D iane Arbus was a photographer. She was non-figurative, and her work has been celebrated for its unique perspective on the human condition. Her photographs are often striking and thought-provoking, and they have been influential in the world of photography. Arbus was known for her use of unconventional subjects and her willingness to explore hidden aspects of society. Her work has been described as both disturbing and beautiful, and it continues to inspire and challenge viewers today.


the person better, feeling as if a lot has (if successful and meaningful) has to explicit form of biography. Any biography provide a suitably complex, convincing and strangers. We can’t not do it. Even insomniac life is spent dissecting soft our waking and 80 per cent of our fancy about it. Probably 50 per cent of other people. There’s nothing particularly Psychobiography is a kind of extra (2016).

Ideally, it allows you to see what was in psychology stays off-stage. It’s invisible. just don’t see it. Psychobiography bares The device is never bared. It’s there; you get at the process ‘pathography’, and regarded it as virtually worthless. I agree. Diagnoses are strictly speaking, psychobiography is a sort of flashlight. The level of analysis is as worthy of attention a psychobiography? What’s the formula? To get at sets of whys you play, some conscious, most probably unconscious.

So, that’s a bit about what psychology stays off-stage. It’s invisible. The device is never bared. It’s there; you just don’t see it. Psychobiography bares the answer to the return – specifically. The Metamorphosis. It’s a constant, iterative even the hardcore trait conceived it as a bad psychobiography is pathography. Too many people also mistakenly believe psychobiography is intrinsically reducetionist, that its explanations take the form of an inversion of events or causes of behaviours traced back to one, and one is being punched in the face by the eye as an adolescent, or the basically boring question of Bowie’s sexuality. Slowly what you begin to do – and this can be shown to be valid, it’s not imaginary – is see in the art assembled patterns and themes, repetitions. Bowie writes several songs in which he’s an alien. He makes three records that together comprise the Berlin Trilogy, just as Sylvia Plath composed a set of poems called the Bee Sequence. The art yields salience – elements that stand out, that draw attention to themselves. Artists have obsessions. They need obsessions. Whatever the case, I think it’s safe to say that the most thoughtful and psychologists espouse the sort of obsession-collector. There are always multiple causes in play, some conscious, most probably unconscious. So, that’s a bit about what

The interviewee interjects, ‘What about spaceships?’ Bowie replies, ‘It’s an interior whatever the case, I think it’s safe to say that the most thoughtful and psychologists espouse the sort of obsession-collector. There are always multiple causes in play, some conscious, most probably unconscious. So, that’s a bit about what

The interviewee interjects, ‘What about spaceships?’ Bowie replies, ‘It’s an interior whatever the case, I think it’s safe to say that the most thoughtful and psychologists espouse the sort of obsession-collector. There are always multiple causes in play, some conscious, most probably unconscious. So, that’s a bit about what

The interviewee interjects, ‘What about spaceships?’ Bowie replies, ‘It’s an interior whatever the case, I think it’s safe to say that the most thoughtful and psychologists espouse the sort of obsession-collector. There are always multiple causes in play, some conscious, most probably unconscious. So, that’s a bit about what

The interviewee interjects, ‘What about spaceships?’ Bowie replies, ‘It’s an interior whatever the case, I think it’s safe to say that the most thoughtful and psychologists espouse the sort of obsession-collector. There are always multiple causes in play, some conscious, most probably unconscious. So, that’s a bit about what

The interviewee interjects, ‘What about spaceships?’ Bowie replies, ‘It’s an interior whatever the case, I think it’s safe to say that the most thoughtful and psychologists espouse the sort of obsession-collector. There are always multiple causes in play, some conscious, most probably unconscious. So, that’s a bit about what

The interviewee interjects, ‘What about spaceships?’ Bowie replies, ‘It’s an interior whatever the case, I think it’s safe to say that the most thoughtful and psychologists espouse the sort of obsession-collector. There are always multiple causes in play, some conscious, most probably unconscious. So, that’s a bit about what

The interviewee interjects, ‘What about spaceships?’ Bowie replies, ‘It’s an interior whatever the case, I think it’s safe to say that the most thoughtful and psychologists espouse the sort of obsession-collector. There are always multiple causes in play, some conscious, most probably unconscious. So, that’s a bit about what

The interviewee interjects, ‘What about spaceships?’ Bowie replies, ‘It’s an interior whatever the case, I think it’s safe to say that the most thoughtful and psychologists espouse the sort of obsession-collector. There are always multiple causes in play, some conscious, most probably unconscious. So, that’s a bit about what

The interviewee interjects, ‘What about spaceships?’ Bowie replies, ‘It’s an interior whatever the case, I think it’s safe to say that the most thoughtful and psychologists espouse the sort of obsession-collector. There are always multiple causes in play, some conscious, most probably unconscious. So, that’s a bit about what

The interviewee interj...
with the image of an enigmatic female in the sky, he imagined her coming down some day to save him. Many of his songs – too many to name – feature mysterious, unreachable women. The best example is ‘Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds’. He keeps running into her; she shows up unexpectedly, but they never really connect, he never really reaches her.

Since psychobiography is a way of doing psychology, there are always questions having to do with these. I'm no fan of brainless Freud bashing. In fact, what I'm a fan of is Freud. I've loved Freud since childhood. But personality science has progressed far beyond psychoanalysis, and psychobiographers need to reckon with that fact, and make use of ideas that are not only newer, but more scientifically sound. A psychobiography is only as solid as the theory it rests on, obviously. Bad theory, bad psychobiography.

Dan McAdams recommends that we assess people from the viewpoint of three independent levels: traits, characteristic adaptations and stories. This makes sense. We are born with basic endogenous tendencies, traits like extraversion, neuroticism, openness to experience, all abstract potentials that incline us towards action. We also evolve habitual, strategic patterns of response – attachment styles, defence mechanisms, forms of coping. Then finally, we narrate it all, tell stories about it, construct theories of self that are organising and self-fulfilling. Silvan Tomkins called these the theories of self that are organising and making us. They prefer nuance, complexity, habitual, strategic patterns of response – inclination us towards action. We also evolve ambiguity, mystery, questions over answers. (Openness correlates with intelligence.) Their range of feelings is wider: they repress less. They believe in magic and ESP and past-lives. They are original, creative, artistic; they are even more creatively productive. They get bored easily, as soon as they master something, what they want to do is extend it, remake it, reinvent it, or move on to different projects altogether. Behaviourally, openness correlates with sensation-seeking, according to research. Open people are experience-seeking, thrill- and adventure-seeking, disinhibited, sexually adventurous. They do more drugs as a way of expanding their minds, raising their consciousness. They also tend to be politically liberal or radical.

Bowie was all these things. He's2 flamboyantly 'O'. He was disarmingly smart, famously well read. His influences, as he described them, extend endlessly, to mime, Kabuki theatre and beyond. He adopted personas, then discarded them – Ziggy, the Thin White Duke. Creatively, he was restless. He acted, he sang, he wrote, he produced, he painted. He spoke of becoming a new kind of rock star, he wanted to use rock to explore ideas he had about identity and fabrication. He played as Ziggy or the Thin White Duke, then he gave interviews in character. It was real and it was an act at the same time. He enjoyed being someone else, he said. His sexuality is a complex subject, but most of the time, in most interviews, he admits to being bisexual. In the least, he was sexually experimental. His styles were all over the map – pop, rock, ambient, folk, soul – he tried it all. Drugs were a problem too, for a time, until he stopped altogether.

Traits are descriptions, individual-difference variables. They are best thought of as a first-read on a person, a conversation starter. They don't get at motives; they don't get at the why. For that, it's necessary to turn to McAdams’s level two, which is all about goals, strategies, coping mechanisms, relationship styles. Level two zeroes in on what you want, and how you go about getting it, or how you manage to avoid what you don't want. I am not a Bowie expert, so I can't satisfactorily answer any of the following questions; but here are level two-type queries. What were Bowie's obsessions and how did he engage them, express them? How did he cope with failure, personal or professional? How did he deal with turbulent, negative feelings? What was the function of his art, what did he get out of it? Did he desire achievement, immortality, power? How did he feel around people, intimates or strangers? Was he comfortable, anxious, avoidant? What about conditional patterns? That is, which sorts of situations led him to act out of character? In what ways did the setting he was in impact how he felt or behaved? What was he afraid of, and how did he contend with the fear? What brought him the most joy? Was he mostly happy, or mostly sad?

Level three is the narrative level, post-hoc constructions in story form of what we have watched ourselves say or do or feel or think. The question here is what Bowie said about his experiences, which he singled out or somehow emphasized. Levels one and two are facts, why did he do such and such. Level three is about why. What about the possibility that psychobiography says nothing about the field's possibilities, just as bad dentists don't prove dentistry to be bankrupt. What's needed is not less psychobiography, but more, and better. It's a scientifically informed art. It's also, in some ways, psychology's stiffest challenge: how to make effective sense of one messy, confusing, contradictory and always fundamentally mysterious life. I think psychology ought to show, every now and then, that it can shed light on the most moving target there is – a person. Psychobiography is one way of doing that.

The above is a kind of outline. It is not, obviously, a psychobiography; it's more a proposal for a psychobiography. Much would need to be filled in – facts presented, interpretations advanced cogently. But it gives a small taste for the enterprise, the kinds of questions asked, and an a priori template to follow, guided by findings from personality science. There's been progress in the field of psychobiography over the last 25 years or so. Bad psychobiography still gets written – I've read some, by accident. But the presence of bad psychobiography says nothing about the field's possibilities, just as bad dentists don't prove dentistry to be bankrupt. What's needed is not less psychobiography, but more, and better. It's a scientifically informed art. It's also, in some ways, psychology's stiffest challenge: how to make effective sense of one messy, confusing, contradictory and always fundamentally mysterious life. I think psychology ought to show, every now and then, that it can shed light on the most moving target there is – a person. Psychobiography is one way of doing that.

Confirmatory bias?

What about the possibility that psychobiographers simply privilege evidence that fits particular pet theories? That's unlikely. In most cases, especially those involving famous artists or historical figures, the evidence is there for all to see. It's part of the record. It exists in super-abundance. It's publicly available in the form of biographies, letters, journals, and so on. So, if a psychobiographer – or a biographer, for that matter – were to simply omit or overlook data that didn't fit with what they had in mind, they would assuredly be found out eventually, if not instantly, and shown to be careless or, worse, intellectually dishonest. This is where psychobiography differs from clinical case study. The Platts and Van Doh's of the world are written about endlessly; they exist in a climate of opinion. It is possible to know their story. Subjects of case studies, however, tend to be anonymous for various reasons, so the evidence is there for all to see. If interpretations cannot be checked against evidence, doing so is impossible almost by definition. Not so for psychobiography.