

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 [audio-visual] 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 identified 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 documentaries are, both in form (the use of talking head interviews) and content (looking 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, separating 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 aesthetic 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, bodyguards, record company executives, movie agents, hairdresser, or therapist. Isolated from the other footage of the documentaries, these talking heads together 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 Houston’s life story, such a ‘from triumph to tragedy’ narrative clearly is very generic, 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 Houston, I may have emphasised such a disappearance, but which does not produce 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.’

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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).

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Notes

- [1] Kooijman 2014, p. 306; Shelton 1995, p. 138.
- [2] Dyer 2002, p. 28.
- [3] Keathley & Mittell 2019, p. 11.