

David Bowie: Transience and Potentiality

Ashley Whitaker

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I argue that, in particular, the avant-garde visuals in musician David Bowie's performance acts and the frequently experimental nature of his catalogue of work throughout his music career serve to inspire fans to overcome feelings of existential anxiety by offering a platform wherein those fans can safely remain ensconced in that anxiety alongside Bowie and explore absurdity as fellow travelers of life. A recent study conducted by Sharman and Dingle (2015) supports the view that therapeutic potential of music in the rock genre goes against the commonly accepted ideal that heavy music typified in rock acts as catalysts for negative emotions, such as general anxiety or aggression. Bowie's penchant for reflecting the world around him – as encompassed especially in the lyrical content of the song and its subsequent music video that showcases a 10 minute runtime and breathtaking visuals – is the key element of why music is not only vital as a human-created art form, but a critical venue wherein the existentialist can mirror his or her world and inspire the layperson to do the same. That echoing of the human situation through art, I suggest, is precisely what Camus meant about remaining present with the absurdity of life and utilizing an alchemical container like a song to channel the resultant anxiety derived from understanding that absurdity, and transforming that anxiety into a feeling of serenity, and even possibly delight.

Key Words: David Bowie, existentialism, philosophy, neuroticism, music

DOI Number: 10.14704/nq.2016.14.2.955

NeuroQuantology 2016; 2: 427-432

Introduction

Existentialism's central focus might well be on the premise that humans can and should grapple with the absurdity of life. Camus' (1955/2012) classic existential work, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, utilizes story-telling to communicate to the reader a profound philosophical ideal, which suggests that no matter how bad one's life events might seem to be, it is worth it for him or her to stick around to see what happens next. Life is not just challenging at times, but to Camus, it is also absurd. He wrote, "If there is an absurd, it is in man's universe" (p. 35), indirectly suggesting that one must grapple with that absurdity

wholeheartedly to transcend the potential existential anxiety that can arise out of his or her understanding of the inherent absurd nature of life. For Camus, one must not attempt to mitigate life's absurdity but instead, we each must embrace it in order to, perhaps, find a subjective meaning to one's life in a world that might be meaningless.

In this theoretical analysis, I argue that through examining the universality of music, the empowering experiences of diverse artists using creativity as a form of resilience becomes apparent (Zausner, 2007). By considering the effectiveness of music as a multicultural healing modality, one could come to understand more fully how art is integral to the human quest for wholeness. Bowie's musical career leaves open the interpretation of the healing implications of art, particularly that of music, with intense instrumentals and lyrics portraying the emotion of desperation. Here, I will examine the possible means by which the icon's music and theatrics

Corresponding author: Ashley Whitaker, M.A., Ph.D. Candidate

Address: 475 14th Street, 9th Floor Oakland, CA 94612

Phone: 510.593.2900

e-mail ✉ awhitaker@saybrook.edu

Relevant conflicts of interest/financial disclosures: The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Received: 01 May 2016; **Revised:** 11 May 2016;

Accepted: 15 May 2016

eISSN 1303-5150



had in cultivating healing of existential angst in listeners, focusing, in particular, on Blackstar, a piece taken from his final album.

Blackstar

*"How many times does an angel fall?
How many people lie instead of talking tall?"*
(Bowie, 2016, Blackstar Album)

Contained in the above specific verse within the title track off the album Blackstar (2016) one notices a central thematic core to the icon's entire career, which seemed to be the mythical. That thematic core is the Sisyphean struggle to embrace existential angst and move beyond feelings of existential anxiety. Clearly, immense anxiety is apparent in Blackstar: there is a plot point of tension that needs resolution, and the narrator attempted to do so as expressed in the song. However, the genesis of the narrator's anxiety might not be readily apparent in initial reflection. Becker's (1973) commentary of Danish philosopher Kierkegaard provided a compelling answer, "Kierkegaard's torment was the direct result of seeing the world as it really is in relation to his situation as a creature ...It seems like a hoax ... What kind of deity would create such complex and fancy worm food?" (p. 87).

Humans in part appear to feel existential anxiety due to a subconscious understanding that they are metaphorically tethered between two states: an angelic state and a state where, ultimately, they are food for worms. Stuck in an intermediate state, one might feel epistemically uncertain of who he or she metaphysically is. One could respond to that confusion by regressing into a catatonic state where choice typically results in feelings of anxiety inducing, trite, and ultimately meaningless life. It may be far simpler, in full slumber, to travel through one's life without reflection on his or her phenomenological experience. Do angels indeed metaphorically fall from grace, and can worms, or worm food, ascend to grace? Regardless of the exact answer to those questions, one observation can be sure: Bowie examined them. It could be that Blackstar (Bowie, 2016) is a representation of how the artist envisioned himself to be after his passing, an approaching event of which he seemed to be acutely aware.

By nebulously describing the "day of execution" further along in the song, Bowie might have been inserting a nod to his terminal illness,

which could be said to be his eventual executioner. Kierkegaard (as cited in Hong and Hong, 2013) offered a bit of background by which one could interpret Bowie's (2016) conceivable inner thoughts revealed in Blackstar:

I belong to the idea. When it beckons to me, I follow; when it makes an appointment, I wait for it day and night...When the idea calls, I abandon everything, or, more correctly, I have nothing to abandon (Hong and Hong, 2013, pp. 114-115).

There was nothing for Bowie (2016) to abandon because there was nothing for him to either do or not do in the grand scheme of the universe. He penetrated a stratosphere so close to this Keirkegaardian rift, one to which we are all tethered, as described by the movements as written in his song, *Fear and Trembling*. Bowie recognized these rifts without any envy for any other man or woman who makes those movements. After all, Bowie is that man, regardless of whether or not he had made those movements. No one else could have done them beside himself, for he was the only one that he truly knew. A closer inspection of the *Myth of Sisyphus* (Camus, 1955/2012) should clear some of the metaphorical cloud cover on Bowie's existential approach to Blackstar.

Myth of Sisyphus

Overcoming Angst

Camus (1955/2012) depicted the human existential struggle to overcome absurdity when he wrote, "I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! ...The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy" (Camus, 1955/2012, p. 123). To what heights did Bowie aspire, and what might those potential goals speak to regarding the Existentialist? Certainly, just as Sisyphus bore the burden of heaving his own stone to the soaring precipice of the mountain; however, the task was his to own. No other human could take the place of Sisyphus or offer to complete the task of dragging the stone to the mountain's peak, only for it to fall again in vain. Neither can any artist narrate exactly the same lyrical structures and embody the same ambiance of Bowie's stage theatrics. Imitation of his work by others is not duplication of his catalogue of it. In a way, art can be the metaphorical Sisyphean stone that one



could seize hold of without ever seeing a satisfactory settlement. Art is never truly finished, just as the Existentialist never appears to entirely dissipate up his or her conflict with angst.

Everyday Creativity

Artistic creation entails a sort of stamp in the form of a finished product that is one's to cherish alone, and to perhaps choose to disseminate to a larger audience to enjoy.

Far from being trivial, or light and fluffy, or strictly constrained to special domains, and only intermittently of relevance, our everyday creativity represents a pervasive and dynamic way of being and knowing, and of encountering the world. If it offers profound and sometimes painful new insights, at the same time it brings us delight, healing, new purpose, growth, and ongoing potential for personal development (Richards, 2007, p. 48).

Richards used numerous onerous adjectives to flesh out the various elements of the term *creativity*. Amongst these adjectives were dynamic, profound, and pervasive. Fluidity of a song can be envisioned as quite dynamic and oceanic in its progression from verse to chorus and back again, with hidden ebbs and valleys materializing at times. Visualize Bowie's (2016) Blackstar album as being made of intricate constructs that formulate a polished work. Each set of constructs working in synchrony to map together the song can be experienced somehow; they could be understood in relation to others. By others, I mean other constructs within the project, apprehended directly by Bowie's intuition, and/or maintained by him in clear intelligence. It does not matter how he began the creative process of Blackstar, or which course he adhered to in creating it, as he was only engaging with what he already was.

Existentialism, in this sense, is not an additive philosophy; it is not beyond the various vocabularies and means of working with it. Instead, it peels away the layers of what is frivolous, appended, and needlessly trenchant. It is in no way surprising that de Beauvoir (as cited in Marino, 2004) makes explicit mention of this: "In setting up its ends, freedom must put them in parentheses, confront them at each moment with

that absolute end which it itself constitutes, and contest, in its own name, the means it uses to win itself" (p. 417). *Freedom* is realizable by its very method. De Beauvoir's statement in the quotation above likewise makes clear that humans cannot not be ideal or fully realized, not without their own complicity. Camus' (1955/2012) in his essay on *Sisyphus* made the statement that, "The idea of an art detached from its creator is not only outmoded; it is false" (p. 96). Again, consider the place of a paradox in which Bowie (2016) might not literally *have been* his music, but severing him from his profession is removing his medium of studying his own personal complexity as a human being living a brief, embodied phenomenological existence.

Bowie might have used music as a form of meditation to enter that state of detachment that Camus (1955/2012) referenced. Recall a poetic statement uttered once by Watts (1973):

We could say that meditation doesn't have a reason or doesn't have a purpose. In this respect it's unlike almost all other things we do except perhaps making music and dancing. When we make music we don't do it in order to reach a certain point, such as the end of the composition. If that were the purpose of music then obviously the fastest players would be the best (p. 47).

Perhaps during his entire career, Bowie was not fixated on a specific outcome of his music other than its personally-edifying side effects. What is meditation from Watts' (1973) view here but sensitivity to all of the incredible activity that is occurring around and within oneself? What is the purpose of music other than to listen to oneself and his or her world and a shared personal interpretation of a unique phenomenological experience with other humans? Music can definitely be created poorly—where no authenticity or awareness is used—or it can be created with limited disturbance of converging perspectives of other humans. There is no right or wrong to music; however, Bowie (2016) defied acceptable Western conventions in music by releasing a track far longer than the 4 to 5 minutes maximum optimized for radio play. Additionally, the lyrics in his song were so nebulous as to coax the listener into making his or her own valuations of the content. Gazing at passing clouds on a clear summer day and attempting to attribute people to certain shapes,



or contemplating the sound of one hand clapping, are examples of instances where one must take it upon him or herself to decide the meaning behind something. Music as Watts suggested shares a similar capacity to shift one's focus away from rigidity and to a space where no certain answers exist. It is okay to not possess immediate answers in life; and, as will become evident by the research done by Sharman and Dingle (2015), extreme music might be a catalyst that one could use to nurture a sense of emotional stability in him or herself.

Extreme Music

Sharman and Dingle (2015) conducted empirical research on the healing effects of extreme music, a category that Bowie's contributions might arguably be included. In their findings, the authors concluded that:

Extreme music fans reported using their music to enhance their happiness, to immerse themselves in feelings of love, and agreed that their music enhanced their well-being. What each of these responses indicates is that extreme music listeners appear to be using their music listening for positive self-regulatory purposes (p. 7).

Interestingly, fans of Bowie's music and legacy—if the study by Sharman and Dingle (2015) is to be used as an analogy—ought to be considered as leveraging the artist's work for awe-inducing purposes. Schneider (2004) described the efficacy of awe when he explained, "While awe does not guarantee Truth (which in itself is contradictory to awe), it does guarantee sensitivity, effort, and fullness" (p. 8). If Bowie's music and overall philosophy reflecting how he lived his life could be identified using adjectives, they might include those that Schneider indicated are shared with the emotion of awe: sensitivity, effort, and fullness. Some might propose that much of, if not all, of Bowie's music was awe-inspiring in its own way. Indeed, awe seems to interrelate with varying secondary emotions including the abovementioned of happiness and love by creating the space to experience the full wellspring of life that is available for consumption. Indeed, musicians who arguably exhibit the pinnacle of human potential regarding their craft enable listeners to tap into a special phenomenological void. That void is called

transience (Arons, 1992). Entangled in transience, Bowie might have metaphorically splattered his conscious thoughts and inner yearnings into the tapestry of his songs.

Transience

Loss is an occurrence that every human experiences. Be it the loss of a loved one, the loss of employment, or any other casualty, this experience can be one of a sense of emptiness and grief that accompanies loss. However, much can be gained from encountering loss as well, particularly in terms of one's search for meaning among his or her losses, which can be considered to be a journey—one that is supported by a humanistic approach (Arons, 1992). With its emphasis on personal potential and self-actualization, humanistic psychology strives to see the innate good within the individual and his or her situation. Bowie grappled with a terminal illness prior to his untimely passing (Grow, 2016), yet he metamorphosed physical ailments that some might argue were debilitating and did not necessitate the need to go through the physical exertion of composing a final studio album.

Yet, I agree and disagree both with the premise that existentialism feels that loss is freeing, regardless of the losses that Bowie might have incurred in life. Existentialism argues that transience—the innately ever-changing innate quality of life—is what is freeing, not exactly loss itself (Arons, 1992). However, one could postulate that every second, the previous moment was *lost*, which is, perhaps, a puerile perspective, but it might be accurate. If human beings lived forever, they would be condemned to live stagnantly. It would literally be Hell, with Hell being frozen in a particular state with no option for growth or decay. At least with decay, there is growth on the other side. Human bodies do not regenerate like trees that wither leaves in the fall and bloom with new leaves in spring, and philosophers, including Plato, advocated for reincarnation (as in the Myth of Er allegory in *The Republic* dialogue, see Plato p. 1219-1223, 616a-621d).

Nietzsche (as cited in Kaufmann, 1954) included his concept of eternal recurrence, challenging humans to live their life in accordance to the supposition that we would have to live the same life over again (p. 333). So,



which life should one choose amongst a plethora of options? Bowie (2016) never seemed to have this issue, as his craft was his life and, perhaps was *himself*. This proposition suggests that one is what he or she does. Existentialists—of which Bowie was clearly a refined and commendable one—do not waver on concepts such as death or decay. Sure, these individuals might feel uneasiness or even anxiety in coming to terms with likely uncomfortable news of one's inevitable physical death or some other sort of loss. In life, though, all is renewed in every moment. Becker (1997), in *Denial of Death*, suggested that the human fear of death was not only anxiety-inducing, but that it can also lead one to feel neurotic.

Denial of Death

“Everyone is neurotic, as everyone holds back from life in some ways and lets his symbolic world—view arrange things ...the artist is the most neurotic [of humans] because he too takes the world as a totality and makes a largely symbolic problem out of it” (Becker, 1997, p. 183).

It may come across as peculiar or surprising to some humans that artists might be more neurotic than laypersons. Again, an individual such of David Bowie was able to penetrate an epistemic fulcrum of intrapersonal understanding that only sprouts in full bloom by exhibiting the Socratic examined life. Recall Socrates' famous credo in *The Apology* dialogue (as cited in Becker, 1997) that, “The unexamined life is not worth living for man” (p. 33). Artists from Becker's (1997) perspective immerse their whole selves heavily into the examined life where an immaculate, widely cast spectrum of the human conditions is potentially explored through a symbolic world. That world of symbolism is a means for one to disseminate his or her interpretations of the external world to others, including psychological experiences based on a personal phenomenology. While many humans might be reluctant to ruminate over substantive questions pertaining to life by asking, “Why do humans exist?” or personalizing the question to one's own existence, the artist is submerged into the depths of his or her psyche in a neurotic, perhaps almost fearful, way.

How Bowie viewed his existence on Earth could be different from how a fan would describe

his autobiographical narrative. Nonetheless, his inner thoughts, desires, and dreams—coinciding with his fears and troubles—spoke to the legions of faithful consumers of his music. Philosopher Aristotle might say that this is because artists/performers in the highest echelon of a given society had their duty to teach younger generations the nuances of being human by displaying good, proper imitation. That imitation could either be, “things as they were or are, things as they are said or thought to be, or things as they ought to be” (Becker, 1997, p. 53).

Communication of values of temperance, good will, and austerity additionally sets the artistic creator apart from citizens in other job sectors. Without an indication of how one ought to act, he or she is all but left to be deprived of a moral compass. In gravitating to Bowie's music, fans tapped in to his struggle to unmask his true identity in a world that forces all humans to subjectively construct an individualized sense of meaning to life in the vast oceanic communal setting of a culture.

Art is a modality of imitation according to Aristotle (1902) as well as Socrates (as cited in Cooper and Hutchinson, 1997). For Aristotle, imitation can have edifying consequences as a way for children to become acculturated to specific normative standards of life. Tragedy in particular is very beneficial to this view because of its ability to sometimes conjure cathartic effects on audiences that inspire introspection, strengthen social bonds through a shared story, and ultimately purify humans through those effects (as cited in Cooper and Hutchinson, 1997, p. 10). In the instance of Bowie's music, one could assert that the existential struggle in the song Blackstar had an excellent plot-line because it held a psychologically safe space for listeners to contemplate the deep inklings of existential angst.

For Plato, art—specifically painting—could be considered a modality of imitation in which some humans engage in. He wrote, “Then if he does not make that which exists he cannot make true existence, but only some semblance of existence; and if any one were to say that the work of the maker of the bed, or of any other workman, has real existence, he could hardly be supposed to be speaking the truth” (as cited in Cooper and Hutchinson, 1997, p. 1207). Imitation is wrong according to his description in *The Republic* because it represents a watered-down

version of a specific Form—as he mentioned in *The Sophist* dialogue (as cited in Cooper and Hutchinson, 1997, p. 256). A drawing of a cat would be sub-par in comparison to the metaphysical Form of cat that encompasses all felines. Contrary to the Platonic idea of artistry, might art unveil more than simply falsification? How is it that the track Blackstar (2016) could be considered untrue? Again, the song is not misleading because unlike empirical studies that rely heavily on intricate instrumentation for their success, Bowie never tried to make definitive truth-claims about the nature of the world or his world.

Conclusion

Life provides more than enough problems (and challenges and sometimes joys) for our creative reflection. Bowie's impeccable timing of the release of his swan song, Blackstar, paid homage to more than the authentic and precise way that the artist appeared to live his personal and professional life. Speaking to the chagrin of the Existentialist, the lyrical content parlayed the breadth and depth of one's inner search for meaning in his or her life. Simultaneously, the intense instrumentals and intriguing long runtime of nearly 10 minutes perfectly complemented the inherent anxiety that the Existentialist faces as he or she attempts to

grapple with the innate absurdity that Camus (1955/2012) described.

Transcendence, freedom, character, godliness, and absurdity are not states of being, but requirements for being itself. As such, they ensure our safe decision on our own behalf. Only this decision is not a scenic rest stop, a point in and of itself; the *rest* is entirely, necessarily, up to us, if at first in thought, and then in concrete action (Buber, as cited in Marino, 2004). God is crusted over in earthly mantle, and we are His revelation in the world, through our relations and orientation. Camus (1955/2012) likewise wrote of the absurd man's feeling of *irreparable innocence*, which allows him everything. Could there be anything more holy, more certain, more ideal than irreparable innocence? It is ours for the claiming, a manifest destiny. Nietzsche said the same thing in *Der Antichrist* (Kaufmann, 1954). Sartre said existentialism is an expression of humanism, and so it is. He was brilliant when he told Catholic nuns, evidently vocal in their distaste of the philosophy, not to confuse their anguish with our own and then growl at us for being morose. The optimism and affirmation of existentialism is in not glossing anything over, for we do not really have anything to hide; it is found, instead, in questioning the layers of what we hold dear. It provides not a lick of sanctuary precisely because we do not need one.

References

- Aristotle. *The poetics* (SL Butcher, Trans.). Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, originally published 1902.
- Arons M. Creativity, humanistic psychology, and the American zeitgeist. *The Humanistic Psychologist* 1992; 20: 158-174.
- Becker E. *Denial of death*. New York, NY: Free Press, 1973.
- Bowie D. *Blackstar*. On Blackstar [CD]. New York, NY: Columbia, 2016.
- Camus A. *The myth of Sisyphus and other essays* (Trans O'Brian J.). New York, NY: Knopf/Doubleday, original work published 1955, reprinted 2012.
- Cooper J and Hutchinson D. (Eds.). *Plato: The complete works*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1997.
- Grow K. David Bowie dead at 69 [Blog post]. *Rolling Stone* 2016; January 10. Retrieved from <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/david-bowie-dead-at-69-20160111>
- Hong HV and Hong EH. (Eds.). *The essential Kierkegaard*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013.
- Kaufmann W. (Ed.). *The portable Nietzsche*. New York: Viking Press, 1954.
- Marino G. (Ed.). *Basic Writings of existentialism*. New York: Modern Library, 2004.
- Richards R. *Everyday creativity: Our hidden potential*. In R. Richards, R. Richards (Eds.) *Everyday creativity and new views of human nature: Psychological, social, and spiritual perspectives* (pp. 25-53). Washington, DC, US: American Psychological Association, 2007.
- Schneider K. *Rediscovery of awe: Splendor, mystery, and the fluid center of life*. St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 2004.
- Sharman L and Dingle G. *Extreme metal music and anger processing*. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 2015; 9(272): 1-11.
- Watts A. *The essence of Alan Watts*. Berkeley, CA: Celestial Arts, 1977.
- Zausner T. *When walls become doorways: Creativity and the transforming illness*. New York, NY: Random House/Harmony Books, 2007.

