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The Mediated Body: Memory and Performativity in the Journalistic Biography of David Bowie

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*This article examines how journalistic biography contributes to the construction of mediated public figures through an analysis of Wendy Leigh's *Bowie: The Biography* (2014). Combining narrative analysis with close reading, the study investigates how memory, testimony and representations of the performative body interact in the narration of David Bowie's life. Leigh's account is read alongside selected works by Paul Trynka, Dylan Jones and James Rovira to identify how different source choices and narrative emphases produce distinct versions of Bowie and his cultural meaning. The analysis finds that Leigh's biography constructs continuity retrospectively, arranging testimonies about childhood, family relations and embodied difference as early signs of Bowie's later artistic practices. It also shows how his clothing, gestures, public statements about sexuality and visual self-presentation are narrativised within a largely celebratory account of cultural transgression. These representations do not recover an identity that precedes mediation. They produce a mediated body through the organisation of testimony, affective memory and public imagery. The article argues that journalistic biography should be understood as a form of cultural production that selects and reconfigures the past, establishes the terms through which embodied identity becomes intelligible, and participates in the posthumous construction of public memory.*

1. Introduction

In a period marked by a rupture in canonical representations of masculinity and femininity, it becomes pertinent to foreground figures who have actively challenged normative frameworks through the body as a site of inscription, performance, and contestation. David Bowie stands as a paradigmatic case: a performer whose name, image, music, and artistry became globally recognisable and culturally enduring (Leigh 13).¹ Widely recognised as a composer and musical performer, Bowie extended his practice into theatre

¹ In journalism, the use of lived experience stories is increasingly valued for its ability to provide personal and nuanced insights into social issues. These narratives help humanise news coverage and foster a deeper connection with audiences.

and cinema, consolidating a cross-media presence in which the body operates as a central mediating force among identity, image, and cultural memory. Years following his passing, that physical form remains a site of ongoing construction and hermeneutic reconfiguration. Through the proliferation of journalistic biographies, his embodied heritage is made culturally intelligible, becoming a narrativised presence that endures within contemporary regimes of visibility and mediated recollection.

Central to this article's engagement with Bowie is the concept of performativity, which is employed here in a precise theoretical sense, distinct from the more general notion of performance. Whereas performance typically denotes the act of presenting or enacting an identity before an audience, as a deliberate, conscious staging, performativity, as developed by Judith Butler, refers to the repetitive processes through which identity is constituted rather than simply expressed (*Gender* 34, 191–92). In this sense, Bowie did not merely perform a series of personas; rather, his repeated corporeal acts, across gender presentation, visual experimentation, and public self-fashioning, participated in the ongoing constitution of a subject that exceeded any single, stable identity. This aspect of Bowie's practice makes performativity central to our analysis of his work. In this context, instead of expressing a pre-constituted self, his body takes shape as a space where the terms of an intelligible personhood are repeatedly produced, contested, and reconfigured.

The lives of artists whose work departs from established aesthetic conventions are increasingly mediated through editorial forms, particularly within the expanding field of contemporary biography. This tendency is especially visible in writing on Bowie, which includes biographies, memoirs, and critical studies concerned with his public trajectory, artistic development, and the accounts of those who experienced some degree of proximity to him. Key examples include *Bowie: A Biography* by Marc Spitz (2009), which follows his trajectory from post-war Britain to international fame; *Starman: David Bowie* by Paul Trynka (2010), a detailed study of his artistic development; *David Bowie: A Life* by Dylan Jones (2017), which draws on interviews and archival materials; and critical works such as *David Bowie and Romanticism* by James Rovira (2022), which places Bowie within wider discussions of identity, gender and selfhood. Against this larger body of writing, the selection of *Bowie: The Biography* by Wendy Leigh (2014) is not intended to provide an exhaustive account of Bowie's life or its many interpretations. The book instead offers a focused point of entry into the ways his

presence across performance, film and everyday life is constructed and interpreted through biographical discourse. Reading Leigh's account alongside the wider biographical field also allows for an examination of how it reproduces, revises, or departs from established narratives of Bowie.

This study examines how journalistic biography contributes to the discursive construction of the mediated body, taking Leigh's account as its primary focus and introducing other biographies where comparison clarifies the analysis. Drawing on the work of Paul Ricoeur and Aleida Assmann, alongside Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, J. L. Austin, Brian Massumi, and Sara Ahmed, the article considers how memory, testimony, affect, and bodily self-presentation shape the narration of Bowie's life. It approaches journalistic biography as a form of cultural production through which embodied identity becomes intelligible.

The study adopts narrative analysis to examine the relationship between memory, testimony, and the performative body in biographical representation. Instead of considering biography as a transparent account of an already constituted life, it focuses on how narrative structures organise and reconfigure lived experience. This approach draws on Paul Frosh and Amit Pinchevski's concept of media witnessing, which describes witnessing performed in, by, and through media and highlights how media position witnesses and audiences in relation to represented events (1–4). Biographical narratives are therefore read as testimonial constructions situated within particular media, historical, and discursive contexts. The analysis focuses on two related processes: the organisation of memory, through which experience acquires meaning from the standpoint of the present, and the discursive constitution of the performative body, examined principally through Butler, Massumi, and Ahmed. Together, these perspectives inform the following research question: How do memory and representations of the performative body interact in the journalistic construction of David Bowie's life?

Works by Trynka, Jones, Rovira, and Spitz are introduced comparatively, where they clarify Leigh's narrative choices or situate them within the wider biographical field. These works are not treated as equivalent objects of analysis, but as points of comparison that reveal how different sources and narrative priorities produce different versions of Bowie. Attention is also given to the material and narrative possibilities of the biographical book as a

media form. Unlike daily journalism, book-length biography permits sustained engagement with temporality and with the affective, social, and relational dimensions of a life. The following section establishes this framework by examining how journalistic narrative organises temporality and mediates embodied memory.

2. Narrative, Journalism, and the Mediation of Embodied Memory

Contemporary culture has assigned increasing importance to the individual as both the subject and object of representation. Practices of self-exposure now circulate widely across social media, journalism, and other forms of cultural production, altering the conditions under which visibility and subjectivity are organised. The award of the 2022 Nobel Prize in Literature to Annie Ernaux offers one literary expression of this tendency. Her autobiographical writing uses personal experience to examine historical processes, class relations, and social life (“Nobel Prize”).² Although such writing can address collective and political experience, the self remains the principal point of its narrative organisation. A related logic can be identified in other forms, including journalistic biography.

Self-representation has a much longer history. Svetlana Alpers reads Rembrandt’s later self-portraits as works in which the artist increasingly identifies the self with painting itself, ultimately “defining the self in paint” (116). The contemporary difference lies in the reach and speed of such practices under digital conditions, where the circulation of self-images through online platforms has unsettled the distinction between recorded appearance and constructed representation. This problem also bears upon Bowie’s biographical afterlife. Photographs, performances, and film footage continue to circulate across digital platforms, where they are removed from earlier contexts and made to signify differently within new interpretative settings. Paula Sibilia examines this demand for visibility through what she calls an alter-directed subjectivity, in which the image of the self is produced to be seen and to generate effects in the gaze of others (244). Within this system, subjects fictionalise the self as if it were constantly being filmed, turning personality into a spectacle oriented toward the gaze of

² Annie Ernaux is a French author known for her exploration of autobiographical and autofictional writing. Her works often delve into personal memory and identity, reflecting on social and historical contexts. She was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2022 for her innovative approach to personal narrative.

others (258). Her argument is pertinent to Bowie, whose public identity developed through a sustained and deliberate engagement with mediated visibility. Journalistic biographies extend this process by selecting, arranging, and interpreting the materials through which his persona remains culturally legible.

In this sense, following Ricoeur, narrative is a form through which past events are reorganised and made intelligible within a particular temporal order (32, 85). Assmann's distinction between memory as *ars*, concerned with storage and preservation, and memory as *vis*, understood as the reactivation of the past in response to present concerns, further defines this process (33–34). The latter guides this study, since biographical writing does not preserve experience unchanged but selects and rearranges it within the cultural present. Leigh's biography forms part of the retrospective engagement that followed Bowie's death in January 2016, contributing to the continuing reinterpretation of his life and its cultural meaning.

This study, therefore, approaches journalism as both an agent of memory and a producer of meaning. Meaning develops through engagement with the present, but it also depends on the organisation of life narratives and on the testimonial claims associated with journalistic practice. As Beatriz Sarlo argues, remembrance is inseparable from the present of enunciation and from the subjectivity that remembers, so the past is narrated from a position shaped by the present (49). Journalistic biography participates in this process by giving the past narrative form and constituting its subject as a culturally intelligible figure. The following analysis examines how this constitution takes place through the representation of Bowie's body, his performances, and the media discourses that continue to organise their meaning.

3. The Body, Journalism, and Performativity

Within journalism and media studies, the body has become a central site for the organisation of representation, evidence, and contested meaning. Journalistic narratives have treated the body as both an object of documentation and a surface upon which social norms are imposed, reproduced, and resisted. Drawing on Foucault, John Tagg, and Allan Sekula, Fredrik Bjercknes notes that photography has historically been used to regulate social deviance

through surveillance, archiving, and identification (953). The killing of George Floyd provides a contemporary example of how non-professional videos can become evidentiary materials in digital investigative journalism, where footage is reconstructed, cross-referenced, and scrutinised rather than treated as self-evident proof (Bjerknes 951, 962). Franz Anton Cramer approaches the body through the metaphor of the “body as archive”, arguing that bodily materiality can accumulate traces of knowledge whose meanings extend beyond immediate physical activity (220). Although Cramer develops this argument in relation to dance, the formulation offers a vocabulary for thinking about how bodily traces acquire meaning through later acts of interpretation. Tamar Ashuri and Pinchevski conceptualise witnessing as a field shaped by contest and struggle, treating it as an inherently political practice whose form depends on the specific event witnessed (135). Similar processes operate in biographical writing, where the subject’s body takes form through selection, emphasis, and narrative mediation.

The body is also understood here through Butler’s account of performativity, in which gender is “performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence” (*Gender* 34). As Butler further puts it, “gender is always a doing”, rather than the expression of an identity that precedes its enactment (*Gender* 34). The body thus bears cultural and social practices sedimented through repetition and normative regulation. Massumi’s account of affect extends this understanding by addressing the body’s capacity to register intensities before they acquire conscious or representational form (28). Affect refers, in this sense, to the capacity of bodies to affect and to be affected. Journalistic biography must translate such sensory and emotional dimensions into narratives without reducing them to explicit statements or stable meanings. Ahmed shifts this discussion toward the social circulation of emotion, arguing that “feelings do not reside in subjects or objects, but are produced as effects of circulation” (8). Emotions therefore move between bodies, objects and signs, shaping how particular figures come to be experienced as threatening, desirable, or transgressive. In Bowie’s case, these approaches direct attention to the affective force of his public image. His bodily self-fashioning produced responses that exceeded conscious interpretation and has helped sustain his cultural presence across different generations.

Bodies are differently positioned within regimes of social intelligibility. Butler’s discussion of *Paris Is Burning*, for example, shows how norms of class, race, gender, and sexuality

structure the categories through which bodies are recognised and performed (*Bodies* 88). Yet corporeal practices may also expose and contest the norms governing their intelligibility. Glam rock, which developed in Britain around the turn of the 1970s, mobilised theatricality, androgyny, and visual excess in ways that unsettled established understandings of gender and sexuality (Auslander 34; Reynolds 13). Bowie occupied a central position within this formation. His engagement with performativity did not consist of conscious theatrical display. Rather, repeated bodily acts, gestures, costumes, and personae participated in the continuing production of identity. As Cramer observes:

Performative aspects exert a fundamental influence on our contemporary culture. The practice of ‘performance’ has become a hybrid medium of contemporaneity, encompassing issues far beyond dance, drama and aesthetics. Stability, normativity and authorship are concepts that are called radically into question by ‘performance’. (220)

Cramer’s formulation also applies to journalistic biography. Biographical writing does not merely describe its subject but produces effects through the ways it names, orders, and connects events. Austin’s theory of speech acts establishes that language performs actions rather than simply representing existing realities, shaping perceptions and social relations. He defines the performative precisely on this basis: “[T]he issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action, it is not normally thought of as just saying something” (Austin 6). Foucault develops this position by treating discourse and power as constitutive of subjects and of their relation to their bodies, since “power relations have an immediate hold upon the body; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks” (25). Viewed in these terms, Leigh’s biography does not recover an intact Bowie who exists outside representation. The following section explains how these theoretical premises inform the methodological approach adopted in the analysis of Leigh’s book.

4. Analysis: Memory and the Mediated Body in *Bowie: The Biography*

4.1 Memory as Narrative Construction

Leigh’s treatment of her sources is itself relevant to the analysis. Near the end of *Bowie: The Biography*, she identifies, chapter by chapter, the individuals consulted and the materials

used, including interviews, archival documents, films, and journalistic accounts. This source apparatus brings heterogeneous materials into a sustained biographical narrative. As a *dispositif*, the book collects, selects, and orders these materials, producing a narrative framework within which Bowie's life becomes culturally intelligible.

Memory, the first axis of the analysis, is constructed largely through testimonies concerning Bowie's familial and social relationships. Leigh introduces him early in the biography as a figure defined by estrangement and identification with others positioned outside accepted social norms. She writes, "David felt like an outcast, a pariah, and his sympathies have always veered toward the underdog, those who walk on the wild side" (Leigh 9). More than a biographical detail, the statement provides an interpretative frame through which later events are organised, encouraging the reader to understand Bowie's artistic and bodily experiments as extensions of an enduring relation to difference. Memory functions here in Assmann's sense of *vis*. The past is reactivated from the standpoint of the present and arranged in ways that give earlier experiences a retrospective meaning.

Accounts of Bowie's childhood follow this narrative pattern. Leigh recalls that his schoolmates called him "the devil" and that he was physically punished for writing with his left hand (8). Within the biography, these episodes acquire meaning through their relation to the adult Bowie. Experiences of punishment and exclusion are placed within a longer account of embodied difference, making childhood appear as the point from which his later challenges to social and aesthetic norms can be understood. This structure risks imposing coherence retrospectively, since the meaning of the childhood episode is produced through knowledge of the life that followed. For Sarlo, testimony is inseparable from the self-designation of the subject who was present when the events occurred, while the narrating subject assigns meaning to the details included in the account (50). Ahmed's account of emotion helps explain how feelings circulate among bodies, signs, and readers instead of remaining contained within the individual subject. As Ahmed writes, emotions can be understood through "an analysis of affective economies, where feelings do not reside in subjects or objects, but are produced as effects of circulation" (8). In Leigh's narrative, this circulation is visible in Bowie's recollection of childhood punishment: "At school, I remember very distinctly kids laughing at me because I would draw and write with my left hand", where a remembered

scene of bodily difference is offered to readers for their affective response and folded into the wider narrative of Bowie's later transgressions (qtd. in Leigh 8).

The accounts of punishment and exclusion invite affective responses through which Bowie's early difference becomes culturally meaningful. With no direct access to childhood experience, the text constructs an affective relation to it through remembered scenes, attributed speech, and their placement within the wider trajectory of the biography. Family relationships provide another source through which this trajectory is assembled. Bowie's father is associated with the development of his intellectual interests. Bowie recalled: "My father opened up my world because he taught me the habit of reading" (qtd. in Leigh 22). His mother, Peggy, occupies a more ambivalent position in Leigh's account. She appears as artistically inclined but emotionally distant and this distance is presented as formative. Leigh also depicts Peggy as a voracious reader and poet whose emotional distance shaped Bowie's childhood. Bowie recalled that a compliment from her was "very hard to come by" and that, when he took out his paints, she would warn him not to make a mess (qtd. in Leigh 23).

This account creates a tension between affinity and emotional separation. Peggy and Bowie share artistic inclinations, but the narrative denies this similarity in the form of a supportive relationship. Leigh instead places maternal distance within an account of Bowie's artistic formation. The quotation attributed to Bowie is especially important because it allows his later recollection to determine the meaning of the earlier scene. His memory interprets it and supplies the terms through which the reader encounters the relationship. Leigh's emphasis differs from the organisation of other major accounts. Jones's *David Bowie: A Life* draws extensively on collaborators and figures from the music industry, constructing Bowie through a broad range of remembered encounters. Trynka's *Starman* gives greater weight to musical contexts, professional relationships, and creative development. In contrast, Leigh devotes more sustained attention to familial experience and its emotional interpretation, a distinction which concerns more than mere subject matter. Each biography establishes different criteria for deciding which memories and relationships are relevant to the construction of Bowie's life. Leigh's choices foreground intimate experience as an interpretative resource and demonstrate how the book format can sustain connections between personal memory, artistic formation, and public identity.

4.2 The Performative Body

The second axis concerns the body as a site of performativity. Leigh traces Bowie's visual self-fashioning to childhood, recounting his use of make-up at around three, his enjoyment of dressing up as a young child, and his later experiments with hair colour and eyebrow shape (27–28, 36). These recollections create a continuity between the young David Jones and the public figure he later became through their placement within the biography, without demonstrating a stable childhood identity. Early bodily practices are interpreted retrospectively through Bowie's adult use of dress, gesture, and visual transformation. The resulting coherence is therefore produced as much by Leigh's narrative arrangement as by the life it describes.

A similar process is evident when Leigh recounts Bowie's childhood performances. His mother remembered that he "would tell everyone to be quiet and listen, and then fling himself about to the music" (qtd. in Leigh 28). The scene places the body at the centre of an emerging relationship between performance, attention, and social presence, tying the command of attention and bodily movement directly to the emergence of a public, performative self. In this way, Leigh's narrative arrangement seeks to impose a retrospective unity on Bowie's life and career. Yet Butler's account of performativity prompts us to question that unity, since it treats identity as produced through repeated acts rather than as a coherence that can be read back into a life. Bowie's body is thus better understood as a performative means of establishing a position from which a recognisable self can emerge, rather than as the vehicle of an interior identity. Massumi's account of affect, moreover, helps explain how Bowie's bodily presentation generated responses that exceeded the explicit meanings attached to particular costumes, gestures, or identity categories (28). Leigh's biography can only access these encounters through remembered reactions and retrospective interpretations, so the affective body it constructs is already mediated by language and temporal distance. This relationship between embodiment and reception is especially visible in her treatment of gender and sexuality. Leigh explicitly frames Bowie's declarations about being gay and bisexual, his public use of dresses, and his openness about

sexuality as acts that challenged accepted sexual norms and enabled some fans to understand their own sexual difference differently (9).

Leigh assigns these acts an emancipatory meaning, moving from Bowie's public statements and bodily presentation to a broad claim about their effects on audiences. This framing requires caution because it gathers declarations and practices from different contexts and orders them into a coherent narrative of sexual transgression, while giving limited attention to Bowie's later revisions of some of these statements. His 1972 declaration to *Melody Maker*, "I'm gay and always have been, even when I was David Jones", is a case in point (qtd. in Leigh 112). In a 1997 interview marking his fiftieth birthday, Bowie recast the declaration as a strategic gesture, saying "I did it more out of bravado. I wanted people to be aware of me. I didn't want to live my life behind a closed door" (qtd. in Leigh 113).³ Even so, it shows how biography presents clothing, speech, and public appearance as acts that make sexual norms visible and contestable. Madonna's recollection that Bowie's gender ambiguity influenced her provides one specific example of this reception. Recalling the concert as a formative event, she describes its lasting effect: "[T]his beautiful, androgynous man, just being so perverse ... as David Byrne so beautifully put it: so unconventional, defying logic and basically blowing my mind. Anyway, I came home a changed woman" (qtd. in Leigh 251). Her testimony shows how Bowie's image entered another artist's understanding of gender and performance. In Ahmed's terms, its affective force emerges through circulation, repetition, and later recollection.

Rovira's *David Bowie and Romanticism* places Bowie's transformations within literary and philosophical traditions concerned with selfhood and artistic reinvention, while Leigh's account remains closer to embodied episodes and the memories attached to their reception. The altered appearance of Bowie's pupil following an adolescent injury provides a useful example. Far from treating this feature as an incidental physical detail, the biography incorporates it into the explanation of his visual distinctiveness. Leigh records that Bowie's "unmatched eyes also lent his gaze a hypnotic quality", and notes that Bowie himself came to embrace the injury as part of his image, admitting that he "quite enjoyed that as a badge of

³ The 1997 interview appeared in the BBC radio programme *Changes: Bowie at 50*, broadcast to mark his fiftieth birthday.

honor” (qtd. in Leigh 37). This framing also operates materially at the level of the book: the biography's own cover foregrounds Bowie's face with the distinctive eye made prominent, so that an accidental injury is reframed as a defining element of his recognisable public image.

Bowie's own testimony occupies a substantial place within this process. Statements drawn from interviews, public appearances, and recorded accounts recur throughout Leigh's biography, often allowing his retrospective self-description to organise the meaning of earlier events. One instance is Bowie's recollection of his mother's response to his early artistic efforts, which reframes a childhood relationship in light of the artist he would become: “A compliment from her was very hard to come by. I would get my paints out and all she would say was, ‘I hope you're not going to make a mess’” (qtd. in Leigh 23). This reliance on self-report creates an analytical problem, for it leads the biography to reproduce the terms through which Bowie sought to represent himself. Yet this limitation also reveals something central to the mediated body. Bowie entered the biographical record after decades of deliberate self-presentation, revision, and commentary upon his own image. Leigh, therefore, writes about a subject who had already participated extensively in the production of the materials through which he would later be interpreted. The mediated body emerges from this unstable relationship between bodily practice, public circulation, remembered responses, and biographical arrangement. In this way, the function of Leigh's text is to add a further narrative layer to a life already constituted through performance and mediation.

5. Conclusions

In the final chapter of the 2016 edition of *Bowie: The Biography*, Wendy Leigh describes her subject as “the man who changed the world, the man who wooed the world, beguiled the world, and ultimately won the world” (269). Through its syntactic repetition and escalating claims, the sentence elevates Bowie from a biographical subject to a figure of near-mythic authority. It also demonstrates how biography can impose coherence and resolution upon a life whose meanings remain fragmented, disputed, and subject to revision. At the same time, journalistic biography should be understood as a partial and situated narrative, produced through selections, emphases, and omissions, and therefore always read from the present. It

can reactivate a life as an object of inquiry, opening space for new investigations, reinterpretations, and rewritings of a biographical trajectory, without leaving it fixed in the past. The question addressed in this article is therefore not whether Bowie “changed the world”, but how journalistic and biographical practices make such an assertion culturally intelligible.

This analysis has shown that memory and representations of the performative body are mutually constitutive within Leigh’s account. Far from a stable repository from which the past can be retrieved unchanged, memory selectively arranges testimonies from relatives, collaborators, and Bowie himself, ordering and interpreting them from the standpoint of the present. Through this arrangement, childhood experiences of exclusion, punishment, and bodily difference acquire retrospective importance as early signs of the artist Bowie would later become. Leigh’s narrative creates a continuity between these episodes and his adult practices, even where the available materials cannot establish such continuity independently of their biographical organisation.

The body undergoes a related process of narrative construction. Leigh arranges childhood scenes involving dance, make-up, and clothing so that they anticipate Bowie’s later engagement with performance, gender, and visual self-presentation. His body appears as the site through which identity becomes recognisable, but the coherence of this development is produced retrospectively. Public statements about sexuality, appearances in dresses, and changes in persona are grouped within an emancipatory account of cultural transgression. This framing makes Bowie’s bodily practices legible as challenges to sexual and gender norms, although its celebratory tone can limit critical examination of the contradictions surrounding these acts and their changing historical meanings.

A comparison with Jones, Trynka, and Rovira’s works shows that Bowie’s biographical identity shifts according to the sources selected and the questions each work poses. Leigh’s emphasis on familial memory and embodied difference produces one version of Bowie among several, none of which can fully contain the life it narrates. Journalistic biography should therefore be understood as a form of cultural production that organises testimony, memory, and the body. The mediated Bowie remains open to revision, as these materials circulate and are interpreted through new narratives and media forms. By drawing attention to this process,

this study has sought to provide a useful basis for further research on journalistic biography, mediated bodies, and the posthumous construction of public figures.

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