage, Bowie was widely acknowledged and accepted as an important 'global' cultural icon whose music had traversed generations and national boundaries (Ghazal 2016' O'Doherty 2016). Yet, Bowie was also portrayed via discourses that emphasized his 'authenticity' and ordinariness while at the same time reflecting upon his 'enigmatic' character (Street-Porter 2016; Wightwick 2016). Whereas newspaper reflections tried to identify a particular moment from Bowie's past (Kenny 2016;

Roberts 2016; Silva 2016), public interpretations were paradoxically played out in the apparent ‘familiarity’ of Bowie and the impact he had on particular lives (Brown 2016; *China Daily* 2016; Kenny 2016).

The legitimacy of Bowie as an ‘authentic’, ‘cultural icon’ and music ‘legend’, loved by everyone, was not dependent upon Bowie’s biological ageing, but instead, was transfixed on particular moments in his career and his array of ‘fictional’ characters. This was reflected in reports that emphasized Bowie the ‘brand’ (Finkelstein 2016) and his (re)interpretation by various contemporary artists (Tschorn 2016). An objectified image, legitimated by a reified sense of immortality and transcendence (*The National* 2016; Tucker 2016), Bowie underwent a process of reification that allowed numerous versions of ‘himself’ to be continuously reimagined, reinvented and repeated (*Belfast Telegraph* 2016; Parker 2016; Usher and Fremaux 2013).

Subsequently, in contrast to ‘The reality of class and struggle [that] is ... obscured behind this impenetrable façade of static things’ (Gartman 1991, pg. 442), Bowie’s reality, that is, his authentic/veridical self, was obscured behind a façade of mediation, interpretation and representation. Here, the ‘reality’ of his career and life was obfuscated through media discourses and public responses that debated and decided his ‘authenticity’ as a cultural icon. Such debates, however, were engagements with a reified image, enveloped in continual (re)interpretation. In doing so, Bowie’s reification was made ‘real’ – ‘reified in consciousness’ (Elias 2001, pg. 106) – in the various interpretations he elicited and the attributed significance this maintained for those ‘fans’ who remembered and reflected upon him (Dunne 2016; Jones 2016a; 2016b; McCormick 2016; Moran 2016; Petridis 2016; Steinberg 2016). Because ‘the narrative of Bowie’s career is long established’, Bowie was objectively portrayed ‘by long-term fans, who want[ed] to relive the Bowie of their past, and by the mainstream media, who ... [were] happy to indulge them’ (Usher and Fremaux 2013, pg. 395). This elaborates upon Radford and Bloch’s (2012, pg. 151) assertion that: ‘Understanding the elevation

of the celebrity to a more sacred or mythic status may have a major impact on the effectiveness of these celebrities as endorsers from beyond the grave and the continuation of their connection with fans'. Here, the 'sacred or mythic status' that is afforded to particular celebrities, their existence 'beyond the grave' and their continued 'connection with fans' (Radford and Bloch 2012, pg. 151), reflects a process of objectification through which the celebrity is consciously present (O'Toole 2016). This was apparent in those interpretations of Bowie that veered towards the transcendent and which highlighted Bowie's timelessness and immortality (Jonze 2016; Parker 2016; Reason 2016; *The National* 2016; Tucker 2016; Walker 2016; Wightwick 2016).

In short, Bowie was polysemously portrayed as a 'chameleon', an 'alien', a '(re)inventor' and 'cultural icon' (Jameson 1979). Yet, together these representations dialectically worked to maintain Bowie's reification, as composite parts of a desire to know the 'irreducible core' (Dyer 2004); that is, 'who he really was' (Brinn 2016; Brown 2016; *Daily Mail* 12/01/16). In doing so, Bowie's 'all-encompassing aesthetic' (Fury, *The Independent* 12/01/16 see also Brinn 2016) signified his reification. Indeed, in the act of representation, discussion and interpretation, 'Bowie' became an objectified notion, a reified celebrity.

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