Talking [Heads] About Whitney

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Although about Whitney Houston, this audiovisual essay does not contain any image or sound of the late superstar singer who was defined by her voice.[1] Instead, I have compiled the talking head interviews with Houston’s family members, friends, and business associates from two recent ‘Whitney’ documentaries: Whitney: Can I Be Me (Nick Broomfield and Rudi Dolezal, 2017) and Whitney (Kevin Macdonald, 2018). The two documentaries – both directed by white European men – are very similar in the sense that they start with Houston’s death and then try to explain ‘what went wrong’, i.e. what caused her downfall. The documentaries find alleged explanations, some different, most of them overlapping, in the strict discipline by her parents, the sexual abuse she suffered during her childhood, the introduction to drugs by
her older brothers, her repressed bisexuality and ‘forbidden’ romantic relationship with former teenage friend turned personal assistant Robyn Crawford, her turbulent marriage with Bobby Brown, and the persistent pressure of being a black superstar within a predominantly white entertainment industry. Obviously, the two documentaries do include the image and sound of Whitney Houston: Whitney: Can I Be Me uses previously unreleased footage from her 1999 My Love Is Your Love World Tour, and Whitney uses a variety of archival material. While these musical performances show why Houston was so exciting, why she was a superstar, here they merely seem to function as a contrast to her tragic life story.

Such a separation of exciting musical performances on the one hand and a dramatic life story narrative on the other is quite common in non-fiction music documentaries as well as fictional musical films. In his classic 1977 essay ‘Entertainment and Utopia’, Richard Dyer points out this ‘division between narratives as problems and [musical] numbers as escape’, arguing that the latter can provide not only an escape from but also a resolution to the former.[2] In the two ‘Whitney’ documentaries, however, the two sides remain separate; there is no resolution, as the tragic fate of Houston takes center stage. The musical performances are merely a reminder of the talent that has been lost, thereby enhancing the tragedy.

As Christian Keathley and Jason Mittell have argued, ‘producing [audiovisual] work according to often arbitrary formal parameters will reveal something about [the] object that would be hard to discover through more typical analytical means’.[3] To explore the generic character of the documentaries, and specifically the use of the talking head interview, I set myself the following five parameters: 1) the audiovisual essay should not contain any image or sound of Whitney Houston; 2) no other archival footage is to be used, only talking head interviews shot specifically for the documentaries; 3) only talking heads shot in front of a bland undescriptive background are to be used (which meant I could not use the footage of Houston’s mother Cissy, which was shot on location in her local church); 4) once placed in the right or left, top or bottom corner of the four-split-screen, the individual talking heads cannot change positions (even if they appear in both documentaries); and 5) perhaps most important, the audiovisual essay should not be another ‘Whitney’ documentary – instead the talking heads of both documentaries are meant to be responding to each other, thereby creating a new narrative that may or may not be about the specific life story of Whitney Houston. For that
reason, I have not identified the different talking heads; they are only iden-
tified when the original footage includes an onscreen text of their names and
their relation to Houston.

With this audiovisual essay, I want to highlight how similar the documen-
taries are, both in form (the use of talking head interviews) and content (look-
ning back at ‘what went wrong’). During the editing I even lost track of which
talking head belonged to which documentary. By only showing the talking
heads, the audiovisual essay amplifies what both documentaries do, separat-
ing the discussion of Houston’s tragic life from the triumph of her musical
performance. The result is almost a cacophony of recollections of – and
opinions about – Houston, presented together in four split-screens (an aes-
thetic choice that may have obtained new connotations in the current
COVID-19 times), regardless of the interviewee’s relation to the subject,
whether they are her husband, siblings, friends, personal assistants, body-
guards, record company executives, movie agents, hairdresser, or therapist.
Isolated from the other footage of the documentaries, these talking heads to-
gether show the impossibility of finding out ‘what went wrong’ in Houston’s
life, let alone of revealing how she ‘truly’ was (the ‘me’ that she could not be).

This does not mean that the audiovisual essay fails to present a narrative.
Compiling and editing the talking head interviews from both documentaries
in (mostly) chronological order revealed a narrative from promise and hope
to suffering and decline, and finally to mourning. Although befitting Hou-
ston’s life story, such a ‘from triumph to tragedy’ narrative clearly is very ge-
neric, particularly when told by talking heads in front of an undescriptive
background. One could even argue that Houston has disappeared from the
narrative all together, as the story told could be about any deceased singer;
here a comparison to Amy (Asif Kapadia, 2015) might be fruitful, if only to
note the importance of the subject’s first name as titles in documentaries
about female singers. By leaving out any image and sound of Whitney Hou-
ston, I may have emphasised such a disappearance, but which does not pro-
duce but rather reveals the generic character of the talking head interviews
and the narrative that they present.

At certain moments in the audiovisual essay, however, Houston suddenly
appears again, when the sound of her music seeps through the chattering
voices of the talking heads. Most prominently, at 03:36, the opening beats of
‘So Emotional’ kick in, providing a gentle sonic reminder of the pleasure and
exuberance Whitney Houston also embodied. At that moment, I cannot help
but hear her voice in my head: ‘I don’t know why I like it, I just do.’
Jaap Kooijman is Associate Professor of Media Studies at the University of Amsterdam and author of Fabricating the Absolute Fake: America in Contemporary Pop Culture (Amsterdam University Press, 2013). His essays on stardom, pop music, and music videos have appeared in journals such as The Velvet Light Trap, European Journal of Cultural Studies, Celebrity Studies, [in]Transition, and Popular Music and Society, as well as book collections such as Unpopular Culture (Amsterdam University Press, 2016), Revisiting Star Studies (Edinburgh University Press, 2017), Music/Video (Bloomsbury, 2017), and Beyoncé: At Work, On Screen, and Online (Indiana University Press, 2020).

References


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