



David Bowie and Film

Hooked to the Silver Screen

Stephen Glynn

palgrave
macmillan

David Bowie and Film

“*David Bowie and Film: Hooked to the Silver Screen* is an important book. It analyzes Bowie’s crossover stardom and provides new knowledge of not only Bowie as a cultural figure but also of the films Bowie acted in. As such, the book also offers a very useful and original case study of the ways in which one star can have a profound impact on British cinema history and cultural history.”

—Paul Newland, *University of Worcester*

Stephen Glynn

David Bowie and Film

Hooked to the Silver Screen

palgrave
macmillan

Stephen Glynn
De Montfort University
Leicester, UK

ISBN 978-3-031-13400-5 ISBN 978-3-031-13401-2 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-13401-2>

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2022

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use. The publisher, the authors, and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG.

The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

David Bowie has been with me since my early teens. A glam poster of the star placed on my bedroom wall certainly got my father in a whirl, and prompted a serious discussion on the (heterosexual) facts of life—my younger brother put up a Debbie Harry poster and was spared the embarrassing talking-to. I saw Bowie in concert several times across the years, bought his records, watched his films. His influence fluctuated greatly over the decades, losing me completely for most of the 1980s and 1990s, then finding me again with his late creative flowering. He merits rigorous analysis (rather than uncritical fandom), and this book is my appraisal and acknowledgement of Bowie's importance to film. To that end, my great thanks to Lina Aboujieb, Executive Editor at Palgrave Macmillan, always in the seat with the clearest view: her support and advice throughout the writing process were much appreciated. As ever, this work is dedicated to Sarah and Roz who are absolute beginners with regard to David Bowie but with whom I have spent my golden years.

CONTENTS

1	Introduction—Sound and Vision	1
2	Bowie as Concert Performer—The Man Who Sold the World	21
3	Bowie as Star(man)—Loving the Alien	53
4	Bowie Goes to War—Cracked Actor	77
5	Bowie Does Fantasy—Scary Monsters (and Super Creeps)	101
6	Bowie Does Musicals—Man of Words, Man of Music	125
7	Bowie Goes Genre-Hopping—Comedian, Chameleon, Corinthian and Caricature	147
8	Bowie Does Biopics—Watch That Man	169
9	Bowie in Absentia—How the Others Must See the Faker	193

10 Conclusion—A Crash Course for the Ravers	223
David Bowie Filmography	229
Bowie Bibliography	231
Index	241

LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 1.1	The Image—A Son of the Silent Age?	14
Fig. 1.2	The Virgin Soldiers—‘He’s Got Medals’	15
Fig. 1.3	The Mask—‘Making Love to his Ego’	17
Fig. 2.1	Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars—‘The Nazz with God-given Ass’	31
Fig. 2.2	Christiane F.—‘I Turned Myself to Face Me’	37
Fig. 2.3	Jazzin’ for Blue Jean—‘The Bogus Oriental Old Queen!’	47
Fig. 3.1	The Man Who Fell to Earth—‘And I Ain’t Got No Hair’	64
Fig. 3.2	The Man Who Fell to Earth—‘Hitting an all-time Low’	71
Fig. 4.1	Just a Gigolo—‘I’ll Stay Clean Tonight’	85
Fig. 4.2	Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence—Bowie does Beckett	90
Fig. 5.1	The Hunger—Bowie does Bardo	107
Fig. 5.2	Labyrinth—Sex and the Single Girl	118
Fig. 5.3	Labyrinth—The Laughing Gnome Goblin	120
Fig. 6.1	Baal—Loving the Alienation	131
Fig. 6.2	Absolute Beginners—Leader of the Pack(ard)	142
Fig. 7.1	The Linguini Incident—Starman as Barman	149
Fig. 7.2	Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me—‘Freak Out in a Moonage Daydream’	153
Fig. 7.3	Everybody Loves Sunshine—‘Put Your Ray Gun to my Head’	157
Fig. 7.4	Il Mio West—‘Shooting Up the Wrong Guy’	160
Fig. 7.5	Mr. Rice’s Secret—‘Come Out of the Garden, Baby’	162
Fig. 7.6	Atlantis SquarePantis—‘O You’ve Got Green Eyes, O You’ve Got Blue Eyes’	163
Fig. 7.7	August—‘I Ravaged at my Finance Just for Those’	165
Fig. 8.1	The Last Temptation of Christ—What is Truth?	173
Fig. 8.2	Basquiat—‘Can’t Tell Them Apart at All’	178

Fig. 8.3	<i>The Prestige</i> —‘Keep Your Electric Eye on Me, Babe’	182
Fig. 8.4	<i>Zoolander</i> —Of Service to the Goon Squad	186
Fig. 8.5	<i>Bandslam</i> —Closure via BowieNet	188
Fig. 9.1	<i>Hedwig and the Angry Inch</i> —Starman/Starwoman	200
Fig. 9.2	<i>Stardust</i> —‘There’s Something Wrong’	205
Fig. 9.3	<i>Velvet Goldmine</i> —Wham Bam Thank You, Glam	210



CHAPTER 1

Introduction—Sound and Vision

This opening chapter establishes how film was an essential medium for David Bowie’s artistic expression. It first surveys the cinematic allusions in his pronouncements, song lyrics, costumes and stage design. It then explains the book’s main focus, an exploration of the films in which Bowie appeared as an actor, and sets out the methodology employed, plus the parameters for case study analysis. It finally traces Bowie’s first uncertain steps in front of the camera, and argues that themes central to both his musical and film career can be traced back to these ‘apprentice pieces’, works that feature non-heteronormative relationships and the adoption of a stage/screen persona with the potential for psychological dislocation.

1.1 BOWIE’S ARTISTRY: HOOKED TO THE SILVER SCREEN

On 23 March 2013 *David Bowie Is*, an exhibition of artefacts and information about the artist’s life and creative output, opened at London’s Victoria and Albert Museum. Initial concerns as to the venture’s viability were disproved as the show became the V&A’s most in-demand show ever, its sell-out run meaning that, by its 11 August closure, it had accommodated 312,000 visitors. More was to come: as a ‘grand finale’ and promoted as ‘A Live Nationwide Cinema Event’, Done and Dusted’s documentary film of the exhibition, entitled *David Bowie is happening now* (Hamish Hamilton, Katy Mullan, 2013), was shown across selected UK cinemas on Tuesday 13 August.¹ The success of the V&A exhibition prompted a

world tour, and, over the next five years, it relocated to 11 major museums, attracting 2 million viewers before closing at the Brooklyn Museum on 15 July 2018.² In these territories the documentary film would again be shown, not now as a finale, but advance publicity. The film's 96-minute tour through the exhibition's rooms, be it employed as souvenir, substitute or selling tool, explored selected highlights from the V&A's 500-plus exhibits and broke for contributions from invited celebrities such as singer Jarvis Cocker and writer Hanif Kureishi.³ Unsurprisingly the film was hagiographical in content and conventional in structure—'a little like hugely extended footage for [an] arts review show', noted Donald Clarke (*Irish Times*, 6 July 2016)—but it complemented the tour's other cross-media experiences that included a 60-plus Bowie-song megamix by his long-time producer Tony Visconti, and a high-production catalogue with newly-commissioned essays on Bowie's cultural impact from 'A-list' academics such as Christopher Frayling and Camille Paglia (Broackes and Marsh 2013). Beyond its function as historical record and promotional vehicle, the cinema-shown documentary was, I would contend, a necessary completion of the exhibition experience since throughout his career, as several exhibits revealed, film was an essential medium for Bowie's artistic output.⁴

The *David Bowie Is* exhibition and film confirmed that, with album, stage and costume design, 'Sound *and* Vision' was always David Bowie's modus operandi. Indeed, it has become almost a commonplace to describe Bowie's main output, his musical productions, as intrinsically cinematic. For Paul Morley 1970s Bowie 'was creating the equivalent of plays or films, and each one required its own location, cinematography, sound, cast, structure, even language' (2016: 221). For David Laderman Bowie 'famously developed his own cinematic motifs during his early glam rock days, both as part of his performance persona and in his song lyrics' (2014: 21). These lyrics, for Simon Reynolds, 'were like compressed screenplays that turned your imagination into a silver screen' (2016: 236). Bowie's collaborators endorse these readings: Brian Eno noted that, on the late 1970s 'Berlin Trilogy', 'we were both thinking very cinematically about this; we were both thinking that each of these pieces we would do should be like a small film of some kind' (cited in Everett 2013). Indeed, the cinematic comparison is encouraged by Bowie himself who, in an interview concurrent with his starring debut in Nicolas Roeg's *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, informed journalist Rex Reed that his career had been misaligned: 'I'm not a rock musician. It was only a grand means to an end.

I've always wanted to be a film director'. He added that 'All of my concept albums, from *Ziggy Stardust* down, were ideas for films, but I couldn't get anyone to perform the stuff I wrote, so I did it myself' ('Glitter Rock's Movie Nut', *Baltimore Sun*, 20 June 1976).

Underlying these metaphorical and aspirational comparisons, Bowie's work is suffused with film—both for sound and vision. His song lyrics are replete with film references. Several centre on the cinema-going experience, be it the cut-up escapist Hollywood of 'Life on Mars?' or the sci-fi educative pornography of 'Drive-In Saturday'. Some are explicit and 'universal'—his July 1969 top-five 'novelty' hit 'Space Oddity' was inspired less by America's concurrent Apollo moon programme than the adventures of (similarly named) David Bowman (Kier Duella) in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). Others are indirect and coterie-related—in his June 1983 number two hit 'China Girl' (co-written with and for Iggy Pop), the singer 'feeling tragic like I'm Marlon Brando' references Iggy's brief liaison with Kuelan Nguyen via the Korean War-set *Sayonara* (Joshua Logan, 1957), where Brando's US fighter pilot Lloyd 'Ace' Gruver risks career ruin when falling in love with Japanese entertainer Hana-ogi (Miiko Taka). Bowie's lyrics culminate in the obscure and deeply personal—'Blackstar', the November 2015 Grammy Award-winning lead single from Bowie's same-named final studio album, potentially references Elvis Presley's 'Black Star', the original title song for a western starring Elvis as mixed-race Texan rancher Pacer Burton, but dropped when the film was retitled *Flaming Star* (Don Siegel, 1960).⁵ With Presley-fan Bowie aware of his own imminent demise, the Elvis track is especially relevant for the prescient line 'When a man sees his black star, he knows his time, his time has come'.⁶

As for sound, so for vision: always a theatrical, visual performer, film influences pervade Bowie's album and concert aesthetic. The invocation from 'Suffragette City'—'Ah Droogie, don't crash here'—orients the strong influence of Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) on Bowie's own dystopian world creation and internecine gang/group dynamic for *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* and beyond.⁷ While touring the album (29 January to 7 September 1972), Bowie opened his concerts with 'March from *A Clockwork Orange*', Walter (later Wendy) Carlos' synthesised version of Beethoven's 'Ode to Joy'.⁸ More centrally, in creating the look of his Ziggy persona, Bowie took the costumes worn by the sadistic Droogs (bovver boots, braces and cod-pieces) and, with close friend and clothes designer Freddie Burretti, worked to

subvert their stylish brutality by employing quilted materials with floral patterns. Alongside the deco-print two-piece costume worn with vinyl wrestling boots on the *Ziggy Stardust* album cover, this influence is visible in stage outfits including white satin trousers and a rainbow jumpsuit. ‘It was a Dada thing’, Bowie later explained, ‘this extreme ultraviolence in Liberty fabrics’ (cited in Deevoy 1993: 77). It was also a Droog thing, Kubrick in kimonos.⁹

In the Isolar aka White Light Tour to support his *Station to Station* album (2 February to 18 May 1976), Bowie shifted to an overture projecting iconic passages from Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí’s *Un Chien Andalou* (1929). For the ensuing shows’ chiaroscuro stage design, almost an antidote to earlier glam excesses, Bowie acknowledged that, with his new Thin White Duke persona akin to a Weimar cabaret singer, he ‘wanted to go back to a kind of Expressionist German-film look ... and the lighting of, say, Fritz Lang or [G.W.] Pabst. A black-and-white movies look’ (cited in Cann 2010). The film aesthetic was recognised in reviews: Lisa Robinson found that, on stage, ‘Bowie moves like a film actor who knows that standing still in front of a camera often commands more attention. The entire production ... is like a film David’s projected himself’ (‘The First Synthetic Rock Star. There is No Other’, *New Musical Express*, 7 March 1976).¹⁰ Across his musical projections, Bowie was evidently ‘hooked to the silver screen’.

1.2 BOWIE AND ACADEMIA: THE STARMAN AND STAR STUDIES

What, though, of Bowie’s work on the silver screen proper? In the chapters that follow *David Bowie and Film* examines his appearances before the movie camera, exploring how Bowie’s image, from apprentice actor through rock star to cultural elder statesman, moves across forms and genres as a variably commercial product offering spectators differing pleasures and expectations, sites/sights for identification and disorientation. This study works to prove that Bowie’s film work is, despite incontestable inconsistencies in accomplishment, an essential component in the artistic expression of one of the most significant figures in international popular culture over the last 50 years. His films serve as a prism through which one can evaluate the sheer range of Bowie’s interests and especially their socio-cultural influence. These are mainly centred in contemporary discourses

on gender, sexuality and identity formation but also reach out to areas such as historical investigation, the visual arts, fashion, science and the internet.

Between 1967 and 2009, Bowie made 28 appearances in film and each receives attention here. *David Bowie and Film* constitutes the first such sustained undertaking. Though Bowie as a musical and cultural phenomenon has received wide print coverage, including increasing academic exegesis, the film aspect of his career has remained relatively marginalised, often dismissed without investigation as secondary to Bowie's legacy and star status. The fullest treatment comes from Bowie encyclopaedist Nicholas Pegg who devotes a chapter to 'Stage and Screen' in *The Complete David Bowie* (2016): largely empirical before analytical, Pegg's coverage occupies just 42 pages of an exhaustive 800-page volume. That apart, Toija Cinque, Angela Ndalians and Sean Redmond have jointly edited an 'In-Focus' section for *Cinema Journal* entitled 'David Bowie On-Screen' where, across six essays, the contributors explore how Bowie was 'a seminal, shimmering part of screen culture for more than forty years' (2018: 126). The edited collection *David Bowie: Critical Perspectives* (Devereux et al. 2015) devotes three of its 17 chapters to Bowie's film appearances, two centred on *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, recipient of the fullest attention in Bowie's filmography. All make perceptive exegesis and are cited hereafter. Edited volumes, though, tend to be partial if not piecemeal in nature, offering 'snapshots' rather than the 'big picture'. *David Bowie and Film* thus presents (to date) the only full-length single-authored study devoted to the entirety of Bowie's work in the medium, a study that proposes a comprehensive and nuanced counter-argument to the prevailing reductive (and sometimes ridiculing) view of his place in film history.

Elucidation may be needed on the terms used in this study. It is entitled 'Bowie *and* film' rather than 'the films *of* Bowie' since, while predominantly examining Bowie onscreen in person, his use on soundtracks and as a film character are also addressed. While cinema is regularly referenced as a medium, this book has specifically employed the term 'film' in its title since it largely analyses theatrically released works by or about Bowie, but also includes his made-for-television feature-length dramas and early underground/avant-garde exhibited events. By contrast, the terminology purposefully indicates that this volume will *not* look at the discrete and myriad rock videos made to accompany Bowie's musical output. While these are an important aspect of Bowie's cumulative cultural reach, including innovative and influential exempla such as the much-analysed 'Ashes

to Ashes' (David Mallet, 1980), this would require a much lengthier investigation and the application of a distinct set of generic and commercial criteria extensively rehearsed elsewhere (Frith et al. 1993; Caston 2020, Perrott 2023).

Linked to this is the issue of how to categorise Bowie in his film roles. Yvonne Tasker, for instance, differentiates three types of onscreen presence: the performer, the actor, and the star (1993: 74). The performer, simply playing their part, is not held up as a 'serious actor' and holds no extra-filmic presence. The actor is acknowledged as possessing artistry and talent and is highly regarded by audiences. The star, by contrast, may or may not be viewed as a serious actor, but they possess a crucial extra-filmic dimension that allows audience identification above and beyond their film roles. Though useful distinctions, this study will reserve the right not to adhere rigidly to this nomenclature, partly because of the interchangeable use of the terms in the existing critical reception of Bowie's films, partly due to Bowie's own descriptors of his work (e.g. 'Cracked Actor'), but also because his various media appearances will be shown to blur the distinctions: for instance, in *Christiane F.* (Edel 1981) the onscreen musical 'performer' is simultaneously promoted as a film 'star'.

The book will, though, regularly investigate this latter 'star' category as applied to David Bowie. Stardom has become the subject of concerted attention in film studies: indeed, the academic turn to 'star studies' was roughly conterminous with Bowie's mainstream film activity, given analytical orientation with the late 1970s work of Richard Dyer, the enduring star of star studies, and consolidated in Christine Gledhill's early 1990s developments of Dyer's sociological framework. Dyer (who explores David Niven and Clara Bow but never, alas, David Bowie) established stars as a 'structured polysemy' (1979: 72) and has demonstrated how 'Star images are always extensive, multimedia, intertextual', generated not just through their films but by the surrounding 'texts' of promotional appearances and material culture, that is, in-person interviews, pin-up photographs, studio hand-outs, biographies, critical commentary and newspaper (plus now internet) coverage, officially authorised or otherwise, of their 'private' lives (2003: 2–3). In a process of constant circulation and intermediality, these texts change over time, and this 'chronological dimension', altering the star image, is a dynamism unmissable with the protean persona-shifting Bowie, a regular (for a while near-ubiquitous) presence not just on cinema screens but on airwaves, magazine and album covers, and in press and television interviews.

Thus, while Bowie's cultural range necessitates applying approaches derived from the more interdisciplinary methodology of celebrity studies, star studies provides a framework for this dedicated analysis of Bowie's film work. For example, within a film's diegesis Dyer argues that stars play 'characters', that is, the 'constructed representations of persons', while their own star image is itself a constructed personage (1979: 99, 109). This creates a doubly constructed interface, where a star embodies a specific type of social being and then plays characters that also embody specific social beings, leading to various degrees of 'fit' for the star with regard to the character portrayed. Employing another tripartite categorisation, Dyer sees these as a 'perfect', 'selective' or 'problematic fit' (1979: 142–146). The perfect fit, sometimes termed 'personification', occurs when the character's traits are fully congruent with those of the star; a selective fit occurs when a film exploits some traits of its star but ignores others; a problematic fit happens when the star's image contradicts the character construct—these latter categories, especially if necessitating a change of physical appearance and voice, can also be termed 'impersonation'. This categorisation will be systematically employed as a relevant means for evaluating Bowie's film appearances.

Film, though, is not just about star presence. As noted by Andrew Britton, Dyer's emphasis on a star vehicle needs nuancing since the construction of character is also prescribed by the codes and conventions of 'a generic form with particular limits and parameters' (1991: 199). Thus, in a Bowie film like *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence* (Ōshima 1983), the generic contexts and narrative determinants of the role of a prisoner of war precede and must to a degree dictate to the star rather than the role being structured solely for the benefit of that star's persona. As adventurous and explorative in his film work as in his musical creations, Bowie repeatedly crossed genres, working inter alia in documentary and biopics, science fiction and fantasy, historical and wartime dramas, musicals and ordeal cinema, a range which facilitates a critical evaluation of whether certain genres serve the star as a better 'fit' than others.

First learning his craft in a different performative medium, acting style will also be key to considering the merits of Bowie's film work. Film has, by and large, been dominated by a 'verisimilar' style of acting: modelled on everyday behaviour, this restrained, understated performance mode, sometimes termed 'invisible acting', allows amplification of individualised gestures to come from the close, quasi-forensic attention of the film camera. However, alternative styles exist. The earliest cinema espoused a

‘histrionic’ acting style, with conventionalised and exaggerated gestures employed to externalise emotion and substitute for language (Wojcik 2004: 49–50). The style, sometimes termed ‘pictorial acting’, was rooted in a theatrical tradition, and has remained the basis for the anti-realistic acting styles favoured by German Expressionist filmmakers, plus Bertolt Brecht whose foregrounding of artificiality was favoured by, amongst others, the directors of the French *nouvelle vague* (Naremore 1988). Mark Sinker opines that, largely due to his ‘self-conscious ‘70s inauthenticity’, ‘[Jean-Luc] Godard’s nearest equivalent in pop was David Bowie’ (1995: 110) and, as shown in his stage-show designs, the Weimar-era alternatives were known to and admired by Bowie. With his own acting style arguably more attuned to non-naturalistic projection, he would appear in works by Brecht and with directors from outside the western verisimilar tradition. It is an important contextualisation. As this study will demonstrate, Bowie’s film acting has, at times, been decried as poor, even inadequate. Nonetheless, and with an indicative blurring of ostensibly binary distinctions, while several films featuring Bowie as the commercially bankable ‘star’ have attained an offbeat ‘cult status’, the aim here is not to equate Bowie with an actor such as Sharon Stone who, for Rebecca Feasey, became a ‘cult star’ solely through ironic readings of her ‘bad’ acting (2003: 172–184). Instead, with due attention paid to the entered genre and surrounding onscreen acting ethos, each of Dyer’s star ‘fits’ will be shown as applicable to the film roles taken by David Bowie, especially during his late 1970s and early 1980s acting heyday.

While informed by genre groupings, the broadly chronological ‘set list’ for this monograph runs as follows. This introductory survey of Bowie’s rapport with film, the establishment of parameters and explanation of methodology is followed by tracing the unknown Bowie’s first steps in front of the camera, ranging from regional television to art house experimentation. Chapter 2 stays with Bowie the musical performer and examines how his 1970s and 1980s personae are accommodated to documentary and fictional film formats. Chapter 3 analyses what is widely considered Bowie’s most achieved film role, in *The Man Who Fell to Earth*: it explores how, in that rare combination, the music star with his film part is widely thought to exemplify Dyer’s ‘perfect fit’. Chapter 4 follows the habitually protean Bowie away from musical performance into ‘straight’ acting in relatively realistic inter-war and wartime historical dramas, and explores the reasons for the distinctly lukewarm responses elicited by these more ambitious starring roles, distinctly ‘problematic fits’ in being removed

from the star's known stage and album image. Chapter 5 takes 1980s Bowie into the ostensibly more compatible genres of horror and fantasy, where his transgressive status can be securely and yet, with some deliberation, 'selectively' exploited. Chapter 6 returns Bowie to musical performance but, with his characteristic drive for non-conformity, in examples of the musical genre at opposite cultural and commercial extremes, ranging from high-brow television work infused with a European art theatre aesthetic to a vainglorious high-budget Technicolor pastiche of Hollywood productions. Chapter 7 treats Bowie's more piecemeal work from the late 1980s onwards, exploring how the codes and conventions of differing genres intersect with the increasingly venerated star's cameo appearance. Chapter 8 examines his more consistent genre appearances as historical figures in biopics, while Chapter 9 looks at Bowie on film in absentia, both as soundtrack and subject matter, building to the rock biopics that attempt (and generally fail) to get behind the mask, significantly without the help of Bowie or the Bowie estate.¹¹ The conclusion, while championing his individual film successes and overall cinematic legacy, seeks to summarise the reasons for the relative disparity between Bowie's *perceived* achievements on disc and onscreen.

If film stardom is often assessed through a triple terminology, *David Bowie and Film* also offers a three-part investigation of each case study, first explaining the motivations and manoeuvrings of their production histories, then summarising their commercial and critical reception, and finally analysing the film 'texts' themselves. If the first two aspects acknowledge that all stars, including Bowie, operate as economic entities within the film industry, the third, visually analysing the star's textual constructions, constitutes the main body of each section/film. These include brief plot summaries since, while the films of 1976–1986, Bowie's cinematic 'Golden Years', are (mostly) heavily marketed 'star' products readily in circulation, his early apprentice work and later more low-key personal ventures can prove harder to access. Mostly, though, the film analysis looks to place the generic conventions, visual style and narrative ideology into the context both of Bowie's own career and also the (youth) socio-cultural movements into which they emerged.

The latter is significant since, like stardom, genre itself is doubly constructed, 'with one face turned towards history and the other to form' (Moretti 2005: 14). These films, of course, are never simply reflectionist but select from, mediate, and at times—such was Bowie's influence—even trigger social and cultural change. Thus Bowie is herein also evaluated as

a bellwether, offering a ‘re-presentation’ or ‘refracted’ view of his time, with his star status, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, giving him a synecdochic function, rendering him a repository for the culture’s shifting tendencies and tensions—an example of what ‘star critic’ Christine Gledhill terms ‘condensers of moral, social and ideological values’ (1991: 215). Gledhill emphasises how the star can be emblematic of those values being problematised, a position exemplified by Bowie’s pin-up Ziggy Stardust status which questioned socially dominant heteronormativity. By dint of his artistic talent, commercial acumen, and ensuing fame and fortune, there is little ‘typical’ about Bowie, but films such as *Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* (Pennebaker 1973) and *The Man Who Fell to Earth* record how successfully he articulated the socio-sexual aspirations enjoyed (and the parental strictures endured) by many of his non-famous younger followers.

This ‘same yet different’ position is, perhaps, the most simplistic articulation of Bowie’s ambivalent status as an artist, a key theme that runs throughout this study. To give one example: in *Labyrinth* (Henson 1986), Bowie’s role combines both tormentor and love interest: ‘Just fear me, love me, do as I say, and I will be your slave’, he offers (opaquely) to his young female rival. Dyer saw the power of stars in this very ability to ‘speak to dominant contradictions in social life—experienced as conflicting demands, contrary expectations, irreconcilable but equally held values—in such a way as to seem to reconcile them’ (1992: 80). The quality is particularly pertinent to David Bowie and has been regularly noted. For instance, in his mapping of Bowie’s career-long polysemy, Will Brooker cogently employs Martin Heidegger’s concept of *sous rature* (‘under erasure’) which ‘captures the fluid dynamic between presence and absence, life and death, no and yes, being and nothingness, and other terms, usually supposed to be binary opposites, throughout Bowie’s work’ (2017: 187). Such contained opposites are, arguably, most ‘under erasure’ in Bowie’s work on film. Here the star’s whole image construction is, in essence, an illusion, putting on display what is not ‘really’ there—as Susan Hayward notes, ‘the star on the screen is absence made presence and the spectator is the hearing, seeing subject’ fetishising the star as always object (2006: 381–382).

This anti-binary effect will be shown to extend to Bowie’s iconographic function, notably in the ambivalence of his enduring androgyny. Gledhill notes that stars reach their audience primarily through their bodies, that is, their projected appearance (1991: 210). With stars’ longevity largely

gendered, Bowie has enjoyed the male prerogative of developing and differentiating his roles over four decades. But also, like the more ‘ephemeral’ female star, his ‘undressed / topless’ roles remain temporally prescribed, reining in his potential as a body that can—and as shown in this study did—give the audience a ‘human sense of beauty and eroticism’ (Konigsberg 1993: 348).

Alongside his fluid status with regard to film genres and gender definitions, Bowie also embodies an example of ‘crossover stardom’, a term increasingly employed to discuss stars who seek to replicate their initial success when moving to other media. In truth, the phenomenon is as old as cinema itself, with silent cinema drawing its actors from the stage, and sound quickly attracting popular music-hall artistes. But it has come to be considered a prevalent career strategy since the 1960s, and can be seen in the varyingly successful career trajectories of pop stars from Elvis Presley through the Beatles and Madonna to Justin Timberlake (Lobalzo Wright 2018; Palmer 2020). Indeed, a corollary of the 1950s collapse of the studio system has been adjudged the end of the carefully constructed film star: with this decline corresponding to the rise of rock’n’roll and pop, the case has been made that discrete film stars ceded in the popular imagination to the new teen phenomenon, the rock’n’roll and pop star. Hence, argues David Shumway, with the appearance of the likes of Presley and the Beatles and their astute cross-media promotion, ‘rock stars would eventually supplant movie stars at the top of the pyramid of entertainment royalty’ (2015: 302). It is a debatable concept: post-studio film stardom saw a decline in degree but not necessarily in kind, while several rock’n’rollers have looked to film as a long-term alternative to/escape from the vagaries of teenage fandom (cf. Tommy Steele, Cliff Richard et al.—Glynn 2013: 14–23). Nonetheless, with performers such as David Bowie bringing with them an established charisma and commerciality, the dynamic significantly blurred between what music stars could offer film and/or vice versa, as this study aims to demonstrate.

This zenith status was not always the case with Bowie, however, especially at the outset of his career, examined next.

1.3 BOWIE'S SCREEN BEGINNINGS: A GOD-AWFUL SMALL AFFAIR

The artist later known as David Bowie first came to public attention not through music but on the BBC *Tonight* programme (tx. 24 November 1964) when Cliff Michelmore interviewed him and fellow members of his (bogus) newly-formed Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Long-Haired Men. Complaining that 'We've had comments like "Darlin'" and "Can I carry your handbag" thrown at us: I think it just has to stop now', here was 17-year-old David Jones, already media-savvy and selling a fictional construct, eager for attention, attracted to difference (Trynka 2011: 44–45). His early experiments in music, taking in the Konrads, King Bees, Manish Boys, Lower Third, Buzz and Riot Squad, plus five unsuccessful single releases, led to David turning solo, taking on Kenneth Pitt as manager and, with Davie Jones making waves in The Monkees, changing his surname in January 1966 to Bowie. He persevered and finally, on 1 June 1967, his eponymous first album came out on Decca's independent arm, Deram—'the first album released by a British artist who had not had a hit single' (Welch 2010: 10). It sank without trace.

As his music career stalled, Bowie explored other artistic avenues and made his film debut in Border Films' black-and-white programme filler *The Image*, a wordless horror short written and directed by fellow film debutant, RADA-trained Michael Armstrong. One of 20-year-old Bowie's few admirers, Armstrong had asked the singer-songwriter to write the music for *A Floral Tale*, a projected comedy based on Greek flower myths. Bowie was also slated to play Orpheus—'prophetically', Nicholas Pegg notes, 'a pop singer who is torn to pieces by his fans' (2016: 688)—but when the project folded, largely due to objections from the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) to the script's explicit homosexuality, Bowie accepted instead (for a welcome £10 per day) the role of 'the boy' in Armstrong's more modest two-hander (Armstrong 2017: 31–34). In this 14-minute *Picture of Dorian Gray* pastiche, filmed in a deserted West London house on 13–15 September 1967 (and with music by Noel Janus not Bowie), Michael Byrne's troubled artist is haunted by Bowie's spectral youth who seems to have stepped out from his latest portrait. The artist's constant attempts to destroy 'the image' culminate in his attacking the original portrait instead until he collapses bleeding before the undamaged canvas. Completing the piece proved equally resistant as financial wrangling led to Border closing the shoot and seizing existing footage:

eventually, when their in-house edit only reached seven minutes, Armstrong was brought back to re-cut the work to sufficient duration to qualify as a British quota film for Eady Levy money (a 1957–1985 government incentive to support British film-making). Due to the panicked artist repeatedly hitting and stabbing his creation, *The Image* became the first British short to receive an ‘X’ certificate from the BBFC. It then disappeared after a brief run in January to February 1969 at Piccadilly’s Jacey Cinema, known for showing ‘adult’/pornographic film programmes. In 1984 and with Bowie a global superstar, *The Image* received an opportunistic video release—and an opprobrious review in the *New Musical Express*: ‘Gasp with horror as your hero gets murdered, not once, not twice, but five times. Gasp with astonishment as he gets up entirely unharmed. Wonder with puzzlement how his acting career ever survived this carnage’ (cited in Pegg 2016: 653).

The review is a touch harsh for what is, admittedly, an art-house apprentice piece. Armstrong described *The Image* as ‘a study of the illusory reality world within the schizophrenic mind of the artist at his point of creativity’ (cited in Lindbergs 2008). While this reading potentially resonates with Bowie’s later Ziggy Stardust creation, the film can more readily be interpreted (*pace* BBFC scrutiny) for its homosexual subtext—the artist’s violent reaction suggests less fear at being haunted by his act of creation than a struggle to accept his attraction to ‘the image’, a motivation underlined by the film ending on a framed photo of ‘the boy’ in pride of place on the artist’s table. Here, at the start of his career, is Bowie, incontrovertibly photogenic, fiercely androgynous, negotiating a space as the object of transgressive desire (Fig. 1.1). In addition, his performance makes relatively subtle use of the mime and Japanese *butoh* skills recently acquired under Lindsay Kemp, his early mentor, friend and—reputedly—lover.

Linked to this physicality, it could also be argued that the film’s avoidance of dialogue works to Bowie’s advantage—certainly if, like Anthony Lane, it is thought that Bowie’s voice was ‘curiously floated and flattened by motion pictures’. This study will return to test Lane’s admission that ‘few of Bowie’s line readings, for any director, resound with a fraction of the ululating bark with which he powers through the spoken verses of ‘The Jean Genie’ [1972]. One hesitates to say this of a rock god, but he might have made better films in the silent age’ (2016). Here, at the outset, is a benchmark for measuring that judgement.

Bowie pursued further acting projects with Lindsay Kemp, joining his devised theatre piece *Pierrot in Turquoise* which toured the UK (28



Fig. 1.1 *The Image*—A Son of the Silent Age?

December 1967 to 30 March 1968). As Cloud, Bowie mimed his part and, at intervals, performed three of his songs, ‘When I Live My Dream’, ‘Sell Me a Coat’ and ‘Come and Buy My Toys’, to piano accompaniment. With both Kemp and Bowie credited as ‘creators’, the piece was later radically reworked for television: reduced to 25 minutes and directed by Brian Mahoney, it was recorded at Edinburgh’s Gateway Theatre on 1 February 1970. *Pierrot in Turquoise* aka *The Looking Glass Murders* was aired on Scottish Television on 8 July 1970 as part of its *Another World* arts series. Bowie reprised his role as Cloud and, in a flowing robe with his hair back-combed as a foil to his clown-white face, offered commentary to the pantomime’s *ménage-à-trois* action as he mouthed to pre-recordings of three new compositions, ‘Threepenny Pierrot’, ‘Columbine’ and ‘The Mirror’. The delayed screen transfer renders the piece anachronistic for Bowie who, by the time of transmission, had completed both *Space Oddity* and *The Man Who Sold the World* albums. Nonetheless, while Bowie’s participation can be viewed as a favour to a friend, the influence of Kemp’s mime and make-up would endure, notably into Ziggy Stardust’s stage act and persona.

That influence can be further traced. Technically, Bowie had made his television acting debut as an extra in BBC2’s *The Pistol Shot* (tx. 20 May 1968), a (now wiped) entry from season 5 (episode 22) in the channel’s *Theatre 625* series (May 1964 to August 1968) and adapted by Nicholas

Bethell from *Vystrel*, Alexander Pushkin's 1831 short story. Directed by John Gibson, Kemp had been charged with choreographing the play's ballroom scene—Bowie appears briefly, in powdered wig and satin breeches, dancing a minuet with his new girlfriend Hermione Farthingale. In similar fleeting vein, he made his feature film debut later that year, technically preceding the postmodern alien movie of Nicolas Roeg with Leslie Thomas' post-war army memoir *The Virgin Soldiers* (John Dexter, 1969). Hustling for work after being dropped by his Deram label in April 1968, Bowie failed a July screen test for a speaking part in the film—co-producer Ned Sherrin later recalled that he and the director agreed that Bowie's 'strange quality was too elusive to capture on screen' (2005: 183). Persistence from Kenneth Pitt earned instead a walk-on extra role and a fee of £40. Six days of shooting from 29 October at Twickenham Film Studios and the army-requisite loss of his Long-Haired status resulted in a film appearance 35 minutes in. When, at the recreation hall bar, Private Brigg (Hywel Bennett) boasts that he has consumed eight Drambuie, an inebriated (and uncredited) Bowie is carried out screen-right-to-left behind them by a barman (Fig. 1.2). It is barely two seconds of screen time, but another beginning, and—again prophetically—a state which Bowie would revisit in *The Man Who Fell to Earth's* coruscating study of alcoholism.



Fig. 1.2 *The Virgin Soldiers*—'He's Got Medals'

Just as briefly, on 22 January 1969, Bowie also debuted in television advertising, appearing in a 30-second slot for a new Lyons Maid ice-lolly named 'Luv'. Directed by Ridley Scott, Bowie reputedly earned £25 for running up and down the stairs of a London double-decker bus with several other young actors, miming to a jingle composed by Alan Hawkshaw and Ray Cameron and performed by their band Mint. The advert did little for Bowie, or Mint, or the 'Luv' lolly which was withdrawn that summer. Days later Bowie also made his first mark in music film. From 26 January to 7 February 1969 he shot, at Pitt's instigation and funding, a promotional film of his music to widen his appeal and sell himself to a new record label. Entitled *Love You Till Tuesday*, the nine-part 30-minute film recycled songs from his debut album and subsequent (rejected) recordings, plus new material including 'Space Oddity', a last-minute addition written with the promotional film in mind. The sole work directed by Pitt's former assistant Malcolm J. Thomson and in essence a series of promo videos *avant la lettre*, each segment, minimally staged due to economic expediency, offered a close visualisation of the song's content, with Bowie dressed as a bandleader for 'Rubber Band', and appearing to float in darkness—with post-*Virgin Soldiers* red wig—for 'Space Oddity' before succumbing to the attentions of two diaphanously dressed space sirens (glamour model Samantha Bond and production assistant Suzanne Mercer). The piece failed to find television or film distribution—until again, with Bowie at his international peak, it was given a video release in 1984. Its initial failure mattered not since, in the meantime, a set of song demos, including 'Space Oddity', earned Bowie a contract with Mercury—and a second chance at his music career. Nonetheless, *Love You Till Tuesday*, for all its frugality, offers evidence of Bowie's growing confidence before the camera and provides an important record of his creative development—for Pegg 'the film witnesses the precise point at which he begins grasping his identity as a solo performer and staging his music in a genuinely theatrical environment' (2016: 638). In particular, amidst the Anthony Newley-esque musical numbers, Bowie continued to perform in mime for *The Mask* (filmed 5 February), and his accompanying spoken narrative can now be seen as a quasi-blueprint for the performer's next five years, 'a preview of the costs of stardom and the psychological dislocation caused by having a public image' (Reynolds 2016: 90). In the five-minute piece a youth enters a junk shop and steals a mask which, when he puts it on, entertains his parents, the lads at the office and the regulars down the pub (Fig. 1.3). A local concert performance leads to 'autographs, films, television, the