4

Painting the Truth

I'm using myself as a canvas and trying to paint the truth of our time on it.

Bowie, 1976[1]

Bowie's artistic output of the late 1970s, often regarded as his 'Berlin period', is distinguished by experimentation, painting and performance.[2] Bowie was experimenting with sonic composition and developing what he described as a 'new musical language'.[3] This was also a period in which Bowie was deepening his knowledge of the visual arts and further developing his passion for painting. His sensibility towards the relations between audio and visual mediums was honed by an autodidacticism – an approach towards learning that enabled Bowie to explore the world of visual music. Aiming to generate new encounters between music and the visual arts, proponents of visual music strive to achieve a visual analogue to musical form, either by adapting musical elements and structures for composition via a visual medium, or vice-versa. An interest in the sensory affordances of audio-visual mediums is manifest through the exploration of analogies between colour, timbre, light, pitch, texture, rhythm, movement and spatial composition. Although rarely described as a visual music artist, Bowie conjured visual imagery through lyrics and sonic strategies, something that is apparent in his earliest songs and promotional films.

By 1977, his interest in experimenting with audio-visual relations was piqued by a mixture of circumstance and environment. Berlin was a petri-dish for Bowie to experiment with the relations between sonic and visual artforms. Integrating his passion for the visual and musical arts, Bowie strengthened his knowledge of

[1] Rook, 'Waiting for Bowie'.
[2] A YouTube playlist for chapter 4 is available at https://tinyurl.com/3u6r7pb4.
[3] David Bowie, Nacho Video, 'David Bowie. Interview. Hotel de L'Europe. Amsterdam, Holland. 14 October 1977', YouTube video, 00:31:08, 7 July 2019, https://tinyurl.com/yc7svnaa.

art history while developing his capacity to 'paint' music. Not only were his paintings informed by musical elements, but his music during this period also portrays a distinct visuality; one could describe these songs as composed with the hue, tone or brush strokes of a painter. These observations are not isolated to his paintings and songs, however. Bowie's late 1970s videos are distinctive for their dialogue between visual and sonic compositional elements. His experience of personal pain, purging and grounding produced a sense of rebirth and optimism which is also apparent in his videos from this period. These outcomes could only have happened as a result of Bowie's collaborations with particular artists who practiced the tenets of visual music.

With visual music and painting being the salient features of Bowie's artistic drive during the late 1970s, this chapter explores these influences upon the videos directed by Stanley Dorfman, Nick Ferguson and David Mallet between 1977 and 1979. These videos reveal the idiosyncratic aesthetic and distinct contribution that each director made to furthering music video as an artform. It is also important to consider the impact of Bowie's collaborations with Brian Eno and Tony Visconti, both of whom indirectly influenced the videos discussed in this chapter. Bowie's collaboration with Visconti spanned five decades, resulting in the production of numerous songs and albums. The characteristic sonic spatiality of songs such as "Low", "Heroes", "Moss Garden" and "Warszawa" can be attributed in part to Visconti and Eno's idiosyncratic approach to sonic production. As a practicing visual music artist,[4] Eno not only contributed a distinctive ambience to these songs, he also influenced Bowie's appreciation for sonic and visual analogues. Eno inspired Bowie to experiment with aleatory production methods, resulting in innovative musical compositions that evoke strong visual associations. In a 2001 interview for *Uncut,* Bowie recalled the collaborative spirit underpinning the Berlin 'triptych' – *Low* (1977), *Heroes* (1977) and *Lodger* (1979):

> For whatever reasons, for whatever confluence of circumstances, Tony, Brian and I created a powerful, anguished, sometimes euphoric language of sounds. In some ways, sadly, they really captured, unlike anything else in that time, a sense of yearning for a future that we all knew would never come to pass. It is some of the best work that the three of us have ever done. Nothing else sounded like those albums. Nothing else came close. If I never made another album, it really wouldn't matter now. My complete being is in those three. They are my DNA.[5]

[4] Christopher Scoates, *Brian Eno: Visual Music* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2013).
[5] Rob Hughes and Stephen Dalton, 'David Bowie Remembers Berlin: I Can't Express the Feeling of Freedom I Felt There', *Uncut*, April 2001, https://tinyurl.com/yrr3n5z4.

While Bowie was evidently excited about this triumvirate of collaborative experimentation and its production of 'a euphoric language of sounds', his optimism for this new sonic language is tinged with sadness about yearning for a future that he sensed would not come to pass. As we shall see, Bowie would return to this sentiment time and again, especially when he felt he was reaching a creative pinnacle.

While Bowie's music of this period has been given much acclaim for its innovative production methods and avant-garde aesthetics, less attention has been given to the visual composition of the music videos accompanying these songs. This chapter addresses this gap by focusing on the ways in which Bowie's late 1970s videos respond visually to the new sonic language he was developing with Visconti and Eno. While Eno instigated new methods of aleatory composition (such as with his Oblique Strategies cards), Visconti developed innovative production methods to experiment with vocality and acoustic space. These significant collaborations form an important context for my examination of the music videos for 'Be My Wife' (1977), 'Heroes' (1977), 'Boys Keep Swinging' (1979), 'Look Back in Anger' (1979) and 'Space Oddity' (1979).

Bowie's Berlin period

To understand the creative energy behind these videos, it is important to consider the context in which Bowie was living and creating during his Berlin period. In a 1977 interview for *NME*, Bowie revealed his sense of the psychic quagmire that instigated his move to Berlin and his drive toward self-re-evaluation.

> [*Low*] was a reaction to having gone through . . . that dull greenie-grey limelight of America . . . and its repercussions; pulling myself out of it and getting to Europe and saying, For God's sake re-evaluate why you wanted to get into this in the first place? Did you really do it just to clown around in LA? Retire. What you need is to look at yourself a bit more accurately. Find some people you don't understand and a place you don't want to be and just put yourself into it. Force yourself to buy your own groceries.[6]

[6] Charles Shaar Murray, 'David Bowie: Who Was That (Un)masked Man?' *New Musical Express*, 12 November 1977, https://tinyurl.com/mrheyrye.

While this statement suggests a healthy dose of self-reflection and a desire to be grounded, Bowie's subsequent recollections of his time in Berlin indicate a tortured mental state that was neither healthy nor grounded:

> At that time, I was vacillating badly between euphoria and incredible depression. Berlin was at that time not the most beautiful city of the world, and my mental condition certainly matched it. I was abusing myself so badly. My subtext to the whole thing is that I'm so desperately unhappy, but I've got to pull through because I can't keep living like this. There's actually a real optimism about the music. In its poignancy there is, shining through under there somewhere, the feeling that it will be all right.[7]

Having been ravaged by drug and alcohol abuse during the mid-1970s, Bowie's relocations to Switzerland, Paris and Berlin became crucial to enabling a process of purging demons and facing up to realities. With the dissolution of his marriage, it was necessary to become grounded enough to fully embrace the responsibility of fatherhood. These were significant life changes that helped shape not only the lyrics and music, but Bowie's conceptual approach to the music videos and his performances for them. Along with his internal struggles, external factors played a role in shaping his creative outputs during the late 1970s. Bowie was experiencing the city and culture of Berlin in all its harsh realities, which provided the grounding he had been yearning for. In a 2001 interview for *UNCUT*, Bowie acknowledged that his drug-addled 'academic' interest in Hitler was met with a fatal dose of reality after moving to Germany. Being suddenly aware of meeting young people of his own age whose fathers had been members of the SS (*Schutzstaffel*), Bowie explained that it 'was a good way to be woken up out of that particular dilemma, and start to re-function in a more orderly fashion . . . I came crashing down to earth when I got back to Europe'.[8] Picturing the impact of Berlin upon Bowie, David Buckley describes Berlin as possessing 'both an astonishing energy and a forceful darkness, weighted down by a blighted past, yet constantly receptive to new ideas'.[9] These observations echo Bowie's recollections of Berlin:

[7] Jon Pareles, 'David Bowie, 21st Century Entrepreneur', *The New York Times*, 9 June 2002, https://tinyurl.com/sxydrhx5.
[8] Hughes and Dalton, 'David Bowie Remembers Berlin'.
[9] David Buckley, 'Revisiting Bowie's Berlin', in Devereux, Dillane and Power (eds), *David Bowie: Critical Perspectives*, 222.

> At that time, with the [Berlin] Wall still up, there was a feeling of terrific tension throughout the city. It was either very young or very old people. There were no family units in Berlin. It was a city of extremes. It vacillated between the absurd – the whole drag, transvestite nightclub type of thing – and real radical, Marxist political thought. And it seemed like this really was the focus of the new Europe. It was right here. For the first time, the tension was outside of me rather than within me. And it was a real interesting process, writing for me under those conditions.[10]

As suggested by these comments, it was the city of Berlin that aroused Bowie's awareness of external tensions rather than those cogitating within himself. On other occasions, Bowie had explained the environmental impact on his writing as an idiosyncrasy of his creative process. In 1977, he reflected on the fact that he was particularly 'vulnerable' to whatever environment he lived in, and that from a musical perspective his 'environment and circumstances affect[ed] [his] writing tremendously'.[11] In a similar vein, Tobias Rüther suggests that Bowie 'is in search of himself in the city. He sees himself in relation to it.'[12] This vulnerability to his environment is evident across Bowie's *oeuvre*. Just as the culture and geography of London are present in songs such as "London Boys" (1966) and "London Bye Ta Ta" (1968),[13] specific aspects of American culture are present in the songs he produced while touring and living there. The presence of Berlin in Bowie's work has been explored by a number of scholars, contributing astonishing observations about Berlin's impact upon his creative process.[14] While Berlin may not appear to be explicitly present in the music videos discussed in this chapter, an in-depth examination of the videos shows that Bowie's experience of Berlin is very much present.

Berlin was a petri-dish for experimentation, and Brian Eno was an ideal catalyst to trigger Bowie's experimental urge, providing him with a toolbox of aleatory compositional methods. Having held a long-term admiration for American culture, Bowie was now ready to reject many of the rock star conventions that were sacrosanct in the USA, and his discovery of avant-garde practices provided him with strategies to subvert these conventions. Having

[10] David Buckley, *David Bowie: The Music and the Changes* (New York: Omnibus Press, 2015), 222.
[11] Allan Jones, 'Goodbye To Ziggy And All That', *Melody Maker*, 29 October 1977, *Bowiegoldenyears.com*, https://tinyurl.com/4nprfxd4.
[12] Tobias Rüther, *Heroes: David Bowie and Berlin* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014), 98.
[13] O'Leary, 'London Bye Ta-Ta', *Pushing Ahead of the Dame*, 29 October 2009, https://tinyurl.com/4946en3u.
[14] See, for instance Buckley, 'Revisiting Bowie's Berlin', and Rüther, *Heroes*.

already implemented a version of Burrough's cut-up technique when composing songs for the *Diamond Dogs* album, Bowie and Eno were primed for further experimentation on the production of the 'Berlin triptych' albums.

In tandem with his embrace of avant-garde musical production methods, Bowie was regularly painting and deepening his knowledge of art history – activities that provided rich resources for conceptualizing his music videos and album cover art. Bowie's iconic pose on the *Heroes* (1977) album cover has come to signify the pinnacle of his conjunction of avant-garde aesthetics and popular music. His distinctive angular arm gesture intertextually references Eric Heckel's painting *Roquairol* (1917) and Egon Schiele's gestural paintings, including *Self Portrait with Raised Arms* (1914), *Self Portrait with Raised Right Hand* (1916) and *Self Portrait with Plaid Shirt* (1917). These references exemplify Bowie's penchant for migrating gestures across mediums, as does a rare clip-on YouTube titled 'David Bowie – Sense of Doubt – Rare Video.'[15] This video includes repeated takes of Bowie miming gestures that bear a striking resemblance to those depicted in Heckel's and Schiele's paintings. While there is some debate about the initial purpose of this footage, its existence illustrates Bowie's determination to use gesture as an intermedial thread of continuity across painting, album cover art and promotional film.

This chapter examines further examples of gestural migration across mediums, cultures and time, while also exploring Bowie's interest in painting and his maturing approach to performance. While all of these aspects helped to shape the videos Bowie released during the late 1970s, these videos bear the distinctive signature of the music video directors he collaborated with. I begin with Stanley Dorfman, whose video for 'Be My Wife' (1977) was the first official video to be released after 'Life on Mars?' (1973).

Stanley Dorfman

> He was a really good painter. We had that in common. He was a sweet man.
>
> Stanley Dorfman, 2016[16]

[15] Joseph Holc, 'David Bowie – Sense of Doubt – Rare Video', YouTube video, 00:03:09, 18 February 2007, https://tinyurl.com/28bsynw8.

[16] Jordan Riefe, 'Music Video Pioneer Stanley Dorfman Recalls Bowie, Sinatra and Lennon', *The Hollywood Reporter*, 2 November 2016, https://tinyurl.com/mr4372vf.

Dorfman shared with Bowie a love of painting and an appreciation for the significance of light in visual art. Both artists had a penchant for working across media and for bridging the fine arts and popular culture. Despite only directing two official videos for Bowie, Dorfman made an important contribution to Bowie's *oeuvre* and to the art of music video. After studying art at Paris' *Ecole des Beaux Arts* and *Académie Julian* in the 1940s, Dorfman moved to the United Kingdom and became a member of the St. Ives School of Art, a small collective who considered themselves vanguards in modern and abstract painting. His art practice moved across the mediums of mosaic and sculpted wall constructions in architecture and included abstract paintings and music videos. Whatever the medium, his work is distinctive for his treatment of light as both a painting medium and a sculpting tool. This emphasis on light characterizes the videos he directed for Bowie and is also apparent in the 'Heart of Glass' video he directed for Blondie (1979). During his time in the UK, Dorfman worked as an art director and producer for the BBC *Top of the Pops*.[17] This role provided him with an entry point into making promotional films that exposed emerging pop stars to a broad audience. Since not all bands entering the 'top 10 chart' were physically available to give a televised studio performance for *Top of the Pops*, Dorfman would often film local youths dancing to the tracks. Alternatively, he would edit a collage of found footage to provide a visual accompaniment to the song. Dorfman's move to Los Angeles in 1974 opened the door to producing promotional content for several high-profile pop stars. He developed a personal and collaborative relationship with Yoko Ono and John Lennon, which led to the task of weeding through yards of video footage shot by Lennon. The outcome was a handful of unofficial music videos, one featuring slow motion footage edited to accompany the unreleased track "Grow Old With Me" (1983).[18] As we shall see, editing audio-visual material was a strength of Dorfman's, as was sculpting with light and composing within the cinematic frame – all strong features of the two videos Dorfman directed for Bowie in 1977 – 'Heroes' and 'Be My Wife'.

[17] See here for a YouTube playlist of videos directed by Stanley Dorfman: https://tinyurl.com/223nsn3j.
[18] Amy Haben, 'Stanley Dorfman: *Top of the Pops* and Beyond', *Please Kill Me: This is What's Cool*, 15 April 2019, https://tinyurl.com/mfr7vbbe.

"Be My Wife" – the song

Recorded in 1976 at the Château d'Hérouville in France, "Be My Wife" became the second single on *Low* (1977). While many critics considered the song too odd to become a *Billboard* success upon its initial release, it later gained popularity, particularly following Bowie's death in 2016. In his book *David Bowie's Low*, Hugo Wilcken suggests that the enigmatic lyrics are directly related to Bowie's failing marriage to Angie.[19] Bowie had commented that the lyrics were 'genuinely anguished . . . but I think it could have been about anybody'.[20] The way in which Bowie delivers the lyrics 'please be mine, share my life, stay with me, be my wife' is not quite the tone you'd expect from a sincere marriage proposal. As Wilcken put it, the lyric's 'dumb simplicity is something of a tease. Could this be anything but irony?'[21] Noting that Bowie's marriage was disintegrating around the time the lyrics were written, Wilcken adds '. . . so it was a rather strange refrain to be singing. And yet . . . the song isn't exactly ironic either. At least a part of the "sincerity" is sincere . . . the song ends poignantly with the first line of a verse that is never completed.'[22] Taking into account Bowie's traumatized mental state at the time, ending the song with 'sometimes you get so lonely' seems in hindsight to be a 'genuinely anguished' call for help.[23] However, the song's expression of loneliness was apparently generated by a desperate state that surpassed the loneliness of a marriage break-up. In 1989, Bowie described how his physical and emotional state at that time may have shaped the music on *Low*:

> You're up and down all the time, vacillating constantly. It's a very tough period to get through. So, my concern with *Low* was not about the music. The music was literally expressing my physical and emotional state . . . and that was my worry. So, the music was almost therapeutic. It was like, Oh yeah, we've made an album and it sounds like this. But it was a by-product of my life. It just sort of came out . . . I never talked to anybody about it. I just made this album . . . in a rehab state. A dreadful state really.[24]

Despite the anguish expressed by the lyrics and the tortured sounding guitar solo, the fundamental musical arrangement for "Be My Wife" is upbeat and

[19] Hugo Wilcken, *David Bowie's Low (33 1/3)* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2005), 97.
[20] Michael Watts, 'Confession of an Elitist', *Melody Maker*, 18 February 1978. https://tinyurl.com/2drrp988.
[21] Wilcken, *David Bowie's Low*, 97.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Adrian Deevoy, 'David Bowie: Boys Keep Swinging', *Q Magazine*, June 1989.

catchy. With a repeated four-note motif, the piano provides the primary rhythmic drive of the song, while the guitar floats over the top, vying for – and at times achieving – instrumental prominence. This tension between the key instruments builds until the chorus, when the drum and bass become more prominent, providing musical accompaniment for Bowie's vocals. While the Cockney accent initially seems ill-fitting with the upper-class tone of the costume, Bowie's made-up face recalls his earlier fascination with Anthony Newley's accent and light entertainer theatrics. In combination, the accent and honky-tonk piano provide a suitable sonic foundation that grounds the ethereal, minimalist quality of the visual composition. Describing the video as 'a visual analogue to how Bowie sings "Be My Wife"', O'Leary explains that Bowie's vocal 'is trapped in a five-note range',[25] and that he uses this vocal minimalism as a strategy of rebellion against rock stardom:

> If *Low* is something of Bowie's rebellion (or act of petulance, RCA would have said) against being an American-approved rock star, then "Be My Wife" is a love song that questions the act of singing a love song. Its lyric is simple; its arrangement, with its crashing piano … and guitar solos, is in the common language of 1970s pop. Yet you can never determine where Bowie stands; it's unclear whether he knows.[26]

Bowie's vocal performance in "Be My Wife" provides a perfect example of how the notorious ambivalence he performed in many aspects of his public life generated enigma. If he sounds ambivalent in the song, perhaps his performance in the video might clarify his stance? Listening to the song in isolation, Bowie is clearly using the common language of 1970s rock. For instance, the symbolic guitar solo might lead one to expect an impassioned Ziggy-type performance, but his vocal delivery is mysteriously lacking passion. Without a visual accompaniment, it is difficult to know where he 'stands'. As we shall see in the following section, the video provides some clues; Bowie's nonchalant attitude and ambiguous performance – his Buster Keaton-esque hairstyle, costume and makeup all work together to undermine the contemporary style, passionate stage performance and guitar playing glory associated with American rock stardom.

[25] O'Leary, 'Be My Wife', *Pushing Ahead of the Dame*, 17 February 2011, https://tinyurl.com/ytuz2y78.
[26] Ibid.

'Be My Wife' – the video

Initially intended to promote the release of *Low*, the video for 'Be My Wife' was directed by Dorfman and shot in Paris on 21 June 1977. The opening shot establishes what Michel Chion would describe as an 'anempathetic' audio-visual relationship, with the visual elements appearing to be mismatched with the tone of the song.[27] The first bars of a honky-tonk piano accompany a painterly image of Bowie's lowered head of hair, accented by the diagonal line of his guitar neck. Although his face is obscured in this opening shot, it is his face that turns out to be the most enchanting aspect of the video.

Just as Dorfman used this video as a canvas upon which to paint with light, Bowie used it as a canvas to experiment with masking and facial gesture. Donning the 'sad clown' mask of Pierrot, Bowie builds upon his long-standing engagement with this figure. Along with the versatile mask of Pierrot, he channels Keaton by raising his eyebrows, crinkling his brow and holding his mouth in a pert Keaton-esque manner (Figure 4.1). Bowie's deadpan facial expression is pronounced by his sustained direct address to the camera. His direct eye contact with the viewer is noted by Chris O'Leary, who describes how, after singing the lyrics 'share my life', Bowie:

> . . . cocks his head and stares directly into the camera, as if noticing the viewer at last. There's no readable expression on his face – he could be suppressing a smile, he could be about to scream – and just before the image fades, the life drains from his face. It's unnerving to watch, as though a marionette is suddenly professing love to you, and worse, that the marionette may not really mean it.[28]

Associating Bowie's facial performance with a marionette is prophetic. The unnerving sensation O'Leary refers to here is in keeping with Bowie's strategic use of masking and puppetized performance in several of his subsequent videos.[29]

[27] 'Anempathetic sound' is a term coined by Michel Chion, to describe the use of sonic or musical elements that do not match what is happening visually at a specific point in a film or audio-visual text. For more on this, see Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

[28] O'Leary, 'Be My Wife'.

[29] For more on this, see Perrott, *David Bowie and the Transformation of Music Video*.

Figure 4.1 Bowie channels Buster Keaton. 'Be My Wife' (Stanley Dorfman, 1977).

Figure 4.2 Bowie anthropomorphizes the guitar as an object of desire. 'Be My Wife' (Stanley Dorfman, 1977).

Guitar love

A ridiculously long electric guitar cable snakes across the white studio, leading the viewer's eye to the guitar and accentuating it as the second most salient feature of the video. Although Bowie's face is more prominent, it serves primarily to express his intimate relationship with the guitar. Employing facial and bodily gesture in synchronicity with the camera, Bowie acts out a relationship with his guitar that shifts along a scale from intimacy to irreverence. At times, he anthropomorphizes the guitar as an object of desire: gazing down upon the fretboard, he moves his head gently as though engrossed in the act of stroking its strings (Figure 4.2). This intense focus on the guitar develops into what might be perceived as a romantic encounter, as he runs his fingers gently up and down the length of the guitar-neck. The lens zooms in to emphasize this bizarre act of instrumental intimacy. In what follows, Bowie then shatters any illusion that he might be in love with his guitar. By the video's end he can't even be bothered pretending to play it, a stance that reinforces the fickleness of his earlier performance. The irony of this act is picked up by Momus (aka Nick Currie), who describes the video as:

> . . . a mime sketch of a rock star making a rock video, yet too comically glum and sulky to go through the required hoops, and lacking the necessary gung-ho conviction. . . . The character . . . makes to play his guitar and gives up halfway through the phrase. He just can't be bothered.[30]

Just as he had performed guitar-love with a nod to rock-star integrity, Bowie does an equally convincing job of acting the part of a character who can't be bothered playing his guitar, but having freed his hands, he doesn't know what to do with them. After a half-hearted attempt at pointing and sweeping his arm to gesticulate the lyric 'I've been all over the world', he awkwardly puts his hands in his pockets while the extradiegetic guitar continues to play. Once he has finished singing, he has another go at playing the guitar but then gives up, nonchalantly propping the guitar on his shoulder. Turning his back on the camera/audience midway through the guitar outro, Bowie deftly acts out the antithesis of the commitment expected of a rock musician (Figure 4.3). This subversive act is multifaceted, however: by drawing attention to the extradiegetic guitar that continues playing the outro, Bowie overtly breaks the conventional verisimilitude of synchronized instrumental play and parodies the music video code of illusory authentic performance. Furthermore, by rendering the guitar as

[30] Wilcken, *David Bowie's Low*, 98.

Figure 4.3 Bowie enacts the antithesis of the commitment expected of a rock musician. 'Be My Wife' (Stanley Dorfman, 1977).

a fetishized but otherwise useless prop, he parodies the heightened presence and feigned authenticity of guitar playing in rock videos of the 1970s and early 1980s. This deadpan thwarting of conventions creates a pastiche of the conventional relationship between a rock musician and their guitar. Bowie's treatment of the guitar in 'Be My Wife' may also be understood as forming one node in a thread of continuity across his music videos, in which the guitar is variously anthropomorphized, bastardized or treated as a subversive signifier. In this respect, his performance in 'Be My Wife' serves as an intertextual reference to his earlier awkward studio performance for 'Let Me Sleep Beside You' (1969), in which he pretends unconvincingly to play the guitar, and then treats it as a phallic prop, flamboyantly flinging it around with one hand. With the exception of the 1972 and 1979 videos for 'Space Oddity' and a few videos comprising live performance clips, Bowie is rarely depicted playing guitar in a music video. On those rare occasions, he usually treats it as a functional prop. For instance, in 'John, I'm Only Dancing' (1972) the guitar is a stylistic prop slung across Bowie's back to connote a punk attitude. And in the *Top Pop* video for 'Rebel Rebel'

(1974),[31] Bowie treats the guitar as a toy he doesn't know what to do with, but it serves its function as a stylistic accessory to match his red jump-suit. In 'Let's Dance' (1983) Bowie's pretence at playing his guitar with gloves parodies the falsity of pop stardom, while in 'Valentine's Day' (2013) the guitar serves as an overt signifier of gun violence.[32] These examples suggest that Bowie is again using the guitar as a complex signifier in 'Be My Wife'.

Painting with colour, sculpting with light

Set against a minimalist white background, the form of Bowie's face and guitar create a sense of visual simplicity that belies the cinematic thought behind the composition of each shot. Much consideration has been given to the scale and positioning of Bowie's figure within the frame. At times he appears as a small distant figure in the centre-rear of the frame. His scale shifts dramatically, however, as the shot transitions into a close-up of his face or a mid-shot of his torso, which forms a diagonal line within the frame. Along with Bowie's figure, Dorfman also makes use of camera angle and movement to create aesthetically interesting compositions. Alternating between high-angle and low-angle shots, the camera subtly roams around Bowie's body, offering the audience subjective camera views from behind him. For the most part, Bowie focuses on his guitar and does not look at the camera. On the odd occasion that he does look into its lens, his direct address and facial expressions are pronounced. As was the case in 'Life on Mars?' (1973), Bowie shifts between indirect and direct address, thus alternating his position as a subject or an object to be gazed upon. Just as Rock had done in 1973, Dorfman also responded to this positioning by framing Bowie in close-up to accentuate the moments of direct address. Like the overexposed effect of the film bleaching process that was used for 'Life on Mars?', these close-ups are further intensified by their juxtaposition with wide shots, which feature overexposed lighting and large areas of white space that expand the limits of the frame. Due to his background in fine arts and painting, Dorfman is acutely attentive to positive and negative space and to the arrangement of lines and shapes within the frame. In this sense, it is possible that Dorfman has taken

[31] TopPop, 'David Bowie – Rebel Rebel. TopPop', YouTube video, 00:04:21, 7 November 2015, https://tinyurl.com/4pz3s33w.
[32] For more on this, see Perrott, *David Bowie and the Transformation of Music Video*.

inspiration from the minimalist paintings of his muse Piet Mondrian, who translated body parts and objects into lines and shapes, sometimes creating the illusion of perspective. Just as the diagonal line formed by the electric guitar cable enhances the sense of perspective within the frame, Bowie's body also forms a diagonal line across the frame. Much like Mondrian might have done with his abstract paintings, Dorfman has arranged body parts and props to form positive (coloured) spaces that are aesthetically balanced with the negative space of the white studio background (Figure 4.4). These observations raise questions about the possibility that Dorfman was subconsciously remediating a Mondrian painting.

This Mondrian-like approach to composition is consistent with the distinctive ways in which Dorfman sculpts with light. The lighting of Bowie's hair and skin produces textural qualities similar to that of ceramic sculpture. High-key (overexposed) lighting throughout the video generates painterly qualities suggestive of translucent paint and textured brush strokes, which serve as abstract transitions between shots. Most of the transitions appear as cross-dissolves and

Figure 4.4 Dorfman composes body parts and props like an abstract painting. 'Be My Wife' (Stanley Dorfman, 1977).

many include moments where two semi-translucent images of Bowie are overlaid within the frame. These moments of transition involve a gradual shift in lighting exposure, opacity, colour saturation and contrast, all of which reinforces the Pierrot mask-like appearance of Bowie's face. In one such transition, a subjective shot from behind Bowie's back fades out just as a shot of his frontal view fades in and eventually dominates the frame. Breaking the 180-degree rule of continuity editing, this cross-dissolve simultaneously provides a view of Bowie from front and behind. Mutating levels of light exposure, opacity and colour saturation enhance the abstracted quality of the lines and shapes in the video. Depending on the level of saturation or the translucency of overlapping images, the resulting colour graduates between pastel hues of amber, pink and purple, with the texture resembling a chalk drawing. These painterly qualities are a result of the way in which Dorfman treats each frame of film as a canvas upon which to sculpt with light – a trait that is even more apparent in his direction of the video for 'Heroes' (1977).[33]

"Heroes" – the song

> The danger *did* create the sound. . . . When you record a group of musicians, you're not only recording the music, you're recording the *environment*. And Berlin was the perfect place.
>
> Tony Visconti, 2014[34]

Heroes was recorded in July and August of 1977 in Hansa Tonstudio, West Berlin, a studio that was situated very close to the Berlin Wall. According to Visconti, Bowie would gaze out the studio window to see the weaponized East German border guards on duty at their guard tower, diligently watching for anyone daring enough to cross the Wall.[35] 'The hall by the Wall' was the phrase Bowie used to refer to the studio, which had previously been used as a Nazi social club.[36] In Bowie's words, 'it was a Weimar ballroom . . . utilised by the Gestapo in the thirties for their own little musical soirées'.[37] Thomas Seabrook explains how this position of the recording studio came to inflect *Heroes* with history:

[33] 'Heroes' was released on 23 September 1977 to promote the *Heroes* album.
[34] Citywire, 'Bowie's Berlin: Tony Visconti Returns to Heroes Studio', YouTube video, 00:04:03, 26 November 2014, https://youtu.be/V9ROgbefCKA.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Hughes and Dalton, 'David Bowie Remembers Berlin'.
[37] Ibid.

> . . . and as such it is the album on which the culture, the history and the very essence of Berlin came to bear most fully on Bowie's work. The fact that he and his fellow musicians were working directly in the shadows of the Wall, surrounded not just by echoes of wars past, but by reminders of the contemporary conflicts between East and West, instilled a drive and seriousness into their work.[38]

Although this drive and seriousness is apparent in all the songs on *Heroes* the album, the shadow of the Wall has a particular presence in "Heroes" the song. While the Wall is overtly present in the lyrics, the sonic elements contribute an emotional complexity that escapes the limits of analysis. Emotionally, the song is enigmatic, conveying a strange combination of profound gravitas and ethereal optimism, tinged with sadness. This emotional complexity is largely a result of the musical arrangement, Bowie's vocal intonation and the particularities of the recording sessions, but the lyrics to 'Heroes' play a vital role in evoking visual imagery.

The song developed in stages, with the music being recorded before Bowie wrote the lyrics. It wasn't until the vocals were recorded and added to the mix that the full emotional impact of the song came to fruition. Without knowledge of the context in which Bowie was living and working when he wrote the lyrics, one might assume that Bowie was writing in an autobiographical mode; perhaps drawing upon experiences of unrequited love or a romantic relationship having existed against adversity. According to comments made by Bowie and Visconti, however, the lyrical and sonic construction of "Heroes" was generated through the synchronicity of place, people and circumstance. The song is not only a reflection of Bowie's response to Berlin, but also each musician's response – to Berlin, to the recording studio, and to the recording process. The unique energy of this process was summed up by Radio 1 broadcaster Mark Radcliffe, who said 'there was a sense that everybody was playing a different song at a different speed at the same time, and yet somehow creating something effortlessly glorious'.[39]

As is the case for several songs on *Heroes* and *Lodger*, the sonic construction of "Heroes" owes much to improvisation and chance occurrence, which is not surprising given Bowie's embrace of avant-garde creative processes during the late 1970s. For *Heroes*, the studio recording process involved composing layered

[38] Thomas Jerome Seabrook, *Bowie in Berlin: A New Career in a New Town* (London: Outline Press, 2008), 171.
[39] David Buckley, *Strange Fascination, David Bowie: the Definitive Story* (London: Virgin Books, 2005), 280.

tracks that would later inspire lyric and melody, much like building a frame before painting a picture. During this period, Bowie would sometimes use Eno's Oblique Strategies cards that, when randomly generated, provided creative dilemmas in the form of aphorisms.[40] When considered in relation to the existing compositional framework (including the studio space, collaborators and instrumental tools at hand), the aphorism offered by a particular card provided a potential direction for approaching the following steps in the creative process. This aleatory process is hilariously illustrated by Adam Buxton's animated cartoon, which spoofs the recording session for Bowie's song "Warszawa" (*Low*, 1977).[41] In addition to the cards, Bowie made use of a range of other experimental approaches that were intended to provide aleatory creative direction external from himself. He explains, 'Maybe I'd write out five or six chords … then discipline myself to write something only with those five or six chords involved. So that particular dogma would dictate how the song is going to come out, rather than me and my sense of emotional self.'[42] These approaches toward chance composition and using only the limited materials at hand extended to the collaborative musical composition of "Heroes". A horn section that was intended for the second verse was improvised by a 'brass' sound on a Chamberlin electro-mechanical keyboard, and planned string sections were replaced with basslines by Carlos Alomar and George Murray.[43] Although Bowie had envisaged the distinct sound of a cowbell, he was happy to improvise with whatever random items were available in the studio. In the absence of a cowbell, Visconti recalls hitting an empty tape canister with 'either a fork or a drumstick.'[44] This improvisational manner carried over from the recording sessions into the way in which the song's lyrics were written.

It was only after the music was recorded that Bowie started writing the lyrics. Sitting alone in the studio, Bowie was immersed in the residual spirit of improvisation that lingered after weeks of recording. According to the "Heroes"

[40] Oblique Strategies cards were designed in 1975 by Brian Eno and painter Peter Schmidt. For more on this, see the interview with Brian Eno at Colin Marshall, 'Jump Start Your Creative Process with Brian Eno's Oblique Strategies Deck of Cards (1975)', *Open Culture*, 2 July 2013, https://tinyurl.com/mrje8chb.

[41] Adam Buxton, 'David Bowie, Brian Eno and Tony Visconti record Warszawa Adam Buxton', 00:03:30, YouTube video, 9 September 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FODvjYoVEi8.

[42] Bill DeMain, 'The Story Behind the Song: Heroes by David Bowie', *Loudersound.com*, 4 February 2019, https://tinyurl.com/u4ukrbxa.

[43] O'Leary, 'Heroes', *Pushing Ahead of the Dame*, 11 May 2022, https://tinyurl.com/yc4w62vy.

[44] Tony Visconti, 'David Bowie's Heroes Producer Gets to the Heart of the Song', *BBC Arts*, 10 January 2020, https://tinyurl.com/483kmh4v.

legend (which Visconti has confirmed), while sitting there at the studio window writing lyrics, Bowie happened to glance out the window just long enough to catch a glimpse of Visconti and back-up singer Antonia Maass kissing next to the Berlin Wall. Much to Visconti's astonishment, this moment of happenstance gave birth to the lyric 'and we kissed, as though nothing could fall'. According to O'Leary, however, this chance occurrence only cemented an image of lovers by the Wall that was already partly drawn in Bowie's mind. After an earlier visit to Die Brücke Museum, Bowie had been inspired by the painting *Liebespaar Zwischen Gartenmauern* (Lovers Between Garden Walls), which Otto Mueller had painted at the end of the First World War. According to O'Leary, 'Bowie transplanted Mueller's image of two lovers embracing by a high stone wall, placing them before the Wall' that he had seen every day from Hansa's studio window.[45] 'At once he had found his lyric's resolution, a snapshot of love and bravery set against the concrete madness of governments, despite it being a shabby act, a man cheating on his wife.'[46] Referring to the fact that Visconti was married to Mary Hopkin at the time of his legendary kiss by the Wall, O'Leary observes an important point: when writing lyrics, Bowie's inspirations were not as obvious as legend might have us believe.[47] Consistent with his magpie-like foraging tendencies, he would often compose a single lyric from a combination of artistic inspirations, chance occurrences, including his subconscious response to the environment in which he was living at the time. O'Leary observes this combination of inspirations at work in the lyrics for several Bowie songs. Noting that "Heroes" is distinctive for words that are 'simple and precisely chosen',[48] he observes the following two European post-war sources:

> One was the short story *A Grave For A Dolphin* by the Italian aristocrat Alberto Denti di Pirajno, which details a doomed affair between an Italian soldier and a Somalian girl during the Second World War (it inspired the 'dolphins can swim' verse). . . . Bowie also nicked the occasional line from elsewhere: 'I will be king, you will be queen' is from the English folk song "Lavender's Blue", which Bowie would sing onstage sometimes as a prelude to "Heroes".[48]

In a 2021 YouTube video, Iman provides further context to O'Leary's tale of how the lyrics 'dolphins can swim' were inspired by *A Grave for a Dolphin*,[50] a story that had

[45] O'Leary, 'Heroes'.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Alberto Denti di Pirajno, *A Grave for a Dolphin* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1956).

been adored by both he and Iman long before they met.[51] While the lyrical inspirations for "Heroes" included a short story, an English folk song, a painting and a chance observation of a kiss, the song can be boiled down to three precisely chosen words – 'I', 'you' and 'we'. Bowie used these words very deliberately to conjure an allegorical sense of separation and eventual unity – either between individuals or wider society. Ultimately, the lyrics express not only the anguish of separation but a yearning for what could be; the desire to transcend not only the physical, but the ideological barriers to human unity. The lyrics also conjure images related to Berlin's history of control ('and the guns, shot above our heads'), as well as imagery that resonates with a desire for liberation ('I, I wish you could swim, like the dolphins, like dolphins can swim'), connection ('and we kissed, as though nothing could fall'), and transcendence ('we can beat them, for ever and ever'). The profound notion of transcendence suggested by these lyrics is perhaps indicative of the sense of control and human polarity Bowie may have experienced while living in Berlin.

While the lyrics work to conjure visual imagery, the sense of authentic emotion is generated by moments of raw vocal intensity. In his analysis of "Heroes", Pegg observes how the recording of Bowie's vocal moves along a spectrum from 'calm and playful to a near-scream, a style he called "Bowie histrionics"'.[52] He belts out the lyrics 'I, I will be King, and you, you will be Queen'. Portraying the emotion he had personally invested in the song, the power of Bowie's vocal performance is also partly due to a pragmatic need to open up the gates in the mics, which were situated several metres away from Bowie in the recording studio. Visconti described how he 'put an electronic gate on the middle microphone and the distant microphone and set them to a specific threshold',[53] so that if Bowie 'sings loud enough, he'll open the microphone. If he sings quiet, the microphone won't open and you'll just hear the sound in front of him.'[54] After Visconti told David Buckley about this gating technique, Buckley commented 'the image of Bowie standing in the Hansa studios with its cold decadence, blowing Visconti's mics to smithereens, was one of his finest moments'.[55] With the emotional power of Bowie's vocals, the improvisational nature of the recording sessions and the imagery-conjuring quality of the lyrics, the resulting song generates a visuality and sense of transcendence that would have been

[51] Vogue, 'Inside Iman and David Bowie's scenic home filled with wonderful objects', YouTube video, 00:09:03, 9 December 2021, accessed 4 July 2022, https://youtu.be/fk9cq3gRCP0.
[52] Pegg, *The Complete David Bowie*, 110.
[53] Visconti, 'David Bowie's Heroes Producer Tony Visconti Gets to the Heart of the Song'.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Buckley, *Strange Fascination,* 280.

difficult for any video director to match, but on 27 September 1977, directors Stanley Dorfman and Nick Ferguson knew exactly what was required.

'Heroes' – the video

Out of the darkness we see the silhouette of a dark figure engulfed by white haze. At first glance, the figure looks like an alien emerging from the smoke of a crashed spacecraft (Figure 4.5). This mysterious image resembles backlit shots of the alien in the 1977 film *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Figure 4.6), which was released three months after 'Heroes' was shot. Accentuating the intrigue of this opening image, we hear an ethereal guitar-synth which seems to confirm the possibility of a science fiction setting. Cautiously, the camera tracks forward. Closer framing and frontal light reveal this dark creature to be thirty-year-old Bowie, dressed in a white singlet, with a low-cut neckline revealing his chest and long neck. As he tilts his head very slightly, the shaft of light emerging from behind his head also tilts. There's an uncanny similarity between the puppet-like

Figure 4.5 Bowie's backlit pose is much like an alien emerging from haze. 'Heroes' (Stanley Dorfman and Nicholas Ferguson, 1977).

Figure 4.6 The alien in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Steven Spielberg, 1977).

motion of Bowie's neck movements with those of the alien in *Close Encounters*. Dense with enigmatic haze and intertextual references, the first seventeen seconds of the video go some way to reinforcing Bowie's reputation as the divine alien who fell to Earth.

Shot only three months after 'Be My Wife',[56] the two videos are in many ways inversely related, yet they have enough in common to be placed within a sequence of minimalist Bowie videos that might begin with 'Life on Mars?'. All three videos are visually uncluttered, structurally simple and devoid of narrative, with the sole focus being Bowie's performance. Despite the similarities, there are some notable differences between the two Dorfman videos. The white studio setting and high-key lighting of 'Be My Wife' emphasizes a visibly definable area of white space, whereas in 'Heroes', the white light emerges from a seemingly limitless dark void. Bowie wears a black leather bomber jacket and tight black

[56] 'Heroes' was shot on 27 September 1977. 'Be My Wife' was shot on 28 June 1977.

pants, a proto-punk look that contrasts with Bowie's Dandyish style in 'Be My Wife'. While the former video is all about his face, arguably the most striking feature of 'Heroes' is Bowie's figure.

A statuesque figure of divinity

Emerging from shafts of 'Divine Light' shot through haze, Bowie's figure appears as a Jesus-like silhouette. In Judeo-Christian and some Eastern traditions, 'Divine Light' is the belief that light is the manifestation of divine presence. In art history, it has been considered by some artists and lighting designers to be an important means of communicating a divine or spiritual presence. This is evident in Byzantine art and architecture, including the mosaic and fresco ceilings, stained windows and sculptures of ancient churches in Rome, Greece and Paris.[57] The spiritual signification of a figure floating in space, framed by shafts of Divine Light, recalls paintings depicting The Divine Mercy (Figure 4.7), and shares similarities with the glowing halo surrounding the deity figures of Byzantine mosaics. These references are consistent with Dorfman's and Bowie's shared passion for fine art, and in particular, Dorfman's interest in light, mosaic, fresco and sculpted wall constructions in architecture.[58] Bowie had impressed upon Dorfman his strong appreciation for the paintings of Gustav Klimt during the month they spent together in Paris in 1977. There is an affinity between the golden backlit glow of Klimt paintings and the halo effect of the back-light framing Bowie's face, which has a slight golden hue. These associations which divinify light provide an appropriate accompaniment to the ethereal sounds of Brian Eno's synthesizer and his rendering of Robert Fripp's 'feedback ostinato'.[59] One might say that the light performs alongside the music to create an allusion of a divine alien hero emerging from the heavens.

The cold 'colour temperature' of the back light creates a bluish-white light. In contrast, the warm temperature of the front and side lights give Bowie's face a soft golden glow. Standing in the same spot and only moving his head and arms slightly, Bowie appears statuesque – an impression that is intensified by his form being outlined by light. The close-up frontal shots are lit with front and fill lights. When the camera moves to capture Bowie's face in profile, it becomes sculpted

[57] For more on this, see Slobodan Ćurčić, 'Divine Light: Constructing the Immaterial in Byzantine Art and Architecture', in Bonna D. Westcoat and Robert G. Ousterhout (eds), *Architecture of the Sacred: Space, Ritual and Experience from Classical Greece to Byzantium* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
[58] Riefe, 'Music Video Pioneer Stanley Dorfman'.
[59] O'Leary, 'Heroes'.

Figure 4.7 'The Divine Mercy', painted after St Faustina's death. (Adolf Hyła, Kraków 1944).

with warm light from either side, creating a low-key effect with parts of his face momentarily in shadow. The dark and light contours of his face change from moment to moment, a transitory effect assisted by the gradual tracking and panning of the camera and accompanying light source. While Bowie stands still, for the most part maintaining the direction of his gaze, it is the camera and the lights that move, enabling the viewer to observe the form of his head from constantly changing perspectives. This combination of bodily stasis and camera movement closely resembles the filming of Liza Minnelli's song 'Maybe This Time',[60] which appears in the Berlin-based 1972 film *Cabaret*.[61] While

[60] Turner Classic Movies, '"Maybe This Time" – Full Song – Cabaret 1972 – Liza Minnelli', YouTube video, 00:03:33, 9 June 2018, https://youtu.be/yMpSQV1-bsA.
[61] Pegg, *The Complete David Bowie*, 111.

this example features some distinct differences to 'Heroes', some sequences feature remarkably similar combinations of light source, framing and camera movements. As is the case in 'Heroes', the statuesque pose of Minnelli is also shot with a moving camera, with use of back light and haze to cast shafts of Divine Light. Just as 'Heroes' draws to a conclusion, there is a distinct moment of divinity when a lens flare washes Bowie in a Byzantine-like golden glow; a result of the camera momentarily catching the warm back light entering the lens. As the camera continues to pan around Bowie's form, the golden flare is replaced by a cooler back light. Although inspiration may well have been drawn from the cinematic examples I have observed here, Dorfman's use of light as a sculpting tool is articulated in perfect harmony with the emotional trajectory of the song. As such, I would describe 'Heroes' as a masterpiece of Divine Light, akin to the paintings, sculptures and architecture of the Renaissance period.

Dorfman doesn't only use light as a sculpting tool; he also uses it as a transitioning aid in both of the videos he directed for Bowie. In 'Heroes' there are fewer transitions and they don't rely on high-key lighting as they do in 'Be My Wife'. The first transition doesn't occur until 00:01:20 minutes into 'Heroes', allowing the opening shot to create enigma, while the camera gradually tracks into an intimate close-up of Bowie's head and then retreats back to a long shot of his body. Cross-dissolves initially serve to transition between a long-shot and a close-up, which creates the momentary effect of seeing Bowie's full body nestled inside his head (Figure 4.8). The fourth and fifth transitions break the 180-degree rule, by overlapping images of Bowie's head shot from opposite angles, thus creating the impression of two Bowie's facing and singing to one another.

While 'Heroes' and 'Be My Wife' both include Dorfman's signature approach to lighting and editing, these videos differ markedly when it comes to Bowie's performance. For 'Heroes', Bowie does away with the guitar prop altogether, delivering an impassioned performance of controlled vehemence. He expresses genuine emotion through his voice, his face and his poised bodily gestures. His bodily stance is that of an immovable statue. The only discernible movement is a gentle tilt of his trunk forwards and backwards in a very controlled manner, with his arms resting by his sides, employed minimally only for the occasional expressive gesture. This poised bodily control is unnerving, much like watching a statue turn into a marionette and then surprise us with a highly sentient gesture. At one point, he raises his hand up and runs his fingers seductively through his hair – a self-touching gesture that maintains continuity with other instances of self-touching, such as the throat clasp and the head touching depicted in his photo shoot for the

Figure 4.8 A painterly cross-dissolve. 'Heroes' (Stanley Dorfman and Nicholas Ferguson, 1977).

Hunky Dory album cover. As with these earlier examples, in 'Heroes', Bowie again positions himself as an object of the gaze, which shows his actor's awareness of 'frontality', as explained in chapter three. While Bowie's disciplined frontality to camera ensures that his performance works in concert with subtle changes to lighting, framing and camera movement, Dorfman responds in kind. One very notable example is the shaft of back-light that emerges through the gap between Bowie's thighs with the slight movement of his body (Figure 4.9).

These examples show how Bowie, Dorfman and Ferguson worked together to achieve a dialogue between bodily movement, light, framing and music. By focusing tightly on the choreography of these elements, the directors achieved the visual minimalism necessary to accompany such a powerful song. In this respect, 'Heroes' is notable for the absence of any cut-away footage that might point toward the meanings in the lyrics. A more conventional music video treatment might include footage of the Wall or of the architecture and people of Berlin, or it might include visual signifiers of romance. Instead, all we see is Bowie wrapped in light, which works as a suitably minimalist accompaniment to

Figure 4.9 Divine light emanating from Bowie's 'thigh-gap'. 'Heroes' (Stanley Dorfman and Nicholas Ferguson, 1977).

the enigmatic lyrics and emotionally intense vocals. This judicious directorial approach allows the lyrical and sonic elements to generate visual imagery by themselves. Despite the strong artistic affinity he shared with Bowie, Dorfman did not direct another video for Bowie after 'Heroes'. This should not be interpreted as indicative of a souring collaborative relationship, for Bowie has explicitly stated his need to move on, especially when things were going well.[62] This often meant closing one collaborative door in order to open another.

David Mallet

By opening a new door, Bowie discovered David Mallet, a prolific music video director who would become a long-term collaborator and 'inextricable part of his creative process'.[63] During the late 1970s, Mallet was a prominent figure in the

[62] Bowie, *Inspirations*.
[63] Pegg, *The Complete David Bowie*, 49.

audio-visual entertainment industry in the UK. He worked as a music video director with MGMM,[64] an enormously successful enterprise founded by Scott Millaney, who was known in some circles as 'the Godfather of the music video'.[65] Having directed videos for Blondie and Queen during the 1970s, Mallet became one of the most prolific music video directors during the eighties. Described by Pegg as 'a restless pioneer of cutting-edge video technology',[66] Mallet developed a reputation for innovative production techniques and for capturing the essence of the performance. As a producer and director of a wide variety of television and video modes, he is noted for his work on television documentaries and shows specialising in popular music and comedy. He directed twenty-eight episodes of the *Kenny Everett Video Show* between 1978 and 1980, which is how he came to work with Bowie.

It all started with Bowie's televised performance of 'Boys Keep Swinging' on the *Kenny Everett Video Show* on 14 April 1979. After working with Mallet on the show, Bowie invited him to direct an official video for the song. A few days later, the video was shot in the same television studio in time to accompany the song's official release on 27 April.[67] Although standing out as a remarkable video, 'Boys Keep Swinging' is unlikely to be described as an artistic masterpiece. The cliché television studio background and standard studio lighting give the video a dated feel. Despite these banalities, the video is significant for its strategic cultural impact, and for displaying the playful magic of Bowie's conjunction of chance composition, performativity and popular culture. The subversive intent of the video is best understood with knowledge of the song's creative process.

"Boys Keep Swinging" – the song

By all accounts, the song itself had a difficult labour, though once the music was delivered, Bowie wrote the lyrics quickly. Frustrated by what he called a 'too professional sound' emerging from the initial takes of the rhythm track, Bowie took inspiration from an Oblique Strategies card suggesting he 'USE UNQUALIFIED PEOPLE'.[68] He responded by having the band members switch

[64] 'David Mallet', *Thinwhiteduke.net*, https://tinyurl.com/y4fsdfkb.
[65] MGMM Studios, 'Scott Millaney – Producer', *MGMM Bios*, http://mgmm.tv/bios.
[66] Pegg, *The Complete David Bowie*, 49.
[67] 'Boys Keep Swinging' was released on 27 April 1979, as a single on the *Lodger* album.
[68] O'Leary, 'Boys Keep Swinging', *Pushing Ahead of the Dame*, 27 July 2011, https://tinyurl.com/58em9s4f.

their usual instruments with each other. According to O'Leary, 'Alomar competently played drums and Dennis Davis not-so-competently played bass'.[69] While this meant Visconti had to redo the bassline during the mixing stage, he 'used the opportunity to play a hyperactive line that echoed his work on *The Man Who Sold the World*'.[70] As a result, Visconti's 'patch-up' bassline 'became one of the track's main hooks'.[71] The exuberance of the resulting musical arrangement suggests the musicians were having fun playing an instrument they weren't accustomed to playing. Alomar later described the result as 'the best-sounding horrible young teen punk sound you ever heard'.[72] Musicologist Leah Kardos explains that the 'roughly played arrangement' of the song is attributable to the switching of instruments, and that 'the song's structure and chord progression [are] a direct quotation of . . . "Fantastic Voyage"', a song that also features on the *Lodger* album.[73] Kardos observes how Bowie frequently played with various types of 'experimental self-quotation' where he reworked his own previously performed musical gestures.[74] Experimental self-quotation is a distinctive audio-visual and gestural characteristic of Bowie's later music videos, such as 'The Stars (Are Out Tonight)' (2013), 'Blackstar' (2015) and 'Lazarus' (2016).[75]

While aleatory process in the recording studio gave the music an underlying subversive edge, the lyrics and performance of the vocals add a layer of semantic enigma. Interpreting Bowie's tone as 'beyond detachment or parody', O'Leary suggests 'the lyric and performance could be an extra-terrestrial's baffled report on human gender roles. If you are a male of the species *you can wear a uniform! You can buy a home of your own!*'[76] These words are consistent with Bowie's use of allusion in many of his songs and music videos. Richard Fitch argues that Bowie 'is a master of allusion, and as a master his allusions allow for more potential connections'.[77] Noting that 'etymologically, allusion can be traced to the Latin *alludere*, which means "to play with"',[78] Fitch explains how allusion generates for fans the pleasure of gameplay and making connections:

[69] Ibid.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Carlos Alomar, interview with David Buckley (1999), quoted in Devereux, Dillane and Power, *David Bowie: Critical Perspectives*, 222.
[73] Leah Kardos, 'I Don't Want to Leave, or Drift Away: The Transition from David Bowie's Lodger to Scary Monsters', *Academia.Edu*, https://tinyurl.com/2p8stf3a.
[74] Ibid.
[75] For more on this, see Perrott, *David Bowie and the Transformation of Music Video*.
[76] O'Leary, 'Boys Keep Swinging'.
[77] Richard Fitch, 'In This Age of Grand Allusion: Bowie, Nihilism and Meaning', in Devereux, Dillane and Power (eds), *David Bowie: Critical Perspectives*, 20.
[78] Ibid., 19.

> Allusion allows the curious to play countless games of fruitful interpretation with Bowie's songs and performances. The curious can play by making their own connections because, in the absence of direct reference, there is no way of determining, once and for all, what connections Bowie had in mind when he crafted his allusions.[79]

While the rich tapestry of allusive references in Bowie's sonic and visual works offer fans the pleasure of gameplay and 'drillability', many of his songs portray the world from the position of an outsider or alien who might find 'normal' behaviour baffling. In addition to this sense of alterity, several of his early songs portray an innocent naivety about social codes, which adds a further layer of enigma. O'Leary observes how "Boys Keep Swinging" calls back to the naivety expressed in Bowie's earlier songs. Paradoxically, he also positions the song in relation to other parodic songs about masculinity:

> 'Boys' isn't really that far apart from 'In the Navy', with its lustily-chanted chorus, its barely-hidden gay anthemic qualities, its goofy delight in the cartoon masculine. It calls back to Bowie's early 'childhood' songs in that the lyric's perspective seems like a boy's cracked idea of what manhood is, with lines suggesting adulthood is like joining a Scout troop: *Uncage the colours! Unfurl the flag!*[80]

As O'Leary observes here, "Boys Keep Swinging" shares some continuity with the ambiguity and tone of Bowie's early songs "Uncle Arthur" (1967), "The Laughing Gnome" (1967) and "When I'm Five" (1968), albeit with additional layers of cultural subversion and performativity. Talking about "Boys Keep Swinging" in 2000, Bowie told Iman, 'the glory in that song is ironic. I do not feel that there is anything remotely glorious about being either male or female. I was merely playing on the idea of the colonization of gender'.[81]

'Boys Keep Swinging' – the video

The video begins with Bowie singing and dancing. As a caricature of a hyper-masculine crooner, or perhaps channelling the sexualized swagger of Elvis Presley and the boyish energy of Mick Jagger, Bowie indulges in vigorous hip

[79] Ibid., 20.
[80] O'Leary, 'Boys Keep Swinging'.
[81] Iman Abdulmajid, 'Watch That Man: Interview by Iman', *Bust Magazine*, October 2000, 32–3, also available at Bowie Wonderworld, https://tinyurl.com/mvzjv6pr.

thrusts and expressive arm gestures. His exaggerated posturing is cross-cut with three parodically feminine characters, all performed by Bowie. Much like the hybrid citations comprising his album covers, Bowie achieved these drag performances by mimicking and melding recognizable gestural traits associated with the Hollywood starlets such as Elizabeth Taylor, Katherine Hepburn, Lauren Bacall, Bette Davis and Marlene Dietrich.[82] While YouTube commenters have associated the three female characters in the video with various actresses, one viewer attempts to settle the confusion, writing 'according to the man himself: Lauren Bacall is the glamour puss. The beehive female is based on a 1950s era tarty girl from the midlands of England, and the old dear is based on Marlene Dietrich in her final years'.[83] Adding further complexity to this claim, Camile Paglia describes the character in the middle of the threesome as a 'blowsy, blasé, gum-cracking Elizabeth Taylor in a tendrilous chignon wig and a big crinoline skirt topped with a violet cinch belt'.[84] Showing off her (and Bowie's) extensive knowledge of cinema, Paglia interprets the character on the right as:

> . . . an icy Valkyrie in a svelte metallic gold sheath dress with fetishistically deformed sleeves – boxy Joan Crawford shoulder pads sprouting lateral wings like shark fins . . . Her full, dark hair resembles that of the enigmatic Lauren Becall in *To Have and Have Not* as well as the stormy Bette Davis in *All About Eve*. The dress itself recalls the clinging metallic moth costume worn by Katherine Hepburn . . . in *Christopher Strong*, and also the spectacular skin-tight nude dress of beaded silk souffle designed in 1953 by Jean Louis for Marlene Dietrich's cabaret concerts.[85]

In addition to these references, Paglia associates this second character with Jerry Hall's entrance in Bryan Ferry's music video for 'Let's Stick Together' (1976), then unequivocally interprets the third drag character as Marlene Dietrich, noting that Bowie had recently acted alongside her in *Just a Gigolo* (1978). The fact that so many 'stars' are associated with these three drag characters is an indication of Bowie's 'magpie' tendency to forage and synthesize multiple intertextual references, a process that, in this instance, creates a simultaneous sense of familiarity and estrangement for viewers.

[82] Camille Paglia, 'Theatre of Gender: David Bowie at the Climax of the Sexual Revolution', in Victoria Broackes and Geoffrey Marsh (eds), *David Bowie Is* (London: V&A Publishing, 2013), 80.
[83] Mangasky7, comment on David Bowie, 'David Bowie – Boys Keep Swinging (Official Video)', YouTube video, 00:03:17, 25 June 2018, https://youtu.be/2KcOs70dZAw.
[84] Paglia, 'Theatre of Gender', 80.
[85] Ibid.

While Paglia praised the video for its 'camp wit', she derided it for having 'shabby production values'.[86] On face value, there's nothing particularly imaginative about the cinematography, lighting, setting, and editing transitions. Shot in the style of the *Kenny Everett Show*, this approach would seem to be a step backward from the artistry of Bowie's preceding videos. However, it is likely that Bowie may have deliberately intended the video to parody the aesthetic banality of pop TV shows. By establishing a sense of bland normality, the low production values accentuate the impact of the drag performances when they suddenly appear as a strange 'arty' interjection to what might otherwise be just another popular television show performance. After fifty-two seconds of manly swagger, the sense of TV show familiarity is abruptly defamiliarized by the first shot of Bowie in drag, performing as three back-up singers (Figure 4.10). This composite drag queen shot is used several times as a repetitive cross-cutting device, having an almost subliminal effect each time it appears. With each of the drag shots flashing on screen for only a second, it took several takes for viewers to realise that it was Bowie performing

Figure 4.10 Bowie performing as three back-up singers. 'Boys Keep Swinging' (David Mallet, 1979).

[86] Ibid.

in drag. YouTube commenter Erik Stevens wrote, 'I first noticed Bowie singing backup in his own song when I saw his teeth and had to playback the video and started to freak because it was Bowie doing drag.'[87] The technique of cross-cutting between longer shots of a masculine Bowie and the composite drag shots has the effect of emphasizing the contrast between masculine and feminine codes. Bowie's modish hairdo, suave suit and confident posture signify a debonair masculinity that contrasts with the tacky glamour of the dresses, jewellery and hairstyles of the female characters. Repetitively cross-cut against each other, these shots juxtapose diametric gender codes. This editing technique – known as Soviet Montage,[88] produces a conglomerate image of Bowie as beautiful man *and* beautiful woman – a combined image that has been described by YouTube commenters as both attractive and perplexing.[89]

As we shall see, what follows is even more perplexing for the audience, as the drag characters take possession of both stage and screen. The 'TV show' set segues into a faux Berlin nightclub set, complete with an Austrian Scallop curtain and a runway stage adorned with upright globe lights. The curtain rises to reveal 'gum-cracking Elizabeth Taylor',[90] who fixes her dress before strutting across the stage with the attitude of a well-worn drag queen. In a striking dual act of gestural contempt, Bowie pulls off his wig, tosses it away, and then performs a provocative back-handed lipstick smear (Figure 4.11). This act is repeated a second time by the 'icy Valkyrie' who Bowie plays cannily well, announcing her entrance with a fabulous hair flick and owning the stage with shimmering poise. As the first two drag characters prance across the stage, Bowie's gestural subversion is propelled by Adrian Belew's eccentrically liberated guitar solo, which builds, screeches and plummets, only to ascend again, serving as a musical commentary to each of Bowie's outrageous drag performances. YouTube commenters quip that Belew's 'washing machine on overdrive guitar solo' also sounds like 'a broken television or a radio you buy at the Goodwill store'.[91] For the third reveal, Bowie emerges from the curtains as an elderly Marlene Dietrich with twinset cardigan and buttoned up collar-shirt. Hobbling across the stage with a walking stick, 'Dietrich' shoots a disdainful glare before blowing a kiss to the audience. With hindsight,

[87] Erik Stevens, comment on David Bowie, 'David Bowie – Boys Keep Swinging (Official Video)'.
[88] Soviet Montage is an editing technique developed by Lev Kuleshov and Sergei Eisenstein, which creates new meaning through the juxtaposition of imagery within a filmed sequence of shots. For more on this, see David Bordwell, 'The Idea of Montage in Soviet Art and Film', *Cinema Journal* 11, no. 2 (1972): 9–17.
[89] John L, comment on David Bowie, 'David Bowie – Boys Keep Swinging (Official Video)'.
[90] Paglia. 'Theatre of Gender', 80.
[91] Douglas Milton and Markus Antonio, comment on 'David Bowie – Boys Keep Swinging (Official Video)'.

Figure 4.11 Bowie performs a back-handed lipstick smear. 'Boys Keep Swinging' (David Mallet, 1979).

we can see how this gesture exemplifies the way Bowie uses absurdist humour to conclude other videos, such as 'The Next Day' (2013) and 'The Stars (Are Out Tonight)' (2013).[92] This bizarre drag act is accompanied by Belew's equally bizarre guitar solo, winding out at the video's end to leave the audience with a residual sense of discomfort. The anarchic sound of the guitar, along with the musical freedom unleashed by switching instruments, provides a perfect accompaniment to the liberating wig-toss and lipstick smear.

This jaw-dropping drag performance left many viewers utterly perplexed, as expressed by YouTube comments like 'this disturbed the living shit out of me',[93] 'WTF was he thinking?! This is weird sht! Now at thirty-two I'm like this sht is genius!!!'[94] and 'I LOVED THIS – it damn near gave my father a stroke when Bowie came on TV looking like this. You can't imagine the utter dreariness of 1970s Yorkshire. Bowie, Bolan, Mercury put some life into our world.'[95] Not only

[92] For an analysis of these videos, see Perrott, *David Bowie and the Transformation of Music Video*.
[93] John L, comment on 'David Bowie – Boys Keep Swinging (Official Video)'.
[94] Mt. Zod, comment on 'David Bowie – Boys Keep Swinging (Official Video)'.
[95] Lulu Saintly, comment on 'David Bowie – Boys Keep Swinging (Official Video)'.

do these comments exemplify the social and cultural impact of this video upon its initial release in 1977, they demonstrate its continuing impact more than four decades later.

While the origins and communicative functions of lipstick smearing are multiple and culturally specific, this particular combination of lipstick smearing – followed by removal and tossing of a wig – was a specific performative act that Bowie added to his repertoire after observing it at Romy Haag's Berlin nightclub. Years later, Bowie said it 'was a well-known drag act finale gesture which I appropriated'.[96] This was not simply a matter of appropriating a gesture and performing a direct copy, however. Bowie inflected this powerful gesture with anarchistic intent and cynical posture, a point he openly acknowledges: 'I really liked the idea of screwing up the makeup after all the meticulous work that had gone into it. It was a nice destructive thing to do, quite anarchistic.'[97] This combination of avant-garde pastiche with popular musical and visual references has led to multiple interpretations and numerous reiterations. As an act of gender transgression, the lipstick smear has a mimetic life of its own, which Bowie may have foreseen. A similar gesture resurfaces in 'China Girl' (1983),[98] another video directed by Mallet (Figure 6.8), and in 1993 Bowie again performed a back-handed lipstick smear in the video for 'Jump They Say' (Figure 4.12).[99]

Figure 4.12 'Jump They Say' (Mark Romanek, 1993).

[96] Pegg, *The Complete David Bowie,* 49.
[97] Ibid.
[98] David Bowie, 'David Bowie – China Girl (Official Video)', YouTube video, 00:04:05, 19 June 2018, https://youtu.be/_YC3sTbAPcU.
[99] David Bowie, 'David Bowie – Jump They Say (Official Video)', YouTube video, 00:04:02, 22 June 2018, https://youtu.be/xPZWgCLMsW8.

Figure 4.13 Lady Gaga re-enacts Bowie's lipstick smear. 'Applause' (Inez and Vinoodh, 2013).

However, in this context, the gesture appears as a cynical attitude towards corporate simulacra. In 2013, Lady Gaga performed a Bowie-esque smearing of her face paint in her video for 'Applause' (Figure 4.13).[100] And at the 2014 American Music Awards, Lorde ended her song by smearing her distinctively vampish lipstick across her face with the back of her hand (Figure 4.14). After Lorde's tribute to Bowie (with a nod to Dietrich) at the 2016 BRIT Awards, along with her Facebook post directly following Bowie's death,[101] her lipstick smearing gesture seems obviously indebted to Bowie.

'Boys Keep Swinging' – *Saturday Night Live* (1979)

One of the ways Bowie spread his work across mediums was by releasing several of his songs in conjunction with both official music videos and televised performances. With the passing of time and the advent of YouTube, the boundaries between these different forms have become blurred. While there is only one official music video for 'Boys Keep Swinging', the song was first released in the form of a live television performance on the *Kenny Everett Show*, which was

[100] Lady Gaga, 'Lady Gaga – Applause (Official Music Video)', YouTube video, 00:03:34, 20 August 2013, https://youtu.be/pco91kroVgQ.
[101] Lorde, Facebook post, 11 January 2016, https://tinyurl.com/4uz68u7x.

Figure 4.14 Lorde re-enacts Bowie's lipstick smear. 'Yellow Flicker Beat' (Live at the AMAs, 2014).

recorded on 23 April 1979. Since both were filmed in the same TV studio, the boundaries between the televised music show and the official music video are blurred. In addition to these two versions of the song, Bowie also performed 'Boys Keep Swinging' for the *Saturday Night Live (SNL)* television show, which was broadcast in the United States on 15 December 1979.[102] As Bowie explains, this performance was inspired by a trick he had seen in the fairgrounds in Germany:

> Standing in a kind of Punch and Judy booth, the performer, dressed in black, would attach a small body puppet (just trunk and limbs) below his chin. This gave the effect of a huge human headed marionette. He would then sing his oom-pah songs and everyone would drink and sing along. Very hearty. By using TV trickery we achieved the same effect while the puppet itself was seen to be of regular human height performing alongside the 'real' band.[103]

The 'TV trickery' Bowie refers to is a chroma-key video compositing technique which involved Bowie being filmed wearing a matching green outfit. An editor would then 'composite' footage of the dancing puppet in place of the green outfit. While it was an emerging technique in the late seventies, video compositing is now so commonly used that it would no longer be perceived as trickery. Bowie

[102] Gia, 'Bowie – TMWSTW, TVC15 & Boys Keep Swinging SNL 79', Vimeo video, 00:09:01, 2000, https://vimeo.com/348064534.
[103] Bowie, cited in Buckley, 'Revisiting Bowie's Berlin', 222.

Figure 4.15 Bowie performing with Klaus Nomi and Joey Arias, 'Boys Keep Swinging' (*Saturday Night Live*, 1979).

performed the song flanked by Klaus Nomi and Joey Arias, whose Dadaist costumes, face-paint and gestural performance added to the avant-garde sensibility (Figure 4.15). Adding artistic legitimacy to the strange image of Bowie as a floppy puppet, Nomi and Arias were an ideal support band. Bowie's puppetized body was to become a reiterated feature in his subsequent music videos, albeit using different techniques and with different strategic affects.[104] In the *SNL* performance, puppetry serves as a strategy of estrangement, particularly given the odd pairing of German trick puppetry with the popular American TV show format, and the limited audience awareness of the compositing technique in 1979. As he had done with the drag act in the official video, Bowie used this song again as a means to subvert the banality of television shows, but for *SNL*, he used a different approach to parody the glory of masculinity. Ironically, the show's censors blanked out the lyrics 'other boys check you out', but they failed to notice the puppet's giant phallus popping out from its clothing toward the end of the clip.[105] Both the *SNL* show and the official video for 'Boys Keep Swinging' demonstrate the idiosyncrasy of Bowie's absurdist humour, his penchant for parody and his cheeky subversion of normative culture and conventional media.

[104] For more on this, see Perrott, *David Bowie and the Transformation of Music Video*.
[105] 'David Bowie on *Saturday Night Live* in 1979', *ThinWhiteDuke.net*, https://tinyurl.com/369pzpj9.

Bowie's pop-up puppet phallus finale may have come as a shock to regular viewers of *SNL*. This finale came at the end of a three-song performance, which included Bowie dressed in a Bauhaus costume, followed by a dress and high heels accessorized by a pink poodle. Bowie was in the mood for subversion and Klaus Nomi was an ideal counterpart. It was the end of a decade and Bowie's work had reached a point of maturity, a point that seemed to lead further and further into parody. As Josh Jones observes, Bowie was entering a period of transition from one artistic phase to another, 'leaving behind his high concept work with Brian Eno on his Berlin trilogy … and entering another high pop phase. It was an abrupt, but natural, shift for Bowie; tapping into Nomi's art-pop affectations may have seemed a perfect way to bridge the two.'[106] In this sense, Bowie's television show and video outputs during the latter months of 1979 could be viewed as a means to segue from one creative phase into another.

'Look Back in Anger' – the video

During 1979 David Mallet also directed the videos for 'DJ' and 'Look Back in Anger', which were released in June and August of that year. While 'DJ' is aesthetically and thematically unremarkable, 'Look Back in Anger' is memorable for its gauche reinterpretation of the conclusion of Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891).[107] Playing a Dorian-esque character, Bowie paints a self-portrait (Figure 4.16), and gazes upon it repeatedly, only to find that the painted likeness of himself becomes increasingly handsome while he himself physically degenerates. Bowie's physical decay is depicted through the addition of clay and paint to his face, a technique that lacks subtlety and is poorly executed. O'Leary aptly describes the video: 'Bowie, in an artist's loft, paints himself as an angel and then, reverse-*Dorian Gray* style, transforms into a grotesque with paint-and clay-encrusted skin'.[108] The video concludes with Bowie dragging himself up the stairs and crawling under a bed, which O'Leary interprets as an act of self-loathing: 'It's as though he's been made leprous by his art, and he's sickened by himself'.[109] Just as the story is played out in an overly dramatic and

[106] Josh Jones, 'David Bowie and Klaus Nomi's Hypnotic Performance on SNL (1979)', 5 September 2014, *Open Culture*, https://tinyurl.com/56e97cae.
[107] Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Ward, Lock and Company, 1891).
[108] O'Leary, 'Look Back in Anger', *Pushing Ahead of the Dame*, 22 July 2011, https://tinyurl.com/3v98dceb.
[109] Ibid.

Figure 4.16 Bowie with his self-portrait, 'Look Back in Anger' (David Mallet, 1979).

literal manner, the video also suffers from unimaginative editing, which is pronounced by the repetition of some of the mirror shots.

While the idea for the video may have been inspired by Bowie's passion for painting, it seems ironic that the video itself is far from a shining example of Bowie's artistry or Mallet's cinematic eye. There's further irony in the fact that RCA chose to promote the *Lodger* album with the video for 'Look Back in Anger' rather than 'Boys Keep Swinging', believing the former video would be a more palatable option for the US audience; an assumption that was not reflected in record sales.[110] Despite its drawbacks, the video is interesting for the role that Bowie plays: a painter (the flipside to his rock star personas), driven insane by the art he has created. This notion of being destroyed by one's artistic creation is a recurring theme in Bowie's *oeuvre*, recalling his acting role in the short film *The Image* (1969),[111] his film 'The Mask', and his last performance as Ziggy Stardust at London's Hammersmith Odeon (1973). As with these examples, Bowie used

[110] '1979 – "Lodger" – AUS/NZ', Bowiedownunder.com, http://www.bowiedownunder.com/lodger.html.
[111] Classic Multimedia, 'The Image (1969) Short Film Starring David Bowie', YouTube video, 00:13:19, 18 July 2021, https://tinyurl.com/3h9bva6a.

'Look Back in Anger' as a canvas to explore the links between creativity, destruction, and insanity. O'Leary alludes to these themes in relation to what he perceives as the song's function as a farewell to the past:

> If *Lodger* and *Scary Monsters* are Bowie finally considering the prospect of decline and tearing himself up, sampling and dispersing himself, 'Look Back in Anger' is at the heart of these records. It's a dry, weird farewell to a muse, decades before Bowie (apparently) stopped recording and performing. . . . So, on the far end of a decade that Bowie, in part, had authored was 'Anger', which sets the stage for the even grander renunciation of 'Ashes to Ashes'.[112]

As indicated by the examples above, Bowie had always needed to farewell his past, even if that meant performing a destructive act to put to death a decaying persona. With the decade drawing to a close, he used the video for 'Look Back in Anger' – much as he used his various performances on television shows – as a vehicle to bid farewell to the past and to bookend the decade, thus allowing him to move on to the next decade with a clean canvas. To achieve this, he needed to segue from 'Look Back in Anger' to his final television show videos of the decade; that segue was to be the theme of insanity, and the focal point of show was 'Space Oddity' (1979).

'Space Oddity' (1979) – the televised videos

In 1979, two new videos were shot for 'Space Oddity,' both released on television shows on New Year's Eve. The first was shot for Dick Clark's *Salute to the Seventies* tribute show, which was broadcast on US NBC on 31 December 1979.[113] In this video, Bowie is dressed in grey overalls cinched in at the waist with a wide belt and heavy buckle. The overall costume resembles a futuristic Soviet space suit, a look enhanced by Bowie's stern facial expressions and rigid militaristic poses. He folds his arms and places his fists on his hips in a masculine manner; the antithesis to Ziggy's feminized hand-on-hip pose. Perhaps a low budget attempt to create a façade of the imagined interior décor of a futuristic spacecraft, the set comprises minimalist curved structures, repetitively arranged so as to create the illusion of receding perspective. The uniformity of the set, subdued light and monochromatic

[112] O'Leary, 'Look Back in Anger'.

[113] A remastered version of this video is available on YouTube. While the televised video was initially broadcast with Bowie miming to the 1969 version of the song, YouTube user Mister Sussex has reedited this video to fit with the 1979 recording of the song. See Mister Sussex, 'David Bowie "Space Oddity" remastered 1979 vocal version', YouTube video, 00:04:49, 15 May 2016, https://youtu.be/yU2hRBdrYS8.

tone is consistent with stereotypical notions of Soviet space missions. The overall look of the video is so quintessentially Soviet that in some shots Bowie's guitar could easily be mistaken for a *balalaika*. It remains unclear what the rationale was for broadcasting a Soviet stylized video in the US at the height of the Cold War. Since the cultural palatability of US and UK audiences differed around this time, it's worth comparing this video with another version of "Space Oddity", which was broadcast on UK television on the same night. For the US show, Bowie mimed to the 1969 version of the song; for the UK show, he mimed to a freshly re-recorded 'acoustic' version, which bears some striking differences to the other recordings of "Space Oddity". Directed by Mallet and shot at Ewart Studios, Wandsworth on 18 September 1979, the video was broadcast on 31 December on the New Year's Eve special edition of the *Kenny Everett Show*.[114]

"Space Oddity" (1979) – the song

As discussed in chapter two, the popularity of the 1969 recording of "Space Oddity" did not wane; in fact, the song became iconic. So why did Bowie heavily revise such a popular song? Few popular musicians have undertaken such a severe revision of their own song. In 1980, Bowie explained that this new recording eventuated because Mallet wanted him to appear on his show and he wanted him to sing "Space Oddity":

> I agreed as long as I could do it again without all its trappings and do it strictly with three instruments. Having played it with just an acoustic guitar onstage early on, I was always surprised as how powerful it was just as a song, without all the strings and synthesizers. In fact, the video side of it was secondary; I really wanted to do it as a three-piece song.[115]

Given that it was the prospect of a new video that led to the song's re-recording, it's interesting that Bowie viewed the video as secondary. The upcoming video provided an opportunity for Bowie to conduct an experiment. His collaborations with Eno and Visconti had convinced him of the creative benefits of musical experimentation, and this gave him the confidence to experiment with one of his most iconic songs, by stripping it down to bare bones. The song was re-recorded

[114] 'Will Kenny Everett Make it to 1980?' *Kenny Everett Show*, broadcast on 31 December 1979. The video of the show was shot at Ewart Studios, Wandsworth, on 18 September 1979.
[115] Angus MacKinnon, 'The Future Isn't What It Used to Be', *New Musical Express*, 13 September 1980, https://tinyurl.com/3a79uwhc.

in September 1979 at Visconti's Good Earth Studios in Soho, London. With Visconti's production skills and three backing musicians, a radical new recording of this song was achieved, one that recontextualized the song's themes of alienation and outer space. According to Adrian Cepeda, the 1969 version:

> . . . had this lifted exploration spirit that gave hope to a new generation. . . . A decade later, that hope had been extinguished with a dramatic sparse sound reflecting back to the paranoid alienation Bowie felt in the 1970s. . . . "Space Oddity" sounds more powerful grounded in this Lennon inspired stripped down primal arrangement.[116]

Apparently inspired by John Lennon's instrumentation for his 1970 album *Plastic Ono Band*,[117] Bowie's vocal and acoustic guitar are accompanied by only three instruments: bass by Zaine Griff, drums by Andy Duncan and piano by Hans Zimmer. Locked in unison, each of the instruments serve a specific purpose; the bass and drums provide a solid yet minimalist rhythmic bedrock and the piano adds emotional texture. These instruments are played with restraint so that acoustic space is provided and Bowie's harrowed vocal is enabled to soar. His vocal always seems to be floating above the instruments, perhaps aptly situated in outer space, while the raw sound of his acoustic guitar grounds the song on Earth. This arrangement is appropriate, given this is a song about Major Tom having fallen to Earth. The notion of 'falling to Earth' takes on a different connotation in this version of the song, however, so it is fitting that the electronic synthesizer sounds are absent and the lift-off sequence is replaced by twelve seconds of silence. The resulting song is remarkable for its sonic space, which propels Bowie's powerful vocal performance and enhances the sense of isolation evoked by the video. As O'Leary describes it, 'Bowie clarified "Oddity" down to the vocal melody, a harshly-strummed twelve-string guitar, a basic bass-drums rhythm section. Instead of a countdown, silence. Instead of the measured back-and-forth of Major Tom and Ground Control's interplay, a pained solitary vocal.'[118] This clarified version was the first step toward estranging a song that had become perhaps too familiar for Bowie. The next step was the video.[119]

[116] Onlylovecanleavesuchamark, 'Space Oddity [1979 Re-record]', *Don't Forget the Songs 365*, 12 August 2012, https://tinyurl.com/mr3as54p.
[117] Ibid.
[118] O'Leary, 'Ashes to Ashes', *Pushing Ahead of the Dame*, 13 September 2011, https://tinyurl.com/22c69vuv.
[119] Nacho Video, 'David Bowie • Space Oddity • Will Kenny Everett Make It To 1980? Show • 31 December 1979', YouTube video, 00:04:54, 1 January 2020, https://tinyurl.com/mrxhv7my.

'Space Oddity' (1979) – the Mallet video

> It's familiar, yet strange . . . like we're watching a transmission from a parallel past, that draws on our collective pop memories but renders them skewed, distorted. But the closer you look, the clearer things become. (Bauer Xcel, 2013)[120]

The video begins with the strum of an acoustic guitar and a white screen, which gradually reduces opacity to reveal Bowie's face in close-up. Deep in character, he stares intensely into the camera lens singing 'Ground control to Major Tom . . .' His eyes dart nervously away then quickly return with a strained fixity (Figure 4.17).

Bowie's performance appears fragile and on-edge, the antithesis of his mastery of the camera in previous videos. No longer is he seductively playing with being the object of the gaze; he appears disempowered, controlled, as though he is the object of surveillance. His paranoid disposition suggests that he is performing to

Figure 4.17 Bowie stares intensely into the camera lens. 'Space Oddity' (David Mallet, 1979).

[120] Bauer Xcel, 'David Bowie and Kenny Everett's "Space Oddity"', *Mojo*, 23 July 2013, https://tinyurl.com/38ecshee.

the camera under duress. As he stops singing and places his guitar beside his chair, his eyes remain glued to the camera. What happens next is a magnificent breach of both music video and television show conventions. During an uncomfortably long ten seconds of silence, Bowie leaves his seat and walks briskly across the studio with his arms folded and shoulders hunched over. Breaking the 'fourth wall', the camera tracks Bowie's exit, divulging lighting rigs, a monitor and other technical apparatus strewn across the 'off-screen' studio. Panning across the studio, the camera reveals that Bowie is being surveilled by a woman in a nurse's uniform at the helm of a camera (Figure 4.18). He turns his head, anxiously clocking the panoptical nurse, before entering an 'on-screen' set within the studio – a padded cell containing only a chair and a guitar. A high louvre window casts streaks of white light across the back wall. This stark set instantly signifies mental instability and institutional entrapment, just as the sustained silence builds tension and accentuates the sense of spatial isolation. Bowie picks up the guitar, sits on the chair and faces the camera ready to continue the song. Breaking the long stretch of silence, a drumbeat coincides with an abrupt cut to a black and white close-up shot of Bowie's face, surrounded by flexible tubes. Only lasting for the length of a single drumbeat, this image

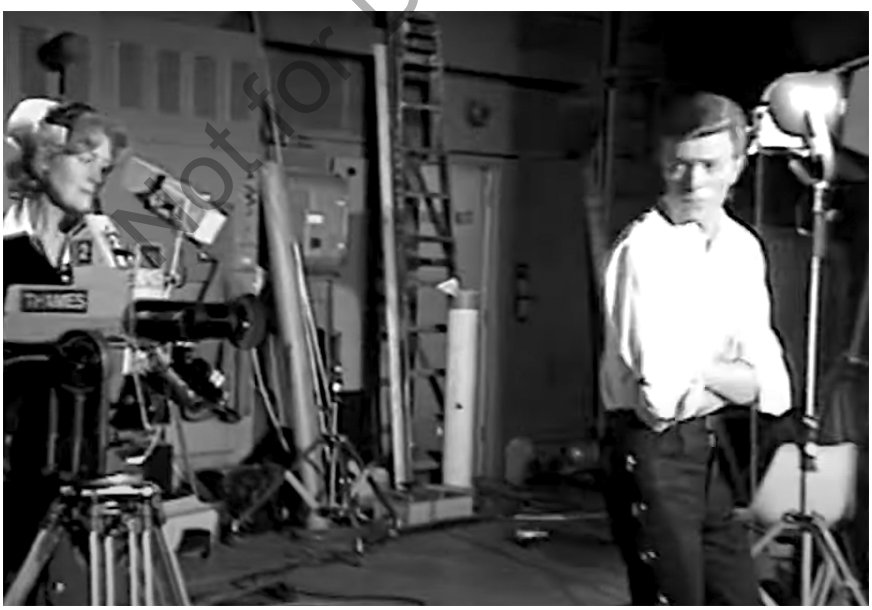

Figure 4.18 Breaking the 'fourth wall' of the television studio. 'Space Oddity' (David Mallet, 1979).

subliminally suggests another reality before returning to a wide shot of Bowie alone in the padded cell. This time, when he sings 'This is Ground Control to Major Tom' the song sounds fuller with the inclusion of the accompanying instruments. While Bowie's voice appears to echo off the sides of the padded walls, in retrospect we know this studio set had no bearing on the construction of this eerie voice, contained in three-dimensional space. Coincidentally, Visconti generated this entrapped sense of acoustic space during the recording of the song before the video shoot. He would not have been aware of how well the recorded sound would match the visual sense of entrapment in the video.

Still in wide shot, Bowie sings, 'You've really made the grade, and the papers want to know whose shirts you wear.' The camera slowly tracks in closer, then cuts to a black and white wide shot as it tracks toward Bowie reading a newspaper and sitting in what looks like an astronaut's chair. Adorned with flexible tubes and flashing lights, the chair looks out-of-place in its domestic setting, which is furnished with 1970s kitchen décor and a nurse preparing something at the bench. The familiarity of the kitchen setting is estranged by the nurse, who appears incongruous in a kitchen, and operating a camera in a television studio. The nurse is prefaced in Kenny Everett's introduction to the video, where she is cleaning a wall of television screens with a giant clock to one side, as though priming the audience to take special note of these screens as intertextual references to Roeg's film *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, along with other potential clues, which might help explain the meanings generated by the video.

In addition to the sense of desperation and edginess of Bowie's performance, viewers are likely to feel perplexed by the angular lighting, the strange images and the analogical way in which these are edited. Bowie and the nurse appear unfazed by the exploding oven and rubbish bin. A potential kitchen catastrophe is averted by cutting back to the deeper tragedy of Bowie singing, alone in the padded cell. His intensely desperate stare into the camera lens is accentuated by a slow tracking shot that moves into an extreme close-up of his eyes. A cross-dissolve transitions into a wider shot of the padded cell (Figure 4.19). Singing 'The planet Earth is blue and there's nothing I can do', Bowie sits in darkness, lit only by a small spotlight, casting his shadow on the back wall. Here we see an excellent example of the film noir lighting that Bowie and Mallet used again in 1981 in 'Wild is the Wind' and 'The Drowned Girl', videos that were lit to diminish the presence of the studio set. In contrast, the noir lighting in 'Space Oddity' (1979) characterizes Bowie and the constructed set as psychologically unstable characters. An angular shaft of light stretches across the wall, creating a venetian

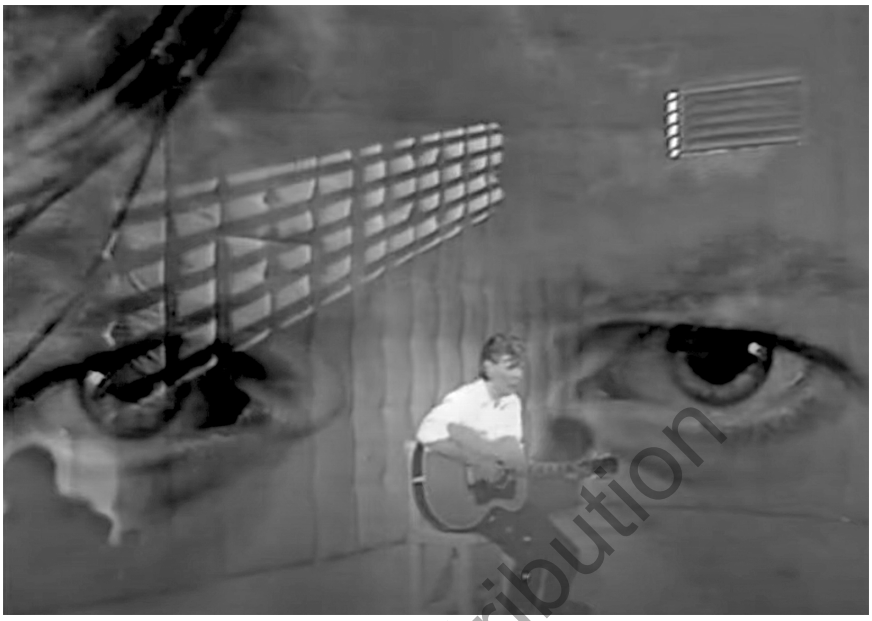

Figure 4.19 A cross-dissolve creates dramatic effect. 'Space Oddity' (David Mallet, 1979).

blind pattern across the wall and sharply pointing toward the shadow cast by the spotlight (Figure 4.20). Accentuated by wafts of haze, the low-key angular light creates an expressionistic feel, reinforced later in the video by a series of rapidly cut images that are shot from oblique angles. Building upon the sense of entrapment and psychological instability already created by the music and the set design, the expressionistic lighting and oblique camera angles conjure images from *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1920),[121] a German Expressionist film that features imagery of an insane asylum. Specific images from *Dr Caligari* are also intertextually referenced by shots of Bowie's body against the padded wall in 'Space Oddity' (Figures 4.21 and 4.22). Along with the film *Metropolis* (1927),[122] *Dr Caligari* was a key inspiration for the preparatory drawings Bowie drew in 1974 for an unrealized film set in 'Hunger City', which further inspired the stage set designed by Mark Ravitz for the *Diamond Dogs* tour.[123] These examples show

[121] *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, directed by Robert Wiene (1920, Berlin: *Lixie-Atelier* film studio).
[122] *Metropolis*, directed by Fritz Lang (1927, Berlin: UFA studios).
[123] David Cantello, 'Diamond Dogs – An Unfinished Film', YouTube video, 00:02:49, 21 March 2021, https://tinyurl.com/y2rvhe98. See also, Broackes and Marsh (eds), *David Bowie Is*, 130–5.

Figure 4.20 Noir lighting references 1920s expressionistic film sets. 'Space Oddity' (David Mallet, 1979).

Figure 4.21 Expressionistic aesthetics in *The Cabinet of Dr Caligary* (Robert Wiene, 1920).

Figure 4.22 References to German Expressionist film. 'Space Oddity' (David Mallet, 1979).

how, on more than one occasion, Bowie drew on German Expressionist artistic strategies as a means of expressing the instability of psychological space through set design, camera angles, and light.

While earlier versions of 'Space Oddity' alluded to the alienation of outer space, Mallet's 1979 version alludes to the alienation of internal space via visual and sonic signifiers of psychological instability. In conjunction with Bowie's eerie vocal and nervous gestural performance, the padded cell, the nurse, and the kitchen setting work together to signify the entrapment of institutional space and the neurosis of domestic space. Building upon the sense of alienation conjured by these images, the sight of Bowie sitting in an astronaut's chair reading a newspaper intertextually calls up images from *The Man Who Fell to Earth*,[124] which includes shots of Bowie sitting in a similar chair within a domestic setting, while watching television. The television screens and astronaut's chair serve as travelling transmedial motifs that transport the theme of alienation across the past and future of Bowie's *oeuvre* (a point that is reinforced by the presence of such motifs in audio-visual productions created after Bowie's death, such as Tom Hingston's

[124] *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, directed by Nicolas Roeg (1976, UK: Cinema 5).

posthumous video for Bowie's song 'No Plan' (2017)[125] and the 2022 television series *The Man Who Fell to Earth*).[126] As discussed in the following chapter, Bowie is seated in a reduced version of this time travelling chair in his next video, 'Ashes to Ashes' (1980), which also includes shots that were filmed in 'Space Oddity's' padded cell and kitchen sets. These explicit threads of continuity between the two videos reinforces the fact that 'Ashes to Ashes' was intended as a sequel to 'Space Oddity'. As we shall see, Bowie wove further threads of continuity beyond these two videos, thus extending the story of Major Tom to the videos released just before, and beyond, his death. Bowie built a surreal storyworld for 'Space Oddity', inhabiting it with enigmatic characters and worldbuilding components. The universal theme of alienation has enabled the song to endure ongoing reconfiguration across mediums, time, and space.

Denouement

This chapter began by exploring Bowie's collaborations with Visconti, Eno, Dorfman and Mallet. While Bowie's collaborations with Visconti and Eno had a longevity that lasted until his death, his working relationships with music video directors were often short lived. Despite the brilliance and obvious artistic compatibility of the directors discussed in this chapter, Bowie was a strong believer in the creative renewal of working with new people, and he would restlessly move on to further collaborators. However, with Mallet, he was starting to appreciate the continuity and reliability of a longer-term collaboration, which is explored in the following chapter. Through his collaborations, Bowie learnt the art of aleatory composition, which left its mark on much of his creative work, but particularly on his songs and videos of the late seventies.

Bowie's videos of this period portray a maturity, a seriousness and a parodic wit not evident in his earlier videos. His performance to camera is more nuanced than in previous videos, something that is particularly evident in the videos for 'Be My Wife', 'Heroes' and 'Space Oddity' (1979). These three videos are remarkable for their lighting, composition within the frame, and for their references to key moments and movements in art history.

[125] Bowie, 'David Bowie – No Plan (Video)', YouTube video, 00:04:02, 8 January 2017, https://tinyurl.com/354wcnwb. See Perrott, *David Bowie and the Transformation of Music Video*.
[126] *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, created by Jenny Lumet and Alex Kurtzman (2022, CBS Studios, Secret Hideout, Timberman-Beverly Productions).

While the videos discussed in this chapter provide a window into Bowie's passion for art, they are also artworks in their own right. Bowie treated each of these videos, not only as an extension of himself, but as a canvas, upon which paint could be applied. In this respect, Bowie was deeply affected by the history, culture, and cities of Eastern Europe, and especially Berlin. Each of these videos is shaped in some way by those experiences, whether that be working in a studio under the shadow of the Wall, experiencing drag acts in a Berlin nightclub, frequenting art museums, enjoying puppetry tricks, or watching early German films.

Bowie's passion for painting, visual art and cinema is expressed in these videos via lighting, transitions, set design and performance. Not only do these videos reference paintings, films and film stars, they are significant for establishing the capacity for music videos to function as works of art in their own right. The videos discussed in this chapter are fascinating resources for anyone studying the links between music video, art history, and cinema. The next chapter will extend and deepen our understanding of the remediation of music video.